

# GILJOTIN

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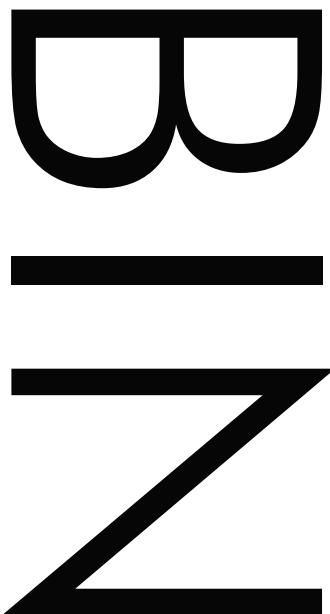
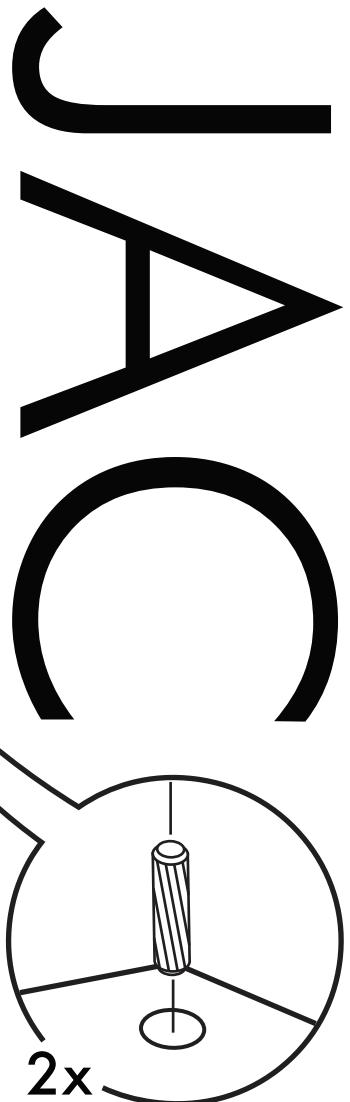
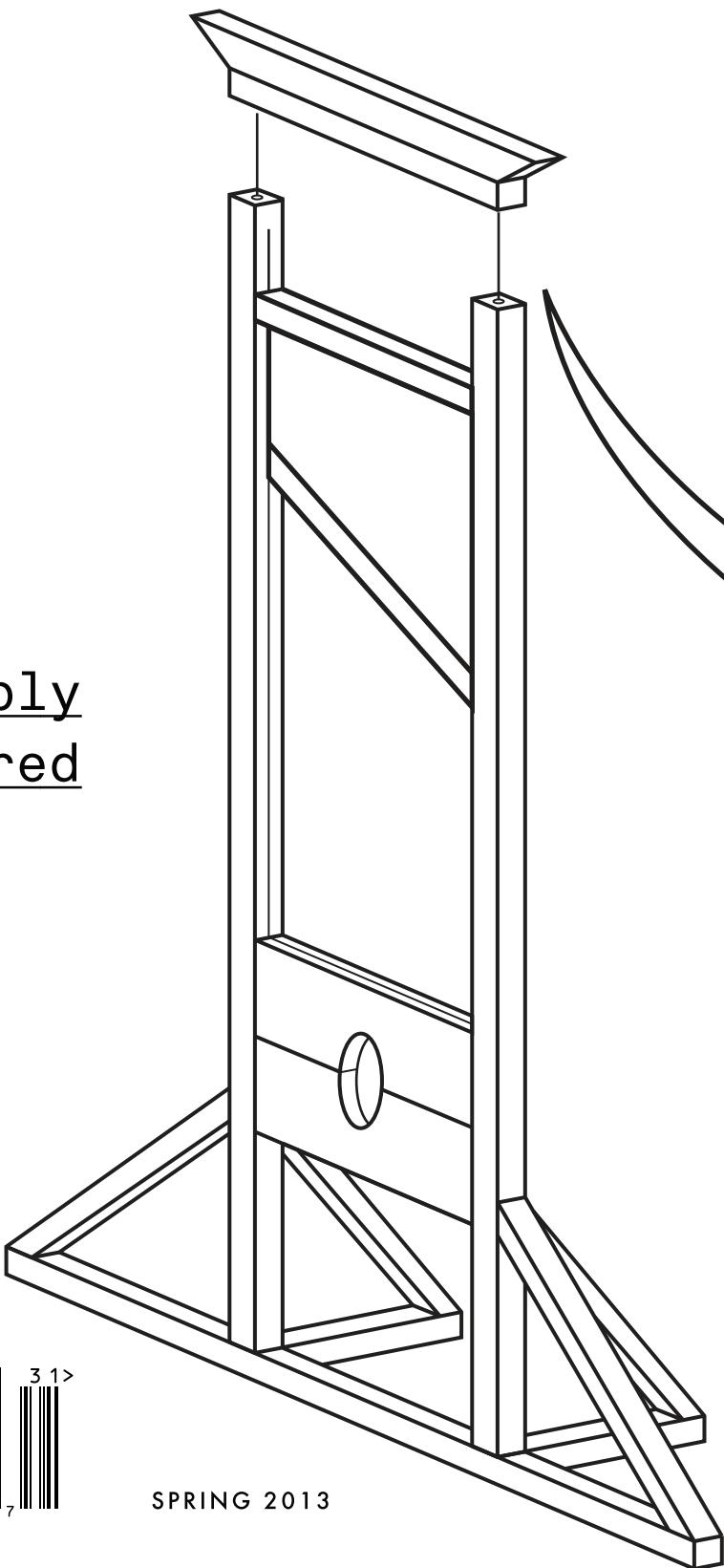
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*Jacobin* is a leading voice of the American left, offering socialist perspectives on politics, economics, and culture. The magazine is released quarterly and reaches over 3,000 subscribers, in addition to a web audience of 250,000 a month.

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# Fellow Travelers

**T'S AN OLD ADAGE** of city life: commute home to masturbate, but don't masturbate during the commute. Such are the reasonable burdens of living in a society.

Last week I was reminded that this sentiment isn't universally shared. On a Euclid Avenue-bound C train, I sat across from someone getting to know himself through his Sunday best. It was jarring, but not nearly jarring enough. In a strange way, years on the radical left had prepared me for such an encounter.

You see, subway masturbators don't care that everyone else is trying to get away from them; they don't care about being a nuisance. They care about jacking off. Not unlike a certain variety of American socialist: enthusiasts of sectarian minutia, reenactors of old battles, collectors of decontextualized quotes. Leftists have a lot to say. What they don't always have is the social literacy to speak to a broader audience, a literacy that comes with a grounding in practical politics. They lack self-awareness about the timing or propriety of their actions, and they don't see why that's a problem.

Of course, the C train masturbator likely suffered from afflictions more serious than a lack of tact. But the Left is not mentally ill. It's insular and inconsequential. Thankfully, many do want to see a change in its internal culture, but usually this sentiment takes the form of vague "can't we all get along and talk about how much we hate drones" platitudes. That attitude isn't quite right either.

The choice facing us isn't between the blind worship of our particular pantheon of dead white men or Daily Kos-style ecumenicism. After all, the problem with the Left isn't that it's too austere and serious; it's that it doesn't take itself seriously enough to make the changes necessary for political practice. We can be rigorous and ideological — without being afraid of being heard outside our own circles. Mass exposure wouldn't spell the end of a vibrant socialist critique.

But to get to the root of the problem will take an organizational revolution, not just a cultural one. We're weird, because we're not accountable to any mass constituency, not because we didn't watch enough cable growing up.

Okay, maybe that too.

But it's impossible to deny that institutionally the socialist left is in disarray, fragmented into a million different groupings, many of them with essentially the same politics. It's an environment that breeds the narcissism of small differences. In a powerless movement, the stakes aren't high enough to make people work together and the structures aren't in place to facilitate substantive debate.

The prospect for left regroupment was one of my main motivations for founding *Jacobin*. Yet the watchwords of this project have seldom appeared in our pages. It's finally time to make a call for joint action on the Left with an eye towards the unification of the many socialist organizations with similar political orientations into one larger body. This idea has been trotted out for generations, but new agents and desperate necessity can finally make it a reality.

If it comes to fruition we'd see the convergence of American socialists committed to non-sectarian organizing under the auspices of an overarching democratic structure. This in itself may not seem like a significant undertaking — we're only talking about a few groups and a few thousand people — but we shouldn't let those humble beginnings obscure the potential that a fresh start for the organized left holds.

For one, a larger, more centralized organization would offer a powerful pole of attraction for both the newly politicized and those who have spent years on the Left's margins. By allowing open factions, such an outlet could incorporate activists from different strands of the socialist tradition and foster a pluralistic culture in which comradely debate and open disagreement, far from crippling action, helps build a political program.

There would be less glamorous benefits, too. A well-run administrative apparatus could consist of dozens of paid staffers and organizers committed to work across the nation. New technology will connect activists who live close to each other and immediately put them to work in local struggles, as well as educational and cultural outreach, all under the same banner.

The strength of the Left is in organization — with it, we could one day contend for power. Without it, Left Forum might as well be Comic Con. An internal restart seems like the only good starting point for radicals looking to making an impact on American political life. I hope to contribute to that process more substantively in time. For now, the quality of our young activists should leave us confident about the future.

We can also take comfort in the memory that small groups of organized militants have made a difference before, paving the way for mass action and sweeping structural change. In the short-term, a new organization would focus on anti-austerity and work hand-in-hand with liberal allies who want to see the welfare state rebuilt. But socialists will not merely be anonymous members of a future liberal-left coalition; they'll seek to push those struggles beyond liberalism's limits. This means identifying capitalism as a social system that benefits a minority, and openly organizing in civil society to challenge it. It means building its own institutions and organs of class power and presenting real alternatives.

Before long, the subway masturbators among us will be drowned out by a generation free of decades of ill-will — organized and confident enough to make a difference. Until then, try not to stare. ■

—Bhaskar Sunkara

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# Imported From Detroit

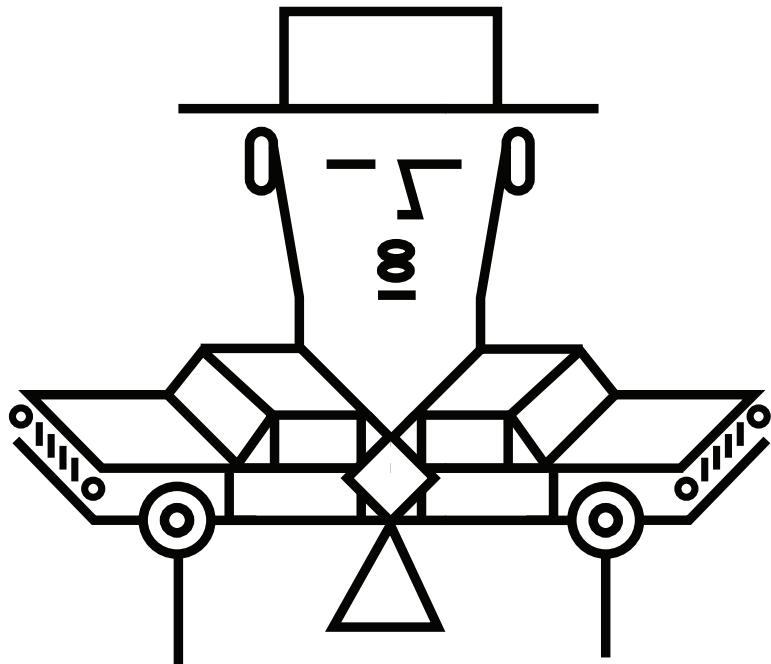
Behind American auto's latest PR campaign lies a bleak economic reality.

by Nicole Aschoff

LIVIER FRANÇOIS is a storyteller. We love his stories. A modern-day de Tocqueville, he has come to America to tell us about hard work and sacrifice, about revival, about a new American century. He also tells us to buy Chrysler cars.

François is the Chief Marketing Officer for Fiat, the Italian car company that now owns Chrysler. He and his team created the “Imported from Detroit” (IFD) ad campaign and this year’s “So God Made a Farmer” Dodge Ram commercial. The original 2011 “Born of Fire” IFD spot made a big splash. It won an Effie and *Advertising Age*’s “Marketer of the Year” award in 2012 and, if we are to believe the hype, it transformed Chrysler’s image from beaten-down, bailed-out failure to iconic American underdog on the verge of greatness. The campaign has been so successful that Chrysler launched an IFD collector’s line. Enthusiasts can purchase IFD track jackets, baby tees, coffee mugs, and Carhartt gear worked up with the new IFD logo (the Joe Louis fist gripping the Chrysler wings).

The story behind the ads is already the stuff of legend. François recalls feeling the stirrings of an idea while watching commercials for vinyl replacement windows and “one-day only” sales events in a Detroit hotel room on his first trip to the city in 2009. Amidst the dreariness of American television, something clicked: “If we could bring back the city that made us, we could take back our rightful place within it, because Detroit, this very place that the public hates so much, is the source of what will save it.”



In 2009, America did hate Detroit. Detroit signified failure. When the Detroit Three executives took their private jets to Washington in late 2008 to ask the Bush administration for a “bridge loan” similar to the bailouts being given big Wall Street banks, they were met with incredulity and anger. The American public was unmoved by the auto-makers’ plight, and Congress briskly voted against a loan. But Bush didn’t want GM and Chrysler going under on his watch, so he threw them a bone from the TARP fund that held them over until Obama took office. The Obama administration decided that an unstructured bankruptcy by these two firms (particularly GM) would be a financial and political nightmare, and so resolved to provide a multi-billion-dollar bailout in exchange for a Treasury-led restructuring of the firms. (Ford avoided this fate by withdrawing its request for loans.)

“Team Auto”—Obama’s auto restructuring committee—believed that GM was viable as a stand-alone company, but not Chrysler. Fortunately, Fiat was looking to expand its presence in the North American market, and so a hasty marriage was arranged, followed by a Treasury-led structured bankruptcy of the two firms in early summer 2009. In the end, twenty-two assembly and parts plants were closed, four divisions were sold or

eliminated, and GM and Chrysler were divided between various stakeholders. These included the US and Canadian governments, the UAW’s employee trust fund, and in the case of Chrysler, Fiat.

Fast forward to Superbowl Sunday, 2011. Green Bay versus Pittsburgh. Chrysler had survived the structured bankruptcy and was showing clear signs of improvement. Profits and market share were up, quality was improving, and new models were out. But customers remained wary. Chrysler cars still ranked low in JD Power quality reports, and their “cool factor” left something to be desired. While Ford came through the crisis smelling like roses because it avoided a government bailout, Chrysler and “Government Motors” were tainted by Treasury’s hand-holding. Chrysler dealers gathered at a St. Louis hotel before the game, hoping to get a look at the new \$9 million Superbowl ad. David Kelleher, a dealer from Glenn Mills, Pennsylvania, remembers the first time he saw the ad: “I was stunned. I looked around. The room was silent. Some people were crying. Then the applause started and just rolled through the auditorium and kept going. We felt a rebirth.”

The “Born of Fire” ad is sophisticated, powerful—a quantum leap beyond the previous year’s ad, which featured George Washington mowing down

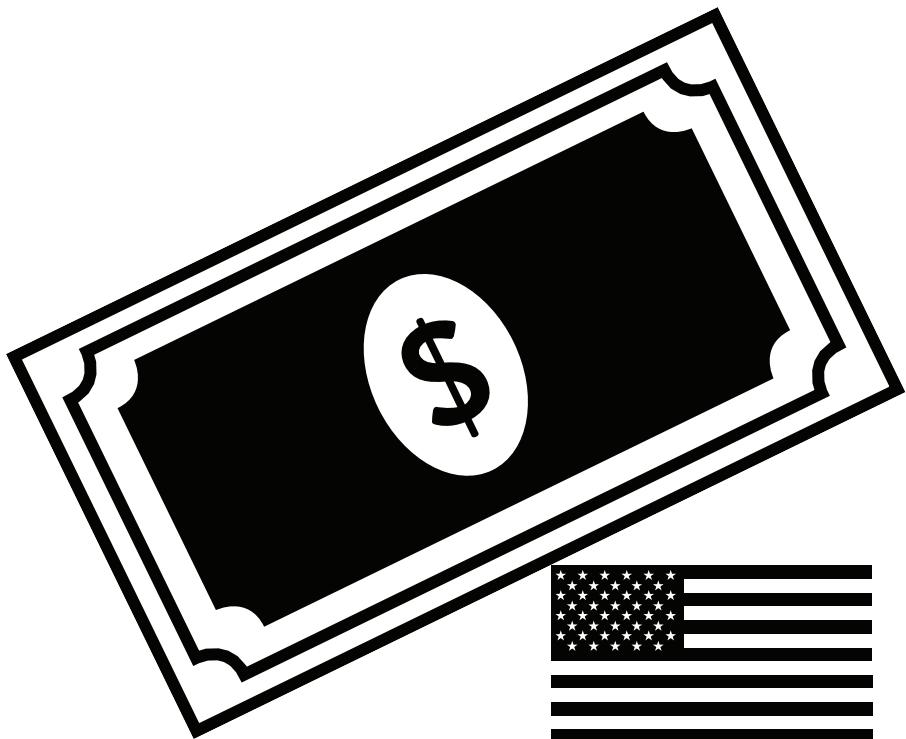
a regiment of redcoats in a Dodge Challenger. “Born of Fire” propels us, metaphorically and physically, through Detroit and its crisis, and onto the stage of its redemption. Eminem, Detroit’s prodigal son, drives the new Chrysler 200 while the voice of Michigan native Kevin Yon, set against the swelling tempo of “Lose Yourself,” gruffly commands us to reconsider our preconceptions of Detroit, to view with fresh eyes what the city has to offer. Images of the Joe Louis fist, figure skater Alissa Czisny doing a haircutter spin, a well-dressed black man crossing the street, Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industrial*, and Eminem easing up to the Fox Theater and joining the Selected of God gospel choir on stage remind us of Detroit’s iconic status as the Motor City. The equation is simple — Chrysler’s rebirth equals Detroit’s rebirth equals America’s rebirth.

“Chest-pounding,” “defiant,” “redemption,” “comeback” — the critics loved it. But in the midst of IFD’s frothy reception, a few haters did emerge. The Made in the USA Foundation argued that while the Chrysler 200 is made near Detroit, the other cars in the IFD ads, like the 300 and the Town and Country minivan, are made in Ontario.

Chrysler’s connection to Detroit’s recovery is also nebulous. Chrysler does have one plant in Detroit — four thousand people build Jeep Grand Cherokees and Dodge Durango SUVs at the

Jefferson North Assembly Plant. And it still produces roughly half its cars and trucks in the Midwest. But Chrysler (like GM and Ford) has been restructuring its US production footprint for decades, with Detroit seeing a steady and permanent decline in investment. Chrysler CEO Sergio Marchionne may have felt a little funny about the company’s dwindling footprint in the city, because he recently rented out the top two floors of the Dime Building in downtown Detroit and has taken to calling them Chrysler House.

Despite the comeback spirit of the ad, recovery has been elusive for Detroit. The state took over the city’s school system in 2009, and residents are currently fighting a push by Governor Rick Snyder to take Detroit through a Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy. In mid March of this year the city was put into state receivership, with the lawyer who structured Chrysler’s bankruptcy appointed as emergency manager with the mandate of saving Detroit from the same fate. If Detroit declares Chapter 9, the state will almost certainly cut services, open (and gut) union contracts, and possibly even rezone the city to make it physically smaller, amputating



peripheral areas. As it stands, vast swathes of Detroit are abandoned, thousands of streetlights are permanently out, and many residents say that police and ambulance services simply never come when they call. According to city officials, more than a third of Detroit residents live in poverty, and unemployment estimates range from 14 to 30 percent. The city's most successful attraction these days is cheap housing for artists and fortune-seekers, alongside a burgeoning "ruin porn" industry for out-of-towners who gawk at the vine-strangled Michigan Central Terminal or snap pictures of the Vanity Ballroom's "unsalvaged" art-deco chandeliers, lamenting the demise of America's golden age. When asked during the 2013 Detroit Auto Show about the city's looming bankruptcy, Marchionne was dismissive, saying, "I don't see what the consequences would be for us."

Marchionne is at least honest — Detroit's bankruptcy would have very little impact on US assemblers. And besides, for all the warm feelings we get watching *IFD* promos about successful Detroiters, Chrysler tells us that the *IFD* ad campaign is not really even about Detroit. According to Chrysler spokesman Michael Palese, "'Imported from Detroit' is sort of a fanciful reference; it was never intended as a literal reference. It's more of an image-and-marketing-type program." Fair enough — all good advertising needs a signifier. In this case, Detroit is a signifier for crisis — America's crisis.

In Chrysler's 2012 "Halftime in America" *IFD* spot, the story of American crisis is explicit. Clint Eastwood walks along a deserted, poorly lit street, amid images of a prairie farmhouse, American flags, and solemn stills of mothers and their children. He tells us: "It's halftime in America too. People are out of work and they're hurting. They're all wondering what they're gonna do to make a comeback, and we're all scared because this isn't a game."

Indeed, the dramatic recovery of the US auto industry following its 2009 restructuring was a bright spot in an otherwise bleak "recovery." Chrysler was able to pay back its government loans in May 2011, six years ahead of schedule, and Fiat bought out the Treasury's remaining shares of the company for \$500 million. Ford was the most profitable automaker in the world in 2010, and GM posted solid earnings, raking in over \$20 billion at its 2010 IPO, the largest in US history.

If we gauge economic recovery by the return of corporate profitability, the Detroit Three are not unique. Profits for both financial and nonfinancial

firms have returned to pre-crisis levels, and Bloomberg recently reported that many companies are sitting on piles of cash. But for the rest of the country, the situation is pretty dismal. Official unemployment hovers around 8 percent, but if you count the people who are forced to work part-time, or who have been dropped from the rolls because they've been looking for a job for a month or longer, the numbers jump to anywhere from 15 to 23 percent of the population.

The Great Recession also exacerbated underlying trends in the job market that don't bode well for the resumption of demand in the long-term. During the downturn, 78.7 percent of the jobs lost were either mid-wage or high-wage jobs like paralegals, carpenters, nurses, and accountants. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, three out of five newly created jobs are part-time, low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. Many companies looking to maximize profits and efficiency are using sophisticated workflow software to avoid overstaffing, forcing workers to clock two- to four-hour shifts that change day to day and week to week.

In 2010, income inequality jumped to its highest level since the government began tracking it in 1967. Inequality rose even higher in 2011 — median household income dropped to \$50,054 with all households in the middle seeing a decline. And while the Dow reached a record high this March, roughly one in ten families, and one in four children, remained dependent on food stamps. The Occupy movement that sprang up in Zuccotti Park in September 2011, and quickly spread around the country and across the world, captured popular anger over the bailout of big banks and companies in the face of increasing debt and poverty for the 99%.

"Halftime in America" also taps into deeper fears that the crisis that swept the country and many parts of the world in 2007 and 2008 is much more serious than a bout of unemployment, a downturn, a few lost jobs. In a 1942 joint piece entitled "An American Proposal," *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Life* magazines declared that the US was the "strongest single power in the postwar world" and discussed how the country should use this power to shape the world and secure US interests. Some scholars argue that this age of dominance is over, that the crisis signals the exhaustion of the US-led model of neoliberal globalization and possibly even of capitalism itself.

Predicting the future is a risky business though, and at the moment the limits to capital are unknowable. Chrysler assures us that the future need not read like a Philip K. Dick novel. At the end of “Halftime in America,” in a tone reminiscent of Reagan’s 1984 “Morning in America” speech, Clint tells us that we’ve seen hard times before, that we simply need to pull together and stop blaming:

We found a way through tough times and if we can’t find a way then we’ll make one. All that matters now is what’s ahead.... This country can’t be knocked out with one punch. We get right back up again, and when we do the world is going to hear the roar of our engines. Yeah. It’s halftime in America and our second half’s about to begin.

The IFD spin-off ads elucidate how we’ll get through the crisis and start our second half. In “Tommy and the Ram,” a wife leaves a note for her husband:

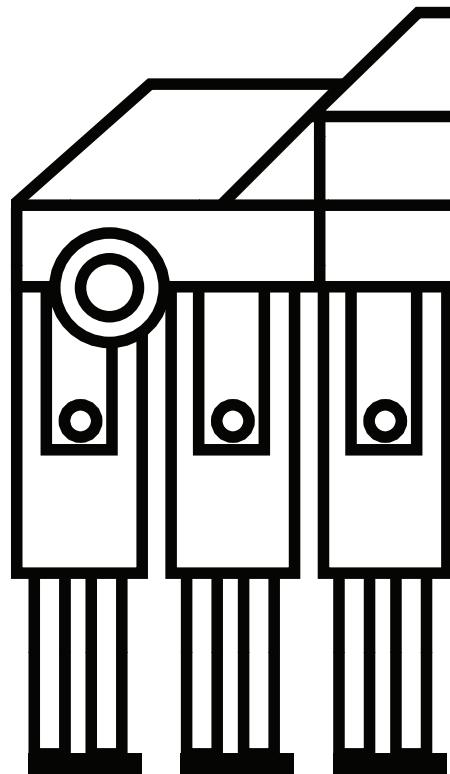
Tommy, I know you’re busy.... I just wanted to tell you that I know it’s been hard and you never once complained or stayed home feeling sorry for yourself. You just said, “Where there’s a truck, there’s a job.” You were so stubborn, you wouldn’t even let us take help from Dad. And you were right.

Then there’s the Chrysler Town and Country ad, “The Quiet Ones,” in which a hockey player’s dad tells us:

Some are quieter than others. Being the squeaky wheel is just not their style. You’ll find them with their heads down, working their butts off. Occasionally they look up from their work and look behind them ... and then put their heads down and begin working again.

In our moment of crisis, the answer is simple, age-old: Work harder. Austerity is good and moral. Keep your head down. Don’t complain. Don’t blame.

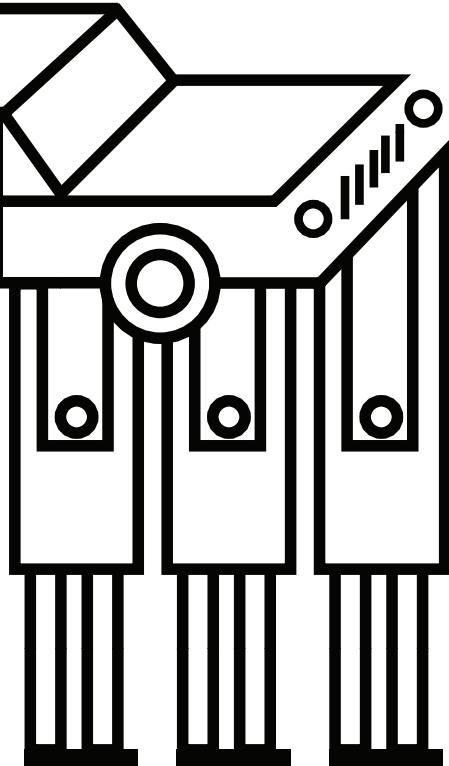
Chrysler’s new “So God Made a Farmer” Dodge Ram ad drives home the theme of hard work. Detroit is replaced by the Heartland, and Clint is replaced by Paul Harvey, America’s favorite right-wing radio icon. In the ad we hear Harvey’s deep, staccato voice, giving his 1978 Future Farmers of America address against a montage of stills featuring pitchforks and cowboy hats. The speech overlays the Genesis creation story with imagery of hardworking farmers nursing dying colts, driving to school board meetings, and carving axe handles out of persimmon roots. François says of the new ad: “We set out to create a call to action to support



farmers and to recognize their place as the foundation of the American character.” Here, American character is defined by a willingness to work hard amidst scarcity, and farmers, we’re told, exemplify this. And perhaps the fact that almost no one is a farmer anymore suggests that we’ve lost this part of our character, that the rest of us have forgotten how to work hard, and that this forgetting, rather than intrinsic contradictions within capitalism, is what got us into a crisis. We need to return to our roots and revive our work ethic.

Paul Harvey had strong feelings about American character. A widely cited *New York Times* obituary remembers Harvey as a man who loved God, country, rugged individualism, and traditional family values. He loathed “welfare cheats, big government, bureaucrats, permissive parents, and leftist radicals.” In a 1965 broadcast entitled, “If I were the Devil (Warning for a Nation),” Harvey says:

If I were the devil, I would take from those who have and I would give to those who wanted, until I had killed the incentive of the ambitious. And then, my police state would force everybody back to work.



Then, I could separate families, putting children in uniform, women in coal mines, and objectors in slave camps. In other words, if I were Satan, I'd just keep on doing what he's doing.

Considering auto's "big government" bailout, Harvey and Chrysler make strange bedfellows, but Chrysler's use of Harvey's 1978 FFA speech is interesting for other, perhaps unintentional, reasons. The speech was about the character of American farmers, and it was also about crisis. The number of family farms in the US was halved between 1950 and 1978. President Carter, onetime Secretary of the Plains, Georgia FFA chapter, was at the convention too. He summed up the farm crisis for the students: "Farm population has gone down. Mechanisms, chemicals, advanced pesticides of all kinds have become an integral part of life. Family structures are not nearly so sound nor stable." Carter linked the crisis to broader problems in the country:

Inflation, my biggest domestic challenge of the present and the future months — there is no way to

win, because when you try to control inflation, control spending, it's inevitable that you aggravate very fine special interest groups, perhaps students, perhaps farmers, perhaps the aged, perhaps some who are unemployed, because there has to be a limit to federal spending or a reduction of deficits and a much sounder management of government money than has been the case in the past.

The President was describing a crisis that even those corduroy-clad high schoolers felt. In 1978, the country was unraveling in what Greta Krippner describes as a simultaneous social, fiscal, and legitimation crisis. In the post-WWII period, the US greatly expanded its political, military, and economic commitments both at home and abroad. Competition from a revived Europe and Japan, military defeat in Vietnam, and growing social unrest at home made these commitments increasingly unmanageable. By the late 1970s, skyrocketing inflation in combination with slow growth and rising unemployment led to the first major crisis in the US since the Great Depression.

Automakers were also sucked into the crisis. Imports, labor unrest, and the skyrocketing costs of oil and raw materials created a serious profit squeeze in the 1970s. A month after the FFA convention, Chrysler CEO John Riccardo approached the Carter administration for tax relief, anticipating losses following a delay in releasing new models. But the government was wary of setting such a precedent and Riccardo was rebuffed. Within a year, Chrysler's situation had deteriorated so severely that bankruptcy was imminent. After intense negotiation, Congress passed the Chrysler Loan Guarantee Act in late 1979, creating a federal board to oversee restructuring of the company in exchange for \$1.3 billion in loans.

The similarities between the 1979-82 auto crisis (which started with Chrysler but soon included Ford and GM) and the 2008-2009 auto crisis are quite striking. Both crises were the result of a major nationwide recession. Both crises led to intensive intervention by the US state and resulted in a Treasury-led restructuring of Detroit automakers (forced restructuring for Chrysler in 1980-81 and GM and Chrysler in 2009). And both crises led to a rapid turnaround for the firms. Chrysler returned to profitability in 1982, paid back its loans in 1983, and by 1985 all three US automakers were making record profits. But what is most striking about the two crises is that they were both resolved by pushing the costs of the crisis onto working people,

allowing the firms to regain profitability and continue on as they always had.

As part of the 1979 loan agreement, the Treasury forced the UAW to open its contract, give back \$462.5 million in wage and benefit gains, and agree to the permanent elimination of more than a third of Chrysler's hourly workforce. The concessions were an historic blow to autoworkers and signaled to the rest of the country that it was open season on organized labor. GM and Ford quickly secured concessions of their own, and in 1981 Reagan made an already clear anti-union message indelible by breaking the air traffic controllers' strike. According to Kim Moody, public employees, truckers, steelworkers, meatpackers, and workers in the trucking, airline, rubber, and agricultural-implement industry had all agreed to major concessions by the end of 1982. Organized labor has never recovered. At less than 12 percent, unionization in the US is now at a seventy-year low and average real wages are lower than they were in 1972.

The same thing happened in the 2009 bailout. Amidst a widespread consensus that autoworkers were to blame for the crisis, the Treasury demanded that the UAW and other unions agree to major concessions in exchange for bailing out their bosses. In his memoir Steve Rattner, former private equity manager and head of "Team Auto," recalls Rahm Emanuel, Obama's chief of staff, barking "Fuck the UAW!" in response to a Team member's reminder that tens of thousands of autoworker jobs were at stake in the crisis. According to Rattner, Emanuel's sentiment left him and his team feeling "newly confident that, at least if Rahm Emanuel had anything to say about it, the President would stand behind [their] tough approach."

Softened up by two decades on the defensive, the UAW agreed to the Treasury's watershed demand that GM and Chrysler "make every effort to achieve labor cost parity with the [non-union] transplants," a demand that essentially negates the right of workers to better their lives through collective bargaining. According to the final agreement, all new-hire wages would be cut in half to around \$14.50 an hour, a tiered wage system (second- and third-tier wages, along with flex, temporary, and contract workers) would be normalized, and a six-year wage freeze and strike ban for all Chrysler and GM workers would go into effect immediately.

As David Harvey says, "Capital never solves its crisis tendencies; it merely moves them around." The auto crisis and the broader financial crisis were

resolved (at least temporarily) by pushing their costs onto workers and taxpayers. Capital accumulation and corporate profitability has resumed through taxpayer-funded Wall Street bailouts, reversing decades of hard-won gains by autoworkers, vilifying school teachers and eliminating public-sector union rights, continually denying the contributions of undocumented workers, using bankruptcy to steal jobs and pensions, and forcing part-time workers to exist at the beck and call of workflow software.

And so the fundamental problem with Chrysler's ad campaign is not its claim that it and Detroit are on the road to recovery together, or that its recovery is the result of some Heartland work ethic that most Americans have forgotten. These are stories designed to make us feel good, to make us believe that working hard will get you somewhere, and that we just need to work harder for things to get back to the way they used to be. But deep down we know that hard work isn't the secret ingredient. Americans have never stopped working hard. Average productivity has increased roughly 2 percent every year since 1990, even during the crisis, while manufacturing productivity increased over 3 percent each year during the same period.

No, the big lie perpetuated by Chrysler's stories is that its recovery is America's recovery, like Charlie Wilson's persistently misquoted but nonetheless pervasive remark that "What's good for General Motors is good for America." This is simply not true anymore. Corporate America might be recovering, but working people aren't. For corporate America to recover, the rest of us have to take a pay cut or lose our job, our pension, our health insurance, our home, our time with our family. Recovered profits aren't trickling down to create decent jobs or pay workers back for concessions.

If we're going to get through this crisis and end up better off on the other side, we need to tell different stories, new stories, stories that don't glorify docility and subservience, stories that don't, as C. Wright Mills once said, confuse personal troubles with public issues. What better place to start than Detroit? Not the Detroit of corporate propaganda, but the Detroit that fights, the Detroit of the sit-down strikes and the Battle of the Overpass. We can draw inspiration and learn lessons from Madison, Chicago, Immokalee, and New York, and any place people speak truth to power. These stories define us. These are the stories we should tell. ■

# The Rise of the Machines

Automation isn't freeing us from work — it's keeping us under capitalist control.

by Gavin Mueller

**O**NE SUMMER during my undergraduate years, I was having trouble scrounging up a job. I needed money fast, so I drew on family connections and applied to America's employer of last resort: McDonald's. I was hired within the week. I'd worked kitchens before, so I figured this would be pretty easy stuff. It was and it wasn't, and it wasn't because it was.

My past experience in the exciting world of fast-casual food prep had gotten me used to a pretty rigid division of labor. Just like in other kitchens, there were "stations": one for fries, one for the grill, and so on. As a native English speaker, I was most often at the drive-through station, which was one of the least popular positions due to the disrespect with which McDonald's customers tend to treat McDonald's employees.

But McDonald's was also different from other restaurants, where I had had to learn at least a few cooking basics. At McDonald's, each station was highly mechanized to minimize the need for employees to know anything. That included counting: the cash register automatically spat out the correct change for me with every transaction. The food prep areas had huge specialized machines to standardize the cooking process. I didn't even have to pay attention when filling up soft drinks — just hit the button for the appropriate size. Practically every machine was connected to some kind of timer. During busy times, the kitchen became a buzzing, beeping

confusion, adding a layer of sonic chaos to an already hectic job.

This is the automated kitchen. At McDonald's, food preparation is designed to require absolutely no thought or technique at all, deskilled as completely as possible by half a century of industrial management. This standardizes the food, so your McNuggets are the same no matter which McDonald's fries them. More importantly, it entails minimal training for employees, a good idea since turnover is high (I did a bit over two months before quitting). A deskilled workforce is a precarious workforce.

In some ways, this deskilling was liberating. Since work asked so little of me other than my physical presence and native language abilities, I was free to do bong hits with my high-school-aged coworkers in the parking lot during breaks. The managers even turned a blind eye. But maybe "free" isn't the right word, since getting high was practically the only way to kill the drudgery. Giving as little a fuck as possible was an exercise in corporate synergy, necessary for my own sanity and for the company's overall corporate strategy. But bong hits notwithstanding, I've never dreaded heading to work more than during that fifteen-minute drive from my parents' house to the restaurant where I listlessly unleashed Big Mac Attacks on suburban office workers. Even stoned, working as an appendage of a machine was awful.

**A**S IT WAS A GENERATION AGO, automation has become a political issue; one Peter Frase, my colleague at *Jacobin*, has been discussing for some time. Frase has developed a "post-work" argument for understanding the politics of automation. In the short term, the new machines benefit capitalists, who can lay off their expensive, unnecessary workers to fend for themselves in the labor market. But, in the longer view, automation also raises the specter of a world without work, or one with a lot less of it, where there isn't much for human workers to do. If we didn't have capitalists sucking up surplus value as profit, we could use that surplus on social welfare to meet people's needs. Meanwhile, whatever work remains could be split up, so we'd have shorter working days and more time for the things that really matter to us.

One of Frase's clearest statements on the politics of the post-work future comes from his summary of the deal the International Longshoremen's

Association worked out with employers, in which dockworkers accepted automation as long as productivity gains could be shared among workers who were no longer needed. This, he argues, is a model for the future, though he admits that longshoremen have extra leverage because they occupy a vulnerable point in capitalism's supply chains. Frase argues that we should model our own political work along these lines, accepting automation while agitating — at the political level, rather than in the workplace — for a universal basic income. Then we have a future where the machines do our dirty work for us, and we can live a life of unalienated labor — or leisure, as we choose.

I love this vision of a future — a "postwork imaginary," in the words of Kathi Weeks. Weeks argues that the Left needs these kinds of utopian visions of a future sans capitalism — one where I can put in a few hours at the office before spending the rest of my day hunting, fishing, rearing cattle, and, of course, writing criticism.

But I'm just not sure how we get there, beyond a nebulous gesture to "after the revolution, comrades." Maybe I'm just impatient, but from where I'm standing, in full-bore capitalism preparing some supersized austerity cuts for everyone, it looks like automation is actually a huge problem, a very real threat to workers, who, with the help of machines, are being casualized, laid off, and made obsolete. If it's disempowering workers and strengthening capital, then it's not making socialism any more achievable.

Despite having written more than a century ago, Karl Marx has a lot of pertinent observations on the introduction of machines into the labor process. In spite of a few positive remarks about bourgeois productive forces in his early years, he was no techno-utopian — for him, the relationship between labor and machines was one of "direct antagonism." The machine was "a power inimical" to the worker, created "for the sole purpose of supplying capital with weapons against the revolts of the working class" — and here Marx singles out the self-acting mule, an early example of automation. His pronouncement is clear: "the instrument of labor becomes the means of enslaving, exploiting, and impoverishing the laborer; the social combination and organization of labor-processes is turned into an organized mode of crushing out the workman's individual vitality, freedom, and independence."

Years later, Harry Braverman, in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, undertook a comprehensive

updating of Marx's analysis of the labor process, taking into account a century of development. This meant a careful examination of technology; as Braverman was at pains to point out, technological development was shaped by capitalist social relations. Automation is not a neutral process; it's a part of capitalist strategy against working-class power.

Braverman sketches out how this strategy unfolds. Before automation, craft workers are responsible for both the conceptual and the manual labor required to produce a commodity. The skill resulting from this unity makes craft workers hard to replace, and thus gives them power to demand concessions from capitalists. Even more than that, workers have control over the labor process, which derives from the advanced knowledge they acquire in the course of the job. In the early days of capitalism, the bosses didn't even know how commodities were made; they just owned the means of production. This put them in a rather precarious position themselves, as anyone who's watched the fourth season of *Breaking Bad* knows. It's dangerous if your workers know more about making the product than you do.

For Frederick Taylor, the godfather of "scientific management," this monopoly of knowledge was where management had to start if it wanted to take control and raise productivity while reducing wages. Taylor devised a process to that end. First, set up an array of surveillance monitors to intensively study the labor process, down to the individual bodily movements of workers. Then use the data to restructure the work process, creating a division between conceptual work (management) and manual work (labor). Then the process of mechanization can begin, in which manual work is replaced with machines, deskilling the labor required in the production process. Taylor was adamant that workers should be given as little agency as possible — the science of management demanded it.

It doesn't stop with manual labor, though. With the advent of computers, even management tasks can be farmed out to machines: work processes can be broken down into component tasks, and machines introduced wherever possible. Braverman relentlessly criticizes the assumption that clerical workers are somehow more skilled than "blue collar" workers, when they are just as deskilled as people working the shop floor, if not more. The fragmentation of administrative tasks leaves even

educated clerks bereft of any coherent concept of what they do, provoking the kind of anomie portrayed in *Office Space* and making it harder for workers to see the contours of shared struggle.

Braverman's overall point is that machines aren't used to make work easier. They are used, and designed to be used, to maintain capitalist control over work processes, especially when the workers start getting organized. They are weapons against potential revolt. It's no coincidence that the disciplinary mechanism of surveillance is such a crucial component in automation. Today, this process continues to intensify: online supermarket Tesco is experimenting with high-tech monitoring bracelets that force its workers into productivity contests — "gamifying" work just as Taylor did to his subjects shoveling pig iron.

It is insufficient to respond by pointing to productivity gains to justify automation — that's a management trick. Automation's prime function is to destroy the ability of workers to control the pace of work. The results are bloody. As Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin document in *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, while management attributed productivity gains in the auto industry to automation, black workers credited "niggermation": the practice of forcing them to work at high speeds on dangerous machinery.

Such shocking terminology underscores a crucial truth. Robots weren't responsible for those cars; rather, it was brutalized black bodies. A 1973 study estimated that sixty-five auto workers died *per day* from work-related injuries, a higher casualty rate than that of American soldiers in Vietnam. Those who survived often suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. This bloodbath is directly attributable to the disempowering effects of automation. Had workers retained control, they wouldn't have worked at such a deadly pace.

**S**OIAL COMMENTATORS are often at pains to comprehend violent opposition to machines. This isn't just a bad understanding of history; even nineteenth-century thinkers, who could see the changes firsthand, were perplexed by the resistance. From the perspective of bourgeois writers, who saw in history a providential march of progress, opposition to new technology seemed irrational. Andrew Ure, the scientist whose *Philosophy of Manufactures* provided Marx with much of his information on new machines, chastised the silk weavers who opposed new loom

technology. Even though he acknowledged that the Jacquard punch card eliminated entire professions and sent pay rates through the floor, Ure treated the weavers' defiance — threatening the inventor and smashing his machine in the public square — as a myopic response to a wondrous and inevitable technological advancement. David Ricardo, while sympathetic to immiserated workers, was ambivalent about whether mechanization could be stopped. The expert consensus seemed to be that machines, love them or hate them, were the future.

We risk reproducing these blind spots in our own day, when we should be much more skeptical of claims to technological progress. After all, automation isn't an inevitable result of capitalism. If the workforce is pliant enough and surplus value extraction high enough, a very low level of machinery will be deployed. This is the case with so-called artisanal mining in Africa, where individuals (often children) with meager tools hop into pits to scrape out minerals by hand. Automation has proven unprofitable enough that grocery stores are replacing self-checkouts with old-fashioned human beings again.

While intellectuals debate the merits and demerits of automation, workers have been quicker to make up their minds. Marx documents how in the seventeenth century, machines like looms and mills were often banned because their introduction caused such social upheaval that it spooked those in power (in one case, the inventor of a mechanized loom was assassinated by nervous authorities). By the nineteenth century, once capital had gained the upper hand, workers repeatedly assaulted the machines that had become instruments of violence against them. When destruction wasn't on the table, workers quit in droves. The introduction of the assembly line in 1913 caused mass desertion in plants owned by Henry Ford, who had to scramble to deal with an astonishing 380 percent employee turnover rate. Waves of worker revolts in the 1960s and 1970s struck at the instruments of production. In 1975, a gang of pressmen at the *Washington Post* held their foreman hostage while they meticulously destroyed and burned the computerized press that had just made them obsolete.

History's most notorious machine-breakers were the Luddites. Though their name is now synonymous with any misguided opposition to new technology, their legacy deserves better. The Luddites revolted against the degradation and acceleration of work: they understood immediately that

their survival was at stake. They wrote their own manifestos, arguing that supposedly neutral technological change was in fact political, shaped by the imperatives of management control. When these arguments fell upon impassive ears, they picked up hammers and went Ludding.

Peter Linebaugh's recent pamphlet "Nedd Ludd and Queen Mab" contextualizes the Luddite rebellion as part of a worldwide insurrection against primitive accumulation, a last-ditch resistance to the Industrial Revolution's forcible destruction of the old ways of life that depended on the commons. Linebaugh argues that the politics of machine-breaking stem from its status as *poiesis*. As Alan Brooke puts it in his review of Linebaugh, "Instead of the 'praxis' of political struggle, an often mechanistic action born of a preconceived theory, the concept of 'poiesis' implies, as its shared root with poetry suggests, an act of creativity, imagination, intuition and spontaneity." What were the Luddites creating? Solidarity in struggle.

I'm not romantic or naïve enough to believe that we'll achieve socialism by smashing things. I don't have a lot of comprehensive answers to that classic radical question, "What is to be done?" But I do know that socialism will have to be achieved by a strong and empowered movement of the oppressed and victimized, which includes the majority of working people. I think it's a mistake to celebrate automation, a process which has such a devastating effect on the working class. Instead, we should encourage people to oppose the technologies they rightly see as threatening their existence, whether it's academics being proletarianized by MOOCs, truckers threatened by Google's smart cars, DJs made obsolete by Pandora algorithms, or even our savvy longshoremen, who are being forced to give up those hard-won benefits (and who are currently accused by management of engaging in some machine-breaking of their own).

Here's a post-work imaginary for you. What if, instead of depending on capitalism to give us all the machines we need for a socialism without scarcity or drudgery, we put the installation of technology on hold until "after the revolution"? Under socialism, automation processes could be guided, controlled, and implemented by workers themselves, in ways that would improve their lives without destroying their communities. Socialism, not capitalism, will get kids out of the mines and away from the drive-through window. And we can't create that future until we stop the present. ■

# Life and Death in the World's Homicide Capital

In a society ravaged by crime, radical ‘law-and-order’ forces end up being at the root of the problem.

by Belén Fernández

Essay



**M**Y FRIEND Mariano runs a fruit and vegetable stand on a busy street in Tegucigalpa, not far from the United States embassy. One afternoon in 2011, I stopped by to find that Mariano's watermelon knife had been stolen by an unkempt pedestrian, who was standing in the middle of a traffic jam threatening motorists with it.

Eventually, all was resolved with the help of a metal baton hidden in a pile of papayas. Assessing the situation afterward, Mariano reasoned that the man was simply under the influence of paint thinner and that there had been no real danger. This was the very same reaction he had had to a recent incident when, sleeping under his stand to deter potential nighttime thefts, he was shot at multiple times by a passerby with mercifully poor aim.

I often wondered if Mariano's "don't worry, it's only paint thinner" attitude was just a defense mechanism for living in the homicide capital of the world, or if specific instances of violence really do feel insignificant in the context of mass disorder.

The June 2009 coup against Manuel Zelaya marked the beginning of the current era of enhanced impunity in Honduras. Shortly afterwards, I traveled to Tegucigalpa for a four-month stay that also was also a psychological experiment in coping with a personal-security-free environment. Despite never going outside with anything more than an inconspicuous black plastic bag containing a cheap cell phone and some small change, I was apprehended on multiple occasions and threatened with death unless I produced something of value.

The first encounter ended auspiciously after I suggested to my would-be assailant that we walk to an ATM. Our conversation en route saved me from having to figure out what to do about not having a bank card, although in exchange for not being robbed or killed it was decided that I would adopt the man's eighteen-month-old son, who was poorly cared for as a result of his mother's crack habit.

The second mugging ended with my being relieved of five dollars and a decrepit alarm clock, though I was ultimately permitted to keep the clock. This happened down the street from a swarm of soldiers and policemen stationed around the Brazilian embassy, where Zelaya had taken up residence after being smuggled back into the country in September 2009. The duties of state security forces had expanded accordingly and now included not only assaulting citizens opposed to the coup, but also preventing "dual-use items" such as ball-

point pens, toothbrushes, shoelaces, tamales, vitamins, and the Bible from entering the embassy.

The most harrowing event took place one night when I awoke to discover that a man had gotten into my second-story pension room after cutting away the screen and removing the glass window slats. My strategic response was to scream maniacally, run into the hall in my underwear, and abstain from sleep for another two years.

Of course, my privileged ability to extricate myself at will from Honduras meant that I wasn't forced to permanently adapt to the reality there. The normalization of violence in that society — which became particularly evident when Honduran friends phoned me to report, for example, witnessing groups of schoolchildren step nonchalantly around a fresh cadaver — is aided by media dissemination of gruesome homicide photographs, a practice that also serves the morbid entertainment and fear maintenance industries.

In her book *Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras*, anthropologist Adrienne Pine recounts an evening in a family home in 2002:

[Ten-year old] Miguelito came in and sat down. "You know that girl who they showed on TV who was killed last night?" he said. His tone would have been no different had he been telling me about the results of a soccer match or the weather. "She was from right down the street. That happened here." "Right here?" I asked him. "Did you know her?" "Yeah, I knew her. She was ten years old. The other was three. They killed them both." "Who killed them?" I asked. "Some guys. People are always killing around here. Because of the gangs." He then saw my camera and, giggling, posed for a picture with our smaller neighbor.

Crucially, the deaths of the two girls in this case are attributed to "*el carro asesino*", described by Pine as "a sort of ethnic (read: social class) cleanser" and the heir to public terror techniques cultivated during the 1980s, heyday of the elite right-wing death squad Battalion 3-16 and its benefactor John D. Negroponte, US ambassador to Honduras.

In a 2002 report on Honduras to the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on Human Rights, United Nations Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir called attention to the strategic mentality of social cleansing as espoused by politicians, business leaders, and journalists "who deliberately incite public sentiment against street children." Her conclusion: "In the end, every child with a tattoo and street child is stigmatized as a criminal who is creating an

unfriendly climate for investment and tourism in the country.”

By pinning the blame for Honduras’ violence on gangs, leaders have obscured the state’s role in creating a climate where extrajudicial police execution of tattooed people and other alleged potential gang members is relatively common. Also obscured is the state’s role in overseeing the socioeconomic deprivation that boosts gang membership.

In a country ruled by a ten-family oligarchy, where a president was recently overthrown for raising the monthly minimum wage to \$290 in certain sectors and attempting to hold a referendum to rewrite a constitution that sanctifies elite interests, it’s unsurprising that some citizens turn to alternate support networks.

As is the case globally, an effective way to get people to support government policies that fundamentally endanger them and their families is to trot out a menace in need of vanquishing. In Honduras, the gang menace and now the narco-menace have proved sufficiently reliable, though the military did briefly revive the communist menace to discredit Zelaya.

In the section of her book on former Honduran President Ricardo Maduro’s zero-tolerance policy on crime — inspired by none other than Rudy Giuliani — Pine analyzes government exploitation of violence and fear:

[T]he language of war resonates with many poor people ... who tend to forget that they themselves will be the victims of a war on crime.... Poor people are more afraid of their own neighbors than of the repressive neoliberal state and industry, despite the fact that they are often themselves labeled criminals by virtue of class and geography.

True to form, my friend Mariano the fruit vendor endorsed the initial appointment of Oscar Alvarez, Maduro’s security minister and a proponent of extrajudicial killings, to the same post in Pepe Lobo’s administration. (Lobo was elected in illegitimate elections held under the post-Zelaya coup regime). A symbol of continuity in more ways than one, Alvarez is the nephew of the late General

Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, School of the Americas attendee and Battalion 3-16 commander.

According to Mariano, who acknowledged the collateral damage that inevitably attended street-cleaning operations, a no-nonsense approach was nonetheless necessary to combat “delinquents.” But there aren’t any structural constraints in place to protect Mariano — who lives in an impoverished neighborhood whenever he’s not sleeping under his fruit stand — from posthumous conversion into a suspected gang member were he to be a victim of police violence himself.

During my own time in Honduras, I started looking for safety in one of the very causes of my insecurity. In the aftermath of the intruder’s appearance in my room, I would catch myself attempting to coordinate my outdoor movements with those of military and police deployments — except, obviously, when they were firing tear gas, water-cannon-propelled pepper spray, and other items at peaceful anti-coup protesters.

A decade after Jahangir’s report mentioning the allegedly detrimental impact on investment and tourism of the ugly surplus of street children in Honduras, the coup has paved the way for the establishment of aseptic neoliberal enclaves called “special development regions” or charter cities. These city-states will be severed from Honduran territory without the consultation of the nation’s citizens and will be unaccountable to Honduran law, governed instead by foreign corporate interests. Extricated from the violent trauma of Honduras proper and from any pretenses to democracy, capital will thus be free to flourish in fulfillment of Lobo’s pledge: “Honduras is open for business.”

A bit of additional trauma is probably required to get the ball rolling, perhaps involving the forced displacement of Afro-indigenous communities living in supposedly uninhabited zones. The 2012 DEA-assisted murder of four Afro-indigenous civilian canoe passengers — including a pregnant woman and a fourteen-year-old boy — in the Mosquitia region underscores the danger of increased US militarization of the country under the guise of fighting narcotrafficking. A review of past

*Structural adjustment programs have amounted to an assault on the population’s security, ensuring corporate enrichment at the expense of public education, healthcare, and government oversight.*

US-Honduran partnerships such as the Contra War-era alliance between the CIA and top Honduran drug lord Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros further calls into question US qualifications for such projects.

The charter city concept, hailed as a visionary solution to poverty, has meanwhile been greeted with such euphoria — at the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Foreign Policy* magazine — that one might forget the whole sweatshop phenomenon and the fact that Honduras has already functioned as a free-market oasis for quite some time.

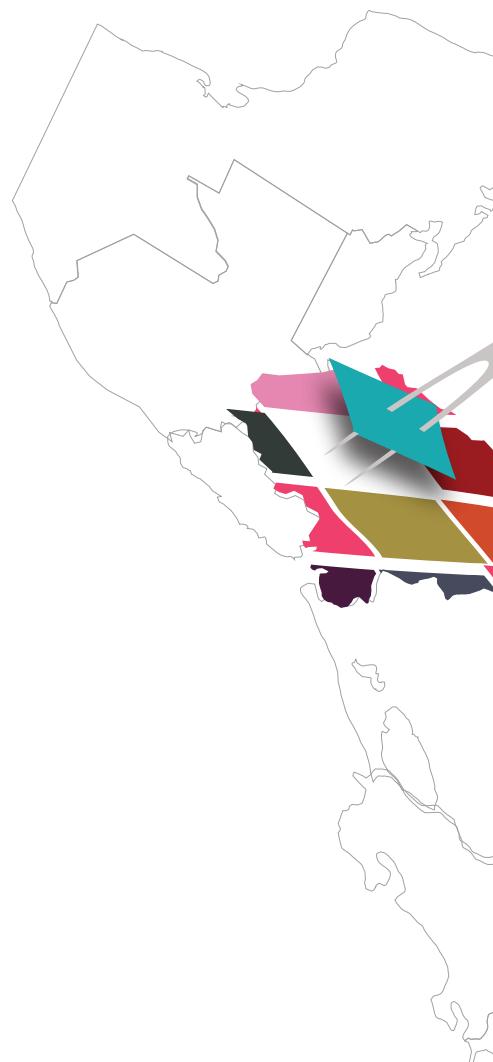
Expanding on the utility of violence to the neo-liberal adventure in the country, Pine emphasizes that structural adjustment programs have amounted to an assault on the population's security, ensuring corporate enrichment at the expense of public education, healthcare, and government oversight. "At the same time," she argues, "people have been distracted by the extremely high levels of violent crime, often carried out by agents of the state and private industry. Thus, many call for a different kind of security than that offered by education and healthcare."

Following the 2009 coup, agents of the state and private industry have had their hands full in areas like the Bajo Aguán in northeastern Honduras, where peasant farmers in pursuit of land rights have encroached on the personal *lebensraum* of the country's wealthiest man, biofuels magnate Miguel Facussé. The task of countering this assault on prosperity and development has fallen to the armed forces — endowed with various forms of US support — and paramilitary actors, who assassinate and otherwise terrorize farmers and their supporters.

One hundred people have reportedly been eliminated since January 2010. To top it off, an October 2011 dispatch in the *Nation* by UC Santa Cruz professor Dana Frank raises this red flag:

New WikiLeaks cables now reveal that the US embassy in Honduras — and therefore the State Department — has known since 2004 that Miguel Facussé is a cocaine importer. US "drug war" funds and training, in other words, are being used to support a known drug trafficker's war against campesinos.

What Honduras really needs, of course, is a war on poverty aimed at eliminating rather than criminalizing deprivation. It needs a war on the crimes that are committed in the name of wars on crime. But, in the meantime, paint thinner is a handy palliative. ■



# Honduran Labyrinth



In a leftward-moving region, the iron fist of Honduras' Porfirio 'Pepe' Lobo makes him Obama's sort of 'democrat.'

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by Todd Gordon &  
Jeffery R. Webber

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**FIRE AT THE LA GRANJA PENITENTIARY** in Comayagua, Honduras killed 361 last February. Guards refused to release prisoners from their cells, while police shot bullets and tear gas at family members trying to save relatives trapped inside.

National police stopped firefighters and rescue workers from entering the prison for almost an hour.

Honduras is a key thoroughfare in the narco-corridor between Colombia and Mexico, and its economy and state apparatuses have long been permeated by drug power and its associated forms of violence. Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, at 82.1 per 100,000 residents. The national prison system, originally designed to hold 8,000, houses 13,000 inmates in 24 prisons. Some cells are packed with over 60 inmates. A mere 53 percent of the prisoners have been convicted, fewer than 397 of the 858 that were in Comayagua before the blaze. Yet a Honduran media narrative depicting hardened, violent gang members

and drug traffickers caught in unfortunate circumstances — if not receiving their just desserts — deflected blame from state officials. Another unhappy event in a hapless country, but certainly not a political one.

That asphyxiating evening, however, encapsulates the anatomy of a much wider, still-unfolding crisis that began with a June 2009 coup d'état. In pre-dawn hours, the military overthrew the social-democratic government of Manuel Zelaya and replaced him with Roberto Micheletti, a figure from a competing faction of Zelaya's own Liberal Party. After Honduras was expelled from the Organization of American States (OAS) for the interruption of democratic rule, fraudulent elections designed to provide the regime with a legitimate face were carried out in November of that year. Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, of the National Party, won and was inaugurated amid mass protests in the streets of Tegucigalpa.

## A People Under Siege

**A** SHADOW of state repression cast itself over those elections, which is unsurprising since the reconstitution of the security forces following the coup involved the recycling of high-ranking personnel who had served under previous dictatorships. The atmosphere was a given. No candidate opposing the coup ran for election. It was boycotted by the National Front of Popular Resistance (FNRP), along with all important international observers except the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, both of which receive financing from the United States. Most Latin American governments refused to recognize the legitimacy of the results.

According to the country's leading human rights organization, Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared of Honduras (COFADEH), there were 43 politically motivated assassinations of civilians associated with the resistance movement between the time of the coup and the end of February 2012. COFADEH acknowledges that this figure is a low estimate, as intimidation and fear of reprisal prevents communities and family members from reporting many such deaths. In November 2011, a report issued by Rights Action listed a higher figure of 59 politically motivated assassinations. Belying official announcements of national reconciliation and a return to democracy following Lobo's victory, repression intensified immediately after he took

power. COFADEH reported 250 violations of human rights in Lobo's first three months alone.

As part of the pattern of intensified repression under Lobo, more than a dozen journalists were murdered by unidentified attackers between January 2010 and November 2011. Many of them had opposed the coup or highlighted corruption and human rights abuses. "Not a day has passed since the start of the year 2012," notes Reporters without Borders, "without a journalist, local media owner, or social commentator receiving a phone call to say his or her life is in danger." This trend led Reporters without Borders to conclude that post-coup Honduras was "the world's most dangerous country for journalists in the first half of 2010."

In the Bajo Aguán Valley, peasant activists fighting for access to land in the fertile palm-oil-producing region of northern Honduras have been under attack by both private and state security forces working for one of the most powerful landowners in the country, Miguel Facussé. He is also a notorious supporter of the coup, with ties to narco-traffickers cited in US embassy documents. Historian Dana Frank chronicled an incident exemplifying these attacks: in June of 2011, "seventy-five policemen destroyed the entire campesino community of Rigores, burning down more than 100 houses and bulldozing three churches and a seven-room schoolhouse; not one has been charged."

In the immediate fallout from the coup, Human Rights Watch notes that "key civil liberties, including freedom of the press and assembly," were suspended. The military "occupied opposition media outlets, temporarily shutting down their transmissions. Police and military personnel responded to generally peaceful demonstrations with excessive force. This pattern of the disproportionate use of force led to several deaths, scores of injuries, and thousands of arbitrary detentions." The Lobo government, which succeeded Micheletti's, has predictably failed to launch any serious investigation into these abuses.

## Narcos and the State

**"W**E ARE ROTTEN to the core," former congressperson and police commissioner Gustavo Alfredo Landaverde told the *Miami Herald* just weeks before being silenced by motorbike assassins at a traffic light in Tegucigalpa on 7 December 2011. According to Landaverde's conservative estimate, one out of every ten

members of the Honduran Congress is tied to drug cartels. The Honduran national police force is linked to death squads and traffickers, and judges and prosecutors are likewise implicated in complex and overlapping networks of power. According to Franck, “drug trafficking is now embedded in the state itself, from the cop in the neighborhood all the way up to the very top of the government.”

The impunity with which the coercive forces of the state operate was perhaps no more clearly demonstrated than when Tegucigalpa police murdered Rafael Alejandro Vargas, the twenty-two-year-old son of Julieta Castellanos, a university rector and member of the government’s Truth Commission, as well as Rafael’s friend Carlos Pineda. None of the suspects, all police, has been brought to justice.

In March 2012, a law facilitating the military’s takeover of ordinary police functions was extended for three months after having been introduced on a temporary basis in late 2011. Lobo has indicated his desire to make the initiative permanent. Honduras would not be the first country to take such a course of action; since his controversial election in nearby Mexico in December 2006, Felipe Calderón’s overt military escalation of the drug war has left tens of thousands dead. Colombia had an earlier start still: Plan Colombia and its successors have channelled \$3.6 billion in American funds into the militarization of counter-narcotics regulation and enforcement in that country since 2000.

These sketches of a consolidating authoritarian state beneath a thin democratic veneer allow us to begin to understand why Washington has so powerfully backed the recent Honduran trajectory. In *Empire’s Workshop*, Greg Grandin presents Ronald Reagan’s 1980s counterinsurgency campaigns in Central America as a dress rehearsal for the subsequent American wars in the Middle East. A new stage in this dialectical exchange seems now to have arrived, with declining troop numbers in Afghanistan and Iraq freeing up personnel for a return to the Central American theater, and the Obama administration drawing novel tactical lessons and strategic variations from Bush’s war on terror.

## The Stakes

**D**OUG STOKES correctly remarked in *America’s Other War* that “by the end of the Cold War the ‘war on drugs’ increasingly came to replace the ‘war on communism’ as

the primary justification for continued US military aid to South American governments.” Both of these conjunctural battle postures, of course, were meant to conceal a deep continuity across the epochs in the underlying promotion of strategic US economic and geopolitical interests in the region. Likewise, in Honduras today, the intensification of a militarized war on drugs has facilitated opportunities for new rounds of capital accumulation through deep and extensive neoliberal restructuring of the country under Lobo, while providing the basis for a fuller projection of US military power against the left-wing social movements and governments that have taken root elsewhere in the region.

The immediate and medium-term interests of US and Canadian capitalist forces in the country include mining, hydroelectricity, tourism developments, the banana export industry, textiles, auto parts, and other manufacturing activities in the low-waged female sweat zones of the industrial city of San Pedro Sula. Foreign investors are also looking to take advantage of Lobo’s plans to privatize the country’s public education, electrical, and water systems, as well as the state-owned ports.

But there are wider Central American concerns at hand, according to longtime Honduras analyst Annie Bird. She notes a resurgence of the “business- and government-backed death squads of the 1980s” that represent “powerful interests promoting large-scale development projects, including tourism corridors, open-pit mines, biofuel plantations, hydroelectric dams, carbon-credit forests, and more” throughout Central America. Guatemala is once again reliably under the hand of former general Otto Pérez Molina, Panama under the right-wing government of Ricardo Martinelli, and Costa Rica under the center-right Laura Chinchilla.

But the governments of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, through gutted and pacified since the 1980s, represent potential barriers to uninhibited foreign investment, resource extraction, and longer-term US efforts to tame Latin America’s tilt to the Left.

Social movements opposed to aggressive mining have emerged in powerful form even within those countries governed by the Right. New waves of conflict around natural resource extraction and its attendant processes of dispossession have meant that disputes over control and access to land have repeatedly seen indigenous and peasant

communities face off against mining multinationals and their paramilitary and state backers. If drugs and gangs dominate the diplomatic discourse of politicians, capital's access to land and resources must be at the root of any materialist explanation for the expanding militarization of Central America, Honduras included.

It is abundantly clear where the US hopes to position itself amid these regional developments. At the outset of 2011, it was announced that the nineteen-year-old Central American Integration System would be expanding its remit to include the coordination of a new Regional Security Operations Center (**COSR**), with the guidance and funding of the United States and the Inter-American Development Bank. This new regional security strategy is to explicitly model itself on the avowed successes of the 2007 Mérida Initiative in Mexico – itself modelled on Bill Clinton's Plan Colombia – and its Central American corollary, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (**CARSI**). Also in 2011, two regional training centers and security operations were established in Panama, including what will become the headquarters of **COSR**. Logistics for the new operations will be supplied by the Joint Inter-Agency Task Force, a subordinate unit of United States Southern Command, which is responsible for coordinating US involvement in regional security, immigration, and drug operations in the area. According to Bird, police representatives from across Central America and the Dominican Republic will be trained to carry out the new regional security strategy at the headquarters once it is operational.

### The Afghan-Iraqi-Honduran Nexus

**B**Y COUNTERING transnational organized crime, we promote stability, which is necessary for external investment, economic growth, and minimizing violence," Colonel Ross A. Brown explained to the *New York Times* from his headquarters in the Soto Cano Air Base just outside of Tegucigalpa – the only American air base between the US and South America. "We also are disrupting and deterring the potential nexus between transnational organized criminals and terrorists who would do harm to our country."

Before being stationed in Central America, Brown spent 2005 and 2006 serving as an armored cavalry commander in southern Baghdad. His Joint Task Force-Bravo has under its command six

hundred US troops who are responsible for American military activities throughout all of Central America, in coordination with the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Border Patrol, and US Army Rangers.

Since the coup, the US has built up its air base presence in Honduras through the establishment of three forward operating bases, ostensibly for drug interdiction – one each in the rainforest, savanna, and coast. According to one enamored *Times* reporter, this new tactical orientation "showcases the nation's new way of war: small-footprint missions with limited troops, partnerships with foreign military and police forces that take the lead in security operations, and narrowly defined goals, whether aimed at insurgents, terrorists, or criminal groups that threaten American interests." He goes on to explain that the new strategy in Central America "draws on hard lessons learned from a decade of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq, where troops were moved from giant bases to outposts scattered across remote, hostile areas so they could face off against insurgents."

The key distinction in the Central American theater is that US troops are officially prohibited from combat, even while accompanying and providing logistics for elite local security units such as the Honduran Tactical Response team. In practice, this careful delineation of duties doesn't mean much. Last May, at least four people were gunned down by Honduran forces firing from a US State Department helicopter, under the supervision of uniformed DEA and US Navy agents.

In addition to the military bases in the country, the massive amount of military aid and high-level diplomatic support and engagement offered to the Lobo regime by the Obama administration reveal the extent to which the US considers Honduras to have resumed Reagan-era strategic significance. Under Lobo, Honduras is being reconstituted as a hub from which to combat popular movements and left-leaning Latin American governments, and to promote the immediate interests of US capital as well as the long-term geopolitical goals of the US state. Obama's proposed budget for 2013 offers more than double the previous year's military and police aid to Honduras. The country received more than \$50 million in Pentagon contracts in 2011, and 62 percent of all Defense Department funds directed toward Central America that year went to Honduras. Referring to the drug war and wider US

interests in the region, American ambassador to Honduras Lisa J. Kubiske characterized the Honduran armed forces under Lobo as “eager and capable partners in this joint effort.”

On 18 January 2012, Lobo was invited to Southern Command headquarters in Miami to meet with high-ranking officials. It was revealed that the US would offer new personnel to assist in further security operations in Honduras, beginning with the appointment of State Department security specialist Oliver Garza as special adviser to Lobo. A month later, Vice President Joe Biden visited the country, pledging that “the United States is absolutely committed to continuing to work with Honduras to win this battle against the narcotraffickers,” a battle to which he promised to contribute \$107 million worth of new police and military funding through CARSI.

### Imperial Statecraft

**F**ROM THE OUTSET, the coup against Zelaya provided the United States with a diplomatic opportunity to recover some of its influence in the region, which had waned since the 1990s. In its calculated response to the coup, the Obama administration has been careful not to be seen as lending open support while nevertheless subtly undermining Zelaya and the anti-coup resistance. To brazenly champion the violent attack on procedural democracy in Honduras, in a context in which even the moderate governments of the region issued sharp condemnations of it, would have undermined whatever political capital Obama had mustered from the already waning liberal credentials of his early tenure. But this did not gainsay American aspirations to contain Zelaya and the reform movement in Honduras. Through the prism of US diplomacy, the events of June 2009 were framed as a regrettable interruption of the constitutional order in which Zelaya shared much of the blame. Micheletti’s government was depicted as transitional, and the Lobo regime, once established, was celebrated as a democratic godsend.

At each turn in diplomatic developments we witness this stylized progression. Referring on the day of the coup to the “detention and expulsion of President Mel Zelaya,” Obama merely called on “all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms, the rule of law, and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.” There was no reference to a coup, nor was there any

demand for Zelaya’s immediate return, and the forces involved were not singled out for rebuke. Instead, attention was drawn to “all political and social actors,” tacitly implicating Zelaya and his supporters as responsible for his forceful removal from power. The Obama administration declared only that Zelaya was the rightful president of Honduras and should be allowed to return home after the OAS, the European Union, the UN General Assembly, and the presidents of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile had denounced the coup and demanded Zelaya’s restitution.

Over the course of July and August 2009, the United States sought to impose a mediation of the conflict through the Costa Rican president at the time, Oscar Arias, in what became known as the San José Accord. Micheletti, still in power at the time, initially agreed to participate in the proceedings, as the US was evidently willing to insist on draconian conditions from Zelaya before arriving at any resolution. Among the non-negotiable demands presented by the US were that Zelaya end any and all commitment to constitutional reform, and that he form a national unity government with the plotters of the coup that had just overthrown his democratically elected government.

Despite the fact that the parameters of the accord would have allowed significant elements of the authoritarian regime to continue in power through a “national unity” coalition, and that it would have utterly defanged Zelaya’s ability to build toward social justice and participatory democracy through constitutional reform, it was Micheletti, not Zelaya, who torpedoed the San José agreement. Micheletti withdrew from the talks, ultimately refusing to countenance even the idea of Zelaya’s return to Honduras under any conditions. He was emboldened by American support. From the outset, the US lent credibility to Micheletti’s undemocratic government by presupposing its legitimacy as an actor with which to negotiate, and further, its legitimacy as a major player within the envisioned coalition of national unity.

### Cartagena Accord

**B**UT IF THE US worked hard to pave the way for the legitimization of the Lobo government and its reintegration into the international community, it was ironically their regional nemesis, Venezuela, that would ultimately bring those efforts to a successful conclusion.

Promoted by Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos and his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chávez, the Cartagena Accord was signed on May 22, 2011 by Santos, a representative for Chávez, Lobo, and Zelaya. In exchange for Chávez's backing of Honduras's readmission into the OAS—achieved on June 1—the Honduran government pledged to allow an end to Zelaya's exile and to annul all legal proceedings against him. The agreement further committed the regime to protect the rule of law, to ensure the protection of human rights, and to permit popular plebiscites around political, economic, and constitutional matters. Finally, the Lobo regime, through the Cartagena proceedings, pledged to recognize any move by the FNRP to transform itself into a formal political party.

Few of the commitments made by the Lobo regime in the Cartagena proceedings were novel. Lobo had long ago formally committed his government to act within the rule of law, ensure the protection of human rights, to permit popular plebiscites around political, economic, and constitutional matters, and to recognize any political party formation the FNRP should decide to establish. There is no reason to believe, therefore, that simply because of Chávez's support the Accord represented a serious progressive step for the Honduran people, or a setback for US interests. In fact, the Cartagena Accord provided *ex post facto* approval by Chávez and Zelaya for the political line to which the US has been wedded since Lobo was elected—that the Honduran government is genuinely committed to national reconciliation and deserves reintegration into the international community.

The precise reasons that motivated Chávez to support Cartagena are unclear. One possibility is the desire for stronger diplomatic ties to Colombia to ensure the continuity of economic relations with a major trading partner; another is suggested Venezuelan aspirations to upstage Brazil as the major diplomatic player on the South American left.

“Everyone is happy that Zelaya has returned,” said Bertha Cáceres of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras when we spoke with her shortly after the Cartagena Accord had been signed. His right of return “should have always been unconditional. He’s a human being and he has the right to return to his country. However, we believe that the Cartagena Accord is in accordance with US strategy. Juan

Manuel Santos, the president of Colombia, played a key role, alongside Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan president. For us it’s unacceptable that someone like Juan Manuel Santos, a recognized backer of paramilitarism in Colombia, and a violator of human rights, is talking about reconciliation and peace.”

In an interview with Carlos Amaya, son of the renowned Honduran novelist Ramón Amaya Amador and an important grassroots activist, we heard a common refrain of the Honduran resistance: “The Cartagena Accord opened up possibilities for resolving a critical ‘problem’ of the resistance that the Obama administration had been seeking to solve since the initial coup: how to channel the popular mobilization into an electoral path, how to defeat the resistance in the streets, and how to stamp out the construction of popular power and direct democracy outside of parliamentary institutions.”

Fraudulent elections may have brought to office a new face of the regime; Zelaya may have returned to Honduras; the Cartagena Accord may have been signed; but the coup—despite lacking the explicit initial backing of the United States—was successful in truncating Zelaya’s presidency, stifling efforts at constitutional reform, and instituting the basis for an authoritarian, militarized extension of the neoliberal political economy. The region’s progressive forces (leery of suffering Zelaya’s fate) and right-wing forces (emboldened by the successes of the coup) have undoubtedly taken notice. “We support the work that President Lobo is doing to promote national unity and strengthen democracy,” former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at a news conference in Guatemala shortly after Lobo’s assumption of power. “What we’ve been seeing is a restoration of democratic practices and a commitment to reconciliation that gives us great hope,” Obama explained to reporters in the Oval Office as Lobo sat next to him in October 2011. Lobo has demonstrated his “strong commitment to democracy.”

The democratic delusion on offer here has been a staple of US-Honduran relations since the late nineteenth century. If Lobo is the latest emblem of that delusion in practice—having apparently re-established law and order after the unseemly interruption of Micheletti—he also exposes its ruthless center: elections as theater, direct rule by capital, and unmediated violence in civil society. We have seen much of this before, and we’ll see it again. ■

# When the Union's the Boss

While some level of personal sacrifice on the part of union organizers is inevitable, that can't justify rendering them powerless over their own workplace conditions.

by Ned Resnikoff

Essay

In 2009, *Monthly Review* published an open letter from three labor activists saying that their union — UNITE HERE — had developed “a cynical and manipulative system of control” designed to create “a cult-like relationship of dependency between staff and their supervisors.” This system, known as pink sheeting, first came to public attention during a prolonged and ugly divorce between the union’s two halves, UNITE and HERE. While the *Monthly Review* authors called the UNITE leadership’s decision to publicize the existence of pink sheeting a “sensational” and “not sincere” attempt to discredit HERE, they also said the practice itself was seriously troubling.

Under the pink sheet regime, a lead UNITE HERE organizer would persuade workers and lower-level organizers to divulge personal information, often about past traumas. The lead organizer would frame this as a private disclosure, a gesture of trust and connection. But if the lower-level

organizer ever second-guessed a command from on high, the lead organizer would use that personal information to pressure the subordinate into carrying out orders.

Hotel worker turned **UNITE HERE** organizer Julia Rivera told the *New York Times* that her supervisors had pushed her to reveal details of how she was sexually abused as a child. Then “her supervisors ordered her to recount her tale of abuse again and again to workers they were trying to unionize at Tampa International Airport, convinced that Ms. Rivera’s story would move them, making them more likely to join the union.”

The authors of the *Monthly Review* letter wrote: “This command and control-style union culture is endemic to much of the movement.” And indeed, while pink sheeting may have been limited to **UNITE HERE**, the mentality that spawned it is not. Take, for example, the actions of **SEIU** earlier that year against its own members: In a May 2009 *Labor Notes* essay, Union of Union Representatives (**UUR**) president Malcolm Harris announced that his organization had filed unfair labor practice charges against **SEIU** for trying to bust its own staff’s union.

The “reorganization” within **SEIU** that led to the termination of seventy-five **UUR** members, wrote Harris, “reveals **SEIU**’s cynical view of organizers and organizing. While it lays off experienced and dedicated International organizers, it is outsourcing our work to non-union contractors and hiring dozens of temporary staff for health care reform efforts.”

These are the stories that are known, the ones that have attracted broader attention. But in many other cases, labor unions have managed to keep shoddy treatment of their own workers quiet. Organizers and other employees, perhaps fearing that they will be blacklisted from the movement or inadvertently help to discredit it, only talk among themselves about the wrongful terminations, low pay, tyrannical bosses, and outright union-busting they face.

The stories I’ve heard are shocking: people being ordered to “organize” around ancillary political issues that have nothing to do with their real job descriptions, an acquaintance who found her position summarily liquidated and herself blacklisted due to an employer’s personal vendetta, countless examples of union-busting.

The problem here is not any particular malice on the part of union management. The problem is that they feel the same pressures as any large

employer: the constant need to maximize efficiency and workforce flexibility while minimizing labor costs. Whereas a corporation feels that pressure most acutely from competitors and shareholders, unions experience it in the form of political reaction and corporate opposition to unionization. Despite these differences, the outcomes are remarkably similar: managers in both sectors constantly look for new ways to extract productivity from their labor forces in exchange for stagnant — or diminishing — pay.

But while labor leaders and corporate bosses face analogous pressures, their situations are not identical. Union bureaucracy is exceptional because the ideology that helps to sustain its sometimes exploitative labor practices is also exceptional. Pro-labor sentiment demands that union employees tolerate their own exploitation as a necessary condition of working to free others from exploitation.

Granted, some other employers use related modes of ideological conditioning to acclimate their workers to shoddy labor conditions. For example, Capitol Hill staffers accept remarkably low pay and long hours in exchange for the prestige of traversing the halls of power. A young creative professional — a designer, say — might tolerate low pay and no benefits because he loves the casual-cool ethos and high social capital of his workplace and industry.

We might be tempted to say these examples are basically identical to the case of the union staffer, but we can’t do that if we’re to take the ideology of unionism seriously. If promoting workplace democracy is a fundamentally noble goal, then those who make sacrifices in order to achieve that goal are not suckers. We should admire, not pity, the idealistic college graduate who gives up a shot at a high-paying private-sector career in order to become an organizer. We should also assume that she is not stupid, that she’s aware of the great personal and financial hardships organizers endure. In that case, the line between exploitation and laudable sacrifice becomes a lot fuzzier.

To look at it from the employer side: When a private employer insists that you must accept precarity as the price of a “fun” job and the ability to wear a hoodie to work, we can dismiss this as obviously ridiculous. Not only is the inverse relationship between the employer’s ability to provide security and the “fun-ness” of the work environment rather dubious, but meeting the basic subsistence needs of workers is a greater moral imperative

than providing free pizza on Fridays. But labor unions don't offer their staff an ideology of fun and free pizza; they claim, with some moral force, that their staff is involved in an emancipatory project of monumental importance. Furthermore, unlike most other employers, they can plausibly claim that any effort to give, say, regular hours to their employees would undermine their ability to satisfy their other moral imperative.

Nonetheless, we should be able to draw up some general principles that help to distinguish exploitation from necessary sacrifice. After all, employees in plenty of other professions, like nursing, find ways to balance worker solidarity with their profession's unique ethical obligations. It is one thing to say that a worker has professional obligations; it's quite another to say that he must abandon all of his concerns about workplace conditions and bow to the limitless authority of the boss.

So while some level of personal sacrifice on the part of union organizers is not only inevitable but reasonable, that can't possibly justify rendering them powerless over their own workplace conditions. To argue otherwise would be to argue against unionism itself. Even the labor movement's right-wing enemies acknowledge that it would be radical to call for the abolition of teachers unions on the sole basis that teachers serve a higher calling. Any attempt to distinguish union organizing from those professions that deserve collective decision-making is bound to be incoherent.

The only lucid arguments for tolerating union staff abuse can be extended to the workforce as a whole. The logic of organizer exploitation is the logic of worker exploitation in general, and therefore corrosive to the very idea of unionism.

Consider the "shit happens" defense, a less ideologically charged cousin of the appeal to shared sacrifice. This line of reasoning excuses abusive practices in a union on the grounds that all organizers and other staff have had similar experiences. In other words, the person making the complaint should not think she's special. Low or no pay, long hours, sadistic bosses, and so forth just come with the territory, and everyone should learn to accept that.

It shouldn't be too hard to guess how unions respond to that argument when it comes from bosses in workplaces they seek to organize. Yet I've heard senior union staff readily apply it to their own work environments, seemingly without any pangs of cognitive dissonance. In one case, when

told that an intern at a labor organization had frequently received his weekly stipend several weeks late, one of his superiors just shrugged, said "shit happens," and pointed out that plenty of interns work for no pay at all.

Of course, this particular intern had been promised a modest weekly stipend, and had taken the job expecting to receive it. Imagine how this same labor organization would likely react if it were organizing workers whose boss routinely violated prior agreements and justified these violations by pointing out how much worse labor conditions elsewhere happened to be. The special exception that this intern's supervisor made for his own staff may not be malicious, but it is both damaging and incoherent.

A slightly more plausible argument could be made that granting union staff any collective representation would lead to unsustainable internal politics. After all, there would be nothing to prevent the new staff union from making unreasonable demands, raiding members' dues to grant themselves lavish salaries, overriding strategic concerns out of pure self-interest, and so on. Union leadership might argue that giving the staff control over the bureaucratic wing of the union would result in corruption, stagnation, or self-destruction.

Such a claim is superficially reasonable, but again, does not apply only to organized labor. In recent years, the American right has marshalled similar arguments against teachers unions. In Wisconsin, for example, Governor Scott Walker and his allies insisted that they would not be able to balance future state budgets as long as the state's public school teachers were able to collectively bargain for their wages and benefits. The subtext of the argument was that selfish, intransigent teachers would demand obscene pay at the expense of everyone else who lived in the state.

To unionists, that was unthinkable. For one thing, the fight to save collective bargaining rights took place amid a budget debate during which the teachers had already made significant concessions.

The Right's depiction of teachers as psychotically rapacious was just sort of bizarre. Teachers are the people who we trust to safeguard our children's physical safety and mental development; if, in reality, most teachers are interested merely in fattening their wallets at the expense of the school district, the taxpayer, and their own students, then the fact that they have the same workplace rights as everyone else is not the problem. No one who fits that psychological profile should be allowed

anywhere near a school, and if we had any reason to believe that it was an accurate description of most public school teachers, then enrolling America's children in school could be reasonably considered a reckless act of child endangerment.

Thankfully, we can dismiss that scenario as absurd. But if we feel comfortable trusting the majority of teachers with the wellbeing of our children for a large chunk of the day, then surely we can grant them the same discretion when they bargain for contracts. If anything, their ability to do harm is much more limited in contract negotiations than during the school day.

The same logic applies to organizers. It is difficult to imagine the person who becomes an organizer just for the money. Unions so often get away with mistreating organizers in large part because of the sincere passion and conviction that brought those organizers into the profession. Just as it is impossible to imagine an entire union of teachers dedicated to bleeding the taxpayers dry at all costs, it is equally hard to imagine an entire staff of organizers whose only aim is to extort money from their union. If they do not care deeply about furthering the cause of unionism, they're unlikely to be organizers; and if they do care deeply, then they're unlikely to make collective decisions that they know will financially ruin the union.

Of course, the idea that union staff would have *any* policy-setting abilities is enough to make some people uncomfortable. This leads us to the most persuasive argument against giving collective bargaining rights to organizers and other staff: the union is supposed to be an agent of the membership's will, and no one else's. True unionists tend to (rightfully) view staff-run unions as oligarchies, disconnected from the concerns of their members and little better than other hierarchical private entities.

In the event that union staff formed their own bargaining unit, they would be forming an institutional counterweight to the uninhibited control of their members — or at least to their members' elected representatives. Therefore, any union with a staff union is at greater risk of becoming a *staff-run* union. Some of the risk could be contained by clearly defining the extent of the staff's bargaining power — for example, by banning them from bargaining over anything but wages, hours, benefits and grievance procedures — but such regulations never entirely work. They often turn previously explicit demands into implicit demands. (This was

the case in the recent Chicago teachers' strike, which was nominally about wages and teacher evaluations but fundamentally had quite a lot to do with charter schools and resources for students.)

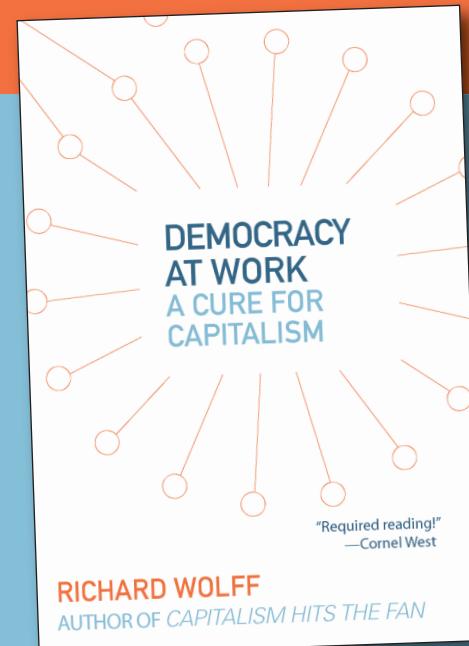
Of course, objections of a similar kind are often made to the existence of public-sector unions. Public sector employees, the argument goes, are meant to carry out the wishes of the democratic *polis* (or at least, again, of its elected representatives). They are not supposed to shape the policy of their own departments by going against the will or interests of the people. The key difference here is that public-sector employees, unlike union staff, are expected to have some political input anyway; they are both employees *and* citizens (and therefore, in a distant sense, employers), whereas union staff are not themselves members of the unions they serve.

Another important distinction lies not between civil servants and union organizers, but between ideal theory and gritty reality. Yes, in an ideal democracy, the people would be the absolute sovereign. And yes, in an ideal union, so would the members. But there is no such thing as a neutral institution, and the institutions created by both governments and unions to serve their own interests will inevitably have agendas of their own. No one truly believes that government departments are capable of perfectly divining majoritarian consensus and carrying it out without the slightest deviation. Few people would even desire that state of affairs, given that government employees often know more about what they're doing than the average voter. We acknowledge that, in the real world, we need to grant government employees some level of discretion.

Similarly, though organizers should strive to represent their members as best as they can, we must acknowledge that union staff will sometimes pursue their own interests, or imperfectly carry out the wishes of the membership. We must also acknowledge that strategic researchers or labor attorneys may know more about their jobs than the unions that employ them. The only way to entirely eliminate the tension between staff and membership would be to have unions without staff, where all of the essential functions are carried out by volunteer members. Even then, however, different volunteer members would have different beliefs, levels of knowledge, and interests — much like citizens who are also public employees. Besides, modern unions *need* staff. Private employers have

**“Required reading!”**

—Cornel West



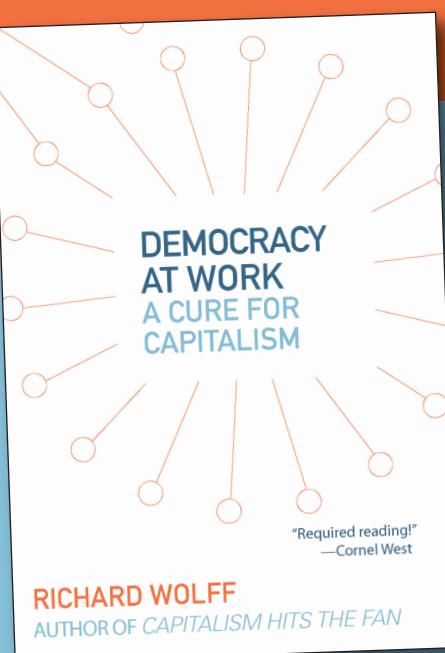
developed exceedingly sophisticated union-busting tactics over the past century, and beating them often requires a dedicated team of communicators, researchers, lawyers, organizers, and statisticians, among others.

We could no more do away with professional union staff than with modern government bureaucracy. As a result, some level of tension between contradictory interests is inevitable. But no serious unionist would suggest that this tension is reason enough to do away with public-sector unions. We can certainly conceive of a situation in which the collective will of a public-sector union goes against the collective will of the public at large, but employees of the public are still *employees*, and it is a fundamental tenet of unionism that a workplace is unjust when its workers have no recourse to democratic decision-making. A state-owned workplace is a workplace like any other.

If we accept that reasoning, then it is difficult to imagine the grounds on which we might argue that a union's bureaucracy is *not* a workplace like any other. If the tension between workplace democracy and the will of the stakeholders is tolerable in a government, it should surely be tolerable in a union. In fact, a union is easier to consider in simple employer-employee terms than a state. Whereas public employees are also citizens who elect their own employers, the power relations between elected union leaders and union staff are far more easily conceptualized using the traditional boss-worker bifurcation.

It seems that labor leaders cannot escape from unionism's categorical imperative: Any abuse, exploitation, or union-busting is a fundamental betrayal of the union ideal. A union president who tries to prevent his staff from organizing might acknowledge this truth but counter that it's not his problem. In the *real* world, he might say, the leadership and senior staff are here to serve the interests of the members. Sometimes those interests will directly contradict the lofty principles of unionism.

That's all well and good, but it doesn't sound much like the attitude of someone who considers himself part of a *movement*. In a time when social unionism seems like the last best chance for organized labor, that kind of atomized thinking is retrograde at best, and suicidal at worst. If workplace democracy is to survive and grow over the next few decades, it requires the cooperation of a diverse coalition in its favor. Firm principles unify such coalitions. Unions abandon them at their peril. ■



A new historical vista is opening before us in this time of change. Wolff writes in this compelling new manifesto for a democratic alternative based on workers directing their own workplaces.

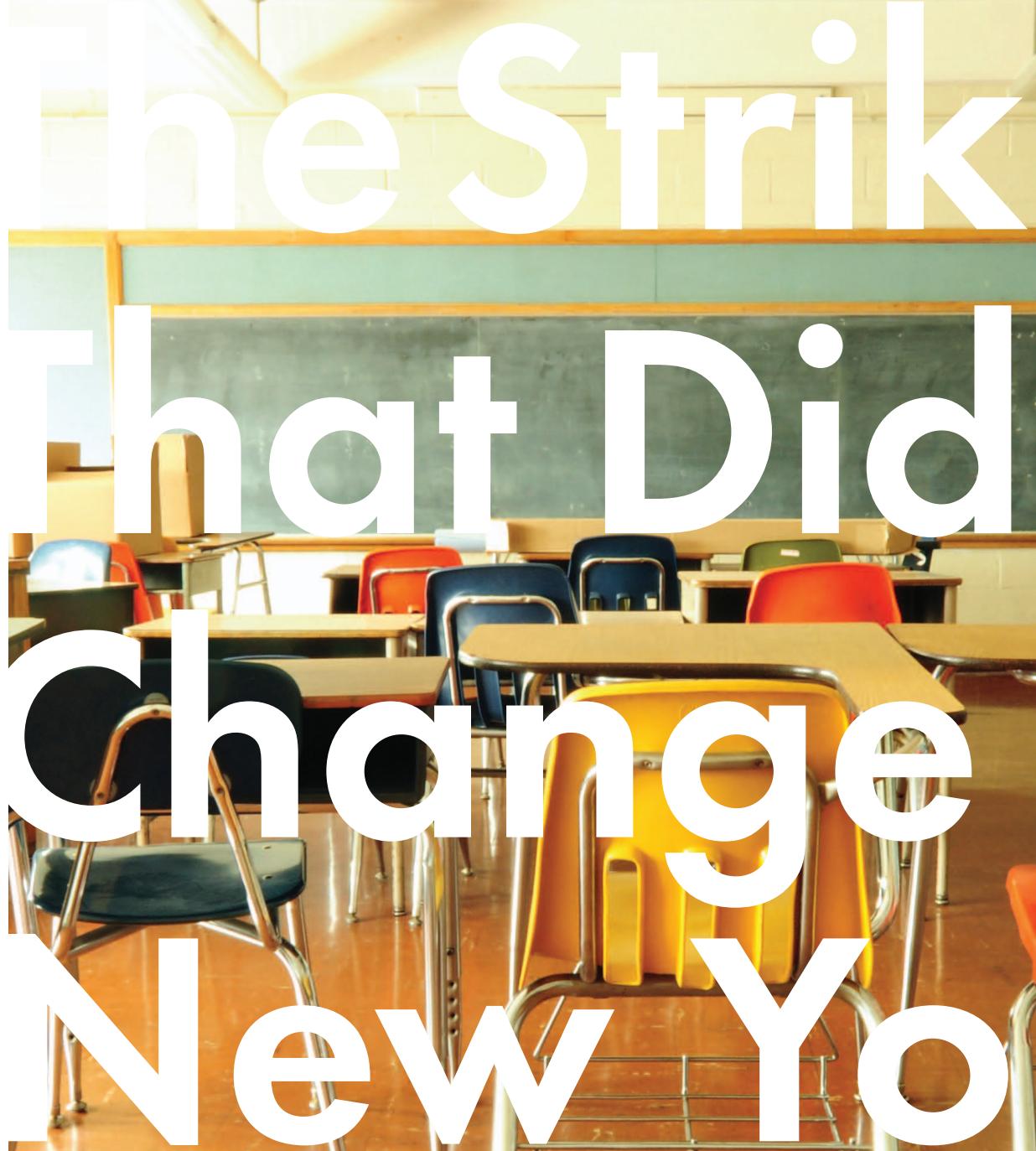
“Imagine a country where the majority of the population reaps the majority of the benefits for their hard work, creative ingenuity, and collaborative efforts. Imagine a country where corporate losses aren't socialized, while gains are captured by an exclusive minority. Imagine a country run as a democracy, from the bottom up, not a plutocracy from the top down. Richard Wolff not only imagines it, but in his compelling, captivating and stunningly reasoned new book, *Democracy at Work*, he details how we get there from here — and why we absolutely must.” — Nomi Prins

Katrina Ohstrom's photographs belong to two series. One documents long-abandoned Philadelphia public schools that have fallen into ruin. The other examines three public schools that were closed in 2012 in a wave of budget cuts. This year, a school reform commission voted to close nearly 10 percent of the district's schools. Ohstrom plans to document all of them.

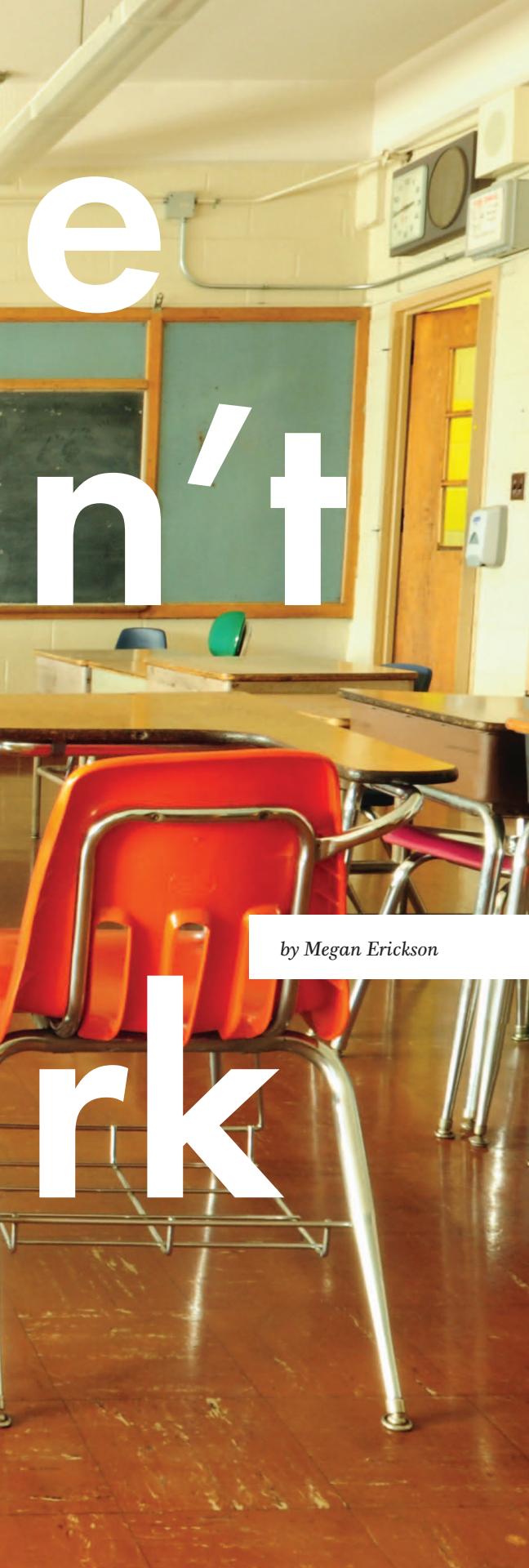
Essay

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# The Strike that Didn't change New York



# e n't rk



by Megan Erickson

The Chicago teachers' strike was a victory for workers around the country. But how do we move from homegrown resistance to a national movement that could ignite a shift in public policy?

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**NEVER LIKED RIDING** the bus as a kid. With its limited possibilities for adult supervision, the school bus was the venue of choice for kicking someone's ass or exploring the more psychological expressions of adolescent torment. One day a boy my age looked at me defiantly across the aisle and set his jeans on fire. The first time I heard the word "cunt" yelled with real conviction? On a school bus. But had it not come, I would have been stranded without a ride. Which is, of course, exactly what happened to New York City's 1.1 million public school children this January, when eight thousand bus drivers walked off the job, sparking a month-long standoff between Local Amalgamated Transit Union 1181 and Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

The *Daily News* accused drivers of "leaving kids ... and forcing their angry parents to drag them to school in taxis or the subway." *Brooklyn Ink*

asserted that the strike could damage the development of children with autism by interrupting the delivery of therapeutic services received at school. In an interview with the *New York Times*, a parent employed at a Starbucks in Midtown Manhattan vented: “I had to take a leave just for this. It’s ridiculous.” For weeks, overwhelmed families shuddered the burden of trucking their kids to school. Then five Democratic mayoral candidates wrote a letter to union members urging them to return to work. Not one of the candidates addressed Bloomberg or Education Chancellor Dennis Walcott, who had stripped a job-security provision from the unions’ contract, inciting the conflict in the first place. Both Bloomberg and Walcott had shrewdly taken to referring to the protests as “a strike against our children.”

The next day, the strike was off — another in a long line of Bloomberg’s victories against organized labor. “In the city’s entire history, the special interests have never had less power than they do today,” he commented, “and the end of this strike reflects the fact that when we say we put children first, we mean it.”

The walkout left nine out of ten bus routes inoperational, effectively shutting down a critical service overnight. It should have been politically devastating for the mayor. But instead of strengthening the union’s bargaining power, the unavoidable impact of the strike on children, particularly those with special needs, was used as a cover by the union’s actual targets: public officials and private business interests. As one Staten Island driver pointed out, the union was not asking for a pay raise or benefits; they were simply protesting for the right to return to their jobs next school year.

But ultimately it was the bus drivers, not the politicians, who were seen as selfish. That the drivers had been picketing around the clock in freezing weather and losing wages to uphold employee protections guaranteed to them since the 1970s was immaterial to parents surrendering their own time and money to transport children to and from school.

It’s inevitable. Like all of the world’s financial capitals, New York is stunningly stratified by race and class. The city’s elites live parallel to rather than among the general public, with separate social networks and institutions that insulate them from the consequences of the disastrous policies they advocate, complicating the antagonism between labor and capital. As children, Bloomberg’s own

daughters attended the private K-12 Spence School on East Ninety-First Street between Fifth and Madison, in the same neighborhood where they resided. In contrast, New York City’s school choice policy of matching students to schools based on preference rather than assigning them to local districts means that some public school students travel more than 90 minutes a day to and from school. Last year, the city finally allowed students to transfer if their commute was over 75 minutes — still twice the average time spent commuting by a New York adult. The problem with the school bus drivers’ strike was that it affected the working- and middle-class families who rely on public services much more than it cost the managerial class.

It’s a conflict faced by everyone whose job it is to look after children. Local government (in the case of the New York City bus drivers, in partnership with private employers) has power over the teachers, cafeteria workers, paraprofessionals, drivers, mechanics, and janitors it employs, but each of these care workers has power over the vulnerable population that depends on them for the fulfillment of basic needs. When care workers strike, their actions don’t stop production or result in profit losses for managers; they stop the provision of essential services for their students or patients. In highly segregated urban societies, the wealthiest people don’t even use public services, making it difficult to earnestly direct a refusal to work at the city’s elites.

The backlash against the bus drivers’ union strike was heightened by the fact that their case failed to move New York City parents. K-12 teachers have always had higher salaries and garnered more public respect than other school workers. Though their once unassailable status as “heroes” in the way of police officers and firefighters is increasingly under attack, even Americans who believe the school system is failing say they are happy with their local teachers. New York City bus drivers don’t have the same clout. In any case, their strike was too rhetorically narrow. Union members protested that the mayor was heartless, but their call for empathy meant little to parents who are themselves unemployed, underemployed, or, if they’re “lucky” enough to have a full-time job, severely overworked.

Since the 2008 recession, even job security — the singular premise on which the last surviving scraps of an American social safety net rest — is no longer seen as a right. The unemployment rate is 7.7%; the

effective unemployment rate that counts part-time workers and those who have stopped looking for work is 20%. And while 92% of union workers have health coverage, only 68% of non-unionized workers do. Today only 12% of American workers even have a union in their workplace.

In *The Future of Schools*, union organizer Lois Weiner describes the choice made by American unions in the 1960s to use their political power exclusively to obtain health care coverage for members without fighting for universal health care. “It’s not common knowledge,” she writes, “but several decades ago the most powerful industrial unions in the United States had internal debates about how labor should deal with members’ need for health care and pensions. Advocates of business unionism argued the union should bargain for health care and pensions as part of the contract, making employers pay.” Others argued for an all-encompassing social justice orientation similar to that adopted by European unions, in which the unions would have used their (at the time) formidable power to lobby for universal healthcare and pensions. Had American unions secured tangible benefits for the public at large, it’s possible that they would still be a force to reckon with. Instead, the dramatic difference between the job security and livable wages of union members and non-unionized employees is now a significant obstacle to uniting workers in the struggle against punitive austerity measures. “In retrospect, the ‘practical’ stance of business unionism was shortsighted and it’s a mistake we ought not repeat,” concludes Weiner.

But the bus drivers’ strike was not merely a reaction to the removal of the job security clause from workers’ contracts. By fighting against budget cuts and the negotiation of cheaper contracts, the bus drivers were implicitly standing in opposition to the broader neoliberal ideology of privatization, competition, “lean” production, and relentless expropriation of workers’ personal time as a cure for society’s ills. That connection was willfully obscured by Bloomberg and Walcott — fluent in anti-labor language — and never clearly articulated by the union.

Compare this to the strategy of rank-and-file workers from the Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Amalgamated Transit Union who, in conjunction with Occupy Wall Street activists, locked open gates at four subway stations around the city during a March 2012 morning rush hour. The union members posted signs around the

city apologizing to subway riders for service cuts and fare hikes which, they explained, were the result of the MTA’s determination to make the highest profit off of commuters.

The signs were formatted in the font used for MTA service announcements and urged riders to enter the station for free through the service entrance, making the public collaborators in a collective action against austerity measures. That service cuts meant layoffs for transit workers wasn’t even mentioned. “Be prepared for expanded free service until the resolution of contract negotiations in favor of TWU Local 100,” they advertised. A press release located the wildcat action in the context of the global political climate, connecting it to the interests of the class as a whole in a time of mass austerity. The tactic had international precedent — the Spanish *indignados* had been running their own fare strike, Yo No Pago, since January of that year.

The failure of the bus drivers’ union strike underscores the necessity of building national and international coalitions between unionized and non-unionized labor, workers and non-workers of all kinds, with the explicit aim of transforming the structure of institutions. After the surprise success of the September 2012 Chicago teachers’ strike — the first in the city since 1987 — the question was: what city’s next?

It’s the wrong question. Located in one of only eleven states in the US where public sector employees have the right to strike, Chicago is exceptional. America’s dogged adherence to local politics means that each district, city, and state is subject to its own labor law regimes. Anti-austerity strategy, in turn, will differ in different regions. What we should be asking is: how do we transition from a localized and evanescent series of collective actions to a national movement with a unified agenda that could ignite a shift in public policy? How do we move from home-grown resistance to victory?

The same month as the bus drivers’ union strike, teachers at Seattle’s Garfield High School voted unanimously to refuse to administer the standardized Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test — purchased by a superintendent who sat on the board of the company that marketed it. In their statement to the public, the teachers stressed that the test was “not good for students” because it wasted valuable instructional time. In a move that mirrored the actions of the rank-and-file transit union members, the school’s parent-teacher

association took immediate steps to notify parents of their right to excuse children from taking the exam, giving parents a chance to join the boycott. They did. Diane Ravitch and Jonathan Kozol sent letters of encouragement. On March 22, district leaders began reducing the number of students required to take the test.

Former DC schools chancellor Michelle Rhee went on the defensive, warning in an op-ed in the *Seattle Times*, “Seattle public school students should pay attention. They’re getting a front-row, real-world lesson in how the actions of adults can distract from what’s best for students.” Rhee, of the “grassroots” education reform organization Students First, insists on referring to the Garfield High teachers as local teachers union members — and unions, she argues, prioritize the protection of educators’ jobs over the need for an objective assessment to evaluate schools’ performance.

Her well-worn assertion that teachers are nothing more than self-interested actors is flatly untrue, but it is rooted in a real shift that occurred mid-century. Under the influence of the AFL-CIO, teachers’ advocacy organizations changed in structure and tone from radical groups fighting for a voice in curriculum to groups negotiating higher pay and benefits for teachers.

From 1970 to 1971, Steve Golin interviewed fifty-two teachers who taught in Newark public schools during the strikes of 1970 and 1971. In *The Newark Teachers Strikes*, he tells the story of two teachers with opposing understandings of the role of urban unions:

In the 1960s as in the 1930s, Lowenstein wanted the Union to fight not only for teachers but for all the oppressed, including the children of Newark. Ficcio wanted the Union to focus on issues it could directly confront, at the bargaining table.... Everyone active in the Union during the 1960s was aware of a conflict between the new strand of bread-and-butter unionism and the older strand of socially committed unionism.

The debate was replayed in city after city, with people like Ficcio winning the day.

Throughout the 1980s, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) — the more urban of the two national teachers unions — maintained an educational philosophy indistinguishable from the neo-liberal agenda being pushed through schools today. In 2008, Randi Weingarten addressed the AFT National Convention with: “Tests, if they are fair and accurate, and aligned with a rich curriculum, can play an important role in holding teachers,

administrators and schools accountable for much of student achievement.” It wasn’t until 2012 that the AFT approved a resolution on standardized testing that called for “balance” in the use of assessments, and even then the language was weak, and the action behind the language was nonexistent. Only the Chicago CORE caucus pressed the AFT to pressure states to monitor the time and money spent on testing.

Either consciously or intuitively, Rhee and other corporate reformers have spent their careers invoking the bitter divisions at the heart of the twentieth-century urban education wars, which pitted unions and their middle-class white allies against low-income black families, left intellectuals like Paul Goodman, and the corporate reformers who supported local control of schools against teachers.

As slogans go, “Students first” is a descendent of the controversial “community control” experiments of the late 1960s and early 1970s supported by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations — the granddaddy of the more insidious present-day Broad, Walton, and Gates Foundations. Both are vaguely populist suggestions that the answer to education reform can be found in individuals and local groups of students, teachers, and community members rather than through a well-funded, systematic program of desegregation and redistribution.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville is a New York City neighborhood adjacent to Bedford-Stuyvesant, where the median household income in Brownsville has fallen every year for the past four years. In 2009, it was \$24,659—\$20,871 less than the starting salary for a New York City public school teacher. In 2013, the Citizens’ Committee for Children released a report ranking Brownsville as the third “worst place for children” to grow up in New York City. Seventy-five of every one thousand children living in the neighborhood were reported neglected or abused, with 52% living below the poverty line, and only one third reading at grade level. According to census data, as of 2010, the demographics for the 11233 zip code were: 87% black, 5% white, .7% American Indian, .9% Asian, and about 3% mixed race.

At the turn of the century, Brownsville was a largely middle-class Jewish neighborhood. Northern migration of Southern black families changed its demographics more dramatically than any other neighborhood in New York City, but it wasn’t until the 1960s that there was massive white flight from the neighborhood. The postwar years



*But ultimately, the power that was redistributed through community control was social power, not economic power.*

saw an unprecedented increase in economic opportunity for the city's once-ostracized European immigrant population thanks to a general increase in social spending (which disproportionately benefited whites), free education subsidized by the GI Bill, and the replacement of industrial jobs with white-collar jobs in New York City.

It was feasible that in one or two generations, children of working-class Italian, Irish, and Eastern European immigrants could rise to ranks of the middle class. As Catholics and Jews, they continued to be shut out from the lucrative WASP-controlled business sector, but many of them became public school teachers, marrying their parents' positive views of organized labor to a fierce personal conviction in the ethos of meritocracy and the value of elbow grease.

Black parents and educators around the country had an altogether different relationship to unions. Labor historian John F. Lyons has argued that teachers unions' right to collective bargaining was secured by politicians, particularly Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, seeking to remove union opposition to the Democratic machine, which was under pressure from civil rights organizations to desegregate schools. As Dorothy Shipps points out in *School Reform, Corporate Style: Chicago, 1880–2000*, Daley's offer of collective bargaining was a double-edged sword, at least in Chicago: the raises did not apply to most black teachers, who comprised a third of Chicago's teaching force at the time and were usually hired as full-time substitutes or temps.

In contrast to the socialist Teachers' Union (TU) it had replaced, New York City's 90% white, majority-Jewish United Federation of Teachers (UFT) had never come out strongly for integration of the public schools. As soon as they'd completed their requisite five years of service, white teachers frequently transferred from predominantly black districts to "better schools" – i.e. white districts – leaving children in neighborhoods like Ocean Hill-Brownsville with a perpetually-shifting group of inexperienced teachers. The UFT successfully blocked the city's efforts to put an end to this practice. In 1967, under the acrimonious leadership of Albert Shanker, the union again backed a controversial provision opposed by black educators and black community leaders including Martin Luther King, Jr. The "disruptive child" provision would have given teachers unilateral power to expel students who acted out in their classrooms, shuttling them into separate schools. During the UFT's 1967 strike, Ocean Hill-Brownsville schools remained open.

As Jerald Podair observes in *The Strike That Changed New York*, "White teachers viewed the educational system as one that, while flawed, had helped them, and would help anyone wishing to work hard. Black parents saw the system as a failure." By 1967, "it was time, as one parent would put it, 'to make our own rules for our own schools.'" Fearful that the city was about to erupt in the same riots that had gripped Boston, Chicago, and Detroit, New York City's business community eagerly supported community control as an ameliorative but largely symbolic gesture.

In 1968, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board – run by black parents and educators – sent

a letter to high school teacher and chapter chairman of the UFT Fred Nauman informing him that he, along with nearly all white and Jewish educators in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school system, had been dismissed. In response, the UFT launched three citywide teachers' strikes aimed at restoring the teachers' jobs and challenging the community's authority over organized labor. The conflict went on for two months, affecting nearly one million students and bringing out the worst in everyone involved, including racist and anti-Semitic rhetoric. It left lasting political and social divisions that prevented whites and blacks from uniting in opposition to austerity measures during the financial crisis of the 1970s – when 10,000 teachers were laid off – and which continue to influence the city's politics today.

The legacy of the community control experiment – which was tried at various points in New York City, Chicago, Newark, and other cities around the country – was twofold. It gave parents a say over what their children learned in school, while requiring little in the way of a financial commitment from either corporate leaders or the government. Its proponents successfully called into question the legitimacy of the competitive promotion-by-exam system for both students and teachers (according to Podair, black candidates were frequently eliminated from consideration for teaching job on the basis of "poor pronunciation"). They challenged the system of tracking, or separating students into groups based on assumptions about their abilities, which most white parents believed in and which the UFT never questioned. They rejected standardized testing and designed a curriculum that balanced study of Western history and philosophy with the works of Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey.

But ultimately, the power that was redistributed through community control was social power, not economic power.

In Chicago and New York, the business community was happy to hand over control of schools to parents since it meant that more expensive (and unpopular among whites) tactics like busing or finance reform would be abandoned. Decentralization became the sanctioned alternative to a coordinated, mandatory effort at integration. Participation became a replacement for a redistributive strategy that would attempt to offset the consequences of common discriminatory practices such as redlining – charging residents in predominantly black neighborhoods more for services

— and blockbusting. Reactionary organizations of whites soon co-opted the language of community control to avoid integration, a development anticipated from the start by socialist Michael Harrington.

When Chicago teachers struck in the 1980s, a *Chicago Tribune* editorial indicted the teachers for their selfishness: “The teachers intend to grab up every possible dollar the school board can raise. And they shouldn’t be surprised that no one believes them the next time they say that they really care about the children or the city.” On the same page in July of 2012, the paper warned, “A strike could start as early as Aug. 18, a week into classes for a third of the district’s students. Both sides know who would lose the most: Chicago’s school kids.”

In fact, the 2012 strike was a seminal victory not only for Chicago’s kids, but for parents, teachers, and workers around the country. When the Chicago teachers struck, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators — an openly anti-neoliberal movement that took power from the AFT-backed CTU in a landslide victory in 2010 — didn’t just shrug and ask us to believe that what’s good for labor is good for students.

Instead, CORE indicted business reformers and politicians for their role in bringing about a punishing wave of high-stakes standardized testing and school closures, connecting the struggle against market-based reforms and austerity to a social justice movement that encompasses all community members. Significantly, instead of working in tandem with corporations as the AFT and CTU have done, Karen Lewis publicly reprimanded business leaders for their overreach: “The business people do not have a clue, but they are the ones calling the shots.”

CORE’s stance echoes the oppositional behavior of pre-1960s unions, who routinely called out business tycoons for tax evasion. At the turn of the century, when the Chicago Commercial Club — a group of wealthy businessmen still active today — argued for budget cuts in schools as a response to an economic shortfall, the teachers’ union responded by filing a lawsuit charging the club members’ corporations with failure to pay their taxes. The corporations were defeated in the state supreme court.

It’s undemocratic and unfair for America’s mainly local and state-funded schools to bear the burden of being the singular means through which

the social welfare of an entire country is either protected or destroyed. But if schools are to be the chosen battlegrounds where corporate “reformers” seek to teach American labor the value of productivity, efficiency, and free markets, it’s a challenge that should be met. If, as Maryland-based defense firm Lockheed Martin claims, “Industry has an important role to play in building the workforce pipeline — and the classroom is the place to begin,” then they should be required to provide jobs for students who’ve graduated from their programs. And before they enter into partnerships with schools, putting their employees in K-12 classrooms in Maryland to “develop talent,” businesses must show their commitment to American children by paying their taxes instead of pushing to receive retroactive exemptions. On March 19, the Maryland Senate passed a bill that would exempt Lockheed Martin from paying \$450,000 a year in county taxes.

Corporate reformers from Bloomberg to Rahm Emanuel to former CEO of Chicago Public Schools Arne Duncan have made a critical strategic mistake in closing “under-resourced” schools. Never before have parents, teachers, and students been so united in defending their local schools. In New York City, UFT chapter leader Julie Cavanagh — who participated in a lawsuit against Bloomberg for the right to protest school closings and charter schools — seeks to replicate the success of CORE with MORE, the Movement of Rank-and-File Educators, an explicitly social justice caucus. She’s currently campaigning for UFT President. This April, United Opt Out (UOO), a national organization that seeks to end corporate education reform, will demonstrate at the Department of Education in Washington, DC.

Building a lasting opposition to the neoliberal consensus on education “reform” will require teachers unions to form broad, international alliances with the general public, instead of bargaining for seniority provisions and minuscule pay raises that never come as promised.

Teachers must focus their advocacy on actions that clearly benefit students as much as they benefit teachers. That means speaking up when it comes to issues that affect the lives of their students — high-stakes testing, yes, but also the deepening of segregation in our schools; police brutality in schools and out; the lack of access for low-income families to healthcare; and the US prison state, which disproportionately affects low-income and black students. That’s what it means to put students first. ■



This is  
a real time  
it is because  
Mandy says it is  
true



# The Industrial Classroom

In resisting standardized testing, today's teachers are part of a rich tradition of struggle against dehumanization in the workplace.

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by Shawn Gude

Essay

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**ICHELLE GUNDERSON** hates standardized tests. The Chicago elementary school teacher thinks they steal “precious instructional time” and drive a wedge between her and her students.

When Gunderson is forced to administer one of the exams herself, “it is so different from my day-to-day interactions with children that I prepare them for it. I tell them that I have to speak the exact words in the book, and that it won’t sound like me. So in a sense, I hate that this test comes between me and the relationships I have with my students.”

Educators in Seattle have voiced similar objections. In January, teachers at Garfield High School announced they would no longer proctor the MAP test, a standardized exam they regard as flawed and detrimental to student learning, and whose implementation was marred by conflict-of-interest concerns.

Jesse Hagopian, a Garfield High history teacher, told me that some anti-MAP teachers have a beef only with this particular test; a better one would mollify their misgivings. A large contingent, however, takes issue with standardized tests themselves. “Many others see the problem as more inherent to norm-referenced tests,” says Hagopian, referring to exams that

place students in “percentiles” and rank them in relation to previous test-takers. “This is a struggle about the MAP test,” he says, “but I think the reason why there’s been so much support from around the country is it’s in the context of a country that’s gone test-crazy.”

This stance places Hagopian, Gunderson, and other dissident teachers at the center of an upsurge seeking to combat the corporate school-reform movement. They are the counterweights to the well-funded reformers, who push high-stakes testing, competition, and merit pay. They are the bulwarks — the most militant instance being last fall’s Chicago Teachers Union strike — against the top-down imposition of policies that drain the profession and the classroom of their humanity.

And in this struggle, the teachers can claim historical antecedents.

A few of their working-class forebears: the Florida educators who launched the first statewide teachers’ strike in 1968, seeking increased education funding and signaling an emerging militancy; the pioneering Chicago educators who, tired of crowded classrooms and crappy pay, formed the country’s first union composed entirely of teachers; the many workers who, in the early twentieth century, resisted the implementation of so-called “scientific management” in their shops and factories. In each instance, workers fought dehumanization, indignity, and domination. They embodied the labor movement’s great promise, that workers acting in concert can control the terms, conditions, and material benefits of their labor.

There’s a special resemblance between the struggles against scientific management, or Taylorism, and today’s teacher resistance to corporate reform schemes. Just as factory workers fought top-down dictates, deskilling, and the installation of anemic work processes, so too are teachers trying to prevent the undemocratic implementation of high-stakes testing and merit pay, assaults on professionalism, and the dumbing down and narrowing of curricula.

There are more obvious parallels: Proponents of scientific management counted some prominent progressives in their ranks, just like the contemporary left-neoliberals hawking education reform. The nostrums of both Taylorism and the education accountability movement paper over foundational conflicts and root causes. Many of those who espouse education reform cast their solutions as unimpeachably “scientific” and “data-driven,” yet as with scientific management partisans, the empirical

grounding of their prescriptions is highly dubious. And proponents of scientific management and corporate school reform share an antipathy toward unions, often casting them as self-interested inhibitors of progress.

The unions-as-impediment framing is correct in one respect, and here the case of Taylorism is instructive: only organized workers can thwart agents of dehumanization.

Born to a wealthy family in 1856, Frederick Taylor was the eponymous champion of the scientific management movement. Less a visionary innovator than a skilled synthesizer, Taylor combined largely preexisting management tools and techniques to develop a coherent system that ratcheted up the amount of control bosses had over workers and the labor process. The stopwatch was his favored metric, the time study his guide. Taylor’s objective was to “rationalize” the production process, to expunge it of perceived inefficiencies and increase output. All the waste — gratuitous motions, worker “soldiering,” idiosyncratic production methods — had to go.

Non-labor superfluity was included in this, but Taylorism’s impact on workers, especially skilled workers, aroused the most opposition. As labor historian David Montgomery details in *Workers’ Control in America*, Taylor was confronting craftsmen who had a high degree of autonomy and control over their work. In the late 1800s, skilled workers — even in non-union shops — commonly set an output quota, or “stint,” to ensure they’d receive decent pay and regular employment. If managers tried to goad workers into abandoning the collectively set rules, they’d often just walk off the job. They held such power because they alone possessed the “secrets of the craft” — only they knew how to make, mold, and maneuver.

The stint particularly irked Taylor. Deriding this collective custom as “soldiering,” Taylor wanted to determine exactly how, and how fast, tasks were completed. No deviation was allowed. He’d find each trade’s “one best way,” thereby deskill the skilled and making the worker easily replaceable.

Workers, unsurprisingly, didn’t take too kindly to being reduced to another “input” in the production process, to being treated as automatons rather than sentient human beings. They were generally contemptuous of Taylorism because, at root, it sought to wrest control from workers themselves and transfer power over the production process to management. (Managers often took issue with

Taylor's prescriptions as well. They resisted outsiders telling them their operation was shoddily run.)

Molders and workers in the International Association of Machinists were among the most stridently opposed to scientific management. They viewed with contempt the deskilling of workers, the stripping of worker control, the cold inhumanity of the stopwatch. They were convinced that those who couldn't meet the feverish pace thus established would be cast aside, disposable and unemployable. And, of course, they were correct. After studying the Bethlehem Steel pig iron workers, Taylor claimed the men should be lugging nearly *four times* as much pig iron as they had been — a feat, he conceded, that "only about one man in eight" was physically capable of. For the roughly 400 percent increase in output, the company would grant the workers a pay increase of about 60 percent. Fair's fair, right?

Scientific management's proponents also consciously strove to individualize and atomize workers and break the bonds of solidarity. Increasing and individualizing worker pay served two purposes: inducing otherwise obdurate workers to go along with management's demands, and holding individual workers accountable for their output. In Taylor's eyes, solidarity and collective bargaining were impediments to a genuinely scientific production process. They prevented workers from pursuing their rational self-interest, which, conveniently enough, meant accepting a workplace structured and run according to scientific management's tenets.

Early in his career, as he tried vainly to get individual workers to churn out more than their peers, Taylor conceded that their umbrage was justified. He would act the same way if he were operating the lathe machine. But later, he tended to ascribe a kind of false consciousness to recalcitrant workers. His method was scientific, objective, infallible. What was there to quibble with? Why hadn't the appeal of collective bargaining and unions collapsed under the sheer weight of Taylorism's analytical rigor? Why didn't workers perceive their self-interest?

Louis Brandeis, active in the Progressive Movement and dubbed the "people's lawyer," wondered the same thing. Credulous but avowedly pro-union, he was among the well-intentioned center-left figures who sung the praises of scientific management. Brandeis saw endemic inefficiency in the monopolistic railroads, and, in the widely

covered "Eastern Rate Case," introduced an expert who claimed the railroads could save up to \$1 million a day. With more money to go around, class antagonism could be ameliorated, if not eradicated. Efficiency would rid the nation of bitter class wars.

Around the same time, scientific management was seeping into the education world. Popular publications like *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Saturday Evening Post*, caught up in the "efficiency craze" and convinced of scientific management's universal applicability, zeroed in on the public education system and shook their heads at the waste and lack of accountability they saw. Unlike scientific management's adherents in private industry, however, they didn't face organized worker opposition. The few existing teachers' unions were young and not major actors. The National Education Association was more a professional organization for administrators than a bona fide union. Rank-and-file teachers had little role in shaping education policy. Superintendents, as Raymond Callahan chronicles in *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, were the ones who bore the brunt of the efficiency backlash. And they tended to bend to the critics' wishes. Businesses required a trained workforce, so an "efficient" education system to them meant an increasingly vocationalized one.

The present-day school-reform movement doesn't exactly have grassroots origins. Its genesis is typically dated to 1983's landmark *Nation at Risk* report, the product of a presidential commission on the state of public education. The panel saw abject failure, a system in decline, and a country imperiled by its educational shortcomings.

Barely twenty years later, over the cries of conservative localists, as well as teachers' unions and their liberal allies — and, it should go without saying, leftists — Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. The Act revolutionized national education policy and signaled corporate reformers' purchase on both major political parties. Accountability was the watchword, stepped-up standardized testing the preferred method of quantification. In the NCLB world, high-poverty "Title I" schools were penalized if their students didn't exhibit, in the technical argot, "adequate yearly progress" — that is, if their test scores didn't improve quickly enough.

While some of NCLB's most punitive measures never came to pass, hard-charging, zealous school-reformers at the local and state levels pushed on.

Michelle Rhee was among the worst. Rhee, former chancellor of the DC Public Schools and avatar of the reform movement, instituted a draconian high-stakes testing regime, and seemed to take a perverse glee in firing teachers and bashing unions. (A *USA Today* investigation revealed widespread cheating under Rhee's tenure, effectively negating the testing gains about which she boasted so much.) President Obama has renounced the ill-conceived NCLB law, but the substantive emphasis on standardized testing hasn't waned under his administration. Obama's signature education program, Race to the Top, is reminiscent of NCLB, rewarding states that increase the role of standardized testing in public education.

As a rule, the past few decades have been marked by a pronounced uptick in standardized testing and regimentation. Xian Barrett, who teaches law and Chicago history to high school juniors and seniors, told me that the prioritization of test prep is crowding out more engaging school activities like trips to DC to meet elected officials. The testing obsession, Barrett said, has also increased the stress level in an already high-stress occupation. "The proliferation of high-stakes testing has ... created unnecessary pressure and urgency where those qualities already existed. It has essentially placed a higher burden on those with the toughest jobs — not just the teachers, but other educators and students as well."



Long-time educators like Gunderson, a twenty-six-year veteran, have seen teachers' control over curriculum threatened and eroded. They've seen the status of their profession diminished. In Chicago specifically, they've seen the predominance of mayoral control — the school board is appointed, not democratically elected — and private largesse in molding public policy. They've watched testing be used to "sort, punish, and privatize," in Gunderson's words. It's put educators on the defensive. "It's not enough to want child-centered learning. You have to be willing to defend it at every turn," the fourth-grade teacher says. "This seems like a silly waste of time and is very different from when I started teaching. I was left alone to make my own sound judgments and was trusted."

The common retort from neoliberal reformers is that teachers must be subject to accountability, and that the most objective way to measure teacher performance is student test scores. Many also favor releasing those figures to the public (so parents can determine the effectiveness of their child's present or future teacher) and linking pay to exam results. But test scores are a notoriously poor way to gauge teacher quality. Student backgrounds, while certainly not determinative, can still impact educational achievement as much as classroom teaching. Equating good teaching with good test scores reduces a complex, human process, and the teacher-student relationship, to a cold data point, bereft of nuance. Under neoliberal reform, rote learning and "teaching to the test" replace critical thinking and problem solving. Taylor's "one best way" is reborn as the "one best answer."

Teachers who balk at high-stakes testing do so because of their love of the profession and support for a lively curriculum, not to inhibit student achievement (or, as Taylor might have framed it, restrict production). Teachers don't "sabotage" their pupils as a defiant worker might a product on an assembly line — the "products" teachers are assembling and molding are living, breathing human beings.

Teachers are, however, fighting incursions on labor autonomy and self-direction that are very reminiscent of Taylorism. As Harry Braverman argues in *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Taylorism was a program of dehumanization. Properly conceived, human labor is purposeful, deliberately designed, and consciously carried out. The work environment that Taylorists favored — regimented,

dictated, with conception divorced from practice — was organized according to the needs of management rather than labor. Workers' wellbeing was an afterthought, entering into the equation only if its consideration could be shown to boost production or prevent labor strife. This amounted to what Braverman calls "the degradation of work," a trend that continued apace through the twentieth century and, to this day, hasn't abated. The same can be said about the corporate school-reform agenda: it results in the "degradation of education."

When education is reduced to test prep, rich curricula and the craft of teaching are imperiled. The vapid classroom of neoliberal school reform mirrors the vapid workplace of Taylorism. Teach for America, which implicitly advances the idea that the sparsely trained can out-teach veteran educators, engenders deskilling and deprofessionalization. Non-practitioners dictating to practitioners how they should do their work mirrors management's disciplining of workers; both militate against work as a creative activity. The appropriation of business language — the head of the Chicago Public Schools is the "CEO" — reinforces the idea that schools should be run like corporations. Merit pay individualizes and severs educators' ties to one another, forcing them to compete instead of cooperate. So too with the anti-union animus that neoliberal reformers and scientific management proponents display.

The goal in each case is to attenuate the collective power of workers to resist management's edicts. The Taylorists' futile efforts to transcend or eradicate class conflict is analogous to corporate school-reformers' sidestepping of child poverty. And prominent Democrats like Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, are school reform's useful idiots, just as prominent Progressive and Taylorist Louis Brandeis was in his day.

This is a simulacrum of schooling. It's education drained of its humanity.

One could easily read the foregoing, nod in agreement, then reasonably object that the analogy between Taylorism and school reform is off in one crucial respect: motivation. Taylor, the skeptic might say, was acting in the service of capital, disciplining labor to increase output. School-reformers, however wrongheaded, are legitimately trying to boost student achievement. This argument contains a kernel of truth, and indeed, the private and public spheres are governed by disparate laws and logics.

As much as reformers are given to business-speak, public schools still aren't driven entirely by the imperatives of profit, as in the private sector.

For his part, Hagopian sees corporate reform as a deliberate attempt to weaken teachers' unions, one of the few remaining bastions of American labor. "One of the ways to undermine those unions," Hagopian says, "is to make teachers' jobs more tenuous, make people fear for their jobs, and get around union protections by pretending to demand teacher quality and instead implementing these value-added junk-science measures that are not designed to improve student learning."

But one doesn't even have to buy Hagopian's reform-as-subterfuge argument to object to the reform agenda. The *motivations* of corporate school-reformers are almost immaterial. It's evident that the *consequences* of the policies they push are injurious to unions. The same can be said about a panoply of reform prescriptions: we needn't speculate about nefarious intent when we know that high-stakes testing narrows curricula and drains the teaching profession of its humanity. We needn't impute bad faith to Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, when we know her in-and-out-in-two-years model vitiates teaching as a profession. We needn't think that Bill Gates, who single-handedly shapes public education policy, is motivated by malice; simple disgust at its diminution of democracy is enough.

So what can reform skeptics learn from the anti-Taylorists of yesteryear?

First, though least auspicious and most obvious: it's an uphill battle. With unemployment low, workers successfully resisted scientific management through World War I, only to have the postwar depression eviscerate unions, wages, and worker power. According to Montgomery, supporters of Taylorism could boast that "the essential elements of their proposals had found favor in almost every industry by the mid 1920s."

Corporate reform appears to be on a similar trajectory. Beaten back in some districts, it nevertheless remains on the march. Charter schools have expanded exponentially over the past decade and now number more than 5,000, operate in more than 40 states, and enroll more than 2 million students. The number of tests given — and the money spent on them — varies by state, but a recent Brookings Institution report estimated that, in total, states shell out about \$1.7 billion annually for assessments. And because under

capitalism economic power is political power, wealthy philanthropists (the "Gates-Broad-Walton triumvirate," in Joanne Barkan's coinage) play an outsized role in determining the fate of public education. Top-down decision-making is the order of the day.

Second, union leaders aren't always the friends of rank-and-file members. Samuel Gompers, the conservative president of the American Federation of Labor, initially opposed Taylorism, only to do an about-face and take a collaborationist stance. One could easily tar American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten with the same collaborationist brush. To her credit, Weingarten and the AFT have backed the Garfield boycott. Yet she's also shown a penchant for conciliation when confrontation would be the best tactic.

Unionization was a necessary, but insufficient, step in arresting Taylorism's advance. Teachers' unions have played the same role vis-à-vis education reform. But will it be enough? Fortunately, reform skeptics do have a model for resistance: the CTU strike was a "critical example," according to Hagopian. "I think it probably helped our union here see that if you wage a battle, you can win." The union has indeed distinguished itself as neoliberal school-reformers' most implacable foe. Last fall, with a new, more militant leadership at the helm, it successfully went on strike — over pay, yes, but also over working conditions, personnel, and resources. Polls showed that parents and community members supported the strikers, in no small part because they spent significant time organizing those groups beforehand and articulated a compelling counter-vision for public education.

The anti-reform fight should not be understood as an anti-progressive, hidebound resistance to inexorable technological and historical advancement. Anti-corporate reform educators aren't hostile to educational progress. They're fighting a neoliberal model in which teachers as agents — subjects teaching subjects — are reduced to objects constrained and acted upon, told what to do and how to do it.

Still, Braverman reminds us that the analogous case of scientific management is a sobering one: "If Taylorism does not exist as a separate school today, that is because, apart from the bad odor of the name, it is no longer the property of a faction, since its fundamental teachings have become the bedrock of all work design." Hopefully, this time around, democracy and humanism will prevail. ■

# Curriculum for a New American Century

What would a national core curriculum to prepare students for work in the Age of Service look like?

by Will Johnson

Essay

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HERE'S A LOT OF DEBATE in educational circles these days about what our children should be reading. Sparked by the Common Core State Standards — new national guidelines for what public school students should learn from kindergarten through twelfth grade — the debate centers on the question of whether students should study literature or “informational texts.”

Supporters of the Common Core have argued strenuously that the purpose of education is to prepare students for their future careers. Reading, therefore, should be taught in a way that will best serve students’ future employers. According to these folks, in the twenty-first-century economy, an understanding of Shakespeare or any other sophisticated literature will be of little use to most students in their careers. As Common Core designer and advocate David Coleman put it: “It is rare in a working environment that someone says, ‘Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood.’”

Coleman and the other architects of the Common Core should be commended for their commitment to promoting curriculum “designed to be robust and relevant to the real world.” Unfortunately, however, their understanding of the global economy seems to be trapped in a late-twentieth-century “knowledge economy” framework.

As the *New York Times* reported in January, the vast majority of job growth in today’s economy is in the service sector, especially low-wage fields like retail and food preparation. An August 2012 report by the



National Employment Law Project highlighted this trend, noting that over the past three years, “employment gains have been concentrated in lower-wage occupations, which grew 2.7 times as fast as mid-wage and higher-wage occupations.” Within these areas of growth, the two fields experiencing the biggest employment boom are retail sales (nearly 350,000 jobs created since 2010) and food preparation (more than 300,000 jobs created).

If the late twentieth century was the information age, the early twenty-first is the age of service. Combine the advances in workplace automation and productivity in recent decades with the collapse of employment in the finance, real estate, and information sectors, and one can only conclude that the service industry’s dominance will continue to accelerate. In today’s economy, service jobs appear to be some of the only ones where a human touch is still needed. For these jobs, the ability to

write a market analysis is no more practical than the ability to write a sonnet. What would a national core curriculum to prepare students for work in the Age of Service look like?

While basic literacy is a requisite for some service occupations, the Common Core designers are correct in determining that literary analysis and — and indeed, critical thinking — have been rendered obsolete by the rise of the service economy. This being the case, the Common Core Standards do not go nearly far enough in their attempts to create a curriculum meant to prepare students for the world of work.

No area of study offers as many exciting service-oriented possibilities as the sciences. Our public schools continue to push students through a twentieth-century curriculum, requiring students to study biology, chemistry, and sometimes even physics. A practical science education for the twenty-first



century economy would be structured around three core fields:

**1. Cleaning /** More than any other field, cleaning remains relevant throughout the service industry. From food service to home care, employers seek out job applicants with an understanding of — and aptitude for — cleaning. Beyond the practical, cleaning offers students the rare opportunity to go beyond skills-based education (*How do I clean things?*) towards more conceptual, analytical questions (*What does “clean” mean?*). Prior to graduation, all students should be required to achieve proficiency in the science of cleanliness. Additionally, high school science departments should offer specialized tracks for students hoping to pursue careers in cleaning. Such tracks might include Cleaning and

Hygiene in Food Service; Methods of Laundry; and Comparative Cleanliness.

- 2. Food Sciences /** Food service is one of the driving forces behind our service economy, yet the study of food science has traditionally been left to home economics or other elective classes. What's more, while food preparation is the largest area of growth in this sector, waiting tables is a rapidly growing job-market niche. Thus, in addition to adding a food preparation track to the secondary school science curriculum, table service should be added as a subconcentration within this track.
- 3. Workplace Physics /** Another exciting growth area in the service economy is stock and material moving. Since 2008, more than 200,000 jobs have been created in this sector, which requires of its workers a deep understanding of how to properly move and deposit materials. We propose a workplace physics track, focused on educating students in the science of lifting and moving materials ranging from heavy boxes to containers of toxic chemicals. Such a track would not only be extremely practical, but would also provide many opportunities for interdisciplinary links with the physical education curriculum.

### Service-Oriented Core Mathematics

In many states, students are currently required to pursue mathematical study far past arithmetic, achieving proficiency in algebra, geometry, and trigonometry before they receive an advanced diploma. High-performing students are even pushed to study calculus! Such math skills are superfluous, even decadent, in a service-driven job market.

Arithmetic, on the other hand, is of great value in the calculation of sums and differences. How many times have you waited patiently at a cash register while an overeducated worker struggled to calculate the correct change? While it's true that most registers now perform mathematics for today's cashiers, these machines tend toward breakdown. It hardly seems fair that when a register isn't functioning, customers need move at the pace of the arithmetically challenged worker.

For mathematics education to be truly practical in the age of service, it must focus primarily on

addition and subtraction. Within these subfields, core skills for mastery should include rapid addition with decimals and subtraction from 100. Students with an aptitude for math should be pushed towards a multiplication track, wherein they could explore the calculation of sales tax.

## The End of History

**N**O DISCIPLINE better exemplifies the waste of our traditional K-12 curriculum than history. There's no practical application of historical knowledge in the service economy. What's more, historical knowledge, combined with the analytical skills traditionally encouraged in history classes, may lead students to become discontented with their roles as service workers. As such, history education is not just irrelevant but detrimental to the goals of the Common Core. As a discipline offering no practical real-world application, history should be eliminated.

The end of history creates the opportunity to add more forward-looking study to our core curriculum. In particular, I propose replacing history with a track called futures in service that students would begin in the sixth grade and pursue through graduation. This track would prepare students to navigate the complex dynamics of the service workplace, using classroom time to provide them with real-world job skills through skills training, role-plays, and icebreakers.

The futures track would not limit students to classroom work. Instead, through this track high school students could become service interns, performing service jobs at their own schools. Having students fill their schools' janitorial and food-service needs would provide them with valuable job training. It would also save school districts millions of dollars in wages and benefits.

## English for the Twenty-First Century

**O**N THE SURFACE, the study of English beyond functional literacy might seem as wasteful as the study of history — and in many ways it is. By demanding that English classes focus intensely on "informational texts" instead of complex literature, the Common Core's architects have taken a positive step, attempting to transform English into a relevant discipline.

Sadly, the Common Core's focus on what literacy experts call "reading to learn" — pulling information out of expository texts — has America's

high-school students focusing on skills that students should master between the ages of eight and thirteen. In English, the Common Core thus represents a lowering of our national standards, particularly for high school students.

Instead of lowering the standards, we propose making high school English relevant to the service economy. Once students can "read to learn" — by eighth grade, at the latest — they are functionally literate as service workers. Further reading study is thus superfluous. We propose that high school English abandon reading and focus on the study of rhetoric. The rhetoric curriculum should be composed of two tracks:

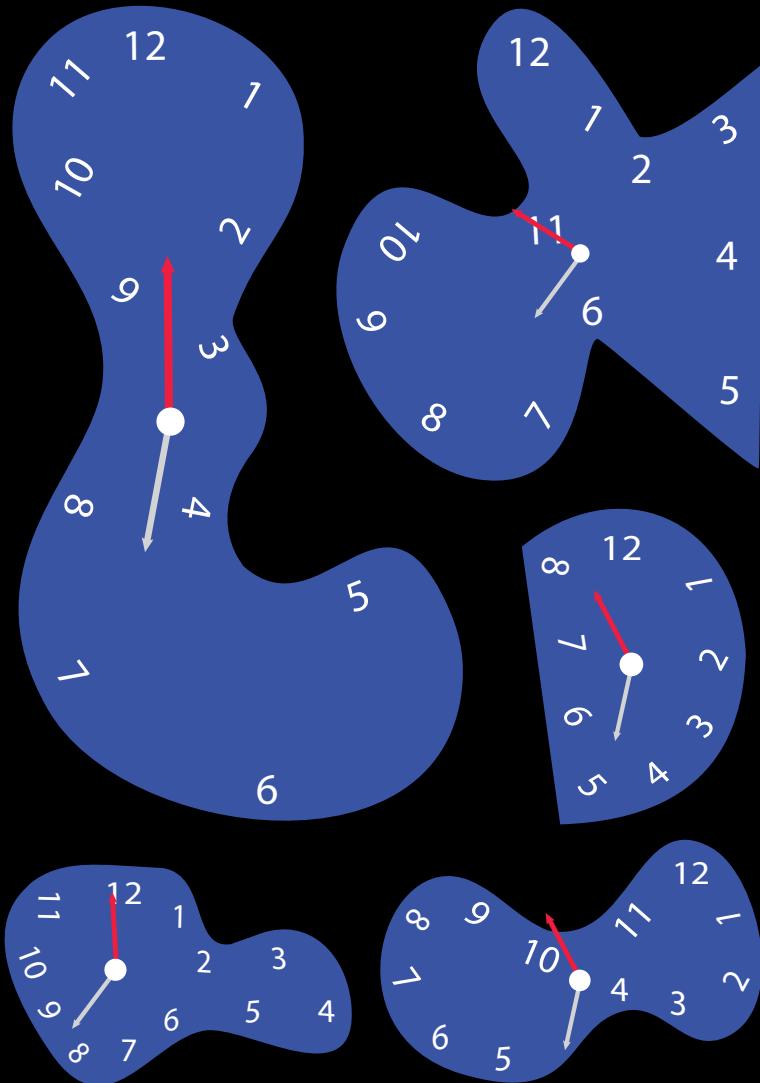
- 1. Servile Rhetoric /** Low-performing English students would receive intensive training in servile rhetoric. Through role-plays and exercises, they would learn how to speak appropriately to consumers and employers. Particular attention would be paid to the areas of apology and genuflection.
- 2. Supervisory Rhetoric /** No skill is more valuable for supervisors than communication. High-performing English students would thus be trained for positions in management through an intensive supervisory rhetoric track. These future managers would study the arts of motivational speech, subtle coercion, obfuscation, jargon, and dispassionate abuse.

## Abandoning the Ivory Tower

**A**T HEART, the Common Core Standards are doomed because their goals are contradictory: to provide students "the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers." In a service economy, students do not need college for career success. In fact, college education will do nothing more than saddle service workers with the twin burdens of crushing debt and unfulfillable intellectual curiosity.

In the age of service, public education should prepare students to be happy and productive in the real world. College education should thus be eliminated as a common expectation for public-school students. After high school, students should transition directly from their service internships into service careers. Sparing them four years of needless intellectual development would be both a favor and a mercy. ■

# A Day Without Care



What does it mean to strike when “production” isn’t the production of widgets, but care for children, the ill, disabled, or elderly?

by Sarah Jaffe

**"A**

### HUNDRED YEARS AGO [Benjamin]

Franklin said that six hours a day was enough for anyone to work and if he was right then, two hours a day ought to be enough now."

Lucy Parsons spoke those words in 1886, shortly before the execution of her husband, Albert. The two had been leaders in the eight-hour-day movement in Chicago, which culminated in a general strike, a rally, and the throwing of a bomb into the crowd in Haymarket Square. Albert Parsons, along with three other "anarchists," was hanged for the crime, though he'd already left the rally by the time the bomb was thrown. Lucy kept up the fight for the rest of her life, working with anarchists, socialists, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Communist Party for the cause.

Women like Lucy Parsons were at the heart of the struggle for the shorter work week, an integral part of the labor movement until the end of the Depression, which saw the forty-hour week enshrined in law after the defeat of Hugo Black's thirty-hour-week bill. As Kathi Weeks writes in "Hours for What We Will: Work, Family and the Movement for Shorter Hours" in *Feminist Studies* 35, after World War II, the demand for shorter hours was increasingly associated with women workers, and was mostly sidelined as the forty-hour week became an institution.

"Not only wages — I am thinking here of the 'female wage' and the 'family wage' — but hours, too, were constructed historically with reference to the family," Weeks notes. The eight-hour day and five-day week presumed that the worker was a man supported by a woman in the home, and it shaped expectations that his work was important and should be decently paid, while women's work was not really work at all (even though, as Weeks notes, the gender division of labor was supported by some paid domestic work, done largely by women of color). The postwar labor movement focused on overtime pay and wages, leaving the women's issue of shorter hours mostly forgotten.

But the power of the eight-hour-day movement was that it didn't require the worker to love her job, to identify with it for life, and to take pride in it in order to organize for better conditions. The industrial union movement rose up to organize those left out of the craft unions, the so-called "unskilled" workers who recognized that they were not defined by their work and that they wanted to be liberated from it as much as possible. That, in their minds,

was what made them worthy of respect, not their skill level or some intrinsic identity.

The fight for shorter hours unified workers across gender and race, class and nationality, skill and ability. It did not require the valorization of "man's work" or the idealization of women's natural goodness.

### T IS A CURIOUS FACT

that in today's climate of increased work for less pay, some of the highest-profile strikes of the last year have called for *more* hours. As labor and its supporters cheered the strikers at Walmart and at New York's fast-food restaurants, it was taken for granted that these part-time workers (some two-thirds of them women) should be calling for more work.

Part-time work and flexible time have been touted as solutions to the problem of "work-family balance," which is somehow only ever considered to be a woman's problem. In the postwar era, as Erin Hatton writes in *The Temp Economy*, temp agencies pushed part-time temp work as a great, flexible option for women who wanted to earn a little extra "pin money." The temp agencies' low pay was acceptable because the workers were presumed to be married, not "real workers" who needed a family-supporting wage. Hatton notes that by the 1980s, temp agencies were spreading their model of work, with its low wages and part-time schedules — formerly associated with women — into the rest of the economy, contributing to what Leah Vosko calls a "feminization" of work in the entire economy.

In *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, Bethany Moreton shows how Walmart too built its global empire on the backs of part-time women workers, capitalizing on the skills of white Southern housewives who'd never worked for pay before but who saw the customer service work they did at Walmart as an extension of the Christian service values they held dear. Those women didn't receive a living wage because they were presumed to be married; today, Walmart's workforce is much more diverse yet still expected to live on barely more than minimum wage.

The end of welfare in the 1990s pushed poor women into low-wage part-time jobs that neither paid them enough to support their families nor provided benefits. Flexibility — considered a good thing when granted to those at the top of the ladder — is now a demand on workers, like those at Walmart who are scheduled by a computer that

predicts staffing levels based on the previous year's sales, regardless of their needs or family commitments. Single mothers who work low-wage jobs have to hold their entire week open — and waste money on complicated child care arrangements — because they never know whether they'll be scheduled for five or twenty-five hours. This makes it difficult to hold down two jobs and puts part-timers in a crunch if they have to worry about child care. To gain any hope of a full-time position or access to promotions, workers must be available around the clock — though in practice they rarely get enough hours to pay the bills.

Weeks notes that certain jobs are constructed as part-time because they are generally done by women. "Work time, including 'full-time,' 'part-time,' and 'overtime,' is a gendered construct," she argues, "established and maintained through recourse to a heteronormative family ideal centered around a traditional gender division of labor." And in *For Love And Money*, Candace Howes, Carrie Leana, and Kristin Smith point out that part-time work reduces job attachment — each additional hour per week increases a worker's odds of remaining in the workforce by 2 percent.

The structure of benefits, too, is built around a heteronormative model, assuming that a full-time male worker gets health insurance through his job and that a part-timer doesn't need such things. There is no definition, under the Fair Labor Standards Act, of what a "part-time" worker actually is.

So we see workers striking for more hours as well as better pay, rather than demanding that they be paid a living wage for those few hours. The eight-hour movement, it should be remembered, demanded eight hours' work for ten hours' pay; a lessening of working time without a corresponding decrease in wages. Both men and women who worked too much embraced this demand. Today, we see workers demanding full-time employment in order to be taken seriously as much as to make more money.

"Women's work," Lisa Ruchti notes in her study of hospital nursing *Catheters, Slurs, and Pickup Lines*, is a term used by sociologists to indicate the correlation between the jobs that women do and the jobs that pay less and offer fewer opportunities to advance. "Feminist economists," she notes, "have argued that part of the reason women's work does not pay well is that it emphasizes tasks women 'should' do naturally." She further notes that it is

useful to distinguish work historically done by women from work that is gendered feminine.

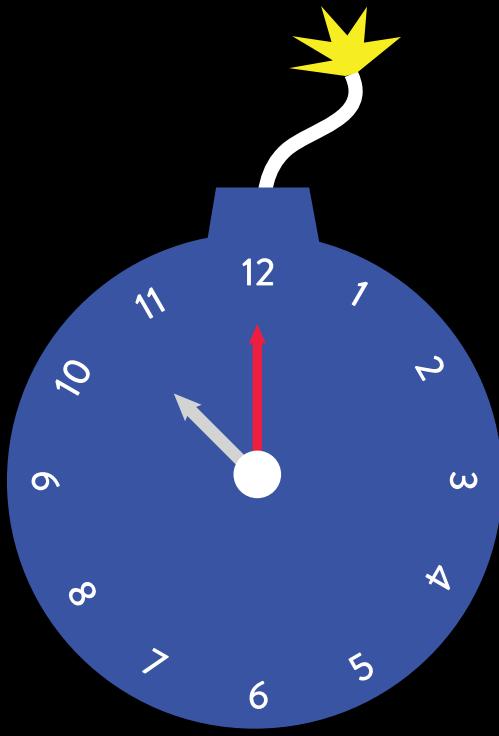
We see examples of this emphasis in Moreton's work on Walmart, in the way the women working as clerks were presumed to be naturally good at helping customers, while men were presumed to be natural managers and quickly promoted. (Liza Featherstone documents the groundbreaking lawsuit by Walmart women in her book *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Women's Rights at Walmart*)

Ruchti points out that women have historically been idealized as "naturally (i.e., biologically) more domestic, submissive, pious, and pure than men," and that nursing and teaching were held out to them as careers that allowed them to exercise their natural talents. Dana Goldstein has written about how the romanticization of women's natural goodness was used to mask the real reason that women teachers were sought when the US public school system was founded: they'd work for lower wages.

Howes, Leana, and Smith note that studies of pay by occupation found that "interactive service jobs," which include care and sales jobs, come with a pay penalty even when controlling for education levels, unionization rates, cognitive and physical skill, and the amount of women doing the job. Feminine work, as Ruchti calls it, is valued less.

It is a surprise to see Walmart workers striking at all; Moreton notes that the way the company played up its "values" made women hesitant to complain about their employer. Paula England, Nancy Folbre and Leana point out (also in *For Love And Money*) that workers who identify with their company's mission earn less. This is even more obvious in the caring professions, where workers are directly responsible for the well-being and health or education of others — and where, more than in sales jobs, the work is identified with women's "natural" skill and place.

**T**HE NOTION that care work should be provided for love rather than money has often served to legitimate gender inequality," argue England, Folbre, and Leana. Women are the ones expected to do the caring — raising children, helping elderly parents, and perhaps supporting both at the same time. Work norms have been shaped by this belief, pushing women into jobs that uphold gender stereotypes. Folbre's research suggests that patriarchal institutions force women to "overspecialize in care



*"A hundred years ago [Benjamin] Franklin said that six hours a day was enough for anyone to work and if he was right then, two hours a day ought to be enough now."*

provision," and Ruchi found that conventional definitions of femininity tend to obscure the fact that care *is work* by defining it as an intrinsic characteristic of women.

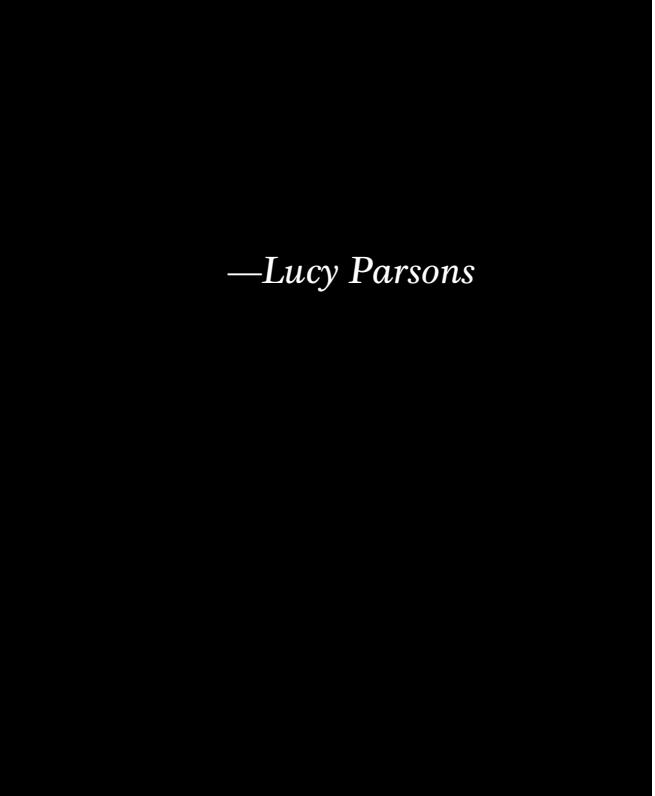
"Good" nurses and other caregivers are the ones who do the work for altruistic motives. "Bad" caregivers are motivated by money. This romanticized view of care workers deflects attention from the low wages and long hours that caregivers work, and serves to justify those low wages.

The care industries are experiencing a surge in growth: Howes, Leana, and Smith write that home healthcare and services for the elderly and people with disabilities are now the industries with the fastest and second-fastest rates of growth of employment in the US. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2010 Population Survey, work in the paid care sector was 24 percent of all employment.

Yet increased demand hasn't driven up wages. Instead, real wages fell for home care workers between 1999 and 2007, and despite the Obama administration's push for new rules that would guarantee home care workers minimum wage and

overtime pay, as of this writing, those rules have not been finalized. Meanwhile, K-12 teachers, who remain mostly women and are expected, as Goldstein notes, to be naturally caring, have borne the brunt of states' austerity policies, facing layoffs, pay freezes, and anti-union attacks.

Nancy Harvey, who runs a daycare center in Oakland, California, told me in an interview that child care providers are also exempt from minimum wage requirements. The state agencies that pay for subsidized child care sometimes wind up as much as two months late with pay. She and other care providers keep the children regardless of whether they are paid. "Most of us don't have any kind of health care, we don't have retirement, we don't have medical, dental, vision. With the subsidized program we are entitled to ten paid holidays a year. That means if you've been in the business for five years, if you've been in the business for forty-five years, you get ten days," Harvey says. "We don't have a voice at the table. We have people making decisions that have no concept of what it's like to walk in our shoes."



—Lucy Parsons

Child care and adult care providers are written off as “babysitters” and “companions” who don’t need wage protections; a report from the National Domestic Workers Alliance last year detailed rampant abuses of live-in nannies and domestic workers, yet California governor Jerry Brown vetoed a Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights. These workers are on the low end of the spectrum when it comes to pay and respect, even among other care workers. K-12 teachers and nurses are professionals who make professional salaries, need specialized education, and often have union contracts. Child care and adult care providers, by contrast, have more in common with the rest of the low-wage workforce. They often work part-time and not year-round, have fewer protections, and are more likely to be immigrants and people of color.

Ruchti notes that researchers have found discrimination within nursing and care work against women of color, who are seen as less professional and even more “naturally” caring than their white coworkers. This adds to the lack of respect for the less professionalized end of the field — or, as Ruchti

says, “[W]hen care work is legitimized through professionalization it is not as accessible to women of color.”

Harvey stresses that she is not just a babysitter; she spends her own money on educational materials and toys for children between the ages of three months and three years. “We’re early childhood educators, and not babysitters,” she says. No one would question, she points out, whether a doctor deserves vacation time or a sick day. “I think it is how people view the profession. Physicians are valued.”

While bosses, administrators, and politicians expect and tout the natural “caring” that women who work in care fields provide, Harvey points out that it adds to their exploitation. “Kindness is taken for weakness,” she says.

**T**HE STRIKE is labor’s weapon of last resort: the ultimate refusal of work, the shutdown of production. But what does it mean to strike when “production” isn’t the production of widgets, cars, or even food, but care for children, the ill or disabled, or the elderly?

The strikes in the last year by workers at Walmart and fast-food establishments weren’t intended to shut down operations; they were intended to shake up the bosses, establish solidarity, and build power among the workers. Similarly, not all care workers can shut down operations — a hospital goes on when its nurses strike, and replacement workers are called in. Child care and home care workers prepare their clients as best they can and help them make other arrangements. The *Brooklyn Rail* reported that when home health aides organized with SEIU 1199 struck in 2004, one woman’s client asked her for a stack of union cards to give out to substitute workers.

Longtime organizer Stephen Lerner and law student striker Emilie Joly, in separate interviews, both stressed the value of the strike as a *freedom from work*, creating time for busy workers to organize, rally, and speak to the press. It’s not just about shutting down production, in other words, but about laying claim to one’s own time.

In 1974, Mariarosa Dalla Costa argued that no strike had ever been a general strike because women’s work in the home was still being done. For a real general strike to be possible, women would have to be able to walk away from unwaged work, she argued. Yet we still have trouble walking away from waged “women’s work.” The women of the

Wages for Housework movement argued that women had to be able to refuse the work that was considered a part of their essential femininity to show, as Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming said, that “we are not that work.” What more concrete refusal of work is there than a strike?

Striking at a factory or Walmart is one thing — it’s very clear who the target is. Striking, when you’re a care aide or a daycare provider or teacher, is a different process. The boss is not necessarily there every day when you go to work. The care recipients, patients, and students are not antagonists. They usually do not set wages for the workers, though they are the ones most immediately affected by a strike.

Yet it is necessary, sometimes, for care workers to strike, because without a demonstration of power from workers, conditions rarely change. Without a demonstration of what happens when women stop working, women’s work will never be properly valued.

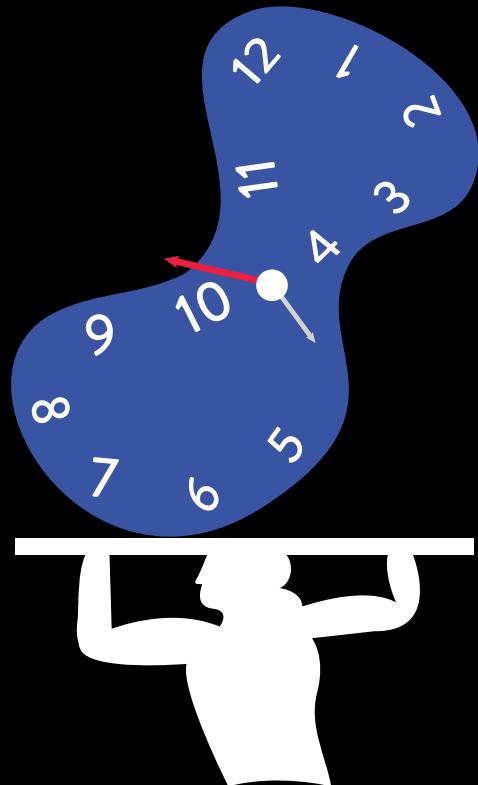
**J**EN JOHNSON is a high school teacher in Chicago, an area vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union. Their union began laying the groundwork for its historic strike months in advance, she told me in a recent interview, with an initial focus on putting education issues on the community’s radar.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel put the teachers on notice shortly after his election. “He made it very clear that the teachers’ union was public enemy number one,” Johnson said. While Emanuel pushed to make the strike about wages, and even normally progressive pundits wrung their hands and lamented for the children, the union had already put forth its message. Teachers wanted better schools, air conditioned classrooms, and smaller class sizes — not Cadillac benefits and 1% wages.

The same rhetoric was thrown at home care workers who struck in New York in 2004, and nurses who strike are frequently shamed for abandoning their patients. “It’s unfortunate and disappointing that the union called this disruptive strike, especially during the holidays, when only the sickest of the sick are in the hospital,” a spokesperson for the Sutter hospital chain in California said — as the chain turned around and locked the nurses out for five days.

The education reform movement calls for merit pay for “good” teachers and swift firing for “bad” ones, encouraging individual self-interest among

*Weeks warns of the dangers of sanctifying “women’s work” and the assumptions about women’s natural place and biological tendencies that comes with it, but what the Chicago teachers did, what nurses and home care aides do, is make their work visible.*



teachers. Yet when they dare to strike, that same ideology is used against them. We get the ironic spectacle of capitalists shaming unionized women workers for being insufficiently communitarian. The people doing “women’s work” are simultaneously not important enough and far too important to strike.

“Traditional femininity, and, by extension, nursing, are defined as pleasing others,” Ruchti points out. “Care — whether an act or idea — is about pleasing others.” In the rest of the capitalist workforce, workers are encouraged to be selfish, to push for their own advancement. Facebook coo Sheryl Sandberg has written a whole book telling women to demand more as individuals. But when care workers take collective action to demand better working conditions, they are shamed as selfish. “You should be taking care of the community!” pundits and politicians scold. “How dare you want better for yourself?”

England, Folbre, and Leana note that emotional attachments to students, patients, or charges often discourage workers from demanding higher wages or better conditions for themselves if they think they will hurt others — while owners and managers, who do not come into contact with care recipients as often, cut costs and squeeze ever more productivity out of workers. New York State Nurses Association vice president Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez commented in an interview that the lack of preparation for Hurricane Sandy was related to the broader neoliberal reorganization of work in the hospital. “They don’t want to pay people for what they call NPT — non-productive time,” she said, which means that training programs are out the window, and patients suffer. Meanwhile, nurses, who often include lower nurse-to-patient ratios in their bargaining, are called selfish.

Molly Knefel, writing about the New York school bus drivers’ strike, notes that pundits and bosses who claim to care often do just the opposite: “How we treat those who care for certain children reflects how we value those children.”

And Harvey asks: “We say we value education, but do we really? Do we value the people that give us the education, the teachers, the providers? When we look at it on paper, no, we don’t.”

**I**N CHICAGO, the teachers beat Emanuel (and the pundits’ pearl-clutching) by out-planning him. “The community had a better sense than normal

that we weren’t just striking over a pay raise, we were striking because we wanted to call attention to serious inequality in our schools. It struck a chord with people,” Johnson says.

The union had added an organizing department shortly after its takeover by CORE, a more militant caucus discussed previously in these pages. They expected members to stay informed, to be media-trained, and to give feedback on their contract. They created a research department, which came up with a report titled “The Schools Chicago Students Deserve,” calling for smaller classes, increasing wraparound services, and better response to social and educational needs. They formed a bargaining team of more than thirty members to go to negotiation sessions, so that classroom teachers were there at the table as experts.

Johnson notes that when teachers framed themselves as educational experts in their communities, it made it harder for Emanuel to claim they didn’t care. They made care a visible part of their labor, and it showed — 67 percent of CPS parents supported the teachers’ strike. Johnson points out that very few children were sent across picket lines to the in-school programs put together by the city while the teachers were out.

Weeks warns of the dangers of sanctifying “women’s work” and the assumptions about women’s natural place and biological tendencies that comes with it, but what the Chicago teachers did, what nurses and home care aides do, is make their work *visible*. By stepping away from it, even briefly, they dissociate themselves from it and remind us that it is not work done simply out of love. By including demands that benefit the community, they make visible the value of their caring as well as their expertise.

Of course, all of this is extra work that comes on top of the grueling work that teachers, nurses, and child care and home care workers are already doing. Which brings us back to the beginning, more or less: to the need for a rekindled movement for shorter hours, a movement that will challenge our fixed ideas about what is work and who should do it, about the organization of domestic, reproductive, and care work.

In Weeks’ words, “The demand would be for more time not only to inhabit the spaces where we now find a life outside of waged work but also to create spaces in which to constitute new subjectivities, new work and nonwork ethics, and new practices of care and sociality.” ■

An  
Interview  
with Vivek  
Chibber

# How Does the Subaltern Speak?

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In recent decades, postcolonial theory has largely displaced Marxism as the dominant perspective among intellectuals engaged in the project of critically examining the relationship between the Western and non-Western worlds. Originating in the humanities, postcolonial theory has subsequently become increasingly influential in history, anthropology, and the social sciences. Its rejection of the universalisms and meta-narratives associated with Enlightenment thought dovetailed with the broader turn of the intellectual left during the 1980s and 1990s.

Vivek Chibber's new book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, represents a wide-ranging challenge to many of the core tenets of postcolonial theory. Focusing particularly on the strain of postcolonial theory known as subaltern studies, Chibber makes a strong case for why we can – and must – conceptualize the non-Western world through the same analytical lens that we use to understand developments in the West. He offers a sustained defense of theoretical approaches that emphasize universal categories like capitalism and class. His work constitutes an argument for the continued relevance of Marxism in the face of some of its most trenchant critics.

Chibber was interviewed for *Jacobin* by Jonah Birch, a graduate student in sociology at New York University.

# Postcolonial theory discounts the enduring value of Enlightenment universalism at its own peril.

Jonah Birch

At the core of postcolonial theory is the notion that Western categories can't be applied to postcolonial societies like India. On what basis is this claim made?

Vivek Chibber

Well, this is probably the single most important argument coming out of postcolonial studies, and this is also what makes it so important to engage them. There has been no body of thought associated with the Left in the last hundred and fifty years or so that has insisted on denying the scientific ethos and the applicability of categories coming out of the liberal enlightenment and the radical enlightenment — categories like capital, democracy, liberalism, rationality, and objectivity. There have been philosophers who have criticized these orientations, but they've rarely achieved any significant traction on the Left. Postcolonial theorists are the first to do so.

The argument really comes out of a background sociological assumption: for the categories of political economy and the Enlightenment to have any purchase, capitalism must spread across the world. This is called the “universalization of capital.”

The argument goes like this: the universalizing categories associated with Enlightenment thought are only as legitimate as the universalizing tendency of capital. And postcolonial theorists deny that capital has in fact universalized — or more importantly, that it ever could universalize around the globe. Since capitalism has not and cannot universalize, the categories that people like Marx

developed for understanding capitalism also cannot be universalized.

What this means for postcolonial theory is that the parts of the globe where the universalization of capital has failed need to generate their own categories. And more importantly, it means that theories like Marxism, which try to utilize the categories of political economy, are not only wrong, but they're Eurocentric, and not only Eurocentric, but they're part of the colonial and imperial drive of the West. And so they're implicated in imperialism. Again, this is an entirely novel argument on the Left.

**What made you decide to focus on subaltern studies as a way of critiquing postcolonial theory more generally?**

Well, postcolonial theory is a very diffuse body of ideas. It really comes out of literary and cultural studies, and had its initial influence there. It then spread out through area studies, history, and anthropology. It spread into those fields because of the influence of culture and cultural theory from the 1980s onwards. So, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, disciplines such as history, anthropology, Middle Eastern studies, and South Asian studies were infused with a heavy turn toward what we now know as postcolonial theory.

To engage the theory, you run up against a basic problem: because it's so diffuse, it's hard to pin down what its core propositions are, so first of all, it's hard to know exactly what to criticize. Also, its defenders are able to easily rebut any criticisms by pointing to other aspects that you might have missed in the theory, saying that you've honed in on the wrong aspects. Because of this, I had to find some core components of the theory — some stream of theorizing inside postcolonial studies — that is consistent, coherent, and highly influential.

I also wanted to focus on those dimensions of the theory centered on history, historical development, and social structures, and not the literary criticism. Subaltern studies fits all of these molds: it's been extremely influential in area studies; it's fairly internally consistent, and it focuses on history and social structure. As a strand of theorizing, it's been highly influential partly because of this internal consistency, but also partly because its main proponents come out of a Marxist background and they were all based in India or parts of the Third World. This gave them a great deal of legitimacy and credibility, both as critics of Marxism and

as exponents of a new way of understanding the Global South. It's through the work of the subalternists that these notions about capital's failed universalization and the need for indigenous categories have become respectable.

**Why is it, according to the subaltern studies theorists, that capitalism's universalizing tendencies broke down in the postcolonial world? What is it about these societies that impeded capitalism's progress?**

Well, subaltern studies offers two distinct arguments for how and why the universalizing drive of capital was blocked. One argument comes from Ranajit Guha. Guha located the universalizing drive of capital in the ability of a particular agent — namely, the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class — to overthrow the feudal order and construct a coalition of classes that includes not only capitalists and merchants, but also workers and peasants. And through the alliance that is cobbled together, capital is supposed to erect a new political order, which is not only pro-capitalist in terms of defending the property rights of capitalists, but also a liberal, encompassing, and consensual order.

So for the universalizing drive of capital to be real, Guha says, it must be experienced as the emergence of a capitalist class that constructs a consensual, liberal order. This order replaces the *ancien régime*, and is universalizing in that it expresses the interests of capitalists as universal interests. Capital, as Guha says, achieves the ability to speak for all of society: it is not only dominant as a class, but also hegemonic in that it doesn't need to use coercion to maintain its power.

So Guha locates the universalizing drive in the construction of an encompassing political culture. The key point for Guha is that the bourgeoisie in the West was able to achieve such an order while the bourgeoisie in the East failed to do so. Instead of overthrowing feudalism, it made some sort of compact with the feudal classes; instead of becoming a hegemonic force with a broad, cross-class coalition, it tried its best to suppress the involvement of peasants and the working class. Instead of erecting a consensual and encompassing political order, it put into place highly unstable and fairly authoritarian political orders. It maintained the rift between the class culture of the subaltern and that of the elite.

Whereas in the West the bourgeoisie was able to speak for all the various classes, in the East it failed

in this goal, making it dominant but not hegemonic. This in turn makes modernity in the two parts of the world fundamentally different by generating very different political dynamics in the East and West, and this is the significance of capital's universalizing drive having failed.

**So their argument rests on a claim about the role of the bourgeoisie in the West, and the failure of its counterpart in postcolonial societies?**

For Guha, absolutely, and the subaltern studies group accepts these arguments, largely without qualification. They describe the situation — the condition of the East — as a condition in which the bourgeoisie dominates but lacks hegemony, whereas the West has both dominance and hegemony.

Now the problem with this is, as you said, that the core of the argument is a certain description of the achievements of the Western bourgeoisie. The argument, unfortunately, has very little historical purchase. There was a time, in the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, even into the 1950s, when many historians accepted this picture of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the West. Over the last thirty or forty years, though, it has been largely rejected, even among Marxists.

What's strange is that Guha's book and his articles were written as though the criticisms of this approach were never made. And what's even stranger is that the historical profession — within which subaltern studies has been so influential — has never questioned this foundation of the subaltern studies project, even though they all announce that it's the foundation. The bourgeoisie in the West never strove for the goals that Guha ascribes to it: it never tried to bring about a consensual political culture or represent working-class interests. In fact, it fought tooth and nail against them for centuries after the so-called bourgeois revolutions. When those freedoms were finally achieved, it was through very intense struggle by the dispossessed, waged against the heroes of Guha's narrative, the bourgeoisie. So the irony is that Guha really works with an incredibly naïve, even ideological notion of the Western experience. He doesn't see that capitalists have everywhere and always been hostile to the extension of political rights to working people.

**Okay, so that's one argument about the radical specificity of the colonial and postcolonial worlds.**

**But you said before that there's another one?**

Yeah, the second argument comes primarily in Dipesh Chakrabarty's work. His doubts about the universalization of capital are quite distinct from Guha's. Guha locates capital's universalizing tendency in a particular agent: the bourgeoisie.

Chakrabarty locates it in capitalism's ability to transform all social relations wherever it goes. And he concludes that it fails this test because he finds that there are various cultural, social, and political practices in the East that don't conform to his model of what a capitalist culture and political system should look like.

So, in his view, the test for a successful universalization of capital is that all social practices must be immersed in the logic of capital. He never clearly specifies what the logic of capital is, but there are some broad parameters that he has in mind.

**That strikes me as a pretty high bar.**

Yeah, that's the point; the bar is an impossible one. So if you find in India that marriage practices still use ancient rituals; if you find in Africa that people still tend to pray while they're at work — those kinds of practices make for a failure of capital's universalization.

What I say in the book is that this is kind of bizarre: all capital's universalization requires is that the economic logic of capitalism be implanted in various parts of the world and that it be successfully reproduced over time. This will, of course, generate a certain degree of cultural and political change as well. However, it doesn't require that all, or even most, of the cultural practices of a region be transformed along some kind of identifiable capitalist lines.

**This is the theoretical argument you make in the book about why capitalism's universalization doesn't require erasing all social diversity.**

Right. A typical maneuver of postcolonial theorists is to say something like this: Marxism relies on abstract, universalizing categories. But for these categories to have traction, reality should look exactly like the abstract descriptions of capital, of workers, of the state, etc. But, say the postcolonial theorists, reality is so much more diverse. Workers wear such colorful clothes; they say prayers while working; capitalists consult astrologers — this doesn't look like anything what Marx describes in *Capital*. So it must mean that the categories of

capital aren't really applicable here. The argument ends up being that any departure of concrete reality from the abstract descriptions of theory is a problem for the theory. But this is silly beyond words: it means that you can't have theory. It doesn't matter if capitalists consult astrologers as long as they are driven to make profits. It doesn't matter if workers pray on the shop floor as long as they work. This is all that the theory requires. It doesn't say that cultural differences will disappear; it says that these differences don't matter for the spread of capitalism, as long as agents obey the compulsions that capitalist structures place on them. I go to considerable lengths to explain this in the book.

A lot of the appeal of postcolonial theory reflects a widespread desire to avoid Eurocentrism and to understand the importance of locally specific cultural categories, forms, identities, and what have you: to understand people as they were, or are, not just as abstractions. But I wonder if there's also a danger with the way they understand the cultural specificity of non-Western societies, and if that is a form of cultural essentialism.

Absolutely, that is the danger. And it's not only a danger; it's something to which subaltern studies and postcolonial theory consistently fall prey. You see it most often in their arguments about social agency and resistance. It's perfectly fine to say that people draw on local cultures and practices when they resist capitalism, or when they resist various agents of capital. But it's quite another to say that they're not universal aspirations, or not universal interests that people have.

In fact, one of the things I show in my book is that when the subaltern studies historians do empirical work on peasant resistance, they show pretty clearly that peasants [in India], when they engage in collective action, are more or less acting on the same aspirations and the same drives as Western peasants were. What separates them from the West are the cultural forms in which these aspirations are expressed, but the aspirations themselves tend to be pretty consistent.

And when you think about it, is it really outlandish to say that Indian peasants are anxious to defend their wellbeing; that they don't like to be pushed around; that they'd like to be able to meet certain basic nutritional requirements; that when they give up rents to the landlords they try to keep as much as they can for themselves because they don't like to give up their crops? Throughout the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this is actually what these peasant struggles have been about.

When subaltern theorists put up this gigantic wall separating East from West, and when they insist that Western agents are not driven by the same kinds of concerns as Eastern agents, what they're doing is endorsing the kind of essentialism that colonial authorities used to justify their deprivations in the nineteenth century. It's the same kind of essentialism that American military apologists used when they were bombing Vietnam or when they were going into the Middle East. Nobody on the Left can be at ease with these sorts of arguments.

But couldn't someone respond by saying that you're endorsing some form of essentialism by ascribing a common rationality to actors in very different contexts?

Well, it isn't exactly essentialism, but I am endorsing the view that there are some common interests and needs that people have across cultures. There are some aspects of our human nature that are not culturally constructed: they are shaped by culture, but not created by it. My view is that even though there are enormous cultural differences between people in the East and the West, there's also a core set of concerns that people have in common, whether they're born in Egypt, or India, or Manchester, or New York. These aren't many, but we can enumerate at least two or three of them: there's a concern for your physical wellbeing; there's probably a concern for a degree of autonomy and self-determination; there's a concern for those practices that directly pertain to your welfare. This isn't much, but you'd be amazed how far it gets you in explaining really important historical transformations.

For two hundred years, anybody who called herself progressive embraced this kind of universalism. It was simply understood that the reason workers or peasants could unite across national boundaries is because they shared certain material interests. This is now being called into question by subaltern studies, and it's quite remarkable that so many people on the Left have accepted it. It's even more remarkable that it's still accepted when over the last fifteen or twenty years we've seen global movements across cultures and national boundaries against neoliberalism, against capitalism. Yet in the university, to dare to say that people share common concerns across cultures is somehow seen as being

Eurocentric. This shows how far the political and intellectual culture has fallen in the last twenty years.

If you're arguing that capitalism doesn't require bourgeois liberalism, and that the bourgeoisie didn't play the historical role of leading this popular struggle for democracy in the West, how do you explain the fact that we did get liberalism and democracy in the West, and we didn't get those outcomes in the same way in a lot of the postcolonial world?

That's a great question. The interesting thing is that when Guha wrote his original essay announcing the agenda of subaltern studies, he ascribed the failure of liberalism in the East to the failure of its bourgeoisie. But he also suggested that there was another historical possibility, namely that the independence movement in India and other colonial countries might have been led by popular classes, which might have pushed things in a different direction and perhaps created a different kind of political order. He brings this up and then he forgets it, and it's never brought up again in any of his work.

This is the road that, if he had taken it — and if he had taken it more seriously — could have led him to a more accurate understanding of what happened in the West and not just in the East. The fact is that in the West, when a consensual, democratic, encompassing order did finally slowly emerge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not a gift bestowed by capitalists. It was in fact a product of very long, concerted struggles on the part of workers, farmers, and peasants. In other words, it was brought forth by struggles from below.

Guha and the subalternists miss this entirely, because they insist that the rise of the liberal order was an achievement of capitalists. Because they misdescribe it in the West, they misdiagnose its failure in the East. In the East, they wrongly ascribe its failure to the shortcomings of the bourgeoisie.

Now, if you want an accurate historical research project explaining the tenuousness of democratic institutions in the East and their veering towards authoritarianism, the answer does not have to do with the shortcomings of the bourgeoisie, but with the weakness of the labor movement and peasant organizations, and with the parties representing these classes. The weakness of these political forces in bringing some sort of discipline to the capitalist

class is the answer the question subaltern studies poses. That question is: "Why are the political cultures in the Global South so different from the Global North?" This is where they ought to be looking: at the dynamics of popular organizations and the parties of popular organizations; not at some putative failure of the capitalist class, which in the East was no more oligarchic and authoritarian than it had been in the West.

You're obviously very critical of postcolonial theory. But isn't there something valid and valuable in its indictment of the postcolonial order?

Yeah, there's some value, especially if you look at Guha's work. In all of his work, especially in *Dominance Without Hegemony*, I think there's a very salutary criticism of and general contempt toward the powers-that-be in a country like India. And that's a tremendously positive alternative to the kind of nationalist historiography that had been in place for decades in a country like India, in which the leaders of the independence movement were seen as something akin to saviors. Guha's insistence that not only was this leadership not a salvation, but that it was in fact responsible for so many of the shortcomings of the postcolonial order, is to be lauded and endorsed.

The problem is not his description of the postcolonial order; the problem is his diagnosis of where those failings come from and how they might be fixed. I am entirely on board with Guha's general attitude toward the Indian elite and its henchmen. The problem is that his analysis of its causes is so wrongheaded that it gets in the way of an appropriate response and criticism of that order.

What about Partha Chatterjee? Doesn't his work offer a serious critique of the postcolonial state in India?

Some aspects of it, yes. On a purely descriptive level, Chatterjee's work on nationalism, like Guha's, does show the narrowness of the nationalist leadership's concerns, their fidelity to elite interests and their suspiciousness of popular mobilization. All that is to be lauded.

The problem, again, is with the diagnosis. In Chatterjee's case, the failings of the Indian nationalist movement are ascribed to its leadership having internalized a particular ethos, and this is the ethos and orientation that comes with modernization and modernism. So for Chatterjee, the problem with Nehru is that he very quickly adopted a

modernizing stance towards the political economy. In other words, he placed great value on a scientific approach to industrialization, to rational planning and organization – and that's at the heart of why India remains, as Chatterjee says, “locked in a subordinate position in the global order.”

It's fine to say that Nehru abided by a narrow set of interests, but to locate the deep sources of his conservatism in his adoption of a modernizing, scientific worldview seriously mistakes what the problem is. If the problem with the postcolonial elite is that they adopted a scientific and rational worldview, the question arises: how do postcolonial theorists plan to get out of the current crises – not only economic and political, but also environmental – if they're saying that science, objectivity, evidence, concerns with development, are to be ditched?

Chatterjee has no way out of this. In my view, the problem with Nehru's leadership, and with the Indian National Congress's leadership, was not that they were scientific and modernizing, but that they linked their program to the interests of the Indian elites – of the Indian capitalist class, and the Indian landlord class – and that they abandoned their commitment to popular mobilization and tried to keep the popular classes under very tight control.

Chatterjee's approach, while it has the trappings of a radical critique, is actually quite conservative, because it locates science and rationality in the West, and in doing so describes the East much as colonial ideologues did. It's also conservative because it leaves us with no means through which we might construct a more humane and more rational order, because no matter which way you try to move – whether you try to move out of capitalism towards socialism, whether you try to humanize capitalism through some kind of social democracy, whether you try to mitigate environmental disasters through some more rational use of resources – all of it is going to require those things which

Chatterjee impugns: science, rationality, and planning of some kind. Locating these as the source of the East's marginalization is not only mistaken, I think it's also quite conservative.

**But is there nothing to the critique that postcolonial theorists make of Marxism, as well as other forms of Western thought rooted in the Enlightenment; that they're Eurocentric?**

Well, we have to distinguish between two forms of Eurocentrism: one is kind of neutral and benign,

which says that a theory is Eurocentric insofar as its evidentiary base has come mostly from a study of Europe. In this sense, of course, all the Western theories we know of up to the late nineteenth century overwhelmingly drew their evidence and their data from Europe, because the scholarship and the anthropological and historical literature on the East was so underdeveloped. In this sense, they were Eurocentric.

I think this kind of Eurocentrism is natural, though it's going to come with all sorts of problems, but it can't really be indicted. The most pernicious form of Eurocentrism – the one that postcolonial theorists go after – is where knowledge based on particular facts about the West is projected onto the East and might be misleading. Indeed, postcolonial theorists have indicted Western theorists because they not only illicitly project onto the East concepts and categories that might be inapplicable; they systematically ignore evidence that is available and might generate better theory.

If it's Eurocentrism of the second kind that we're talking about, then there have been elements in the history of Marxist thought that fall prey to this kind of Eurocentrism. However, if you look at the actual history of the theory's development, those instances have been pretty rare.

Since the early twentieth century, I think it's accurate to say that Marxism is maybe the only theory of historical change coming out of Europe that has systematically grappled with the specificity of the East. One of the most curious facts about subaltern studies and postcolonial theory is that they ignore this. Starting with the Russian Revolution of 1905 and on to the Revolution of 1917, then the Chinese Revolution, then the African decolonization movements, then the guerilla movements in Latin America – all of these social upheavals generated attempts to grapple with the specificity of capitalism in countries outside of Europe.

You can rattle off at least six specific theories that came out of Marxism that not only addressed the specificity of the East, but explicitly denied the teleology and the determinism that subaltern studies says is central to Marxism: Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development, Lenin's theory of imperialism, the articulation of modes of production, etc. Every one of these theories was an acknowledgement that developing societies don't look like European societies.

So if you want to score points, you can bring up instances here and there of some sort of lingering Eurocentrism in Marxism. But if you look at the balance sheet, not only is the overall score pretty positive, but if you compare it to the orientalism that subaltern studies has revived, it seems to me that the more natural framework for understanding the specificity of the East comes out of Marxism and the Enlightenment tradition, not postcolonial theory.

The lasting contribution of postcolonial theory — what it will be known for, in my view, if it is remembered fifty years from now — will be its revival of cultural essentialism and its acting as an endorsement of orientalism, rather than being an antidote to it.

All of this begs the question: why has postcolonial theory gained such prominence in the past few decades? Indeed, why has it been able to supersede the sorts of ideas you're defending in your book? Clearly, postcolonial theory has come to fill a space once occupied by various forms of Marxist and Marxist-influenced thought, and has especially influenced large swathes of the Anglophone intellectual left.

In my view, the prominence is strictly for social and historical reasons; it doesn't express the value or worth of the theory, and that's why I decided to write the book. I think postcolonial theory rose to prominence for a couple of reasons. One is that after the decline of the labor movement and the crushing of the Left in the 1970s, there wasn't going to be any kind of prominent theory in academia that focused on capitalism, the working class, or class struggle. Many people have pointed this out: in university settings, it's just unrealistic to imagine that any critique of capitalism from a class perspective is going to have much currency except in periods when there's massive social turmoil and social upheaval.

So the interesting question is why there's any kind of theory calling itself radical at all, since it's not a classical anticapitalist theory. I think this has to do with two things: first, with changes in universities over the last thirty years or so, in which they're no longer ivory towers like they used to be. They're mass institutions, and these institutions have been opened up to groups that, historically, were kept outside: racial minorities, women, immigrants from developing countries. These are all people who experience various kinds of oppression,

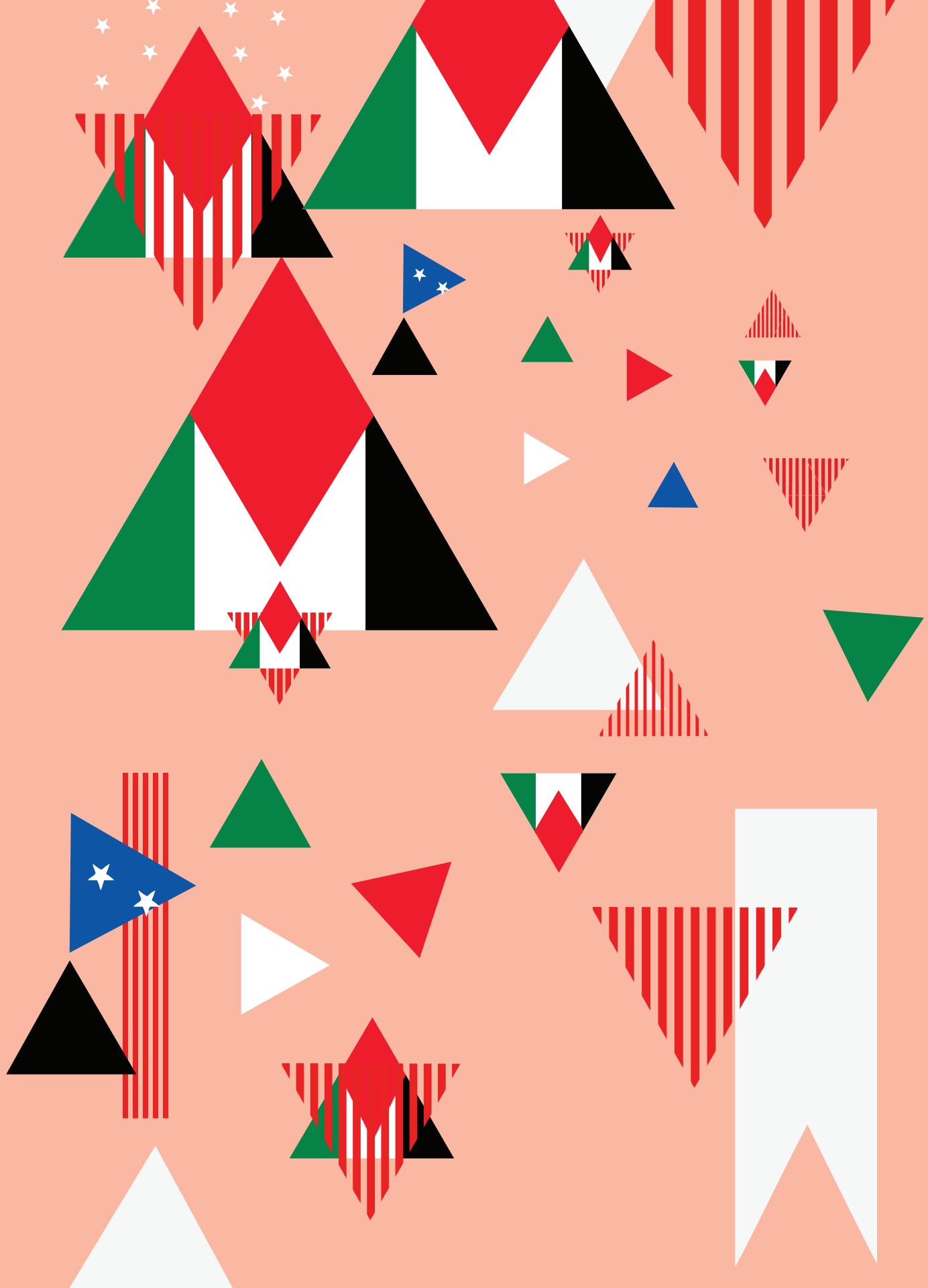
but not necessarily class exploitation. So there is, as it were, a mass base for what we might call oppression studies, which is a kind of radicalism — and it's important, and it's real. However, it's not a base that's very interested in questions of class struggle or class formation, the kinds of things that Marxists used to talk about.

Complementing this has been the trajectory of the intelligentsia. The generation of '68 didn't become mainstream as it aged. Some wanted to keep its moral and ethical commitments to radicalism. But like everyone else, it too steered away from class-oriented radicalism. So you had a movement from the bottom, which was a kind of demand for theories focusing on oppression, and a movement on top, which was among professors offering to supply theories focusing on oppression. What made them converge wasn't just a focus on oppression, but the excision of class oppression and class exploitation from the story. And postcolonial theory, because of its own excision of capitalism and class — because it downplays the dynamics of exploitation — is a very healthy fit.

What do you think about the prospects for postcolonial theory? Do you expect that it will be eclipsed within the academy and within the Left anytime soon?

No, I don't. I don't think postcolonial theory is in any danger of being displaced, at least not anytime soon. Academic trends come and go, not based on the validity of their claims or the value of their propositions, but because of their relation to the broader social and political environment. The general disorganization of labor and the Left, which created the conditions for postcolonial theory to flourish, is still very much in place. Plus, postcolonial theory now has at least two generations of academics who have staked their entire careers on it; they have half a dozen journals dedicated to it; there's an army of graduate students pursuing research agendas that come out of it. Their material interests are tied up directly with the theory's success.

You can criticize it all you want, but until we get the kind of movements that buoyed Marxism in the early years after World War I, or in the late 1960s and early 1970s, you won't see a change. In fact, what you'll see is a pretty swift and vicious response to whatever criticisms might emerge. My sad, but — I think — realistic prognosis is that it's going to be around for a while. ■



# Special Topic: Palestine

## Palestine and the Left

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**T**HE LEFT has a checkered history when it comes to Palestine. For at least the first two decades of Israel's existence, due in part to the attempted extermination of European Jewry, in part to the distorting effects of Soviet foreign policy, and in part to sympathy for a purportedly socialist movement, almost the entire Western left lived with illusions about Zionism.

Ideologically, Zionism was a broad and heterogeneous nationalist movement, with many competing currents of the Right and Left, each with different degrees of moral awareness vis-à-vis the non-Jewish world. But as it manifested itself concretely, Zionism meant the creation of a colonial sovereignty in historic Palestine, and all that went with it: the calamitous replacement of a complex Palestinian society with vibrant urban and agricultural communities, deeply embedded within the surrounding Arab world, with a European nation-state.

Building a European state outside of Europe meant the destruction, expulsion, or assimilation of indigenous people, what the historian Patrick Wolfe has called the “logic of elimination.” That logic was then rationalized as a reparation for the horrors inflicted on European Jews — even as it was brought to bear against Palestinians who were not responsible for those horrors.

That's why the shotgun marriage of Zionism and the Left has been so troubled. Socialist Zionism, even in theory, meant socialism for Zionists. Ultimately, it meant socialism for no one: Israel today is the second most unequal developed economy in the world.

Meanwhile, some recurring tropes within the pro-Palestine community have also blurred the issue. What is essentially a classic struggle for national liberation has been obscured by a tendency to exceptionalize Israeli crimes, distracted by a barren fixation on international law, and lost in a hopelessly abstract analytical idealism. A corollary of these analytical faults has been the so-called Israel lobby thesis, which argues that were it not for a handful of pro-Israel lobbying institutions, America might not support the occupation or continue its “special relationship” with Israel.

This special section of *Jacobin* takes on these themes. It lays out materialist analyses of the links between Israel and the United States, and the role of the Israel lobby. It delineates the contemporary social bases of the two-state solution and the Palestinian Authority. It analyzes the waxing power of Palestinian capitalists in the West Bank, and also discusses the solidarity movement itself.

Why now? Because almost without anyone noticing, the movement in solidarity with Palestinian rights — with all its solipsisms and ultra-leftist foibles, its quarrels and magnetic attraction for eccentrics, opportunists, and, yes, the occasional antisemite — has grown to become one of the most important, inspiring, and fast-growing social movements in the country.

Palestine is no longer a dirty word on college campuses. The last Students for Justice in Palestine national conference attracted well over 300 delegates from more than 140 colleges and universities across the country, converging on Ann Arbor to discuss capitalist state formation in Israel, solidarity among prisoners, colonialism, the persistence of the occupation, refugee rights, and remarkably, with a minimum of rancor and sectarianism, the Syrian conflict.

Much of the energy that in the past would have found its home in student antiwar movements has migrated to the cause of Palestine. That is not without its problems: after all, children are gunned down by helicopter gunships in Afghanistan as surely as they are gunned down by snipers in the Gaza Strip. But the bloom of student interest in this old and bloody colonial conflict is something the

Left ought to take interest in, because the Left is not just an idea but also the masses in motion, and scarcely anywhere — except for the environmental movement — are young people in motion with such a mix of revolutionary élan and disciplined militancy as they are in the case of Palestine.

But radical action has outpaced radical understanding. In part, that is because young people have gotten involved just at the moment when the Palestine question is in unprecedented political and ideological flux. Some activists are unaware, for example, that support for a two-state solution was not always the hollow alibi it now represents. It was the pragmatic position of the Palestinian capitalist class and its cadres, along with a large portion of the Palestinian people, and many communists. That position therefore often became the default position of the American solidarity movement in the defeated days of Oslo and then the brutal destruction of the Second Intifada, even as it receded beyond the horizon of possibility. The number of settlers rose to surpass four hundred thousand, each settler a “fact on the ground,” in the argot of Israeli planners; each one making it more difficult for Palestinians to gain sovereignty over the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.

In those days, simply telling the truth acquired a radical edge. To denounce Israeli war crimes and to call unambiguously for the end of the occupation was to expose oneself to death threats. All the more so when figures like Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein, who defended Palestine in the American public sphere, still traced their ideas for resolution of the conflict to the old Matzpen position of the 1960s and 1970s: a regional revolution, the evaporation of state borders, and socialism in the Middle East.

But times changed sometime between the brutal Israeli assault on Lebanon in the summer of 2006, the siege of the Gaza Strip from 2007 to 2010, and the 2008–2009 Cast Lead massacre — when one of the world’s most powerful armies, desperate to destroy a subject people’s capacity to resist, laid waste to a tiny strip of land filled with refugee camps and children on live television.

In Europe, consistently ahead of the American left in mobilizational capacity, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in protest. The US reaction was more subdued, but even here the shockwave of Israeli bombs broke the Zionist hegemony over the American psyche. Watching white phosphorus fall on children will do that.

And so the level of struggle in solidarity work took massive leaps — but not without problems and misunderstandings. The essays we present in this section aim to illuminate some of the critical issues with which the movement is grappling.

As Mezna Qato and Kareem Rabie, along with Sobhi Samour and Omar Jabary Salamanca, have pointed out, “scholarly production accurately mirrors the dynamics of incoherent contemporary Palestinian politics.” Indeed, it takes its cue from them. The result is that a rights-based campaign has fundamentally accommodated an often far too liberal Palestine solidarity discourse. As Qato and Rabie discuss in this section, such liberalism is manifest everywhere: a centering of the American state as the key leverage point for all American activists, Palestinian or otherwise; a palsied internationalism, repeating the same old slogans but without the links to struggling communities in Palestine and the Arab world which gave them meaning; and a focus on individuals as opposed to collective organizing, and in turn a diminished focus on substantive and self-critical political practice.

Using a different lens, Chris Toensing reviews Rashid Khalidi’s new book on the peace process and uses it as an occasion to analyze the basis of this liberal and lobby-centric turn, one which both miscasts the American structure that gives succor to Israeli colonialism and that also displaces the struggle from a global North-South arena to one between various varieties of American imperialism, some more melioristic and aggressive than others.

Finally, Adam Hanieh offers a class analysis of the turn to the “peace process.” Hanieh explains exactly who composes the peace-process bloc in Ramallah, and how that Palestinian elite has created a vested interest not in freedom but in endless wrangling about freedom. What he shows is that this elite has in effect dominated discussion of the “national” question, and that this domination has been bound to a deflection of the internal class question among Palestinians. The result is the division of struggles and the weakening and oppression of Palestinians on the planes of both class and nation. He argues that this must be reversed and in turn linked to a regional perspective, focused on freedom for all Arab peoples not merely from the dictators who oppress them but the economic shackles that those dictators play a crucial part in producing.

Finally, our own perspective. Taking our cue from the Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions movement,

we believe the fundamental demand that guides our actions must be that Jews and Arabs live as equals, even though we know of no easy way to reach that goal. That is why we support Palestinian self-determination and decolonization without reservations, and believe the movement’s job is to support those goals, and not to impose its own standards on the means by which Palestinians free themselves. Thus, far more important than meaningless efforts to draw red lines about “one state” or “two states” — both now empty chimeras, so far from substantive realization as to make the entire debate unreal — is to recognize that the precondition for progressive social change is self-determination.

At the same time, we understand that Israeli Jews — especially those from North Africa and the Middle East — can also be an oppressed class in historical Palestine. We ignore them at our peril, for any change that doesn’t also pass through the prism of the minds of the Jewish working class would be a revolution from above: an imposed decolonization, which, along with continued economic stratification, would remain politically fragile and ripe for further injustice. But this gets very complicated in today’s Israel, where today only a tiny fragment of the Jewish population supports ending the occupation. Many prefer to deny its bleak existence, or to simply shrug and say that Israel has no constituency for peace — as though this settles the question of how exactly the colonization of Palestine will stop.

This does not leave us in a very clear place. The political force that can forge a clear national liberation strategy does not exist, and it is Palestinians and Palestinians alone who can forge such a force. Rather than issuing useless and inappropriate manifestoes about how that project ought to progress, our touchstone should be clear solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

But not as an idiosyncratic fetish divorced from the broader politics of the Left. Rather, we should return it to what it has always been: a focal point of anti-imperialist struggle, where peasants and slum-dwellers are now fighting a desperate struggle against tanks and F-16s, and where their best weapon at the moment may be to starve themselves to death in the hope of fracturing ideological support for Israeli militarism.

The question of Palestine is a question of justice. That is why we do not hesitate to take sides. ■



# The Oslo Illusion

The Oslo Accords weren't a failure for Israel – they served as a fig leaf to consolidate and deepen its control over Palestinian life.

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by Adam Hanieh

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HIS YEAR MARKS the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Oslo Accords between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government. Officially known as the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements, the Oslo Accords were firmly ensconced in the framework of the two-state solution, heralding “an end to decades of confrontation and conflict,” the recognition of “mutual legitimate and political rights,” and the aim of achieving “peaceful coexistence and mutual dignity and security and … a just, lasting and comprehensive peace settlement.”

Its supporters claimed that under Oslo, Israel would gradually relinquish control over territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) eventually forming an independent state there. The negotiations process, and subsequent agreements between the PLO and Israel, instead paved the way for the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian Authority, which now rules over an estimated 2.6 million Palestinians in the West Bank, has become the key architect of Palestinian political strategy. Its institutions draw international legitimacy from Oslo, and its avowed goal of “building an independent Palestinian state” remains grounded in the same framework. The incessant calls for a return to negotiations — made by US and European leaders on an almost daily basis — harken back to the principles laid down in September 1993.

Two decades on, it is now common to hear Oslo described as a “failure” due to the ongoing reality of Israeli occupation. The problem with this assessment is that it confuses the stated goals of Oslo with its real aims. From the perspective of the Israeli government, the aim of Oslo was not to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or to address the substantive issues of Palestinian dispossession, but something much more functional. By creating the perception that negotiations would lead to some kind of “peace,” Israel was able to portray its intentions as those of a partner rather than an enemy of Palestinian sovereignty.

Based on this perception, the Israeli government used Oslo as a fig leaf to cover its consolidated and deepened control over Palestinian life, employing the same strategic mechanisms wielded since the onset of the occupation in 1967. Settlement construction, restrictions on Palestinian movement, the incarceration of thousands, and command over borders and economic life: all came together to form a complex system of control. A Palestinian face may preside over the day-to-day administration of Palestinian affairs, but ultimate power remains in the hands of Israel. This structure has reached its apex in the Gaza Strip — where over 1.7 million people are penned into a tiny enclave with entry and exit of goods and people largely determined by Israeli dictat.

Oslo also had a pernicious political effect. By reducing the Palestinian struggle to the process of bartering over slivers of land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Oslo ideologically disarmed the non-insignificant parts of the Palestinian political movement that advocated continued resistance to Israeli colonialism and sought the genuine fulfillment of Palestinian aspirations. The most important of these aspirations was the demand that Palestinian refugees have the right to return to the homes and lands from which they had been expelled in 1947 and 1948. Oslo made talk of these goals seem fanciful and unrealistic, normalizing a delusively pragmaticism rather than tackling the foundational roots of Palestinian exile. Outside of Palestine, Oslo fatally undermined the widespread solidarity and sympathy with the Palestinian struggle built during the years of the first Intifada, replacing an orientation toward grassroots collective support with a faith in negotiations steered by Western governments. It would take over a decade for solidarity movements to rebuild themselves.

As it weakened the Palestinian movement, Oslo helped to strengthen Israel’s regional position. The illusory perception that Oslo would lead toward peace permitted Arab governments, led by Jordan and Egypt, to embrace economic and political ties with Israel under American and European auspices. Israel was thus able to free itself from Arab boycotts, estimated to have cost it a cumulative \$40 billion from 1948 to 1994. Even more significantly, once Israel was brought in from the cold, international firms could invest in the Israeli economy without fear of attracting secondary boycotts from Arab trading partners. In all these ways, Oslo presented itself as the ideal tool to fortify Israel’s control over Palestinians and simultaneously strengthen its position within the broader Middle East. There was no contradiction between support for the “peace process” and deepening colonization — the former consistently worked to enable the latter.

It is worth remembering that amid the clamor of international cheerleading for Oslo — capped by the Nobel Peace Prize awarded jointly to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 1994 — a handful of perceptive voices forecast the situation we face today. Noteworthy among them was Edward Said, who wrote powerfully against Oslo, commenting that its signing displayed “the degrading spectacle of Yasser Arafat thanking everyone for the suspension of most of his people’s rights, and the fatuous solemnity of Bill Clinton’s performance, like a twentieth-century Roman emperor shepherding two vassal kings through rituals of reconciliation and obeisance.” Describing the agreement as “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles,” Said noted that the PLO would become “Israel’s enforcer,” helping Israel to deepen its economic and political domination of Palestinian areas and consolidating a “state of permanent dependency.” While analyses like Said’s are important to recall simply for their remarkable prescience and as a counterpoint to the constant mythologizing of the historical record, they are particularly significant today as virtually all world leaders continue to swear allegiance to a chimerical “peace process.”

One question that often goes unaddressed in analyses of Oslo and the two-state strategy is why the Palestinian leadership headquartered in the West Bank has been so willingly complicit with this

disastrous project. Too often, the explanation is essentially tautological — something akin to “the Palestinian leadership has made bad decisions because they are poor leaders.” The finger is often pointed at corruption, or at the difficulties of the international context that limit available political options.

What is missing from this type of explanation is a blunt fact: some Palestinians have a great stake in seeing the continuation of the status quo. Over the last two decades, the evolution of Israeli rule has produced profound changes in the nature of Palestinian society. These changes have been concentrated in the West Bank, cultivating a social base that supports the political trajectory of the Palestinian leadership in its eagerness to relinquish Palestinian rights in return for being incorporated into the structures of Israeli settler-colonialism. It is this process of socioeconomic transformation that explains the Palestinian leadership’s submission to Oslo, and it points to the need for a radical break from the two-state strategy.

### The Social Base of Oslo and the Two-State Strategy

**T**HE UNFOLDING of the Oslo process was ultimately shaped by the structures of occupation laid down by Israel in the preceding decades. During this period, the Israeli government launched a systematic campaign to confiscate Palestinian land and construct settlements in the areas from which Palestinians had been driven out during the 1967 war. The logic of this settlement construction was embodied in two major strategic plans, the Allon Plan (1967) and the Sharon Plan (1981). Both these plans envisaged Israeli settlements placed between major Palestinian population centers and on top of water aquifers and fertile agricultural land. An Israeli-only road network would eventually connect these settlements to each other and also to Israeli cities outside of the West Bank. In this way, Israel could seize land and resources, divide Palestinian areas from each other, and avoid direct responsibility for the Palestinian population as much as possible. The asymmetry of Israeli and Palestinian control over land, resources, and economy meant that the contours of Palestinian state-formation were completely dependent on Israeli design.

Combined with military-enforced restrictions on the movement of Palestinian farmers and their

access to water and other resources, the massive waves of land confiscation and settlement-building during the first two decades of the occupation transformed Palestinian landownership and modes of social reproduction. From 1967 to 1974, the amount of cultivated Palestinian land in the West Bank fell by about one third. The expropriation of land in the Jordan Valley by Israeli settlers meant that 87% of all irrigated land in the West Bank was removed from Palestinian hands. Military orders forbade the drilling of new wells for agricultural purposes and restricted overall water use by Palestinians, while Israeli settlers were encouraged to use as much water as needed.

With this deliberate destruction of the agricultural sector, poorer Palestinians — particularly youth — were displaced from rural areas and gravitated toward work in the construction and agriculture sectors inside Israel. In 1970, the agricultural sector included over 40% of the Palestinian labor force working in the West Bank. By 1987, this figure was down to only 26%. Palestinian agriculture’s share of GDP fell from 35% to 16% between 1970 and 1991.

Under the framework established by the Oslo Accords, Israel seamlessly incorporated these changes to the West Bank into a comprehensive system of control. Palestinian land was gradually transformed into a patchwork of isolated enclaves, with the three main clusters in the north, center, and south of the West Bank divided from one another by settlement blocs. The Palestinian Authority was granted limited autonomy in the areas where most Palestinians lived (the so-called Areas A and B), but travel between these areas could be shut down at any time by the Israeli military. All movement to and from Areas A and B, as well as the determination of residency rights in these areas, was under Israeli authority. Israel also controlled the vast majority of water aquifers, all underground resources, and all airspace in the West Bank. Palestinians thus relied on Israeli discretion for their water and energy supplies.

Israel’s complete control over all external borders, codified in the 1994 Paris Protocol on Economic Relations between the PA and Israel, meant that it was impossible for the Palestinian economy to develop meaningful trade relations with a third country. The Paris Protocol gave Israel the final say on what the PA was allowed to import and export. The West Bank and Gaza Strip thus became highly dependent on imported goods, with

total imports ranging between 70% and 80% of GDP. By 2005, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated that 74% of all imports to the West Bank and Gaza Strip originated in Israel while 88% of all exports from those areas were destined for Israel.

With no real economic base, the PA was completely reliant on external capital flows of aid and loans, which were again under Israeli control. Between 1995 and 2000, 60% of the total PA revenue came from indirect taxes collected by the Israeli government on goods imported from abroad and destined for the occupied territories. These taxes were collected by the Israeli government and then transferred to the PA each month according to a process outlined in the Paris Protocol. The other main source of PA income came from aid and foreign disbursements by the United States, Europe, and Arab governments. Indeed, figures for aid measured as a percentage of Gross National Income indicated that the West Bank and Gaza Strip were among the most aid-dependent of all regions in the world.

### Changing Labor Structure

**T**HIS SYSTEM of control engendered two major changes in the socioeconomic structure of Palestinian society. The first of these related to the nature of Palestinian labor, which increasingly became a tap that could be turned on or off according to the economic and political situation and the needs of Israeli capital. Beginning in 1993, Israel consciously moved to substitute the Palestinian labor force that commuted daily from the West Bank with foreign workers from Asia and Eastern Europe. This substitution was partly enabled by the declining importance of construction and agriculture as Israel's economy shifted away from those sectors toward high-tech industries and exports of finance capital in the 1990s.

Between 1992 and 1996, Palestinian employment in Israel declined from 116,000 workers (33% of the Palestinian labor force) to 28,100 (6% of the Palestinian labor force). Earnings from work in Israel collapsed from 25% of Palestinian GNP in 1992 to 6% in 1996. Between 1997 and 1999, an upturn in the Israeli economy saw the absolute numbers of Palestinian workers increase to approximately pre-1993 levels, but the proportion of the Palestinian labor force working inside Israel

was nonetheless almost half of what it had been a decade earlier.

Instead of working inside Israel, Palestinians became increasingly dependent on public-sector employment within the PA or on transfer payments made by the PA to families of prisoners, martyrs, or the needy. Public-sector employment made up nearly a quarter of total employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by 2000, a level that had almost doubled since 1996. More than half of the PA's expenditures went to wages for these public-sector workers. The private sector also provided substantial employment, particularly in the area of services. These were overwhelmingly dominated by small family-owned businesses — over 90% of Palestinian private-sector businesses employ fewer than ten people — as a result of decades of Israeli de-development policies.

### Capital and the Palestinian Authority

**A**LONGSIDE the increasing dependence of Palestinian families on either employment or payments from the Palestinian Authority, the second major feature of the socioeconomic transformation of the West Bank was related to the nature of the Palestinian capitalist class. In a situation of weak local production and extremely high dependence on imports and flows of foreign capital, the economic power of the Palestinian capitalist class in the West Bank did not stem from local industry, but rather proximity to the PA as the main conduit of external capital inflows. Through the Oslo years, this class came together through the fusion of three distinct social groups: "returnee" capitalists, mostly from a Palestinian bourgeoisie that had emerged in the Gulf Arab states and held strong ties to the nascent Palestinian Authority; families and individuals who had historically dominated Palestinian society, often large landowners from the pre-1967 period, particularly in the Northern areas of the West Bank; and those who had managed to accumulate wealth through their position as interlocutors within the occupation since 1967.

While the memberships of these three groups overlapped considerably, the first was particularly significant to the nature of state and class formation in the West Bank. Gulf-based financial flows had long played a major role in tempering the radical edge of Palestinian nationalism; but their conjoining with the Oslo state-building process radically

deepened the tendencies of statization and bureaucratization within the Palestinian national project itself.

This new three-sided configuration of the capitalist class tended to draw its wealth from a privileged relationship with the Palestinian Authority, which assisted its growth by granting monopolies for goods like cement, petroleum, flour, steel, and cigarettes; issuing exclusive import permits and customs exemptions; giving sole rights to distribute goods in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; and distributing government-owned land below its value. In addition to these state-assisted forms of accumulation, much of the investment that came into the West Bank from foreign donors through the Oslo years — infrastructure construction, new building projects, agricultural and tourist developments — were also typically connected to this new capitalist class in some way.

In the context of the PA's fully subordinated position, the ability to accumulate was always tied to Israeli consent and thus came with a political price — one designed to buy compliance with ongoing colonization and enforced surrender. It also meant that the key components of the Palestinian elite — the wealthiest businessmen, the PA's state bureaucracy and the remnants of the PLO itself — came to share a common interest in Israel's political project. The rampant spread of patronage and corruption were the logical byproducts of this system, as individual survival depended on personal relationships with the Palestinian Authority. The systemic corruption of the PA that Israel and Western governments regularly decried throughout the 1990s and 2000s, was, in other words, a necessary and inevitable consequence of the very system that these powers had themselves established.

### The Neoliberal Turn

**T**HESE TWO MAJOR FEATURES of the Palestinian class structure — a labor force dependent on employment by the Palestinian Authority, and a capitalist class imbricated with Israeli rule through the institutions of the PA itself — continued to characterize Palestinian society in the West Bank through the first decade of the 2000s. The division of the West Bank and Gaza Strip between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 strengthened this structure, with the West Bank subject to ever more complex movement restrictions and economic control. Simultaneously,

Gaza developed in a different trajectory, with Hamas rule reliant on profits drawn from the tunnel trade and aid from states like Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In recent years, however, there has been an important shift in the economic trajectory of the Palestinian Authority, encapsulated in a harsh neoliberal program premised on public-sector austerity and a development model aimed at further integrating Palestinian and Israeli capital in export-oriented industrial zones. This economic strategy only acts to further tie the interests of Palestinian capital with those of Israel, building culpability for Israeli colonialism into the very structures of the Palestinian economy. It has produced increasing poverty levels and a growing polarization of wealth. In the West Bank, real per-capita GDP increased from just over \$1,400 in 2007 to around \$1,900 in 2010, the fastest growth in a decade. At the same time, the unemployment rate remained essentially constant at around 20%, among the highest in the world. One of the consequences was a profound level of poverty: around 20% of Palestinians in the West Bank were living on less than \$1.67 a day for a family of five in 2009 and 2010. Despite these poverty levels, the consumption of the richest 10% increased to 22.5% of the total in 2010.

In these circumstances, growth has been based on prodigious increases in debt-based spending on services and real estate. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the hotel and restaurant sector grew by 46% in 2010 while construction increased by 36%. At the same time, manufacturing decreased by 6%. The massive levels of consumer-based debt levels are indicated in figures from the Palestinian Monetary Authority, which show that the amount of bank credit almost doubled between 2008 and 2010. Much of this involved consumer-based spending on residential real estate, automobile purchases, or credit cards; the amount of credit extended for these three sectors increased by a remarkable 245% between 2008 and 2011. These forms of individual consumer and household debt potentially carry deep implications for how people view their capacities for social struggle and their relation to society. Increasingly caught in a web of financial relationships, individuals seek to satisfy their needs through the market, usually by borrowing money, rather than through collective struggle for social rights. The growth of these financial and debt-based relations thus individualizes Palestinian society. It

has had a conservatizing influence over the latter half of the 2000s, with much of the population concerned with “stability” and the ability to pay off debt rather than the possibility of popular resistance.

### Beyond the Impasse?

**T**HE CURRENT CUL-DE-SAC of Palestinian political strategy is inseparable from the question of class. The two-state strategy embodied in Oslo has produced a social class that draws significant benefits from its position atop the negotiation process and its linkages with the structures of occupation. This is the ultimate reason for the PA’s supine political stance, and it means that a central aspect of rebuilding Palestinian resistance must necessarily confront the position of these elites. Over the last few years, there have been some encouraging signs on this front, with the emergence of protest movements that have taken up the deteriorating economic conditions in the West Bank and explicitly targeted the PA’s role in contributing to them. But as long as the major Palestinian political parties continue to subordinate questions of class to the supposed need for national unity, it will be difficult for these movements to find deeper traction.

Moreover, the history of the last two decades shows that the “hawks and doves” model of Israeli politics, so popular in the perfunctory coverage of the corporate media and wholeheartedly shared by the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, is decidedly false. Force has been the essential mid-wife of “peace negotiations.” Indeed, the expansion of settlements, restrictions on movement, and the permanence of military power have made possible the codification of Israeli control through the Oslo Accords. This is not to deny that substantive differences exist between various political forces within Israel; but rather to argue that these differences exist along a continuum rather than in sharp disjunction. Violence and negotiations are complementary and mutually reinforcing aspects of a common political project, shared by all mainstream parties, and both act in tandem to deepen Israeli control over Palestinian life. The last two decades have powerfully confirmed this fact.

The reality of Israeli control today is the outcome of a single process that has necessarily combined violence and the illusion of negotiations as a peaceful alternative. The counterposing of

right-wing extremists with a so-called Israeli peace camp acts to obfuscate the centrality of force and colonial control embodied in the political program of the latter.

The reason for this is the shared assumption of the Zionist left and right wings that Palestinian rights can be reduced to the question of a state in some part of historic Palestine. The reality is that the overriding project of the last sixty-three years of colonization in Palestine has been the attempt by successive Israeli governments to divide and fracture the Palestinian people, attempting to destroy a cohesive national identity by separating them from one another. This process is clearly illustrated by the different categories of Palestinians: refugees, who remain scattered in camps across the region; those who remained on their land in 1948 and later became citizens of the Israeli state; those living in the isolated cantons of the West Bank; and now those separated by the fragmenting of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. All of these groups of people constitute the Palestinian nation, but the denial of their unity has been the overriding logic of colonization since before 1948. Both the Zionist left and right agree with this logic, and have acted in unison to narrow the Palestinian “question” to isolated fragments of the nation as a whole. This logic is also one wholeheartedly accepted by the Palestinian Authority and is embodied in its vision of a “two-state solution.”

Oslo may be dead, but its putrid corpse is not one that any Palestinian should hope to resuscitate. What is needed is a new political orientation that rejects the fracturing of Palestinian identity into scattered geographical zones. It is encouraging to see the mounting chorus of calls for a reorientation of Palestinian strategy, based on a single state in all of historic Palestine. Such an outcome will not be achieved solely through Palestinian efforts. It requires a broader challenge to Israel’s privileged relationship with the US and its position as a key pillar of US power in the Middle East. But a one-state strategy presents a vision for Palestine that confirms the essential unity of all sectors of the Palestinian people regardless of geography. It also provides a path to reach out to the Israeli people that reject Zionism and colonialism through the hope of a future society that does not discriminate on the basis of national identity, and in which all may live regardless of religion or ethnicity. It is this vision that provides a route to achieving both peace and justice. ■

# Against the Law

Through the rise of organizing based on international law, the struggle for Palestinian liberation has been transformed into a question of rights.

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by Mezna Qato &  
Kareem Rabie

In late 2011, a tweet was posted from the Occupy Wall Street Twitter account. Written in support of the flotilla that the Israeli military had just intercepted, it read: “We support and would like to express #solidarity to #FreedomWaves #Palestine #ows.” The message was quickly deleted.

A mealy-mouthed explanation circulated: the Tweet was “unauthorized” and had not been subject to Occupy’s consensus-based decision-making structure. And it was never discussed because consensus on Israel/Palestine would have been impossible to achieve — a dispiriting fact. It’s difficult to imagine other contexts where support for activists trying to break a brutal blockade would have been so hard to muster.

But that fact remains. Whether because of lingering Zionism or lack of analytical clarity, the Left has had trouble accepting the reality of Israeli colonialism. Indeed, the refusal to consider Israel’s nature seeps into movements that actually oppose Israeli crimes. Progressive disapproval too often fixates on Israel’s excesses: riotous settlers, wars on Gaza, spotty record with African immigrants, and right-wing fundamentalists. More provincially, some see such missteps as endangering US national and geostrategic interests.

The upshot of this view is that Israel must be brought back into the orbit of responsible nation-states by defanging the lobby, cast as a

powerful bully that silences public debate and harasses clueless or benignly venal politicians interested only in the next election cycle. Boxed into a claustrophobic context where Israel and America's structures and institutions are barely discussable, organizing works by expanding the possibilities for domestic conversation, and every half-sensible public utterance is lauded as a movement triumph, another example of how the discourse is shifting. But to where?

Unfortunately, by focusing on the peripheries of Zionism and the margins of the state, too often we're left with a left that mimics liberal pieties and moralisms, and has increasingly been unable to offer sustainable analytic clarity on Palestine. The focus on this or that wayward Israeli policy leads to a myopia when it comes to Israel's settler colonial nature and imperatives vis-à-vis territory and the indigenous population. And the lobby fetish only aggravates the problem. Can anyone seriously argue that were it not for the lobby Israel would decolonize? To ask the question is to answer it. This fuzziness about the target of organizing makes it hard to imagine what a coherent analysis and strategic clarity in support of Palestinian self-determination might look like, or how organizing in Palestine ought to be linked to organizing elsewhere.

Blurry goals and analysis mean that leftists get bogged down organizing for pittances. This includes not just the focus on the lobby, but also ill-fated attempts to encourage even-handed US policy. For example, earlier this year during Obama's trial balloon, potential nomination, actual nomination, and eventual confirmation of Chuck Hagel as Secretary of Defense, Republicans harshly attacked the former Senator for making one or two public comments about the existence of Palestine. Hagel's opponents intimated that he is out of the mainstream on the special relationship with Israel. His nomination remained controversial until his confirmation. At the same time, large chunks of the respectable core of organizations in support of Palestinian rights — Jewish Voice for Peace, US Campaign to End the Occupation, and Code Pink — rallied around a Republican, a senator, and a potential Secretary of Defense, on the basis of milquetoast comments he made years ago. They saw him as a potential ally or, at least, the kind of figure that should be cultivated precisely because he is out of the mainstream.

Such a narrow focus on high politics also leads to problematic movement strategies. Given the

special relationship, the argument goes, domestic work on American policy is the most efficient path forward. Whatever autonomous strength the Left may have is directed towards pressuring lawmakers to bring Israel into compliance with US policy and strategic interests or, in the most radical iteration, with UN resolutions. But it seems clear that Hagel cannot be meaningfully understood as marginal. Nor is the Defense Department a potential ally of the Left. American popular discourse on Palestine is so solidly conservative that as soon as leftists get involved, they have to serve as a counterweight and as a result, it's easy for them to get sucked into a piecemeal, reformist agenda. This ought to be unacceptable.

And this realpolitik is omnipresent: in the academy, in coalitions of grassroots movements including Occupy, and in progressive and radical left parties. Palestine organizing in the US inevitably operates against the backdrop of American nationalism, and in turn, it often treats Palestine and the Israeli/American relationship as exceptions, imurred from larger structures of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism.

Although the language of internationalism sometimes remains, and flourished briefly during the recent Arab uprisings, solidarity and left Palestine organizing is increasingly isolated in the US. Gone are the days when solidarity formations worked with Palestinian communities in the diaspora, the PLO, and kindred Palestinian political parties. Instead, and in part because there is no longer a Palestinian representative body, Palestinian solidarity now almost exclusively interfaces with large civil society umbrella groups and NGOs in Palestine, and with only a few exceptions — including the US Joint Struggle Delegation to the World Social Forum Free Palestine in Porto Alegre, and student collaborations with other campus movements — they do not have a sufficiently direct relationship with progressive formations in Palestine or Palestinian communities in exile.

Such disconnects are linked to other problems. Increasingly, the movement seems composed of constellations of well-known figures — academics, artists and poets, journalists, activists, Twitterers — who generate thinking and rhetoric that becomes associated with them as individuals. In the past, this kind of thinking was collectively deliberated and determined. Such people clearly contribute to advancing the Palestinian cause, and there is much to laud in the decentralized work of countless



Palestine organizers. But the way the abundance of voices maps onto the wider strategy of public engagement here has had the unintended consequence of crowding out collective work.

Such individualism also flourishes because of a Palestine organizing practice that appeals to the lowest common denominator of potential supporters in the West — often assumed to be white, liberal, and elite. Palestine organizers often use the term to describe the effort to build the most minimally achievable consensus against Israeli state practices. This practice often assumes and implies that the liberation project is dead. And it enables left movement organizers in the US to act in ostensible solidarity while sustaining the acceptability and prestige necessary to operate in the domestic context. It is an ideological issue. But it's also a practical one: groups reliant on donors are concerned to appear centrist enough to be funded, and

balanced enough to avoid being slandered as antisemitic.

This appeal to the lowest denominator of favorable Western opinion also has an affinity with an insistence on legal remedies. Almost all prominent Palestine organizing, including the solidarity movement, bases the struggle and its claims on international law. Indeed, the 2005 call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions by Palestinian civil society groups was made in order to pressure Israel to adhere to international law. We support BDS as a potentially fluid and inclusive solidarity tactic, but we consider it problematic to pivot movement strategy on bodies of law that emerged in order to regulate imperialism, and that often function to legalize Israeli colonization and colonialism. Laws have no enforcement agents except for the states they regulate. And although international law has its critics, in this context they frequently argue that

it can't succeed without grassroots organizing to force recalcitrant states to accept it. This shifts the struggle to the plane of abstract, rights-based national claims, and burdens the movement with the responsibilities of both plaintiff and police.

Through the rise of organizing based on international law, the larger struggle for Palestinian liberation has transformed liberal, left, and Palestine solidarity discourse into a question of rights. The controversy over the utility of the law is as well known in Palestine as it is elsewhere: international judicial rulings against the separation wall may move it a few meters, but they don't challenge its existence, or the occupation that put it there. There is a real question about what specifically the law can ameliorate for Palestinians under occupation and in diaspora, but there is also a larger issue. The move towards legal practice was supposed to step around the bogus peace process, and to get us beyond the logic of negotiations. Legal rulings can lead to small changes in their status on the ground, or big changes in the UN, but the West Bank and Gaza remain in a state of suspension within Israeli colonial logics. And such changes cannot be understood without reference to the Oslo accords.

Rhetorically, Oslo was supposed to solve the Palestinian question and establish a Palestinian state within five years. In practice, Oslo has served the occupation, and established a new security apparatus and leadership structure that quashed and delegitimized popular struggle.

For Palestinians in the US, organizing has also transformed, in part as the result of a generational shift. But this change is also embedded in a larger context. The diaspora communities once shaped the framework for political action and attachment to Palestinian national formations both in the camps and elsewhere. But increasingly, this relationship between exile communities and the national movement has morphed into deep political alienation from a leadership that has abandoned both refugee claims and the diaspora's role in the movement. While some in Palestine and in the diaspora work to cultivate structures of representation, and some work to reclaim the PLO and to establish direct elections to the Palestinian National Council, most young Palestinians in the US have not yet taken up this work. Instead, they are the cadres of the BDS movement, marching alongside solidarity organizers, pushing Israel in the direction of compliance with international law, and short-circuiting the Israeli state's propaganda

apparatus. There have been many high-profile successes, but they have happened largely without diaspora community organizing and without reference to it.

Still, in general that alienation from national leadership and institutions has not pushed Palestinian communities to rescind their national rights, claims, or anticolonial politics. Palestinian community organizing may be frustratingly slow, but it does not tend to articulate legitimacy through the law or in an effort to convince potential supporters. Palestinians still talk about liberation. Appeals to rights — like the right of return — are made with the intention of achieving transformative justice, and are propelled by the will to determine and chart Palestinians' own national path, rather than to force Israel to acknowledge the existence and validity of such rights. In contrast to movements formed with the intention of creating broad consensus among non-Palestinians in support of international law, Palestinian organizing tends to work, as many in the movement have signed their communiqués, "until liberation and return."

In turning towards organizing practices designed to work in the American context and on nationalist terms, the Left often neglects these anticolonial principles and seeks out Jewish voices to validate Palestinian claims. In turn, it privileges Jewish discourse, anxieties, and histories in ways that marginalize Palestinians in their own struggle. At its least productive, the exclusion of Palestinian community voices from both popular narratives and organizing treats the question of Palestine as an intra-Jewish problem. In turn, this prods activists to organize for Palestinian rights under the Jewish state, towards multiculturalism and tolerance rather than justice, towards a better colonialism rather than the end of colonialism.

The point here is simple: Palestinians are at a low point — fragmented, under siege, excluded, harassed. Their ongoing struggle goes largely unacknowledged. If the Left wishes to be in solidarity, it ought to affirm an anticolonial and anti-Zionist struggle rather than frame political possibilities in the terms of the domestic context. One way it can begin to do so is by seeking reference in Palestinian communities both in Palestine and in exile, and their collectivities, and by supporting democratic grassroots formations and mobilizations. There is no wishing away the problem. It is only by acknowledging colonialism that we can get rid of it. ■

Review of  
Brokers of  
Deceit: How  
the US Has  
Undermined  
Peace in the  
Middle East  
by Rashid  
Khalidi (Beacon  
Press, 2013)

# A Dishonest Umpire

Two-state proponents argue that comprehensive peace is only possible with deeper US involvement in the process. The reverse is true.

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by Chris Toensing

“T

HE CONFLICT over geographic Palestine — the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea — is widely misunderstood in the United States.” Observers have been writing versions of that sentence since 1948, when the state of Israel was created and the question of Palestine became crucial for the US presence in the Middle East. And the sentence has remained essentially correct, even though perhaps no foreign affair is more closely watched by major media outlets or more ponderously discussed in highbrow journals of opinion.

For decades, the perplexity was rooted in uncritical acceptance of the stock narrative of Israel’s founding: “a land without a people for a people without a land.” As this people had been downtrodden for centuries and then murdered with mechanical savagery in Europe, this story of Israel offered a providential comfort. Increasingly, though, it is fear that explains the persistent confusion — fear of knowing too much, to borrow the title of Norman Finkelstein’s 2012 book, about the erosion of pro-Israel sentiment among liberal American Jews. The truth about Israel’s origins, that the people without a land took a land from its indigenous population, leaves the arc of history bent backward toward injustice. That, in the

prototypical American psyche, means that the story is incomplete. It is scary to think that the tale has no happy ending, that suffering sometimes begets more suffering, that a successful project of settler colonialism is predicated on displacement and dispossession.

Many Americans simply spare themselves the cognitive dissonance by believing that all Palestinians, if not all Arabs, are potential terrorists, or that God ordained the ingathering of the Jews as a sign of the Second Coming of Christ. Others just turn off the television. But for a swath of the population, one overlapping heavily with the chattering classes, it is important to believe that the US government is doing all it can to bring about narrative closure, otherwise known as “Middle East peace” — a conceit related to liberal mystification of the nature of the American state itself.

Rashid Khalidi is a Palestinian American who has long urged the US government to fulfill this historical mission, even as his scholarly output has become quite skeptical of its actual role. A Columbia University historian, Khalidi was formerly president of the American Committee on Jerusalem (now renamed and, without Khalidi, refashioned as the American Task Force on Palestine), a group that advocated for an end to Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. He was also an adviser to the Palestinian delegation at the US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that began in Madrid in 1991.

His commitment to the vision of a two-state solution to the question of Palestine, along with his many skillful media appearances over the years, has made Khalidi the bane of hardliners in America’s pro-Israel lobby, who seek to blackball him at every turn. In 2008, news that Barack Obama attended a 2003 farewell dinner for Khalidi, who was then leaving the University of Chicago for Columbia, sent the lobby into a frenzy. Obama said that the professor had reminded him of his “blind spots,” one of a string of statements that seemed to indicate that the presidential hopeful was suspiciously sympathetic to Palestinian views.

The *Los Angeles Times*, which broke the five-year-old story, had a videotape of the event at which other speakers were rumored to have been strongly critical of Israel. The John McCain campaign joined the lobby’s chorus, accusing the *Times* of “suppressing” the tape; the Obama team disavowed its man’s connection to Khalidi, as it had done with Bill

Ayers and Jeremiah Wright. But the “idiot wind” of accusations, as Khalidi called it, succeeded in its larger goal: prodding Obama to issue ritual declarations of undying support for Israel. As president, Obama has repeated these pledges with increasing fervor, even as his own half-hearted attempts to resolve the question of Palestine have met with utter Israeli intransigence.

There is no puzzle here: the liberal faith in the energy and integrity of US peacemaking is misplaced. Indeed, as Khalidi argues in his latest book, *Brokers of Deceit*, the US has actively obstructed the pursuit of peace by adhering to Israel’s view of what can be achieved and Israel’s schedule for achieving it. It is not a new argument among specialists — *Dishonest Broker* by Naseer Aruri is a comparable text — but one may hope that Beacon Press will market it to a larger audience.

Khalidi’s key document is a CIA memorandum penned in 1982 to brief the higher-ups on “US-Israeli Differences Over the Camp David Peace Process.” At Camp David in 1978, Israel had grudgingly agreed to future talks about a “self-governing authority” in the Palestinian territories. President Jimmy Carter could not get those talks started before he left office, and the Reagan administration, keen on Israel as a Cold War ally, was in no hurry to do so either, at least at first. But in the summer of 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to expel the PLO, and the Reagan White House fielded several phone calls from Arab capitals irritated by the passive US response to the ensuing destruction. Accordingly, Reagan approved an initiative aimed at stopping the growth of settlements, ending the post-1967 occupation, and ushering in some form of Palestinian self-rule.

The CIA memorandum laid out a detailed analysis of Israeli premier Menachem Begin’s stance on the “self-governing authority,” which concluded that Israel would not accept “any exercise of Palestinian self-determination except one that continues Israel’s preeminent position in the West Bank.” Begin’s view, the CIA analyst continued, “is that the self-governing authority should be a solely administrative authority regulating the affairs of the Arab inhabitants and leaving control of the territory and all key security issues with Israel. In sum, autonomy is for people not territory.”

It was an uncanny prediction of how not just Begin, but also subsequent Israeli leaders, would behave. When the Reagan plan bit the dust, when the Madrid effort of the early 1990s stalled and,

*The present tragedy of Israel-Palestine is not that the two-state solution is moribund. It is that the one-state reality in the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean cannot be acknowledged, much less acted on, by those with the power to let it speak its name.*

most consequentially, when the Oslo process of the mid-to late-1990s fizzled, the reasons were the same: Israel would permit no Palestinian sovereign entity in the West Bank; Israel would not recognize East Jerusalem as part of the West Bank; and Israel would take no responsibility for the Palestinians made refugees in 1948 or their descendants. And Washington would exert none of its ample leverage to compel the Israeli leadership to reconsider these positions, even though the first two flout UN Security Council resolutions and the third an overwhelming international consensus.

That is where the deceit comes in. All of Washington's "peace processes" — from Carter to Obama — have been based on the notion that the Palestinians would be sovereign on the 22 percent of their historical lands that remained after Israel's founding. Carter used the word "self-determination." His immediate successors backtracked, but George W. Bush and Obama have gone all the way, speaking of "a new member of the United Nations — an independent, sovereign state of Palestine, living in peace with Israel." In practice, however, the US has done nothing to slow the shrinkage of the putative Palestinian state's territory, as the settlement project proceeds apace. And Washington has moved vigorously to suppress Palestinian shows of independence, most brazenly in September 2011 when Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice rallied a vote to block Palestine's statehood application before the Security Council.

Khalidi invokes Orwell to describe the resulting impasse, wherein words like "peace process" "give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Gramsci is the better guide: the question of Palestine is stuck in a diplomatic zombieland, a place where the hegemonic discourse bears vanishing relation to facts on the ground, where secretaries of state

mouth pieties they know but cannot admit to be empty, where the old is dying and the new cannot be born. The present tragedy of Israel-Palestine is not that the two-state solution is moribund. It is that the one-state reality in the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean cannot be acknowledged, much less acted on, by those with the power to let it speak its name.

What is to be done before this dispiriting tableau? The answer depends on one's diagnosis of why the US has acted as "Israel's lawyer." An influential view, associated with State Department Arabists, holds that the explanation lies in the clout of the pro-Israel lobby, which is able to intimidate politicians with vows of Jewish campaign donations withdrawn and Jewish and evangelical Christian votes withheld. This interpretation gained much additional visibility with the 2007 publication of *The Israel Lobby* by prominent political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who, as adherents to the realist school of international relations, emphasize that uncritical US backing for Israel deviates from the US national interest in the Middle East.

No knowledgeable student of the subject can deny that the lobby wields great power, particularly on Capitol Hill. As Khalidi can attest, the threat of the lobby's wrath can cause real consternation. Neither is it immaterial that such staunch Zionists as Elliott Abrams and Dennis Ross have held top policymaking posts when various "peace processes" have floundered. But, as a theory of US state behavior, the lobby thesis is weak, drawing as it does on a tautology whereby the US national interest is what people like Mearsheimer and Walt perceive it to be. (Activists under the spell of the lobby thesis often say that US Middle East policy has been "hijacked" by Israel and call on Americans to "take it back.")

To the extent that the national interest is a category of analysis, and not just a set of policy prescriptions, surely it is to be found in another tautology: it is what the American ruling class has historically perceived it to be. Since 1967 the power structure, whether Democrat or Republican, liberal-internationalist or neoconservative, has found steadfast support for Israel to be a vital US interest. As Obama put it, "this bond is unbreakable." Why?

Khalidi advances a more sophisticated domestic political analysis, coupling the influence of lobbyists like Abrams and Ross with the absence of a countervailing force. As former National Security Council staffer William Quandt writes of his time

on the job in the 1970s, “the Palestinians had no domestic constituency” to compete with the pro-Israel lobby for the ear of presidents. But the strategic dimension has driven US policy more than electoral calculations. During the Cold War, and particularly after its crushing military victory over Soviet-armed Arab states in 1967, Israel was seen as the most reliable US ally in the Middle East. US intervention in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war followed Cold War logic: the Nixon administration airlifted armaments to Israel to ensure it would prevail against Soviet-armed Egypt and Syria. Egypt had already signaled its willingness to become a US client-state by expelling Soviet advisers in 1972. Its loss in the 1973 war advanced that process. After the Cold War, Israel retained its value to US strategic thinkers as the ultimate bulwark against the spread of political Islam, which took the place of communism in their minds (or at least in their rhetoric) as the number-one ideological rival to liberal capitalism.

But the overriding US interests in the region, as laid out in a 1978 Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum, are “to assure continuous access to petroleum resources” in the Persian Gulf and “to prevent an inimical power or combination of powers from establishing hegemony” in the oil patch. During the Cold War, the “inimical power” was the Soviet Union; in 1990, it was Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Today, the term might apply to a regional rival like Iran or a rising global power like China. The US military guards not only the friendly petro-principates of the Gulf but also their hydrocarbon riches on behalf of the world economy. Its Gulf deployment thus undergirds global acquiescence in the US claim to be the sole superpower. Multi-front Arab-Israeli wars threaten this arrangement — hence the US-brokered Israeli treaties with Egypt and Jordan — but the steady colonization of the West Bank does not. As Khalidi explains, there is no countervailing force on the regional stage either, because Saudi Arabia is too solicitous of its special relationship with Washington to rock the boat. To frame it another way, the US benefits tangibly from its other special relationship, that with Israel, but pays no strategic cost.

The big picture is bigger still. To maintain Israel’s “qualitative military edge” over any possible combination of its Arab neighbors, the US has sent \$67.4 billion in military aid to the Jewish state since its inception — well over half that amount since 1997. Most of these transfers have taken the form of

Foreign Military Financing, a cash grant whose rules stipulate that the money must be spent on purchases from American arms manufacturers. Thanks to its friends in Congress, Israel has a special deal whereby 22 percent of its boodle is exempted (presumably, the set-asides are lavished on the Israeli weapons industry). But the sheer volume of aid — in 2012, grants to Israel made up 60 percent of the Foreign Military Financing handed out worldwide — guarantees that American arms manufacturers have a vested interest in a tight US-Israeli alliance. The pro-Israel lobby gets it: the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs is a lesser-known but extremely important lobbying organization that exists to cultivate these ties. Israel gets it: in 2007, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed a pact whereby the entirety of the annual aid package would be military after two years. It is no accident that support for Israel tends to be more unstinting at the Pentagon than at the State Department.

One might contend that, together with the enormous arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, military aid to Israel sustains a sort of permanent war economy in the Middle East. The US presides over a regional system so fraught with political tensions that periodic crisis is almost inevitable. But, from the war economy point of view, crisis is productive: it assures that weapons stocks will be depleted, and thus need to be replaced, while permitting the US client-states to perennially defer grappling with their political problems by pointing to the urgent priority of “security.” To the American strategic class, therefore, conflict management comes to seem low-risk, high-reward, while conflict resolution is high-risk, no-reward.

The question of Palestine is therefore bound up with the fate of US empire. Those who hope against reason for a two-state solution posit that the chances for a comprehensive peace are stronger the deeper the US involvement and the greater the US prestige in the Middle East. The reverse is likely true, but the proposition is unlikely to be tested, for settlements, bypass roads, and separation barriers are sprouting in the West Bank much faster than US empire is fading. For those who are not wedded to any particular solution to the question of Palestine, who merely wish for maximum justice with minimum additional bloodshed, the imperative is clear: one way or another, Washington’s death grip on Middle East peacemaking must be broken. ■

# They Shoot Oscars, Don't They?

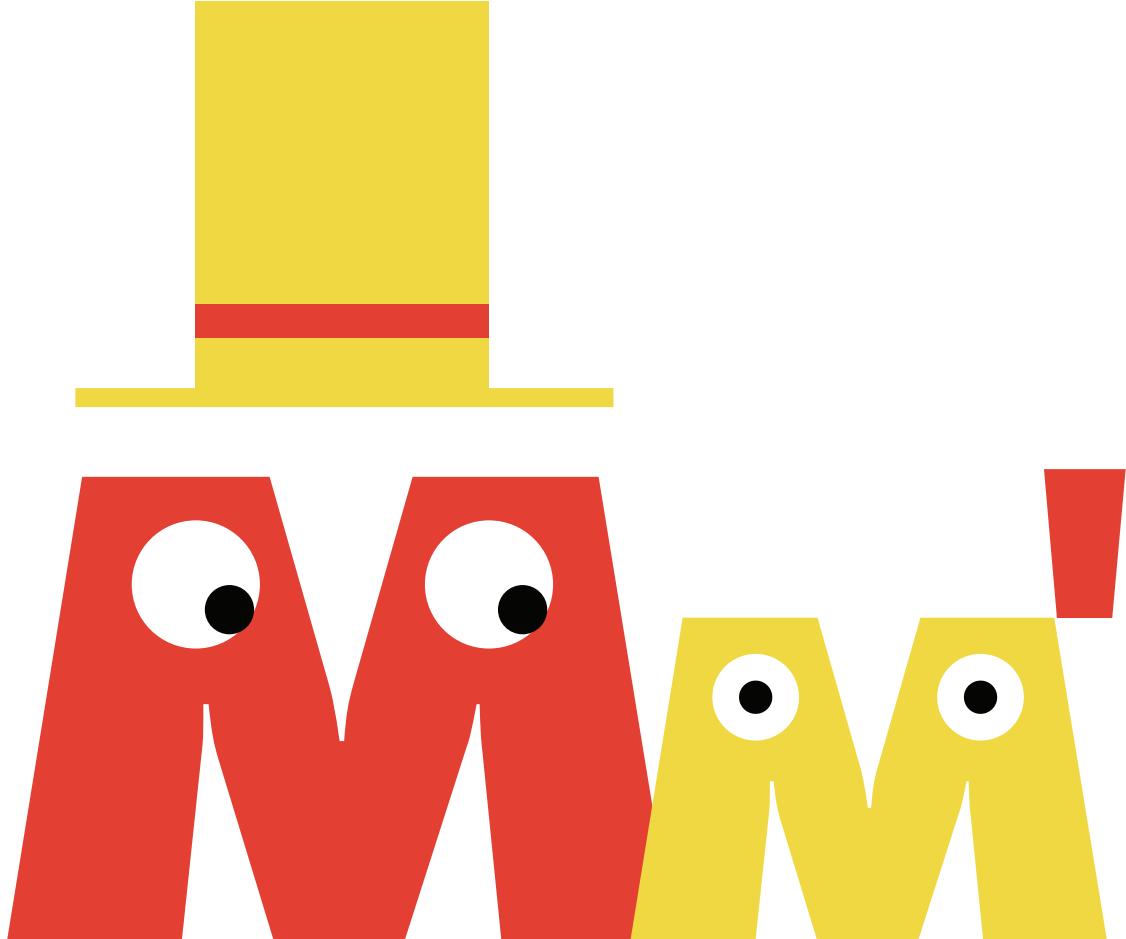
The Oscar ceremony has finally acquired an ideal twenty-first century host in the smirking, tap-dancing, bland-faced Seth MacFarlane.

by Eileen Jones

**T**HE NIGHTMARISH EXPERIENCE of the Academy Awards ceremony a few weeks back generated a lot of commentary, mainly long laments about what an unfunny, creepy host Seth MacFarlane was. But time passes; rage cools; the ratings come out and prove that, compared to previous years, the 2013 Oscar telecast was a popular triumph. The show's producers, Neil Meron and Craig Zadan, go on record saying they're "proud" of their chosen host for succeeding in making the show, once again, "part of the cultural conversation."

If MacFarlane succeeded at his job, what was that job? In what sense might the Oscar ceremony have finally acquired an ideal twenty-first-century host in this smirking, tap-dancing, bland-faced man?

To see it that way, you have to think about Seth MacFarlane's role as the Oscar's master of ceremonies. The Master of Ceremonies was a big deal in the early Catholic Church, responsible for making sure religious rituals were performed correctly. There's probably a Master of Ceremonies kicking around the Vatican today, making sure nobody drops the communion wafers. But religious rituals ain't what they used to be



when it comes to constructing and affirming social order. Today, instead of religious rituals to give us the sense that we're all connected and our lives have meaning, we've got media rituals.

It's quite a comedown when you think about it, from the transfigured body of Christ to a crap TV spectacle. Perhaps this dramatic demotion is at the root of the basic hostility that emanates from the typical emcee. He's the tuxedoed, grinning man, "fronting" for the show but not on a par with the other performers, leading the applause but not a member of the audience. He's the head salesman, hawking a debased ritual. The salesperson may be central to capitalist culture, in which everyone is forced into sales somehow, but of course, in a system of bitter social inequity and forced self-abasement, we despise him for his obviousness. And at

some level we resent what he's selling. Performers are a cheap substitute for spiritual idols. They're too ordinary to fulfill a godlike function yet too elevated in grotesquely inflated socioeconomic status to help us feel any social unity. So the audience has hostility even greater than the emcee's, and the emcee's job is to manage it.

The modern emcee is a strangely outmoded figure. He seems to have a harder and harder time doing his job. Like his close kinsmen the toastmaster, the roastmaster, and the carnival barker, his services are only very rarely required in contemporary life, though many forms of popular entertainment used to require an emcee. The job's practical tasks include introducing the performers, setting the pace of the show, and acting as the intermediary figure between performers and audience.

Performers must be brought back for encores if they are good, maneuvered swiftly offstage if bad, and jeered or rebuked if very bad. The audience must be prodded to applaud and appreciate or forgive and forget. Mistakes have to be smoothed over, hecklers dealt with ruthlessly. Working for the good of the show entails furious stage-management and salesmanship on the part of the emcee, while necessitating a perverse self-effacement — after all, he's not the show itself, just the guy facilitating the show.

There's a reason every Oscar postmortem begins with a thumbs-up/thumbs-down evaluation of the host. Did he succeed in "selling" the Oscars or not? We acknowledge that it's a hopeless task, pulling off this lumbering four-hour test of endurance that contains within it a fashion show, a variety show, a stand-up comedy routine, a contest, a tribute, a party that we're invited to spy on, and an interminable coronation-like ceremony for "America's royalty." Nevertheless, we routinely condemn the emcee who can't sell it to us. "Us" being the impossibly heterogeneous audience ever more estranged from the world of classic Hollywood studio filmmaking that generated the Oscars in the first place.

MacFarlane found a winning formula for the Oscars not by inventing something new, but by channeling something old: a callous, perpetually bored man "mastering" the audience as well as the performers with rhetorical ploys ranging from oily flattery to lugubrious tear-jerking to outrageous patriotic jingoism to incessant hostile patter. The banter isn't necessarily funny, but it contains within it the established rhythms and grammatical patterns of humor — the setup, the joke, the "topper." Only vague hostility is a must.

It's a defensive stance reminiscent of street barkers trying to haul in customers with a hard sell ("Hurry-hurry-hurry, step right up!") and over-the-top superlatives ("The most amazing, death-defying act ever attempted by modern man!"). This is often laced with dismissive asides used to quell hecklers ("Go away, kid, you bother me") and to amuse and build the crowd.

Put a tuxedo on the seedy barker and you have your typical Oscars night emcee, a figure at once vital and marginal, necessary and embarrassing. Hangdog comedian Joey Bishop is a good example, having emceed for the smarmy nightclub act that the Rat Pack — Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, and the rest of the ring-a-ding-ding crew — used to do in Las Vegas. MacFarlane himself is a

devotee of the Rat Pack performing mode, especially the song stylings of Sinatra and Martin. He put out a CD in 2011 entitled *Music is Better Than Words*, on which he sings 1940s and '50s pop music standards in an old-fashioned Sinatra-like crooner baritone. You can buy it on Amazon for \$10.99.

Joey Bishop was bitter till the end of his life that he was the least-remembered rat in the pack. In his view, he was actually the "hub of the wheel," the most important figure in the success of the Rat Pack shows, the superman able to control a bunch of undisciplined egomaniacs. Bishop complained that they weren't even ad-libbing those famous free-wheeling, high-living, macho, racist, sexist ad-libs — he himself wrote most of them ahead of time. Even Dino's drunk act was a fake — at least on stage.

Bishop bragged in a late-life interview about how he defined the Rat Pack experience through "pure Rat Pack" humor, such as the following material he did with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. Bishop injected mildly insulting commentary into the line-breaks of a sentimental ballad they were singing, "She's Funny That Way":

"I'm not much to look at," sings Frank.  
(You can say that again, opines Joey.)  
"Nothing to see."  
(If you stand sideways they'll mark ya absent.)  
"I'm glad I'm livin'."  
(Dean, he thinks he's alive!)  
"And happy to be. I've got a woman."  
(He found a broad!)  
"Who's crazy 'bout me."  
(She must be nuts.)  
"She's funny [that way]."  
(She's queer.)

You see, actual humor is entirely optional. MacFarlane didn't need to be funny at the Oscars; he needed to generate laughs. Maintaining an air of vague hostility toward the performers, putting up some sort of resistance to their "act," unites the emcee in a resentful conspiracy with the audience. Periodically, however, the emcee must seem to join the performers, becoming one himself by doing a soft-shoe shuffle or participating in a skit, and then rejoin the audience — transforming himself into a model spectator by leading a round of reverent applause for the "showbiz legend" he just introduced. He always returns to Position A: the superior huckster-showman, smarter than us all.

On these old-fashioned terms, MacFarlane can be regarded as a great success. He moved smoothly

from insult comedy to a lugubrious rendition of the old love song “The Way You Look Tonight.” He made jokes about gender, race, and ethnicity that Joey Bishop would’ve been proud to have the Rat Pack deliver back in 1960. He hawked and praised the very things he mocked and dismissed, sometimes at the same time, a high-wire act worthy of a born emcee. He evoked the vaudeville tradition, introducing Meryl Streep with: “Our next presenter needs no introduction,” and promptly walking offstage. A gag so old it has whiskers on it, and perfect for exactly that reason. The line originated when a typical emcee attempted to offer suspiciously sky-high flattery to the performer along with some phony self-effacement, but it quickly became the tritest possible intro, open to every kind of insult and parody. Introducing Streep this way did triple duty: fawning over her Great Actress status, undercutting that status by neglecting to introduce her, and acknowledging just how jaded everyone is about her Great Actress status. We love the ritual, we crave the ritual, we despise the ritual.

MacFarlane established his superiority to the performers and the audience by pre-judging the show and his part in it, predicting bad reviews — especially if he performed a crass number called “The Boob Song.” Then he performed it, as the cameras picked out the actresses mentioned in the song for having given nude or semi-nude performances. “Look, there’s Halle Berry, Charlize Theron, Naomi Watts!” We got a look at each one so we could swiftly judge whether she frowned angrily, squirmed in embarrassment, or smiled defiantly. Many of the show’s bad reviews centered on “The Boob Song.” It was aggressive even for an emcee to make the charge — in song-and-dance-form, at the Academy Awards — that female performers might tell themselves they’re making art, but they’re just “selling” too, whoring themselves out in the flesh-peddling business of Hollywood, because hetero male audience members turn their “art” right back into porn.

Jamie Lee Curtis, former film star, wrote an appalled editorial about the Oscar show on behalf of her former-film-star parents, Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis, and all of Hollywood’s elite. While acknowledging that she herself is “an actress who has bared her breasts in films to satisfy the requirement of the role I was asked to do — lucky to do, for in my case, those films were significant in my career,” she demanded to know what this “new” Oscar telecast was supposed to be, anyway.

When did they turn it into a roast?... As an Academy member, as the child of former Academy members, and as a woman, I expected more from the best that the movie business has to offer. The Oscars are about honoring art and artists. It is not supposed to be a cheesy vaudeville show.

But in fact, the Academy Awards telecast has been loosely modeled on a cheesy vaudeville show for decades, and “roasting” has always been part of the emcee’s arsenal. If we have trouble recognizing it now, that’s because vaudeville has been dead for generations, and we’re long past the point when American cinema’s ties to older entertainment forms like vaudeville and nightclub acts and variety shows were clear because talent migrated readily among them. Bob Hope, the emcee of the first televised Oscar show, had made his name in vaudeville, and carried the vaudevillian’s hard-won and varied skill set into radio, TV, and film stardom.

Esteemed Oscar host Johnny Carson was mentored by Jack Benny and got his big break emceeing TV comedy and variety shows. With each successive generation, our connection to the showbiz traditions that produced the emcee figure gets weaker. The Oscar ceremony represents the place where that tradition came to die.

Only, strangely enough, it doesn’t die. We don’t let it die. We keep it alive by watching it, long past the point when old vaudeville approaches to celebrating cinematic achievement have stopped making any sense at all. Somehow there’s always another carny-emcee tapping into our atavistic desire to watch a passive-aggressive man in a tux spew generally uninspired enmity at the very show he’s selling. Bob Hope, who presided over the Oscars a record eighteen times, was certainly a faster, funnier comedian than Seth MacFarlane, at least when he was young, but if you look at the old black-and-white TV footage of the earliest televised Oscars featuring Hope, you can recognize the sideshow huckster’s rictus grin that’s come down through the generations to appear in softer form on Seth MacFarlane’s pampered face.

The Oscar hosts regarded as most successful are the ones that have best evoked this moribund tradition. Johnny Carson was such a perfect emcee that he seemed machine-made. Billy Crystal was a maddeningly cheesy latter-day Borscht Belt comedian, a long-time student of moth-eaten “take my wife, please” gags. But how did young MacFarlane manage to crack the code?

I only happened to realize MacFarlane’s

perfection as a retro Oscar host because I'd just watched the harrowing 1969 movie *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* It features a master of ceremonies and literal con man, Rocky, who presides over a seedy depression-era dance marathon just outside Los Angeles. The marathon draws hungry people as contestants, some hoping to break into the Hollywood film industry by catching the eye of a talent scout supposedly in attendance; it also draws Hollywood stars making appearances in the audience as symbols of the American Dream realized. They are paraded in front of the hungry, presumably to make them hungrier.

For Rocky, the sadistic grifter-emcee, the point of the marathon is not who wins and gets the prize — the contest is rigged to have no winners — but the quality of “the show.” What matters is that the audience of suckers keeps watching and believing in the drama of the marathon with its winners and losers, its trumped-up love affairs and Hollywood contracts, its all-too-real rivalries and physical anguish and mental breakdowns. That means managing the performers, as well as how they’re received.

“Yowzah, yowzah, yowzah,” Rocky brays, trying to gin up applause for the shuffling zombie-like marathon contestants. He oozes contempt for the marathoners and for the spectators at the marathon, while remaining perversely proud of his own ability to manipulate these highly suggestible chumps.

In other words, Rocky’s not just a sociopath, he’s also a typical emcee. And in his portrayal by Gig Young, who had once been a blandly handsome Hollywood star with a smooth baritone voice and a smug smirk, we can see the kinship to Seth MacFarlane with disturbing clarity.

Why do we keep this unpleasant, obsolete figure around? For years now, would-be Oscar reformers have pointed out that the whole emcee-centered vaudeville structure of the telecast is peculiar, passé, and unsatisfactory to all. But even timid changes have been dismissed as failures, and the show always returns to the old format. There must be something we want from that format, and from the figure of the emcee, that Seth MacFarlane was able to recognize and revive.

Nick Couldry argues in *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* that what we require of our media rituals is not a mere “affirmation of what we share,” but “the management of conflict and the masking of social inequity.” In other words, we require the figure of the emcee to make a spectacle

of this “managing” and “masking.”

For Rocky in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, this entails making a show of poor and desperate people (the marathon contestants) for other, slightly less poor and desperate people (most depression-era audiences) so that the spectators feel somewhat better about their own suffering compared to the immediate, visceral suffering of the contestants. Rocky has to manage the degree of visible suffering, however. He won’t showcase the screaming hallucinations of a sleep-deprived contestant, for example, because “that’s too real.”

Too much reality is a danger if it alerts the audience to systemic cruelty in the workings of the dance marathon or the society that produced it. The spectacle has to be shaped carefully so that suffering takes on the qualities of an elevating narrative the audience can feel part of, an affirmative allegory of capitalism in which hard work and energetic competition show us the most worthy, the winners.

Too much reality wouldn’t seem to be an immediate problem faced by any emcee presiding over the ultra-mediated Academy Awards ceremony. It’s a plausibly unexciting contest in which all involved are already “winners”: stars, Hollywood insiders. What has to be “managed” and “masked” is that the losers, who are nowhere to be seen in this spectacle, are the regular people watching at home. Throughout the worshipful celebration of these winners, the emcee must defuse popular resentment through a procedure of selective mockery, insult, and puncturing of celebrity images. We must have close-ups of the faces of the stars in reaction to this. Degrees of hurt or anger or good-humored ability to “take it” are thoroughly scrutinized. And the level of perceived hostility in this procedure is carefully evaluated afterwards. Did the emcee go “too far”? Was he too mean?

There has always been an agreed-upon tipping point, a perfect balance to be achieved in the matter of how much “humanizing” must go on, how much the stars must be made to seem “like us” in vulnerability, before it is too much. We want reassurance that the “winners” are safe, protected, and happy far above us, as they must somehow deserve to be. MacFarlane’s retro emcee hostility, as well as his reputation for crude cartoon satire seemed to upset the balance. This wasn’t a roast, after all! Though perhaps to continue as a popular ritual in our ever more conflicted and inequitable times, it’s going to have to become one. ■

# Whores' Glory

The reaction to a new film about sex workers tells us more about liberal reviewers than the workers themselves.

by Charlotte Shane

**B**ANGLADESH is one of the planet's poorest nations, with nearly half of its population living under the poverty line. According to the UN, 18 percent of the country's women are "acutely malnourished" and more than two in three girls are married before they turn eighteen. There is no law against marital rape. Divorce often results in homelessness for the former wife. Child labor is common and found in unregulated, toxic industries. The country has been on the UN's Least Developed Countries List for over thirty years and recently has appeared in the American media because of deadly garment-factory fires. The executive director of the Worker Rights Consortium, a US-based NGO, described Bangladesh as having "the worst labor rights record, lowest wages, and most dangerous factories."

The documentary *Whores' Glory* is not about garment factories, but it is about labor in Bangladesh, as well as in Thailand and Mexico. But because the labor covered in the film is sex work, American reviewers have uniformly lamented its grotesquery and ignored any deeper insights. A film about women using their bodies for physical labor — at least this type of physical labor — was, as Salon's Andrew O'Hehir put it, almost "too difficult to sit through."

Though the film was consistently praised as "nonjudgmental," it yielded nothing but judgment from these audience members. "The

fly-on-the-wall technique makes clear that what attracts flies usually stinks,” wrote Michael O’Sullivan for the *Washington Post*, while Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* declared that it “begins in an outer circle of hell” — presumably Thailand, where the film opens — “and works its way to the depths” — presumably Mexico, where it ends. After acknowledging that “most of the women interviewed … are relatively cheerful about their occupation,” Mark Feeney of the *Boston Globe* concluded that “views of prostitutes differ, but all prove depressing.” The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Mick LaSalle declared it “as sad a film as you can possibly see,” depicting “a human tragedy of enormous scale,” and added that “to experience it is to be haunted by the bleakness and ugliness of prostitution, the hopeless trap of it.” In case the message hadn’t come across, LaSalle further clarified that prostitution is “a life-destroying catastrophe.”

There’s no denying that *Whores’ Glory* captures some harsh realities, most notably that of the adolescent girls indentured into service at a large brothel in Bangladesh. In interviews, director Michael Glowager claimed that the rule was that a girl must have her period before she can start working. The film utilizes no narration, so viewers can only guess how old the girls are. Some looked as young as ten or eleven. But critics also recoiled at the drug use of “middle-aged” (late twenties to late thirties) Mexican prostitutes, and the display mode favored by the Thai brothel, which sequesters workers behind a pane of glass, like bank tellers. For these reviewers, all of the film’s revelations are best understood as part of a long litany of degradation.

The film contains only one brief sex scene, and the majority of the footage is of women joking, hustling, and talking to the camera about their lives. They brag about their prowess, tease each other about work, and speculate on the odds of making good money during their shifts. One Bangladeshi woman details the variety of men she’s seen that day, noting that only one of the ten men mistreated her, and she forced him to leave. (One customer, she sees fit to add, was very good looking and a perfect gentleman.)

In Thailand, three working girls eat dinner as they discuss the pros and cons of working as a masseuse. “I always give sex, too. I don’t do just massage. Massage makes me tired and frustrated,” says one. These women are, for the most part, savvy, capable, and adept at navigating their jobs.

While one hopes that anyone watching the documentary would be appalled by child labor and indentured servitude, those elements of the documentary aren’t singled out as particularly horrific; instead, the entire film is smeared with one dirty brush. If the reviews are to be believed, the plight of Bangladeshi children forced to work for shelter is comparable to that of grown Thai women coming and going freely from their brothel and taking home the majority of their earnings.

For American reviewers, the difference is one only of degree, and the source of any and all anguish is prostitution itself, existing somehow independently from larger, intersecting, international challenges of alienation, child labor, scarcity, and drug addiction. They’re confident about making conclusions devoid of context. Adopting this attitude means that the brothel in Bangladesh has no running water not because much of Bangladesh has no running water, but because it is a space for prostitutes, necessarily squalid and “ghastly.” Similarly, the Mexican prostitutes rhapsodize about Santa Muerte, a feminine death saint, not because she’s a potent legacy of Mesoamerican native folklore speaking to many of Mexico’s poor but because, as one reviewer put it, they “openly long” for a literal death to deliver them from their wretched lives.

So it’s no surprise that when one girl in Bangladesh asks the camera why *women* must suffer so much, reviewers seized upon it as proof of the unique pain intrinsic to prostitution. They ignored the line that immediately preceded it: “It is very hard to survive *as a woman*.” Nor did the reviewers I came across see fit to mention a house mother’s scene minutes earlier, in which she details the cycle of stigma that will most likely lead to her baby daughter either becoming a whore or being homeless. In this complex equation of poverty, stigma, and unequal rights, it’s unclear what removing prostitution would achieve. Does it make poverty acceptable? Does it make the unequal status of women less maddening? Is it preferable to our American sensibilities that these foreign women go homeless rather than work as prostitutes? These are not facetious questions.

To struggle with and suffer in the course of one’s work is not always taken as a sign that the work itself is inherently “soul-destroying.” Michael Glowager’s previous film, titled *Workingman’s Death*, also focused on physical, brutal work, but with male bodies on the line. In spite of the bleak title, reviewers like Stephen Holden at the

*New York Times* found cause for celebration: “You are struck by [the workers’] exuberance, vitality, teamwork and satisfaction in discharging back-breaking duties with a minimum of complaint.” We see several women in *Whores’ Glory* take pride in their work, and almost all of them rely on one another for support, but this is apparently not deemed worthy of comment.

In interviews, Glowager regularly says that the Mexican prostitutes — those most pitied by reviewers, for their age and their drug use — felt grateful not to work in either of the other countries. (He translated their sentiments as, “Thank God we live in Mexico, because our kind of prostitution has heart.”) The labor in *Workingman’s Death*, because men carry it out, made highly dangerous work a well-earned source of pride and a testament to the human spirit. The *San Francisco Chronicle* regarded its depiction of body-breaking labor as a “message, implicit but unmistakable, about the laborers’ dignity and the injustice of their compensation.”

Glowager, to his credit, admits that his gender creates a disconnect in his ability to fully understand the subjects of his film: “I think it is obvious that this film was made by a man, a man who looks at working girls and tries to understand.” Though he’s well aware of the rich, multi-dimensional humanity of each of his subjects, and so resists describing them as victims in interviews, the film itself tends to paint the women as tragic, in part because of the choice of sad, moody music.

Elegies and rants by CocoRosie and PJ Harvey cast a pall over the proceedings even when we’ve no indication the participants are in any type of anguish. This clash is particularly obvious in Thailand, where the sex workers are savvy business-women when speaking for themselves, but seem to transform into emotionally fragile girls the moment the camera pulls back and Antony and the Johnsons kick in.

It’s no coincidence that Bangkok, the wealthiest and most developed of the film’s locations, also showcases the prostitutes who best pass as middle class. (As a whole, Mexico is slightly richer than Thailand, but scenes there are shot in the comparatively desolate border town of Nuevo Laredo, which has a population less than one-twentieth of Bangkok’s.) Here, brothel workers pray fervently for many clients who will “give us money,” the better to become “rich and successful.” The workers have disposable income, a supportive community,

and seem content with their jobs. They even agree that they prefer being at the brothel to being at home, asserting that making their own income is preferable to being given money by relatives. They are clear-headed and income-oriented as they evaluate the ratio of clients to women in the club that night, and instruct the resident beauticians on how their hair and makeup should be done.

And they are, understandably, as calculating towards their clients as we are to believe their clients are towards them. “One john per shift won’t even pay for my bus ticket,” a woman complains, articulating the mental math typical of a freelancer. It’s worth noting that Thai prostitutes are the only women we see hired (occasionally) by foreign men. Though the film was marketed as part three in Glowager’s “globalization trilogy,” the brothels he fixes his cameras on are emphatically domestic, established neighborhood institutions serving local men and populated by local women. Of the clients he interviews in Bangladesh, several claim to visit the brothel once or twice a day, and the women and men there sometimes have relationships that closely resemble that of girlfriend and boyfriend. One young egg seller speaks simply and specifically about the beauty of the prostitute he most regularly sees, explaining that he loves her and that she’ll come fetch him from the beds of other prostitutes if he dares to see one while they’re fighting. Another fact that goes unmentioned by reviewers is that the boys patronizing the Bangladeshi brothel often appear to be teenagers themselves.

Again, there’s no doubt that the youths working in the Bangladeshi brothel are being exploited, and because of that, the intensity and tenacity of their behavior can be shocking. They corner men in the halls of the complex, demanding to be hired. They grab shirt collars, bully former customers into another round, and physically force men into their quarters after which a friend helps to hold closed the door. If we hope to bear responsible witness to what *Whores’ Glory* shows us, there must be a way to acknowledge their fierceness and the injustice of their situation simultaneously. The standard vocabulary of “tragedy” and “victim” do nothing to illuminate the nuances of their lives or their humanity. Former prostitute Tracy Quan was one of the few journalists to draw this point out by centering her coverage of the film on the history of Bangladeshi sex workers fighting, often physically, to protect their brothels and livelihoods. (Their efforts paid off with the legalization of prostitution in 2000.)

It's true that the men quoted above are only movie critics, not social justice experts, not human rights lawyers, and not sex workers' rights advocates. They can be forgiven a degree of ignorance, but it's disturbing that after two hours, their prejudices still obscure the first-person stories of real human beings. Mick LaSalle, the most hyperbolic but perhaps most honest of *Whores' Glory*'s reviewers, explained it like this: "The Mexican brothel is so ghastly, degraded, and impoverished that it's difficult to imagine anyone in this environment thinking ... in erotic terms." When impoverished women work as prostitutes, those observing from a distance may wrongly conclude that the hallmarks of poverty are instead the intrinsic qualities of work in the sex trade. But people have sex in slums in the United States, too, for pay and for free, on dirty mattresses and on no mattress at all. While revulsion on the part of wealthier observers might be understandable, it's unethical when it masquerades as morality.

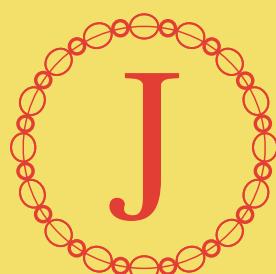
Comparably ugly, thoughtless, and biased reactions to prostitution are the stuff of our foreign and domestic policies, which burden and endanger countless working women around the world. *Whores' Glory* could and should have been a film to open the eyes of uninformed viewers, but it seems instead to have sewn some shut. These irresponsible reactions matter; they hinder practical thinking about how to alleviate suffering and improve quality of life across societies.

Is it possible that the nakedness of transactional sex and its effect on the male ego was also a factor in the reviewers' treatment of prostitution as humanity's greatest failure? Did it sting these men when one prostitute said to another: "At work, it's over in 30 minutes or a couple hours. At home, they never leave you alone"?

Whatever the emotional source, there's a deep perversity in men condemning the women who labor in an industry that exists because of male desire — even if that condemnation comes under the guise of compassion. It's mostly men who hire sex workers, mostly men who engineer the laws and stigmas that keep their circumstances so limited, and mostly men who declare women ruined for having worked under those conditions. As viewers, we may not have the immediate power to change those conditions, but we certainly can have the decency to acknowledge the fundamental dignity and strength of our fellow workers. ■

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# Truth Told Through Lies

*Zero Dark Thirty* is a film that didn't need to be made — it strives for realism, but ends up rehashing Bush-era tropes about the ‘war on terror.’

by Hailey Huget

In a 1992 interview with Edward Said, Gillo Pontecorvo described *The Battle of Algiers*, his masterful film about the Algerian War of Independence, as imposing a “dictatorship of truth.” In coining that phrase, Pontecorvo meant to capture the implications of his film’s membership in the seemingly paradoxical genre of the fictional documentary. The aim of films in this genre, many of which were made in the 1960s by left-leaning directors like Jean-Luc Godard, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Pontecorvo himself, is to produce works of fiction that can in some sense masquerade as works of fact in the service of political ends.

There has been a widespread failure on the part of critics and audiences to interpret Kathryn Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* as a film belonging to this genre. This failure has dictated the terms of the debate about the film, generating the questions we have posed about it and supplying predictable answers to those questions. Questions about whether or not the film endorses torture, in particular, have become central in critical discussion of the film, and form the locus of both its accolades and its recriminations.

But whether or not the film endorses torture is emphatically not the

right question. Focusing on that question obscures the true role of torture in the film and ultimately masks many of the film's more subtle — and more sinister — implications. Like *The Battle of Algiers*, *Zero Dark Thirty* employs the trappings of documentary-style objectivity in order to persuade at a sub-rational level. In understanding *Zero* as a fictional documentary, we can both refocus the critical conversation and uncover the film's underlying point of view.

The intentionality of that point of view is, however, an open question. In fact, Bigelow has made it clear that her goal was to suspend, not impose, judgment. As she told the *Guardian*, “I was presenting the story as faithfully as I could, based on the research we gathered.” This is reinforced by what many critics have described as the film’s dry, taut style, which gives it a general feeling of objectivity and disinterestedness.

But the important fact of the matter is that the film does, intentionally or not, advance a point of view by perpetuating — as if they were totally uncontroversial facts — a series of background assumptions about the nature of the war on terror, the structure of al-Qaeda, and the psychology of terrorists. The film reinforces the Bush-era dogmas that al-Qaeda is a coordinated, coherent enemy, that the war on terror in some sense resembles a conventional war, and that terrorists are motivated merely by a fanatical hatred of America. That the film uncritically advances these assumptions and all the misinformation they carry with them tells as much about the failure of the film as it does about our contemporary political imaginations.

Fictional documentaries typically make some claim to historical accuracy; they also strive to create a sense of intimacy by providing access to spaces that are off-limits and, within those spaces, showcasing behavior that is illicit or transgressive. This intimacy ultimately works to underscore the film’s claim to represent the “real story” that has not been censored for public consumption. As accuracy and intimacy help establish a fictional documentary’s claim to authenticity, they also aid the film in covertly advancing subjective agendas.

*Algiers* exemplifies these two characteristics in a skillfully subtle manner. While its plot and characters are largely fictional, Pontecorvo employed a range of cinematic techniques to make the film seem like a documentary. He shot the film in black-and-white in order to make it seem more like newsreel; he employed non-professional actors, many of

whom were Algerians who had been involved in the war. The film was shot in the kasbah where actual fighting took place. Finally, the plot, while still fictitious, remains extremely faithful to the actual events of the War of Independence.

The film also creates a feeling of intimacy on both a stylistic and a substantive level. In the famous scene where three Algerian women don European clothing in order to plant a bomb in a French café, Pontecorvo’s use of close-ups compels the viewer to breach the privacy of their changing room. By voyeuristically gazing into the private space of the women’s changing room, the viewer feels as though she is experiencing an authentic story that has not been modified for public consumption. This is the role that torture scenes play in *Zero*: breaching privacy to give the viewer access to privileged space.

*Zero*, like *Algiers*, makes a claim to historical accuracy while simultaneously purporting to be a fictional portrayal of events. The film opens with the text: “The following motion picture is based on first-hand accounts of actual events.” Immediately following the opening text, we hear real recordings of the World Trade Center victims on September 11. The film tracks real, public developments in the war on terror, including the 2004 Khobar Towers bombing, the 2005 London bombings, and the 2008 Islamabad hotel bombing. We frequently see real footage of various political figures commenting on terrorist attacks.

If the film lays its claim to accuracy and authenticity through its documentary style, it rhetorically reinforces this claim by giving the viewer access to spaces typically demarcated as private. The film repeatedly identifies the torture scenes and other interrogations as occurring at CIA “black sites” in undisclosed locations. This gives the audience the sense that they are bearing witness something that they are not supposed to see — and to which they’ve been given exclusive access. *Zero*’s torture scenes largely occur in these black sites, in poorly lit rooms or shacks.

What we witness in these locations is brutal, disgusting, upsetting, and morally if not legally transgressive. In one scene, Ahmad, a member of al-Qaeda, is made to crawl on all fours led by a dog collar. We see him stripped naked and covered in feces. That these details offend us is precisely the point: it wouldn’t feel as much like the “real” story if the film portrayed torture practices in a manner that was banal and inoffensive. This is how torture

functions in *Zero Dark Thirty*: it creates a sense of intimacy in order to heighten the film's authenticity.

That these scenes portray the CIA's torture practices in a way that is wildly inaccurate underscores this point. Steve Coll, in his *New York Review of Books* piece, observes that *Zero*'s sensational depiction of torture stands in stark contrast to the clinical and bureaucratized manner in which the CIA actually carried out interrogations. The CIA kept doctors on hand for interrogations to check the prisoners' vital signs and painstakingly documented the details of each session. As Coll notes, "this CIA office routine might have been more shocking on screen than the clichéd physical abuse of prisoners that the filmmakers prefer."

While this is probably true, that the filmmakers took such massive liberty with the details of the torture scenes is deeply revealing. Were they to portray torture as a clinical "office routine," it would lose its status as a practice that occurred in secret, as something that was transgressive and private. It would become public, officially sanctioned, banal. As with other films in its genre, *Zero* needs private, intimate scenes of transgression in order to convince the viewer that the film's content is authentic. Paradoxically, in *Zero*, these scenes rest upon massive inaccuracies. If anything, this paradox casts doubt on Bigelow's claim that she merely sought to render events accurately and objectively, leaving the question of whether or not the subliminal messaging in the film was intentional open and unanswered.

That torture functions in this way allows us to see how discussion about the role of torture in the film has rested upon the conflation of two distinct questions: *Does Zero endorse torture?* and *Why is torture depicted at all?* Those who say the film endorses torture have tended to mobilize that answer in responding to the second question — suggesting that torture scenes were included in the film so that the film could endorse torture. Understanding the film as a fictional documentary, we see the answers to these two questions come apart. The torture scenes have an ulterior motive — one totally distinct from the endorsement question — that is at bottom rhetorical, designed to persuade the audience of the film's authenticity.

So *Zero* isn't, as most critics have suggested, a film about endorsing or condemning torture. In fact, by setting the torture question aside, we can see that the real manipulative power of the film lies

in the way it presents — as if they were uncontroversial facts — a range of the CIA's background assumptions about the nature of the war on terror, the structure of al-Qaeda, and the psychology of terrorists. This is another important feature *Zero* shares with *Algiers*: both films use the style typical of objective documentaries to advance points of view. Yet this is also where the analogy between the two films breaks apart. Despite the fact that *Algiers* advances a point of view, it daringly challenges both Algerian and French colonial narratives of the conflict by humanizing both sides. *Zero* does no such thing.

*Zero*'s main failing in this respect is its suggestion that the war on terror resembles a conventional war, with a single, identifiable origin and a coherent, coordinated enemy. Given this suggestion, which is itself deeply misleading and problematic, the film makes absolutely no effort to include the "other side," or perspectives that might dispute the major themes in the conventional American narrative about the conflict. That the film opens with the voices of World Trade Center victims clearly locates the origin of the conflict in the attacks of September 11. Perhaps it is too much to expect out of a Hollywood movie that it locate al-Qaeda's emergence in a complex set of circumstances in the 1980s, one in which the United States played a substantial role. Yet the way in which the film opens by reminding us of American casualties makes us feel as though no matter what horrible things the CIA does and whether or not we approve of them, it has justice, or at least a right to vengeance, on its side.

The film is at its most misleading when it appears to be merely reporting bare facts about terrorist attacks that have occurred globally in the past ten years. The film leads the viewer to believe that the bombings mentioned earlier as well as the 2010 Times Square bombing were all perpetrated by al-Qaeda, implying that al-Qaeda is a coordinated, coherent network where individual *mujahideen* report directly to al-Qaeda leadership. The film also deliberately leads the viewer to believe that the perpetrator of the 2009 Camp Chapman attack was an Islamist doctor close to top al-Qaeda leadership.

In reality, only one of the attacks cited in the film can be definitively traced to al-Qaeda: the 2004 Khobar Towers bombing. The perpetrators of the 2005 London bombings were homegrown British terrorists with no al-Qaeda ties. The perpetrators of the 2008 Islamabad hotel bombing are unknown,

and there is only faint speculation that al-Qaeda may be responsible; several other fundamentalist groups were considered just as likely or more likely to have carried out the attack. Faisal Shahzad, who attempted to bomb Times Square in 2010, was inspired by the writings of an al-Qaeda member but funded the bombing himself; he likely had no concrete ties, personal or material, to the group. While it is still unclear who was responsible for the Camp Chapman attack, many agree the attack is most plausibly attributed to the Taliban, and that the Haqqani Network, a Taliban ally, was intimately involved. Though the Taliban and al-Qaeda do have ties, they are two distinct groups with very different constituencies and goals. Conflating them is a hallmark of Bush-era war-on-terror dogmatism.

The film does not explicitly mislead the viewer by directly stating that each of these attacks was carried out by al-Qaeda. The film merely maintains it as an uncritical background assumption, which makes it more subliminally persuasive. After the attempted Times Square bombing is shown, the film's protagonist, Maya, is chastised to end her obsession with searching for bin Laden and is ordered to "start working on the American al-Qaeda cells" as if some cohesive al-Qaeda cell had carried out the attempt, and not a lone extremist. What is most telling, though, is the film's silence about the true perpetrators of each attack, and the inclusion of the attacks in a narrative that is exclusively about al-Qaeda. Any viewer who did not know in advance that al-Qaeda was responsible for only one of the attacks portrayed in the film would leave thinking it was responsible for all of them.

The film fails to contend with the messy reality that not only is al-Qaeda deeply fragmented, but terrorist acts are perpetrated by many different groups and individuals with a wide variety of motives and backgrounds. By remaining silent on these fundamental points, the film ultimately lumps all Islamists together under the umbrella of "terrorists who hate America." This is reinforced by the film's willingness to perpetuate conventional American prejudices about the psychology of terrorists. In the only discussion of the possible motives of al-Qaeda operatives, Maya and a fellow CIA agent debate whether terrorists can be bought off with money or whether they are so fanatical that money isn't persuasive. Noticeably absent is any attempt to supply terrorists with something resembling motives that are intelligible to us and that could provoke our sympathy.

Terrorists do not, for example, seek revenge for family or friends who were lost to Western military operations, have intellectual objections to American imperialism, or rebel against economic or political disenfranchisement. They are driven either by greed or by fanaticism. By contrast, the CIA agents in the film are given a multiplicity of motives, both abstract and personal. They are patriotic but also seek revenge for comrades who were lost in terrorist attacks. They are painted as intelligent and credentialed; Dan, the CIA agent responsible for the film's early torture scenes, "has a PhD." They are also flawed — Maya is sometimes brash, aggressive, too cold and unfeeling — but these flaws emerge only as part of a relentless devotion to the noble objective of protecting America.

It may be misleading to attribute these background assumptions, many of which rest upon gaping factual inaccuracies, to some specific directorial intention to produce a film sympathetic to the CIA's worldview. Perhaps Bigelow truly did intend her film to be a neutral, objective rendering of events. Yet, regardless of her intention, the fact that the film ultimately reiterates and perpetuates all of the generalizations and inaccuracies of the conventional narrative of the war on terror points to a more troubling conclusion. Perhaps Bush-era war-on-terror ideology, and all of the basic factual inaccuracies that accompany it, has penetrated our national consciousness so deeply that even a director faithfully attempting to render events objectively cannot avoid accepting that ideology's assumptions.

This is why *Zero*, despite sharing a genre with *Algiers*, fails while the latter succeeds. While Pontecorvo's sympathies lay with Algerians and not the French colonists, he tried seriously to do justice to historical fact. The film was widely praised for its fair-mindedness, exemplified by Pontecorvo's willingness to humanize both sides of the conflict. In doing so, he interrogated both Algerian narratives of the conflict and French colonial ones. In this sense, Pontecorvo's dictatorship of truth is a regime in which no perspective is entirely immune from criticism. Perhaps this is because he believed in only making films that "need to be made": films that strive to communicate some truth that would otherwise go unexpressed. *Zero*, to its great detriment, lacks this critical spirit, ultimately rehashing assumptions about the war on terror that are both problematic and predictable. By Pontecorvo's standard, *Zero Dark Thirty* didn't need to be made. ■

Review of  
Fear Itself: The  
New Deal  
and the Origins  
of Our Time  
by Ira Katznelson  
(Liveright, 2013)

# The Last Lost Cause

Was the mid-century dominance of southern Democrats essential to the defeat of Hitler and the triumph of American democracy?

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by Jeremy K. Kessler

**E**IGHTY YEARS after Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced the New Deal, American liberals remain enthralled by it. While conservatives pose as defenders of a lost moral order, liberals harken back to FDR's promise to overcome "fear itself," dedicating a broken nation to the dream of ending economic insecurity. Today, such insecurity is pervasive, a situation that conservatives contend is natural and liberals blame on right-wing insurgents who tore down the state that FDR built.

In *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*, Ira Katznelson challenges the liberal narrative of defeat from without. Expanding the temporal and spatial boundaries of the New Deal, Katznelson argues that the American state that rose to global dominance between 1932 and 1952 contained within itself the racism, violence, and anti-labor politics that liberals tend to blame on barbarians beyond the gates. Where previous histories of the New Deal emphasize Roosevelt, the new bureaucracy he helmed, and the social movements that swept him into power, *Fear Itself* turns our attention to Congress. There, the vast majority of members were Democrats, and the majority of Democrats hailed from the Jim Crow South. According to Katznelson, these populist, racist, and deeply patriotic men were the engineers of modern American liberalism. It was southern Democrats who took the lead in the New Deal's "radical moment," when American government checked an unprecedented crisis of capitalism with innovative experiments in economic

planning and unionization. The Solid South also led the charge against German and Japanese militarism, laying the groundwork for a successful American war effort in the years before Pearl Harbor.

But if southern Democrats cleared the way for American liberalism's march to victory, they also locked that liberalism in what Katznelson calls a "southern cage." White supremacy constrained the American welfare state's egalitarian potential and fostered a bellicose, paranoid, and opaque national security apparatus. Born in the "southern cage," the modern United States is strangely schizophrenic: it is both a "state of procedures," in which public institutions are too weak to check private economic power, and a "crusading state," in which public institutions dole out overwhelming violence with little democratic oversight.

While the central chapters of *Fear Itself* tell this startling story of the southern domination of the American state, Katznelson places his epic of disappointment within a grander — and surprisingly consoling — historical framework. He argues that the struggle that seized the world between Hitler's rise to power and the death of Stalin was a struggle between dictatorship and parliamentary democracy. Across the globe, citizens feared that their legislatures could no longer effectively resolve the conflicts brought on by industrialization, nationalism, and total war. Confronted by this overwhelming sense of fear, the United States did not abandon its democratic traditions. Instead, congressional majorities ably responded to unprecedented perils. Insisting that the viability of parliamentary authority was the defining question of the mid twentieth century, Katznelson identifies the continuing effectiveness of the US Congress as the period's critical achievement. And the necessary condition of this success story, he reasons, was "keeping the South inside the game of democracy."

The New Deal's accommodation of white supremacy was thus an essential "ethical compromise" on which depended the fate of American democracy at home and US ability to oppose the "era's global tyrannies" abroad. Because of this ethical compromise, "human suffering on the most existential scale was sanctioned" and "black citizenship was traduced." Yet only with this "Faustian terrible compromise could lawmaking have stayed at center stage. There was no American enabling act [on the model of Hitler's Germany]. Productive legislation proceeded to grapple with the largest

issues of the day in familiar democratic terms. In that painfully ironic way, the New Deal secured democracy, perhaps against the odds."

*Fear Itself* does register the aftershocks of the southern New Deal — the inegalitarian and illiberal tendencies of the American state. But Katznelson also insists that the formation of this state was a "rejuvenating triumph," disproving "the era's widespread claims that representative democracy was obsolete and incapable." As a final consolation, he asks us to take "an even longer view" and acknowledge that "lawmaking ironically shaped by the southern bloc modernized in a manner that ultimately undermined Jim Crow's presuppositions and prospects." However flawed, the New Deal created the conditions for "an incipient, soon powerful, movement for equal rights for blacks," a movement that would shake — though by no means shatter — the southern cage.

Katznelson's path-breaking narrative of the southern welfare and warfare states is sure to last. It is a deeply researched and imaginative recasting of an historical literature that has too long searched for external forces to explain the New Deal's limitations. But the intended moral of *Fear Itself*, that the American state crafted by southern domination was necessary lest democracy fall to dictatorship, is the product of rhetorical excess and unexamined political assumptions. Ironically, it is Katznelson's adoption of the language of fear and the logic of emergency, so often used to justify dictatorship, that leads to his portrayal of the southern New Deal as the only viable path the United States could have taken out of its mid-century crisis.

**C**ONTRARY to *Fear Itself*'s dramatic framing, the choice that Americans faced in the 1930s and 1940s was not between democracy and dictatorship. Katznelson himself acknowledges this fact time and again, often a page or a sentence after suggesting the opposite. Setting the scene in the early 1930s, for instance, he lists in quick succession the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the growth of the Soviet gulag, the proliferation of German concentration camps, and American economic, environmental, and racial upheaval, concluding that "threats to liberal democracy were proliferating in a way that was without precedent" and that "the pressures on liberal democracy did not stop in the second half of FDR's first term." But a caveat follows: "Of course, it would be an exaggeration to state that the United

States was on the verge of joining the democratic collapse that was spreading like a domino effect during the 1930s.” The next sentence caveats the caveat: “But there were plenty of dangers at home and a continuing atrophy for liberal democracy abroad.”

The next paragraph repeats this pendulum-like cadence, beginning with a warning: “The United States possessed many of the same features that Hannah Arendt was soon to associate with the rise of totalitarianism.” Katznelson then ticks off “racism as a robust ideology, imperial expansion, and the control of subject populations … ethnic admiration, even loyalty, to German and Italian fascism, ideological attachments to the USSR to the point of spying,” and disregard for civil liberties. Not only do such lists obscure important distinctions — the threat to democratic governance posed by pro-Mussolini Italian-Americans is simply not comparable to the unremitting oppression visited on blacks by American society — their total significance must inevitably be scaled back. Thus, Katznelson follows the catalog of horrors with a considerably understated acknowledgment: “American democracy may not have risked the same apocalyptic fate as the Weimar Republic.” The next sentence: “Nevertheless, there was a real set of pitfalls.” The differences between American and German political economy and culture in the 1930s are too severe for this kind of linguistic maneuvering.

As generations of American historians have concluded, neither fascism nor communism was in the cards for the United States. For all his sharp talk, Katznelson does not seriously contest this conclusion. As he explains in his chapter on US military mobilization during World War II, “at issue was not whether the United States would be a dictatorship, but rather, what kind of democracy it would elect to possess during and after the war.” Most tellingly, *Fear Itself* provides no sustained analysis of what dictatorship in the United States might have looked like.

The book teems with contemporary reports about an increasingly powerful executive branch under FDR. But these expansions of executive authority, as Katznelson details, were designed and approved time and again by overwhelming majorities in Congress and the Electoral College. By contrast, the National Socialists never garnered more than 38 percent of the German federal vote before Hitler was appointed Chancellor; even after the Nazis had effectively seized power in March 1933,

they could not muster an electoral majority.

Nor is it clear why democratic theory should preclude a strong executive. It is simply hyperbole to write that “in placing the recovery program almost entirely in the president’s hands, Congress did flirt with what might be thought of as a functional Enabling Act,” the German legislation that licensed Hitler’s emergency reign. Neither the sensational rhetoric of the New Deal’s critics nor general tendencies toward administrative centralization can substantiate fearful analogies between the Roosevelt regime and one-party rule in Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany. A serious comparison of the American, German, and Russian administrative states would require an analysis of lines of authority, decision-making procedures, methods of legitimation, and the use of violence to compel assent. The incoming president of the Social Science Research Council, Katznelson is a brilliant political scientist as well as an insightful historian, and he could provide such analysis. The results, however, would be less sensational than the rhetoric of *Fear Itself* demands.

FDR-as-dictator aside, Katznelson at times suggests that the United States scored a moral victory simply by “keeping the South in the game of democracy.” But the alternative to this outcome remains unspoken. Was there any serious threat of the South abandoning democracy beyond

*Despite these efforts to exclude black workers and secure local control, the blueprint of economic planning and labor militancy created by southern Democrats soon threatened to transform their region’s illiberal political economy.*

the extent to which it already had by enforcing apartheid? While Katznelson does note that “demagogic figures like Father Charles Coughlin and [the Southerner] Huey Long appealed to many millions,” he never makes the case that such populist leaders posed a real challenge to the Union. Precisely because of the South’s vise-like grip on the Democratic Party, it is difficult to imagine circumstances in which the region would have sought to destabilize the country’s well-functioning white supremacist political system.

If the 1930s and 1940s were not about whether the United States would abandon its relatively democratic form of government, what were they about? The careful case studies that make up the last two thirds of *Fear Itself* clarify the real issue: how would American democracy respond to the failures of capitalism and the fascist and communist states that these failures helped to produce? In deftly answering these questions, Katznelson offers an innovative account of the United States’ recreature of capitalism and war.

**T**HE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE of the early 1930s was the most severe crisis of capitalism in world history. With the Great War’s bloodshed in recent memory and the world’s first socialist state looming to the east, Western countries faced what historian Charles Maier has called the twin challenges of “legitimation” and “production.” On the one hand, these nation-states had to justify the hierarchy that separated labor from capital, factory and farm workers from the technology necessary to make their toil more productive and less back-breaking. But even if Western governments could convince their working populations to accept the bargain of “increasing satisfaction of material wants” in return for the maintenance of capitalist hierarchy, these governments still “had to be able to pay up”—they had to deliver satisfaction in the form of an ever-increasing stock of products and markets for their consumption.

This balanced escalation of production and consumption depended largely on the easy flow of money and goods. Free trade, however, required international economic cooperation, and such cooperation was sorely tested by at least four factors: enormous debt and reparation payments from the recent war, military insecurity, the political necessity of keeping wages and public spending high to prevent domestic unrest, and rigid

monetary policy. Together these factors broke the economic ties that bound the capitalist West. The Great Depression’s rolling crisis of underconsumption and unemployment followed. Stalinist Russia was partially insulated from the collapse, having launched a massive project of industrialization in 1929 that put the nation to work while sentencing millions to starvation. Germany turned to Hitler, whose racial messianism, rearmament policy, and program of agricultural relief united all sectors of the economy in a fearsome coalition dedicated to national expansion.

In the United States, the Great Depression swept Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party into power after twelve years of Republican rule. The early years of FDR’s first term saw a flurry of experiment with economic planning that historians have often labeled the “First New Deal.” Such new forms of executive power as the National Recovery Administration and the Tennessee Valley Authority were established by Congress but operated as partnerships of presidential appointees, local officials, and private representatives of labor and capital. These public-private coalitions made wide-ranging decisions about the targets of investment, the price of goods, and the levels of wages paid and hours worked. Such programs faced resistance in American courts, where the corporate bar challenged them as unconstitutional delegations of authority by Congress to the President and as violations of individual economic freedom.

Despite judicial setbacks, Congress continued to experiment, passing American democracy’s boldest challenge yet or since to capitalist hierarchy: the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. The NLRA, or the Wagner Act, created the legal conditions for large-scale unionization in the United States, expanding the labor rights included in earlier economic planning legislation. *Fear Itself* places this revolution in labor law at the center of a larger “radical moment” when federal and state governments, industrialists, and a newly potent labor force managed the economy for the common good, understood as the good of the American worker.

Southern Democrats were in the vanguard of this radical push for economic planning and labor rights, but they also put their illiberal stamp on it. The southern economy depended on low-wage black labor, and so even as Democrats checked the power of capital, they included space for a powerless underclass within the framework of the newly progressive national state. Southerners made sure

that economic planning and labor rights legislation excluded agricultural and domestic workers, who were predominantly black. Planning programs were also tailored to place as much control as possible in the hands of local elites who could enforce regional patterns of racial oppression.

Despite these efforts to exclude black workers and secure local control, the blueprint of economic planning and labor militancy created by southern Democrats soon threatened to transform their region's illiberal political economy. The new industrial unions empowered by the Wagner Act began to integrate black and white workers throughout the country; the Congress of Industrial Organizations, in particular, turned its sights on the poorly organized South as an untapped source of labor power. Meanwhile, a rapidly expanding federal bureaucracy promised to challenge southern efforts to insulate a racialized, low-wage labor force from national manpower planning. Sensing their inability to control the progressive forces they had unleashed, southern Democrats turned against reform.

In 1938, they successfully watered down the Fair Labor Standards Act, preventing Washington administrators from directly regulating wages and hours, and insulating swaths of southern industry from the reach of the law. Southern congressmen also joined forces with Republicans in launching an investigation of the National Labor Relations Board, the vanguard of pro-labor sentiment within the federal bureaucracy. Congressional investigators charged the Board with class warfare and communist collaboration, pioneering a political language that would help secure domestic support for the coming Cold War and hamstring the American welfare state up to the present day.

Even as southern Democrats were undermining Washington's welfare powers in the late 1930s, they took the lead in demanding a strong national response to Nazi aggression. As Katznelson argues, the South was remarkably resistant to overtures from German fascists, who had hoped to sustain American neutrality by appealing to the country's racism. Beyond a general culture of militant patriotism, southern support for free trade, rooted in the region's reliance on agricultural exports, was a major source of its anti-fascism. Another was the welcome influx of federal dollars to the South that a military mobilization would bring. It was thus the American advocates of white supremacy who spearheaded the repeal of neutrality legislation, the

institution of the United States' first peacetime draft, and the launch of a massive program of industrial rearmament – all before the country at large was united behind Roosevelt's call for "the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny."

The mobilization of America's arsenal also provided southern Democrats with the means to harmonize their inveterate racism and their economic populism. In the wake of the radical moment, the challenge that Jim Crow politicians faced was how to provide security for white workers while ensuring that the federal government lacked the power to meddle with racial hierarchy and local autonomy. The South's answer was strikingly modern: fiscal policy. Rather than intervening directly in the contest between owners, workers, and local governments, the state would now set general targets for growth, manipulating federal spending, taxation, and debt to maintain prosperity and ensure its relatively equitable distribution. This fiscal New Deal, however, could only truly come into its own during World War II.

Then, the federal government rapidly expanded its tax base and happily took on debt to finance a popular and exigent struggle against fascism. While US entry into World War II launched a new phase of emergency planning, a boom in union membership, and an increase in civil rights activism, its biggest economic legacy was fiscal. After the war, military spending backed by debt and taxation would remain the United States' preferred mode of economic regeneration. This new American fiscal state was progressive to the extent that it taxed the well-to-do in order to soften the effects of economic turbulence on the less affluent. But it also signaled the nation's retreat from the more ambitious political-economic vision briefly glimpsed during the pre-war period: in this lost recreation of capitalism, an alliance between an activist bureaucracy and a powerful, racially integrated labor movement would have contested social and economic inequality industry by industry, state by state, town by town.

Southern Democratic power in Congress reached its peak in 1950, and Katznelson shows how the South continued to mold American capitalism and foreign policy during the early Cold War. Under the watchful eye of Jim Crow politicians, an unprecedented burst of foreign aid and military spending, the construction of a massive nuclear arsenal, and the purge of leftists from government agencies, unions, and civil rights organizations set the stage for the second half of the twentieth

century. Anti-communism not only justified the “crusading state” abroad — a state that resurrected Europe while embroiling itself in postcolonial conflict across the globe — but the “state of procedures” at home, a state susceptible to the disproportionate influence of private wealth and reluctant to correct enormous inequalities in the well-being of its citizens.

**K**ATZNELSON concludes on an upbeat note: the flawed, “Janus-faced” state of southern design also provided the platform for the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. Once again, southern plans backfired: World War II had produced a militant generation of black veterans and industrial workers, and legal critiques of state power intended to restrain New Deal administration laid the basis for assaults on formal segregation. Yet this dialectical story in which Jim Crow digs his own grave obscures the costs of conducting civil rights reform in the shadow of the Cold War.

The “state of procedures” that emerged from racist and anti-communist efforts to check unionization was powerful enough to end officially mandated racial discrimination. But the American state has faltered in the face of less formal modes of racial subordination: residential segregation, pervasive health and wealth gaps, a two-tiered and two-toned criminal justice system. And while the defeat of racial and economic democracy in the 1940s most grievously affected African Americans, it continues to determine the life choices and political visions of all Americans. The United States remains locked in its southern cage.

If the mid-century dominance of southern Democrats was truly essential to the defeat of Hitler, the avoidance of a third world war, or the rescue of American democracy, then the conditions of our present confinement might be easier to bear. But Katznelson does not make this case. As he notes, most of the critical decisions of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly the decision to go to war against Japan and Germany, were supported by overwhelming majorities in the country and in Congress. While total opposition by southern Democrats could have worsened the Great Depression and slowed military mobilization, it remains unclear what set of factors would have sparked such a southern strike, or what alternative coalitions might have been forged during the New Deal to circumvent southern dominance.

*Fear Itself* is an indispensable starting point for scholars and citizens who wish to explore the possible futures that the southern New Deal precluded. What is peculiar about the book is its implication that no alternative response to crisis was ever available. In a groundbreaking essay written toward the end of the Reagan era called “Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?” Katznelson surveyed this same terrain and reached a somewhat different conclusion. Then, he argued that the possibility of American social democracy persisted until the late 1940s. It was only a contingent series of events that enabled southern Democrats, moderate northern Democrats (a group *Fear Itself* unfortunately ignores), and Republicans to close the door on a more robust union movement and a more equal America. What Katznelson has added in *Fear Itself* is an emphasis on southern power and a sense of tragic inevitability. Menaced by dictatorship on all sides, American society was compelled to capitulate to the demands of Jim Crow. Because the world’s only hope lay in the survival of democratic legislatures, the reconstruction of American capitalism had to proceed along the inequitable lines laid down by a white supremacist Congress. Although the racial and economic injustice that persists as a result is unfortunate, we can console ourselves with the fact that such injustice was produced in a roughly democratic fashion.

In the twenty-five years between Katznelson’s earlier essay and *Fear Itself*, the world changed. Most significantly, the Soviet Union fell, ushering in a decade of prophecy about the final victory of capitalism and the end of history. Although many read September 11 as a refutation of the latter thesis, a resurgence of religious fundamentalism has not seriously challenged the liberal conviction that free-market capitalism, more or less unequal, more or less unjust, is the economic system that best harmonizes with democratic hope. *Fear Itself*’s tragic acceptance of the state that the southern cage made is a product of this conviction. It is the definitive account of the New Deal for an age that may be passing. Thanks to Ira Katznelson’s achievement, the next great history of mid-century America can ask a new set of questions: During the Great Depression and World War II, were there countervailing forces capable of contesting the dominance of southern democracy? Today, are there forces capable of overcoming the legacy of that domination? ■

# The Problem of Sex

In the absence of radical change, disquiet finds other outlets. Dystopic visions have replaced Shulamith Firestone and Adrienne Rich's utopian ones.

by Laura Tanenbaum

**N 1951**, W.H. Auden awarded the Yale Younger Poets Award

to a Radcliffe College senior named Adrienne Rich. Three years later, Rich married a Harvard economist named Alfred Haskell Conrad. Near the start of *Of Women Born*:

*Motherhood as Institution and Experience*, Rich would reflect on those early years: "I have a very clear, keen memory of myself the day after I was married: I was sweeping a floor. Probably the floor did not really need to be swept; probably I simply did not know what else to do with myself ... I felt I was bending to some ancient form, too ancient to question. This is what women have always done."

In the seventies, the question of "what women do" was more in flux than at nearly any time before or since. Thinkers like Rich and Shulamith Firestone, both of whom died in the past year, were part of a vibrant and far-reaching intellectual reimagining of social life. Having been politicized through the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement, they were both deeply engaged with the economic arguments of the Left, insisting on a place in public life even as they critiqued its core institutions. It was one of the rare moments in which intellectual work and practical politics not only reinforced each other, but became nearly indistinguishable. In texts like *Of Women Born* and Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, women thinkers built on their understanding of the relationship between biology

and the oppressive division of the sexes. They asked how we had organized ourselves in social and economic relations, what the consequences of these organizations were, and how it might be done differently. The result was not a laundry list of “issues” to be dealt with, but an analysis of a system that deforms everything from work and family to art and science. It’s an analysis that continues to resonate, even as public discourse declares on the one hand that feminism’s goals have been accomplished, and on the other that they were always impossible.

Firestone’s work stands out among that of other radical feminists during that period. She resisted the common notion that sexism is an easily fixable glitch in an otherwise just and functioning society, noting that conventional wisdom instinctively understands this. When anti-feminists say, “This is how relations between the sexes have always been,” she argues, they are speaking a truth about the depth of the problem. Near the start of *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone dismisses the search for egalitarian models in long-lost matriarchal pasts or indigenous cultures as “anthropological sophistries.” The nuclear family may be a recent construction, she notes, but a biological, patriarchal family is not. But, she asks, so what? We accept many things into our world that have not been there before; we need not accept oppression because of its long history any more than we accept disease. “The ‘natural’ is not necessarily a ‘human’ value.” And yet the biological structures persist. “The problem becomes political, demanding more than a comprehensive historical analysis, when one realizes that, though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give this tyranny up,” she writes.

Where Rich begins her book as a new wife cleaning the kitchen floor, Firestone begins by comparing herself, favorably, to Friedrich Engels. Earlier feminists, she argues, were like Fourier and Owens, forced to rely on moral appeals and the reader’s inherent aversion to oppression. But contemporary feminists, like Marx and Engels, have the tools to analyze the diffusion of production and reproduction along sexual lines and the psychology of power that goes along with them. *The Dialectic* quickly overflows its formal framework, becoming a freewheeling, eccentric description the ways that the current system of sex division, like capitalism, makes people miserable.

Throughout this misery tour, Engels and Freud are replaced by another voice, one instantly recognizable as conventional wisdom. At times, Firestone refers to it as the voice of women gossiping or men having a drink. Instead of railing against prevailing ideologies, she suggests that the conventional wisdom about the sexes reflects our lived experience.

*The Dialectic* reflects the collective theoretical work of radical feminist groups of the time, including several Firestone co-founded. Rather than argue for the moral righteousness of women’s equality, as earlier utopians might have done, she outlines the ways in which sex inequality is embedded in every aspect of culture and society. Until that changes, she suggests, it’s no good to try to dissuade a mother from telling her daughter that she must employ certain tricks to “trap” a man. Until it changes, there’s little chance of changing anyone’s mind about what men and women are really like or what they have always done.

Take the chapter entitled “Down with Childhood.” Most adults accept the necessity of school and the separate spheres of the adult world and the child world. To suggest that children have rights — let alone that they are an oppressed class whose situation is analogous to that of women, as Firestone does — is to invite ridicule. And yet she demonstrates that even the traditional association of women and children is not without foundation in our current social roles. Both women and children have been told that their exclusion from the public sphere is for their own good, and both are conditioned to placate others in exchange for affection and protection. Women are romanticized to maintain the illusion of innocence; children, the illusion of a golden age. “In a culture of alienated people, the belief that everyone has at least one good period in life free of care and drudgery dies hard. And obviously you can’t expect it in your old age. So it must be you’ve already had it.” But isn’t it better that children go to school, no matter how soulless, than to the factories? And aren’t the family and the consolations of love and romance better than the corruptions of the workplace?

Firestone would say that neither is better. “What we ought to be protesting, rather than that children are being exploited just *like* adults, is that *adults* can be so exploited. We need to start talking not about sparing children for a few years from the horrors of adult life, but about eliminating those horrors.” She at once refuses to accept private relations between men, women, and children as they

have been; the exclusion of women from the public sphere; and the public sphere as it is.

Rich's sense of desperation is quieter than Firestone's, but it is desperation nonetheless. Her accounts of early motherhood are horrific: giving birth under twilight sleep, callous doctors, a cancelled reading at a prep school because her pregnant body would be too much of a distraction for the young boys. She published her second book of poems the year her first son was born, and describes her world at the time as one of anxious faculty wives clinging to the pretext that their conversations were taking place in a Paris salon. The setting resembles any number of *New Yorker* stories, awaiting the inevitable alcohol-soaked dinner-party epiphany. Attempts to assuage the problem tended only to underscore it: Rich notes how, under the guise of sympathy, women's magazines urged their readers to "take time for themselves," implying that motherhood is something from which one needs escape. Unlike the characters in an Updike story, Rich knew a change of scenery or wouldn't have altered her desperation, as the desperation was not hers alone: "Slowly I came to understand the paradox contained in 'my experience' of motherhood; that, although different from many other women's experiences, it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I hope, as a woman, have any authentic life at all."

Rich speaks to the long tradition of "exceptional women" — women who carved out small spaces in public and professional life, provided they didn't upset their benefactors, didn't agitate for other women, and took it as a complement when they were told that they had "male minds." It is often forgotten that women were present in the professional sphere prior to the movements of the sixties and seventies; as far back as the end of the nineteenth century, women in the professions were tolerated as long as they accepted secondary status and sacrificed or hid their private lives. It was a bargain Rich knew well, having been singled out by her intellectual father as an honorary son and feted by Auden at twenty-one.

What she wanted was for women to be taken seriously as intellectuals without disguising any traits that would mark them as female, an aim that would necessitate the rearrangement of work and family structures. It was also essential that the experiences of pregnancy, marriage, and motherhood not be so profoundly alienating as to contribute to women's isolation.

Today, Rich's reflections on maternal ambivalence and the struggle to lay claim to one's own experience are familiar. The women's health movement did much to rectify the medical field's paternalism toward women, though anti-choice politics have threatened this progress. But as the backlash against feminism took hold in the 1980s, discussions of private and public became distorted. The notion that the two spheres might be reorganized has disappeared from public consciousness, and the question has become whether women can "have it all," or whether those spheres can be "balanced." There is now more possibility for humane relationships between the sexes, but little economic and political support for alternative family or communal structures. Discussions of the social dimensions of relationships run constantly up against the idea of "choice." Feminists concerned with economic and racial injustice recognize these injustices as the limits of choice. Yet even these discussions are often more focused on recognizing those limits than thinking about how a different social context might change things.

In the absence of radical change, disquiet finds other outlets. Dystopic visions have replaced Firestone's and Rich's utopian ones. As Kate Millett noted in *n+1*, Firestone's most provocative notion — that artificial reproduction would be necessary in order to uproot the material cause of women's oppression — is now more likely to bring to mind nightmarish visions of exploitation than the technological utopianism Firestone evoked. We can see the shift in feminism's creative expression as well: in 1976, feminist and antiwar activist Marge Piercy wrote *Women on the Verge of Time*, which juxtaposes possible utopian and dystopian futures. By contrast, among the most influential works of feminist literature in the eighties was Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopic fable of reproductive coercion.

This change was also reflected in many of the issues that came to consume feminist energies in the eighties and nineties. In particular, much has been written about the dubious alliance between anti-pornography feminists and the religious right in the eighties. Whether one objects to sexual liberation per se or to images perceived as violent and threatening to equality, the impulse is the same: to rid the culture of the distressing symptom. Prominent anti-porn feminist Andrea Dworkin shared Firestone's understanding of a society defined by the fundamental split between the sexes.

Yet instead of declaring the world unacceptable, as Firestone had, and working out how it could improve, Dworkin envisioned the world as a permanent sexual dystopia. It's not surprising that, as the backlash against feminism took hold, Dworkin's vision came to embody radicalism for many younger feminists. Like Firestone and Rich, Dworkin offered readers the shock of recognition, an airing of the previously taboo. For readers in the eighties and nineties, she spoke to the suspicion that there was more and deeper unfinished business between the sexes than securing recent feminist gains, closing the pay gap, and getting men to "do their share" around the house. In her telling, the unfinished business felt timeless: it connected sex, power, and violence.

All social movements face resistance and backlash, even when their advances have been modest in comparison to their goals. Firestone describes the practical political efforts of dozens of organizations and countless individuals that were required to secure women's suffrage, and the backlash that followed. Her description of the 1920s brings to mind much of what happened in the 1980s: "The cultural campaign had begun: emancipation was one's private responsibility; salvation was personal, not political. Women took off on a long soul-search for 'fulfillment.'" With this history in mind, she begins *The Dialectic* by evoking the resistance to the radical movement of which she was a part. This opposition to feminism represents an understanding, not a misreading, of its implications, she argues:

Sex class is so deep as to be invisible. Or it may appear as a superficial inequality, one that can be solved by merely a few reforms, or perhaps by the full integration of women into the labour force. But the reaction of the common man, woman, and child — 'That? Why you can't change *that!* You must be out of your mind!' — is the closest to the truth. We are talking about something every bit as deep as that.... If there were another word more all-embracing than *revolution* we would use it.

The problem with the more circumscribed forms of feminism, whether embodied in mainstream women's rights organizations or in liberal discourse around rights and equality, is not simply that the goals are wrong or insufficient — though they are. It's that even the most modest goals require radical change. A full consideration of basic issues like workplace equality, equal pay, and humane working conditions inevitably raises questions about what kind of work is valued and how our public and

private lives should be structured. It asks what it would mean to have autonomy over our time, to freely organize humanity in ways that serve our common aims. It asks what kind of world women are integrating themselves into. In 1938, Virginia Woolf, wondering how women struggling for education and respect could possibly think about confronting the militarism and fascism of the day, put it like this:

We, the daughters of educated men, are between the devil and the deep sea. Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed. The one shuts us up like slaves in a harem; the other forces us to circle, like caterpillars head to tail, round and round the mulberry tree, the sacred tree, of property. It is a choice of evils. Each is bad. Had we not better plunge off the bridge into the river; give up the game; declare the whole of human life is a mistake and so end it?

But before you take that step, Madam; a decisive one, unless you share the opinion of the professors of the Church of England that death is the gate of life — *Mors Janua Vitae* is written upon an arch in St. Paul's — in which case there is, of course, much to recommend it, let us see if another answer is not possible.

Writing under the shadow of fascism and war, Woolf wondered what it meant for women to lay claim to their rights at a moment when their world was growing ever more violent and corrupt. Rich, Firestone, and other radicals of the seventies asked similar questions at a moment when opposition to American racism, imperialism, and economic injustice had opened a cultural and political space that viewed those in power with an intense degree of hostility. In this environment, radical feminism argued that skepticism should be extended to our most private institutions as well as to our public ones: to the family as well as to the government, to arrangements of reproduction and care as well as to arrangements of production, to medicine as well as to the military. The incredible gains of the movement in reproductive health and choice, in access to education and the workforce, should not obscure the fact that its radical thinkers also offered visions that are hard to articulate in today's cramped political climate. As much a host of outstanding policy items, the unfinished business of feminism may be to revive this imagination. ■

**I**F YOU SPEND ANY TIME keeping up with the news on climate change, or even just looking at the occasional graph or two, it's hard not to come to the reasoned, scientific conclusion that we are, in fact, totally fucked.

Scientists now think that by the end of the century, the planet is very likely to be four degrees Celsius warmer than it was at the start of the

industrial revolution — a difference equivalent to that between now and the last ice age — and possibly much more. Even in a mid-range emissions scenario, temperatures could rise by three degrees by the middle of the century. The effects of global warming are already materializing more quickly than expected; it seems that every day a new report emerges declaring that all previous bleak predictions actually underestimated how bad things are, and how soon they will get worse.

Where we used to speculate in terms of centuries and future generations, we now speak of decades and the fate of those already living. We're treading on treacherous ground, marked by thresholds we may have already crossed and negative feedback loops whose trigger points we don't understand. A certain amount of warming is already assured, though we're not sure how much; the window to prevent the certainty of more is rapidly closing. Environmentalism has long been the bearer of bad news and the trumpeter of end times, but this time the wolf really seems to be at the door: if not quite end-of-civilization territory, it's frighteningly close. After years of putting on a brave face so

What use is  
playing the  
long game  
when the arc  
of the universe  
feels so  
frighteningly  
short?

No

# Back to

as not to scare the public into fatalism, even scientists are starting to freak out.

Should the Left join them? Those end-of-civilization scenarios are still a ways off, after all, and there are so many other things to worry about in the meantime. In any case, the Left is certainly no stranger to bleak futures; it's been a more-or-less uphill struggle since the advent of industrial capitalism set the course for our current predicament. Do we really need more doom and gloom?

But this, after all, is a movement that regularly takes heart in events that took place in the nineteenth century, and which has long appealed to the chance for something better than the dismal present. Leftists think about politics with an eye on the clock of history: the fortunes of labor are traced not in years but in generations. The abolitionist movement took decades to end slavery in the United States and the Civil Rights Movement another century in full; it's been less than a hundred years since American women could vote. Even these projects remain unfinished. This is frequently interpreted with hope — the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice, and so on. And the ability to zoom out to the *longue durée* is important in bringing a sense of perspective to bear on

the zeitgeist — though perhaps also, less usefully, in sustaining what Walter Benjamin pejoratively called “left melancholy.” But if understanding climate change requires the historical imagination of the Left to add politics to geology, it also requires the ability to look at the famous hockey stick graph and see that the entire history of the movement is

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encapsulated within the steeply rising line at the very end — a line that, turned upside down, looks like nothing so much as a cliff.

So surely the prospect that we've got at most a few decades before things start to get really bad has implications for the Left beyond environmentalism. Since the onset of the no-alternatives stage of capitalism, the Left has been on the defensive as the range of imaginable futures shrinks ever smaller. And so a year ago T. R. Clark wrote in the *New Left Review* of a “left with no future,” suggesting that our task consists of a sort of tragic anti-utopianism, a piece-by-piece orientation toward the present with no illusions that its circumstances will improve anytime soon. But what’s the task when it’s not just the Left but the world itself that’s seemingly faced with no future? In other words, what should the orientation be of a politics that’s playing the long game when the arc of the universe is starting to feel frighteningly short?

Who cares if you’re on the right side of history if there’s no one left to write it?

I realize this sounds like the kind of hysterically apocalyptic rhetoric that many have warned against. Catastrophism is, after all, better suited to the goals of the Right than the Left; more likely to produce despotism and repression in the name of Malthusian emergency than the plentiful egalitarian society of our dreams; more likely to fuel millennial fundamentalism than revolutionary fervor. Those cautions are important, and should be taken seriously. But merely warning against the perils of apocalyptic politics feels inadequate as it becomes harder to avert our collective gaze from what appear to be genuinely dismal prospects.

It’s easy to understand why some climate scientists and activists have feared that explicitly laying out how bad things are would produce paralysis or panic; thinking about climate change can be genuinely terrifying and overwhelming. Despair is a completely rational response that growing numbers of people are likely to experience whether or not activists resort to fearmongering, particularly as extreme weather affects more people and becomes harder to dismiss as an aberration. But collective action can be a powerful force to counter the isolation and fear that come with facing overwhelming odds. And the fact that there are such terrifying end-times narratives out there is exactly why the Left needs to be thinking about how to respond in a way that feels — and is — adequately urgent.

The most obvious precedent is perhaps the

nuclear age, when the end of the world seemed perpetually close at hand — so much so that we got the term “no future,” and an ethos to match. A lyric from the Sex Pistols song “God Save the Queen,” the phrase is most immediately associated with the punk subculture that emerged from the recession of the 1970s, revolting against grim urban landscapes of unemployment underpinned by a Cold War sense of imminent annihilation. The declaration of “no future” signified an intensely oppositional, at times nihilistic focus on the present; it was anti-utopian, declaring that only action in the here-and-now mattered. It wasn’t so much a politics as an attitude, and perhaps, ultimately, an aesthetic.

The aesthetic of the anti-nuclear movement couldn’t have been more different — earnest, respectable, middle-class mothers made up its front-lines, marching against nuclear weapons and nuclear energy by the thousands — but its politics were still founded on negation: no more nukes, and get rid of the old. The movement ran almost entirely on urgency and moral outrage; they proved a galvanizing combination. At the height of the arms race, hundreds of thousands of people turned out for anti-nuclear demonstrations in countries around the world, and in 1982, a million people demanded a nuclear freeze in Central Park.

Yet upon failing to achieve one, the movement began to lose steam. Raymond Williams, reflecting on the movement’s limitations, wrote that “to build peace, now more than ever, it is necessary to build more than peace. To refuse nuclear weapons, we have to refuse much more than nuclear weapons. Unless the refusals can be connected with such building, unless protest can be connected with and surpassed by significant practical construction, our strength will remain insufficient.” They weren’t, it wasn’t, and it did. Nor did the anti-nuclear movement, for the most part, address the structures perpetuating the nuclear arms race. But then, there seemed no real reason to rebuild the world: avoiding apocalypse required only that each nation do nothing. While the nuclear age didn’t actually end, the threat subsided with the sudden end of the Cold War. By that time, the anti-nuclear movement had largely been pared down to an ultra-committed core.

The anticlimax of the nuclear age might suggest that climate change is just one more in a long string of false doomsday prophesies. Of course, it’s often because prophesies are made and acted upon that they end up looking false in retrospect; credit is

rarely given when bad things don't happen. But in any case, there's much to suggest that this time is different. Where nuclear apocalypse would occur suddenly, and be largely undiscriminating in its effects, the climate apocalypse won't come in one sudden burst. It will happen jerkily and unevenly, without us doing anything at all. We will have to do a lot for it *not* to happen. It is in many ways much more difficult to address, but also much more predictable in its general outlines. The ability to see our own version of "no future" coming from afar is one of our few advantages. And so we need to ask: how could the urgency and outrage of the "no future" sensibility translate into, if not a programmatic politics, something beyond negation and refusal, beyond a cultural obsession with apocalypse?

There were elements of such a politics in the protests and actions that swept the world in 2011, driven in large part by young people — unemployed Egyptians, Spanish *indignados*, indebted Americans — without much in the way of a future, and certainly not the bright one they had been promised. Yet as Occupy demonstrated, the desire to focus on the here-and-now without any vision of what comes next tends to be overtaken almost entirely by process-oriented prefigurative politics. And when the old vision of the future is untenable, as it now appears to be — what then?

Here we might look to the queer activism that formed in response to the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the eighties.. In its early days, many gay liberationists criticized terms like "epidemic" and "plague" and rejected the framework of crisis, pointing out that it was being used by homophobes as a tool to roll back queer freedoms. And with good reason: right-wing groups suggested that gays be tattooed, sensationalistic media accounts moralized about gay male sexuality, legislators called for quarantine rather than research. But as time went on and the scope of the problem revealed itself to be far vaster than most had imagined, as entire communities were sick and dying of a unknown, incurable disease, fear and panic seemed like the only rational responses.

Thus, in 1983, the playwright Larry Kramer wrote an article titled "1112 and Counting," which declared: "If this article doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble. If this article doesn't rouse you to anger, fury, rage, and action, gay men may have no future on this earth. Our continued existence depends on just how angry you can get."

Gay men and other marginalized people, Kramer argued, were suffering as guinea pigs in the search for a cure while white middle-class heterosexuals stood by and watched. It was time, he suggested, to fight back. Kramer's article sparked a frenzy of discussion, but not the mass civil disobedience he called for, in part because he had a scant history of queer activism, and consequently little standing in the community. Many sympathized with his sense of urgency, but questioned the confrontational tactics he proposed. As the radical movements of the sixties and seventies subsided, many gays and lesbians sought inclusion in society rather than liberation from it, and many felt the response to HIV/AIDS should be one of self-moderation: to minimize gay difference and assert mainstream norms. Protest seemed too countercultural.

But as time passed and the crisis worsened with little response from the Reagan administration, protests and vigils began to emerge. When the Supreme Court decreed gay sex unconstitutional in *Bowers v. Hardwick* three years later, it was the final straw. Queers felt like they had nothing to lose, sociologist Deborah Gould argues, and "rather than paralyzing, despair became freeing." Rather than closing off the sense of possibility, it "helped to wrench open the existing political horizon." Lesbian and gay male activists began to recognize a shared identity; lesbians involved in antiracist and feminist politics recognized the threat that HIV posed to women of color and low-income women; radical liberationists and mainstream assimilationists recognized that they faced a shared threat. Together, they began a movement aimed at forcing the Reagan administration to take HIV/AIDS seriously, much of it characterized by the confrontational direct action undertaken by organizations like the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power — otherwise known as ACT UP.

There are, of course, significant differences between early HIV/AIDS activism and the modern climate movement. Yet their trajectories resonate. In particular, the defiant attitude Gould describes activists adopting in the face of despair sounds remarkably similar to that expressed by Tim DeChristopher, a climate activist recently imprisoned for falsely bidding against oil and gas companies in an auction of public lands. Rather than being paralyzed by hopelessness, DeChristopher was radicalized when he heard from a leading climate scientist how slim the chances of preventing catastrophic climate change actually were. "Once I

realized that there was no hope in any sort of normal future,” he explained, “there’s no hope for me to have anything my parents or grandparents would have considered a normal future – of a career and a retirement and all that stuff – I realized that I have absolutely nothing to lose by fighting back. Because it was all going to be lost anyway.”

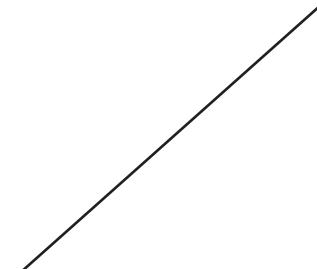
Of course, nothing-to-lose radicalism has long been tempered with the suggestion of something to gain. Capitalism speculates about the future while imposing restrictions on the present, whether emphasizing work and saving for future investment, offering to lift all boats in due time, or holding out the hope that you too can be rich; even the immediate gratification of credit is premised on expectations of a future payoff. Welfare liberalism promises everyone a job and a house eventually — the economy just needs to grow a little first. Movements are urged to be patient, to wait, to recognize that change comes gradually, in small and steady increments. When faced with desperate circumstances, it can seem that the only sensible course of action is to abandon grand projects and do what seems most immediately possible.

It’s not always the wrong approach. The problem is when it’s held up as the only one: legislative incrementalism has been fetishized to the point where it’s the default for all serious, reasonable politics. But climate change flips the logic of serious and reasonable. Climate change is often framed as a problem stemming from inadequate attention to the future, but it’s our immense faith in a brighter future that makes the untenable present possible. In fact, we’ve put off addressing climate change in part because economists argued that we’d be richer in the future and better able to deal with it then. And while one reaction to impending catastrophe is to look away, the other is to look still farther into the future, to the point when we innovate our way to clean energy or colonize the moon or geoengineer the oceans. The wildly unrealistic utopians are people like Richard Branson, who sees no contradiction between his purported concern for climate change and his plans to take the rich to space, and Elon Musk, who sees the future of humanity in Mars colonies for the wealthy.

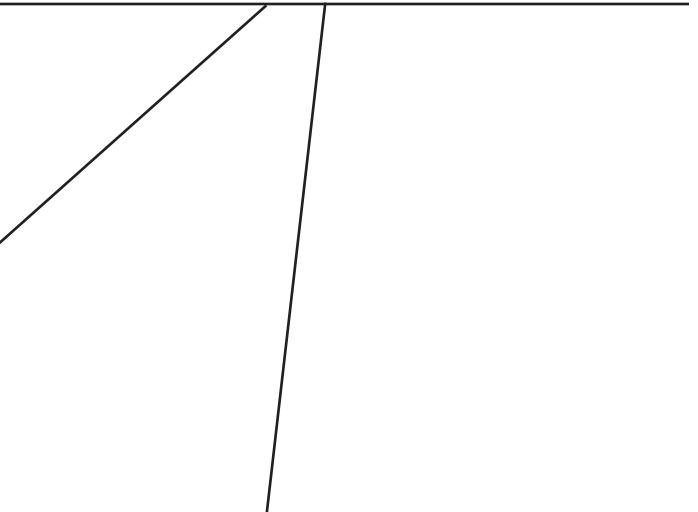
But if that future orientation is in part what got us into this mess, the end of that future could be what helps get us out. As Gerry Canavan writes, “to say that the present has no future is not to say there is no future — it is only to say that things cannot continue to go on as they have.” As Princeton’s

*Utopia is usually considered the realm of bright-eyed optimists, but clear-eyed pessimism may be the state of mind best suited for building sturdier varieties. The new utopias won’t look the way the old ones did; they are unlikely to be lands of endless plenty.*

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Stephen Pacala points out, “the rich are really spectacular emitters … the top 500 million people (about 8 percent of humanity) emit half the greenhouse emissions. These people are really rich by global standards. Every single one of them earns more than the average American and they also occur in all the countries of the world.” While climate change is mostly a concern of the white middle class in the US, at the international level it’s arguably the most robust space for examining class and racial disparities. It’s one of the few issues remaining where justice is discussed explicitly and



climate negotiations in Doha, Naderev Saño, the lead negotiator for the Philippines, cried as he spoke of the damage caused by the sixteenth typhoon to strike that country this year and insisted on “no more delays, no more excuses.” But without the power to back it up, his demand was mostly symbolic. How could a no-future politics not only reject the endless deferral of rights, equality, meeting of basic needs, but actually do something about it?

Impatience can be a virtue, but the understanding of *why we can't wait* doesn't come spontaneously. Arc of the universe aside, Martin Luther King knew perfectly well that the advance of justice isn't assured — that moments of action are made, not given. A passage from *Chaos or Community?* reads eerily like a premonition of the current situation:

Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. We are faced now with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late.... We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: Too late.

Of course, every now carries a fierce urgency for those who live daily with the reality of scarcity and repression. That urgency is reflected in the most classic of all activist chants: “What do we want? When do we want it?” Whatever it is, and whoever we are, we know we want it now. But climate change adds a twist to that old chestnut. The recognition that incrementalism is an inadequate response to the problem that most threatens the Left doesn't quite collapse all horizons into now or never, but it gets us closer to a shared time frame and a common answer to the question of *why now?* It gets us closer to a shared understanding of the importance of the current moment and a reason to pull together once and for all.

The global pall cast by the nuclear age brought, if not exactly a sense of unity, a morbid recognition of our interconnectedness, memorably encapsulated by the phrase “mutually assured destruction.” But the decision about the future was ultimately up to a few people. Climate change likewise suggests an interconnected doom, but it also offers a chance of salvation through mutual reconstruction. The kind of everything-at-once politics this suggests can be self-defeating if it amounts to fighting among

unyieldingly in terms of equality, where rich nations are openly named as obstacles to progress, where historical inequities and legacies of exploitation remain on the table, where responsibility for disparity is openly discussed. The focus on science versus deniers in the United States has served to obscure the question of who exactly is emitting all these greenhouse gases.

But now that the rising tide that supposedly lifts all boats is threatening to inundate the shore instead, more people are losing patience with being perpetually put off. At the most recent round of

ourselves for attention and space. Instead of jostling for position, instead even of forging temporary alliances aimed at achieving specific political goals, the emphasis needs to be on finally figuring out how all our different projects work together.

Because as the earth changes around us, the Left will have to change too. Nostalgia will serve us less well now than ever; we have to bring a newly critical eye to old goals, and find a core to build on as once-solid ice caps melt into open ocean. We need to ask: what could we do if we all agreed that now is the moment? But rather than subsuming all left politics under the single issue of climate change or treating it as an issue apart, we need to consider climate change a background condition for all politics. Instead of being bludgeoned by climate change, how can we use it as a lever to wedge open cracks of possibility, a shield against marginalization, a time machine into our future, and a spotlight on the present?

Of course, for all its mobilizing potential, despair can also be debilitating, especially in the long run. If the rise of the HIV/AIDS movement was in part a product of despair, so was its decline: eventually, the fear and anguish that came with the inability to stem the tide of death took its toll, and internal divisions fractured the movement. Gould suggests that more attention to building trust and relationships among different factions in the early days of the HIV/AIDS movement would have helped organizations like ACT UP make it through later debates. Perhaps it would have fractured anyway in the face of the challenges before it.

But HIV/AIDS activists were also too quick to turn sorrow to anger, channeling emotions into politics without allowing themselves to simply feel them first. And so we should acknowledge that our work will be difficult. Suggesting that our new future won't require much of us may increase surface-level support; offering lists of "things you can do" momentarily makes problems seem less daunting. But painting an overly rosy picture is also the best way to prompt a backlash when people realize that dealing with climate change is actually going to be hard or at the very least, defection by those who didn't realize they were in for the long-haul. Told we'd reached the end of history, it turns out that we've actually arrived at the end of the future, or at least the one we knew. The experience will be disorienting. We have to rethink what progress means, and shift our gaze to a different horizon as we reconfigure our expectations for the present. It will

sometimes feel like loss. We're going to have to try things, and they aren't always going to work. There are no assurances. But we have to start by recognizing the stakes.

This may seem rash. Sasha Lilley cautions that catastrophic politics tend to veer between "mechanistic determinism and no-holds-barred voluntarism or adventurism," the likes of DeChristopher's action arguably fits into the latter category. But his seeming recklessness reflects a larger shift in the climate movement, away from Al Gore-narrated documentaries and towards organizing, provocation, and confrontation. The broader left should be moving and thinking along with it. That doesn't always mean replacing incremental politics with direct action at every turn. Even politics without a future can't be oriented only toward the short-term: a movement that burns out after a few shrill years of protest may change the game for a while, but it isn't going to rewrite the rules. Transformational projects require long-term politics. Nor does it mean rejecting partial solutions or hewing to overly determined prerogatives. It does mean pointing out that they are partial, and refusing to be placated. It doesn't mean being rigidly dogmatic; it does mean making the case for our wildest dreams explicitly, in mixed company. It means thinking and acting more boldly than the political climate permits, all the while thinking in terms of futures that might be scoffed at as imaginary.

Utopia is usually considered the realm of bright-eyed optimists, but clear-eyed pessimism may be the state of mind best suited for building sturdier varieties. The new utopias won't look the way the old ones did; they are unlikely to be lands of endless plenty. But released from the imperative to be politically realistic, we have new license to think about what's actually possible.

The recognition of ecological limits could help undo political ones: if no other planet is possible, then another world is necessary. And while building a new present from the wreckage of old futures may be daunting, what other choice is there? The alternative is to watch the projected horrors of the future come closer; to view our own future through others' suffering; to whistle in the dark and recite that Fredric Jameson quote about how it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. That's probably true even for the Left at this point. But then, nobody said it was going to be easy. We have nothing to lose, and a future to win. ■



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