Essays toward a New Left

THENAND

Essays toward a New Left

CLASS WAR THEN AND NOW

CHRIS WRIGHT

Class War, Then and Now Copyright © 2025 by Chris Wright. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For more information, e-mail all inquiries to info@manhattanbookgroup.com.



Published by Manhattan Book Group 447 Broadway 2nd Floor, #354, New York, NY 10013 (212) 634-7677 | www.manhattanbookgroup.com Printed in the United States of America

Printed in the United States of America. ISBN-13: 978-1-967458-37-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	v
PART ONE: VALUES	ix
The Value of the Humanities	1
Communism and Human Nature	9
The Necessity of a Moral Revolution	13
Capitalism, Socialism, and Existential Despair	
Thoughts on Overcoming Despair	
The Revolutionary Beethoven	
Classical Music vs. Mediocrity	
In Kitsch We Trust	
Free Speech, Hassan Nasrallah, and	
Other Victims of Internet Censorship	49
The Value of Noam Chomsky	
PART TWO: HISTORY	71
The Founding Fathers: "Neoliberals" Avant le Mot	73
The Government vs. the Population	
Our Passive Society	
The Radicalism of Working-Class Americans	105
The Life and Times of Jimmy Hoffa	117
Capitalism vs. Freedom: A Book Review	
Capitalism and Colonialism	

The Rise of Right-wing Libertarianism Since the 1950s	167
Organized Labor and the Crisis of Democracy	187
PART THREE: QUESTIONING DOGMAS	195
On the Use and Abuse of Rage for Life	197
The Significance and Shortcomings of Karl Marx	205
Eleven Theses on Socialist Revolution	
It's Time to Embrace Nuclear Energy	245
Renewable Energy Is Not the Answer; Nuclear Is	253
The Second Cold War Is More Dangerous than the First	
The Left and the Ukraine War	267
What "Security Threat" Does China Pose?	271
NATO's Endgame Appears to Be Nuclear War	281
PART FOUR: IDENTITY POLITICS	285
Defending Materialism Against Postmodernism	287
"Race Reductionism" Threatens to Doom the Left	
The Stupefying Mediocrity of Barack Obama	311
Political Correctness Is Getting Out of Hand	317
The Righteous Outrage of Norman Finkelstein	
The Origins of Patriarchy	
Postliberalism: A Dangerous "New" Conservatism	
How to Rebuild the Left	

PREFACE

It isn't a secret that the world is in trouble, most ominously from ecological collapse and the ever-present possibility of nuclear war. Stated in the simplest terms, the reason is that capitalism is running amok and the left has almost no power across most of the world. Capitalism cares only about making profit; values such as environmental conservation, preservation of human and animal life, the end of war, abolition of nuclear weapons, and human well-being count for little or nothing. The only way such values can rise to prominence is if popular movements fighting against capitalism force them onto the political agenda. But popular movements, including the labor movement, perennially lack sufficient resources to halt or reverse capitalism's misanthropic tendencies. In the neoliberal era, this perennial problem has become more serious than ever. Hence the prospect of civilization's collapse in our century.

The only hope, it seems, is that the world's descent into multidimensional crisis will itself generate the conditions for the popular majority to effectually fight back. For the sake of survival and out of disgust with the political and economic status quo, people will be compelled to join together to build oppositional movements and cultures and institutions, in fact even new modes of material production and distribution on the basis of which, eventually, a new kind of politics may arise. As the old world suffers its torturously protracted collapse, a new world might be born amidst its ashes. I have discussed the "historical

CHRIS WRIGHT

logic" of this process, as well as speculated on some of the possibilities, in a book called *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States* (2014), using a revision of the Marxist theory of revolution to illuminate how the whole gigantic transition between modes of production, from capitalist to cooperative, might unfold. I present a summary in two essays below, "The Significance and Shortcomings of Karl Marx" and "Eleven Theses on Socialist Revolution." The ideas may be too optimistic, but in that case humanity's future will be very grim indeed.

This book, to quote the Port Huron Statement of 1962, "is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living." In essence, it is an elaboration of what I take to be a consistent Marxist philosophy, the sort of philosophy that must be realized on a large scale if humanity is to have a decent future. Not all leftists will agree with everything in the book. For example, I criticize identity politics from a Marxist point of view, and I argue that feminism should prioritize materialist issues over certain "culturalist" ones (in addition to the very common, and very doctrinaire, social constructionist theorizing of gender) fashionable under the influence of postmodern academia. I also defend nuclear energy as an essential component of a transition to clean energy, a stance that isn't popular on the left. Nor will most Marxists appreciate the revisions I've made to the Marxian conception of revolution. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that rationality, respect for evidence, and open-mindedness should guide our thinking. We shouldn't remain perpetually chained to old theories, old analyses, and old prophecies that history has proved wrong. I like the slogan of the young Marx: "For a ruthless criticism of everything existing!" Leftists are hardly infallible.

The book consists of essays and articles written between 2014 and 2024, which were published in *CounterPunch, Socialist Forum, Dissent, New Politics, ROAR Magazine, Common Dreams, Dissident Voice, Sublation, Compact,* and *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. I've tried to impose an order on the material by arranging it in four parts according

to thematic content. Such content, too, implicitly links successive chapters. Inevitably, there is some repetition between essays, but I've lightly revised them to try to minimize that.

Not all the essays are directly political. The first one, for instance, on the value of the humanities, might seem out of place in a book devoted to critiquing capitalism and defending a leftist philosophy. I've included it because art and the humanities are fighting an existential battle today, and in the end they represent the human spirit facing off against the spirit of commercial gain. If the former can't find some way to put shackles on the latter, our descendants may inherit a world of ashes.

Likewise, the inclusion of seemingly random pieces on Beethoven, classical music, Jimmy Hoffa, the authoritarianism of the U.S.'s "founding fathers," the implicit radicalism of most working people, and other topics might be faulted, but I think it is justified by the book's general themes of class struggle and building a left grounded in rationality and human dignity rather than woke dogmas, academic groupthink, and pop cultural mediocrity. For example, historically the left had great respect for high culture, from Bach to Balzac, the Enlightenment to modern science. The postmodern left's scorn for the past achievements of genius ("they're white supremacist, patriarchal, misogynistic, heteronormative, colonialist, Eurocentric!") is but another manifestation of the left's degeneration due to the influence of academia, post-1960s social movements, neoliberal evisceration of the labor movement, and neoliberal culture. The old left had plenty of flaws, but it also had strengths that have been lost.

The writing in this book reflects my belief that, by and large, academic modes of writing and thinking are not necessary in order to grasp truth. They are just as likely to obscure as to illuminate. The greatest scholar in history, after all—whose 150+ books encompass linguistics, cognitive science, philosophy, evolutionary biology, history, contemporary politics, media analysis, the history of science, and other areas—is

CHRIS WRIGHT

Noam Chomsky, and he rejects academic conventions in favor of clear writing, insightful thinking, and intellectual honesty. One doesn't need endless convoluted verbiage backed by scores of citations in order, for example, to understand why gender relations are as they are, as I try to show in the article on patriarchy. Straightforward reason suffices. In fact, *institutional* thinking and behavior are among the greatest threats to life today, and they should be repudiated.

In its "humanistic" philosophy expounded in a somewhat disjointed way, the book amounts to a continuation of two others that are even more unconventional: Notes of an Underground Humanist (2013) and Finding Our Compass: Reflections on a World in Crisis (2014), both available for free online. My Journal of a Dissenter (2025) contains countless summaries of good scholarship that is far too rarely read. Readers interested, on the other hand, in a more arduous interrogation of social history might enjoy a book entitled Popular Radicalism and the Unemployed in Chicago during the Great Depression (2022). The present book reproduces ideas from these others, but hopefully in a more concise and digestible way.

Nothing is more urgent today than for us to collectively recover human values, learn from history, think critically about our society, and build international social movements to save the future for our children. I hope this book makes some small contribution to these colossal tasks.

PART ONE VALUES

THE VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES (2014)

The old question of the humanities' relation to humanity continues to bedevil, bewilder, and bemuse. Intellectuals like Stanley Fish perform mental acrobatics to justify their life-pursuits. Do art and the humanities tend to ennoble? Does immersion in them make moral, broad-minded, and empathetic? Does it give one a greater appreciation of "life's meaning," or greater understanding of other minds and cultures, or greater capacities for public-spirited and informed citizenship? Does it give one the mental habits and resources with which to live well and resist modern dehumanization? What, in the end, is the humanities' value at all?

Or are the naysayers right that this sphere of study and creation is not only economically unproductive but also elitist, solipsistic, socially disengaging, and in general useless, even harmful? Given the age in

See Fish's articles "Will the Humanities Save Us?" and "The Uses of the Humanities, Part Two," *New York Times*, January 6 and 13, 2008.

which we live, it seems that a clear and forceful statement of the value of the humanities—if indeed we decide they have value—is in order.

That creating and studying humanistic works need not make humane is shown by the caliber of so many people who create and study these works. "Humanistic" intellectuals are perfectly capable not only of being cultural decadents, contemptible narcissists, and personally immoral obscenities (pedophiles, authoritarians, abusers of women, whatever you want), but also of being enthusiastic fascists, Nazis, and semi-Eichmannian bureaucrats. The scholarship of Zeev Sternhell, for example, shows how the ideological seeds of fascism germinated in the fecund soil of alienated turn-of-the-century European intellectual culture.² George Steiner's thoughts are worth quoting at length:

The simple yet appalling fact is that we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they humanize. We have little proof that a tradition of literary studies in fact makes a man more humane. What is worse—a certain body of evidence points the other way. When barbarism came to twentieth-century Europe, the arts faculties offered very little moral resistance, and this is not a trivial or local accident. In a disturbing number of cases the literary imagination gave servile or ecstatic welcome to political bestiality. That bestiality was at times enforced and refined by individuals educated in the culture of traditional humanism. Knowledge of Goethe, a delight in the poetry of Rilke, seemed no bar to personal and institutionalized sadism... It is at least conceivable [not only that the humanities don't humanize, but that] the focusing of consciousness on a written text, which is the substance of our training and pursuit, diminishes the sharpness and readiness of our actual moral response. Because we are trained to give

Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

psychological and moral credence to the imaginary, to the character in a play or a novel, to the condition of spirit we gather from a poem, we may find it more difficult to identify with the real world... Thus there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity.³

One can't help thinking of Hannibal Lecter reveling in Bach's Goldberg Variations as he kills and cannibalizes his victims.

It is significant, however, that such juxtapositions seem strikingly incongruous. Great artistic and philosophical works have an intrinsically elevated character, in the sense of embodying and speaking to our higher capacities: reason, spirituality, existential wonder, empathy, creativity guided by standards of beauty and human resonance, and the quest for understanding. Whatever the "usefulness" of art and the humanities, their being a manifestation and confirmation of such high values and capacities already justifies them. Humans are perpetually drawn to them, from the cave paintings of Cro-Magnon man to the poetry of postmodern man. They are the creative facets of the human spirit at play, self-constrained only by rules of logic, proportion, harmony, expressive power, fidelity to experience, and the like. It is a magnificent fact that art and the humanities hold a magnetic attraction for people in all times and of all ages: we're fascinated by them, whether the six-year-old fantasy-conducting a Beethoven symphony or the sixty-year-old writing a commentary on the philosophy of Spinoza. And if the creation and appreciation of such works is, so to speak, justified in itself, so is the study and analysis of them. For that is a humanistic, creative act as well, an expressing of our higher powers, a contribution to the thoughtful assimilating of experience, an oblique contribution to the object of analysis itself (to its meaning for others). This whole humanistic and artistic sphere of life—together with the academic study of it—does not need a

George Steiner, Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998 [1967]), 60, 61.

justification outside itself; it is justified as long as it moves us, grips us, and captures our imagination.

The reason it seems as though art and the humanities should have a morally uplifting effect is that they intrinsically affirm humanity. Their pursuit of beauty and truth is a pursuit of what is good and noble, what inspires and serves as an ornament to life, what raises one's vision from crass self-advantage to a more disinterested and universal plane of experience. We are drawn out of ourselves and called to join a community of minds. Indeed, one of the foundations of art is empathy, implicit identification with the feelings and thoughts of others; it is largely this that moves us, whether in a piece of music or a poem or a painting. Thus, there is a kind of inherent moral quality to art, or at least good art—even to negative works like, say, Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. But a huge proportion of art and philosophy—surely the best of it—is more positive, moral, and "humanistic" in spirit than absurdist or nihilistic, and in such cases the connection between morality and the humanities is especially clear. It strikes us as particularly obscene that admirers of Goethe should have become Nazis.

On the other hand, art also exists in tension with humanity, as the passage quoted from George Steiner shows. While the aesthetic may have moral overtones, it is perfectly possible to sacrifice morality in the creation and appreciation of art. In themselves, the ethical and the aesthetic are two very different things. Kierkegaard, for example, illustrates this with his famous story of Johannes the Seducer, whose aesthetic approach to life disregards morality. A lived philosophy of aestheticism, in fact, can be pure decadence, pure moral and psychological rot; see Thomas Mann's story "Death in Venice," or consider an aesthete like Oscar Wilde (whose life, however, was not without some tragic dignity—unlike that of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, and most other such refined hedonists). The production of art even has an ironic similarity to capitalist production: humans and nature are objectified and subordinated to a "higher" principle, whether beauty and profundity in

art or profit and capital accumulation in capitalism. Some film directors are notorious for treating actors cruelly in the attempt to produce a more compelling work of art, and performance artists sometimes integrate violence into their routines. Doubtless such art is rarely good, consisting of mere provocation; but it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the aesthetic stance, inasmuch as the ethical-for-its-own-sake is obliterated.

From this perspective, there is nothing inconsistent about artists and most types of humanistic intellectuals being morally objectionable in some way. Art and the humanities constitute a separate sphere of life, a separate set of values, from moral treatment of others, even if particular works—the large majority—do embody and proceed from an ethical vision that is properly moral. Indeed, the humanities don't give values at all; they reflect values, as science does, and can be used in the service of any agenda. They don't in themselves give meaning to life or make us appreciate life's value; they don't necessarily make their partaker wise or compassionate or broad-minded. They have no necessary utilitarian justification. All depends on how one "takes them up." The most that can be said is that using art and the humanities in a morally and intellectually elevated way, to improve oneself and the world, is more consistent with their spirit than not being improved by them would be. They are most fully realized when one remakes oneself in the light of the values they embody, namely human connection, exaltation of the imagination, and insatiable hunger for truth. One honors and personifies art and philosophy by treating oneself as a work of art and philosophy.

Thus, if you approach art and the humanities with the right attitude, they *can* be all the things stated in the first paragraph above, and that does give them a myriad of utilitarian justifications. A good system of education would approach these works from a humanistic standpoint, not only as valuable in themselves (aesthetically, philosophically, etc.) but as important components of the good life—as means for us to make *ourselves* more valuable. Their study, and the study of good scholarly analyses of them, should make us more thoughtful and empathetic,

more informed about the world and better able to act intelligently on that information, more adept at "critical thinking" about people and society, more open to alternative viewpoints, more well-rounded and able to appreciate the "more complexly valuable" experiences we have access to,⁴ and, yes, more moral and concerned for others. Reading good literature and literary criticism is not only a pleasure in itself but can foster deeper understanding of ourselves and others; reading moral philosophers and their commentators can and should make us more thoughtful about how we act and interpret our actions; listening to and studying great music can invigorate, can sharpen the appetite for life and cultivate acute sensibilities; studying history can teach innumerable lessons about our own society, where it's headed, and how best to change it. None of this is automatic; it requires good teachers, an educational system that prioritizes humane learning, and an open and interested attitude on the part of students.

Incidentally, these reflections on what the humanities *can* be also provide some criteria for great art, philosophy, historical writing, and critical commentary. The distinction can be conceptualized as between decadence and vitality. The literary criticism of Georg Lukács elaborates on this,⁵ but to an extent it is intuitive. What is healthy, and what isn't? What stimulates to action and exalted achievement, and what enervates or alienates or seems comically pretentious? (Much of "avant–garde" art falls under the latter category.) What induces a feeling of brotherhood with humanity, and what fills with contempt or existential nausea? What *integrates*, is ambitious and comprehensive, and what fragments, is overly specialized or parochial? What contributes to realistic understanding, rationally and clearly placing things in proper relations to one another, and what mystifies or obfuscates? Despite what formalists and postmodernists and *l'art pour l'art* advocates might think, considerations

Barton Swaim, "Book Review: 'The Value of the Humanities' by Helen Small," Wall Street Journal, February 14, 2014.

⁵ See, e.g., his *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

of morality and "healthiness" and truth—considerations of *content*—cannot be irrelevant to judging the value of a work of art.⁶ While it's true that art and the humanities in a sense constitute their own separate sphere of experience with its own standards, on a deeper level they are integrated into life, society, and personality, and neither can nor should be divorced from their context. The Goethean and Marxian attention to the *whole* is the noblest, truest, healthiest, and most moral—most humanistic—approach to living, to art, and to analysis.

Whether any of this justifies the enormous academic apparatus of the humanities is an open question, which I'm inclined to answer in the negative. Most scholarship and criticism is forgettable, and most teaching is of middling value to the student, who is not well served by the anti-humanistic, pro-status quo priorities of the educational establishment. Nevertheless, when done well, humanistic teaching can open the student's mind to new and more adequate ways of viewing the world, and it can even contribute to such things as democracy, civic engagement, and other populist values our society pretends to uphold. In particular, if their spirit is properly imbibed, the humanities can instill a healthy and moral disgust with capitalism, consumerism, arbitrary authority, irrational thinking, war, and all things inhumane. At their heart, art and the humanities are essentially moral, the very jewel of human creativity and ethical awareness.

Even the postmodernist decadent Susan Sontag recognized the value of this Marxianhumanistic perspective late in her life, when she to some extent repudiated the formalist sins of her youth. See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist* (Bradenton, FL: Booklocker, 2014), 432, 433.

COMMUNISM AND HUMAN NATURE (2017)

In a world becoming more atomized and misanthropic by the day, where it seems sometimes that you have only to be a raving degenerate in order to achieve fame and power—witness Donald Trump and Steve Bannon—it is useful to be reminded of the other side of human nature. The institutions of modern capitalism happen to reward depravity, first and foremost in the economic sphere, but since the maturation of mass society generations ago in the cultural sphere as well. One is constantly confronted, therefore, by moral and intellectual filth—the depths of human vulgarity on television and the internet, mad lusts for power and profit in politics and business, collective slavishness to mainstream norms in intellectual institutions, self-deception on a virtually heroic scale among the hordes of servants of power. One feels hemmed in by

forces of delayed social implosion; one feels claustrophobic in a society whose categorical imperatives are but to privatize and marketize, to impersonalize, bureaucratize, and stupidize, all for the sake, ultimately, of accumulating capital.

Fortunately, there are avenues of momentary escape from the decadence. One such avenue is to follow a particular train of thought that David Graeber pursues in his bestselling *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011). It provides a conceptual antidote to the knowledge that Trumps and Bannons exist.

Namely, Graeber reminds us that fundamental to human nature, more fundamental than the debaucheries thrown up by late capitalism, is the tendency he dubs *communism*. On a deep level, we are all (or nearly all), to some degree, communists. For if communism means "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need," as Marx defined it, then it simply means sharing, helping, and cooperating—giving to others in need what you're able to give them, even if it is only advice, assistance at some task, sympathy or emotional support, or some money to tide them over. Friends, coworkers, relatives, lovers, even total strangers constantly act in this way. In this sense, Graeber says, "communism is the foundation of all human sociability"; it can be considered "the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace."

From this perspective, incidentally, the early Marx's apotheosis of communism in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* acquires a somewhat different meaning. To quote his grandiose idealistic formulation: "This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between

David Graeber, "On the Moral Grounds of Economic Relations: A Maussian Approach," Journal of Classical Sociology 14, no. 1 (2014): 65–77. See also David Graeber, Debt: The First 5000 Years (New York: Melville House, 2011), 94–102.

freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species." If one understands "communism" in Graeber's sense, as, in effect, a fundamental tendency of human nature—and a "principle immanent in everyday life," to quote Graeber—these exalted theses are at least suggestive. For instance, humans' psychological communism does tend to resolve conflicts between man and nature and between man and man, for it springs from the reservoir of *sympathy* that Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith understood to be shared by all non-pathological humans.

The communist morality, in fact, is nothing but a corollary of the Golden Rule, that you should treat people as you'd like to be treated, with respect and compassion. Morally speaking, communism is common sense. Indeed, polls show that, despite what we're taught to think about the political proclivities of Americans, large numbers agree with this "radical" statement. In 1987, for example, when Reaganism was ascendant, a national poll found that 45 percent of Americans considered Marx's famous slogan quoted in the third paragraph of this article above (from his *Critique of the Gotha Program*) to be so obvious that they thought it was enshrined in the U.S. Constitution! This is a point one might make in debates with political "conservatives" (i.e., reactionaries).

It would be amusing, too, to point out to some Breitbart writer or his legions of online followers that, in spite of himself, he is manifesting a communist morality every time he helps someone, every time he shares or cooperates; he is acting contrary to the capitalist imperative to "gain wealth, forgetting all but self." Or to point out to a conservative Christian that "Christian love" is essentially communistic, and that Jesus hated the wealthy. (See, e.g., Luke 6:24-25: "But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn

⁸ Jonah Goldberg, "The Will of the Uninformed," Los Angeles Times, April 24, 2007.

⁹ Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840–1860* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964 [1924]), 25.

and weep.")¹⁰ A communist *society* would just be a society in which the "baseline communism" of everyday life (and of original Christianity) was the guiding rule, the main principle of social organization.

As for our own society, the only reason it is able to function at all is that it's held together by this dense anti-capitalist fabric, into which the more superficial patterns of commercialism, the profit motive, and greed are woven. Capitalism is parasitic on everyday communism: everything would collapse if the latter even momentarily vanished. One might, therefore, reverse the typical judgment of apologists for the status quo: not only is capitalism not a straightforward expression of human nature (supposedly because we're all predominantly greedy, as an Ayn Rand or a Milton Friedman might say); it is more like a perversion of human nature, which evidently is drawn to such things as compassion, love, community, respect for others, and free self-expression unimpeded by authoritarian rules in the economic or political sphere.

Such are the thoughts with which I try to comfort myself periodically, when feeling overwhelmed by the systemic misanthropy that daily bombards us all.

For a scholarly investigation of the real Jesus, who was, in effect, a revolutionary, see Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013). See also the New Testament's Epistle of James, Jesus's brother, who shared his attitudes: "Come now, you wealthy ones, weep and howl for the miseries that are about to come upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and the venom within them shall be a witness against you; it shall eat your flesh as though it were fire" (James 5:1–3). "The rich man will pass away like a flower in the field. For no sooner does the sun rise with its scorching heat, which withers the field, than the flower dies and its beauty perishes. So it shall be with the rich man" (James 1:11). Etc.

THE NECESSITY OF A MORAL REVOLUTION (2017)

We're embarking on a long revolutionary era, an era that promises to be more transformative even than the 1930s. No society of overwhelming decadence and moral rot, luxuriantly productive of Stephen Millers and Jared Kushners, is destined to last very long. No society that can throw up as its leader a bewigged slug like Trump has much of a future. As it parasitizes itself to death, new social forms are bound to sprout in abundance (through the energy of activists and organizers).

The core of the protracted revolution, of course, is to create new institutions, ultimately new relations of production. Every revolution is essentially a matter of changing social structures; the goal of transforming ideologies makes sense only as facilitating institutional change. Nevertheless, to spread new ways of thinking, new values, can indeed

serve as an effective midwife of revolution, and thus is a task worth undertaking.

The fundamental moral transition that has to occur (in order, for example, to save humanity from collective suicide) is from a kind of nefarious egoism to a beneficent communism. This is the ideological core of the coming social changes, this shift from individualistic greed to collective solidarity. We have to stop seeing the world through the distorted lens of the private capitalist self, the self whose *raison d'être* is to accumulate private property, private experiences, private resentments, finally private neuroses, and instead see the world as what it is, a vast community stretching through time and space. Such a change of vision might facilitate the necessary institutional changes—which themselves, later, will naturally engender and instill this communistic vision.

The very notion of "private property," of "this is mine, and I alone earned it," has to be recognized as a form of moral idiocy or insanity. Here, I can do no better than to quote the old anarchist Peter Kropotkin. In his classic *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin explained just how *unintelligent* is the idea of entitlement to a private piece of property (as though "no one else deserves it"):

Take a civilized country. The forests which once covered it have been cleared, the marshes drained, the climate improved. It has been made habitable. The soil, which bore formerly only a coarse vegetation, is covered today with rich harvests... The rivers have been made navigable; the coasts, carefully surveyed, are easy of access; artificial harbors, laboriously dug out and protected against the fury of the sea, afford shelter to the ships...

Millions of human beings have labored to create this civilization on which we pride ourselves today. Other millions, scattered through the globe, labor to maintain it. Without them nothing would be left in fifty years but ruins. There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, born of the past and the present. Thousands of inventors, known and unknown, who have died in poverty, have cooperated in the invention of each of these machines which embody the genius of man. Thousands of writers, of poets, of scholars, have labored to increase knowledge, to dissipate error, and to create that atmosphere of scientific thought without which the marvels of our century could never have appeared. And these thousands of philosophers, of scholars, of inventors...have been upheld and nourished through life, both physically and mentally, by legions of workers and craftsmen of all sorts...

By what right then can anyone whatever appropriate the least morsel of this immense whole and say – This is mine, not yours?¹¹

As he goes on to argue, the wage system itself, which is conceptually and institutionally a close relative of private property, is morally absurd. And not only because it is repugnant for people to be forced to rent themselves to others in order to survive. Or because wage-earners necessarily can't receive the full equivalent of the value they have produced (for then the capitalist couldn't make any profit). Perhaps equally ridiculous is the idea that it's possible to "measure" labor at all, to quantitatively compare workers' contributions, when there are so many qualitative differences between the work that each person does. How can one say whose work is more valuable than another's? Why should a plumber's work be considered less valuable than an engineer's? Why

¹¹ Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, ed. Marshall Shatz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13–16. More concisely, "the means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men have need of them…and since it is not possible to evaluate everyone's part in the production of the world's wealth."

an investment banker's more valuable than a sanitation worker's? (If anything, the opposite makes more sense.)

The only principle that makes logical and moral sense is "to put the *needs* above the *works*, and first of all to recognize *the right to live*, and later on *the right to well-being* for all those who take their share in production." Society has to be rid, once and for all, of the obsessive "who deserves what?" mentality, the apportioning mentality, the "mine vs. yours" pathology.

"If middle-class society is decaying," Kropotkin writes—thereby, incidentally, proving the timelessness of his thoughts—"if we have got into a blind alley from which we cannot emerge without attacking past institutions with torch and hatchet, it is precisely because we have given too much to counting. It is because we have let ourselves be influenced into *giving* only to *receive*. It is because we have aimed at turning society into a commercial company based on *debit* and *credit*."¹²

Actually, even contemporary capitalist society, whose utopia is to make everyone an enemy of everyone else (that's what thoroughgoing privatization—near-abolition of the public sector—would mean), could not function without a substratum of implicit communism. Everything would instantly break down if people stopped giving what they could to those in need, whether money, time, free labor, gifts, advice, ideas, or encouragement. The general systematization of private property is a perversion.

Kropotkin's arguments suffice to answer the misanthropic refrain of conservatives that "it's wrong to give something to people who have done nothing to earn it." But other answers are possible. One might point out that people born into the middle or upper class have done nothing to "earn" their privileged position. The wealthy haven't earned the inheritance they receive from their parents. White Americans didn't earn their skin color or the fact that they weren't born in, say, a Haitian slum. People who benefit from charisma or physical beauty or intelligence did

¹² Ibid., 154, 155.

nothing to earn that; they were born with it. They deserve no credit for it. Somebody who happens to meet the right person at the right time and is launched on a successful career is the beneficiary of luck—as, in short, every "successful" person is, in innumerable ways.

Nor does any of this begin to address all the ways that the wealthy or corporations or Silicon Valley entrepreneurs benefit from state policy designed to give them what they want and to strip the poor of the right to live. Through the agency of the state (e.g., its corporate welfare programs, defense budget, patent and copyright protections, and even interest payments on bonds), the population subsidizes the power and wealth of people whose ideology is to shame those who benefit from government largesse. According to their own ideology, then, these "libertarians" in the business class ought to have their property confiscated, since, strictly speaking, they have "earned" little of it.

In fact, to the degree that our economy has become mainly a rentier economy, owned by parasites on the productive labor of others, it is sheer farce to talk about property-owners' *right* to their wealth—which is to say *their right to exclude others from ownership/use*. For where would this right come from, if there isn't even a *pretense* of their having earned all they own? How rich would Bill Gates be without the "rent" he receives from ridiculously stringent copyright protection for Windows and other Microsoft products? He is merely the lucky beneficiary of government policies that serve to hinder the diffusion of knowledge and wealth.

All this private property-exalting thinking, therefore, has to be cast onto the dung-heap of history. Rather than Reverence for Property, we ought to strive for something like the Reverence for Life that Albert Schweitzer famously wrote about and embodied. That is, we ought to explicitly embrace the moral communism which we're already implicitly committed whenever we act as though guided by the Golden Rule,

¹³ Dean Baker, "How Rich Would Bill Gates Be Without His Copyright on Windows?," *Truthout*, July 10, 2017.

which is to say whenever we act morally at all. To be moral is, in essence, to act like a communist (i.e., *commune*-ist, *communalist*).

"Let us go then, you and I" (to quote T. S. Eliot), and bring forth the moral revolution.

CAPITALISM, SOCIALISM, AND EXISTENTIAL DESPAIR (2020)

Decades ago, Edward Said remarked that contemporary life is characterized by a "generalized condition of homelessness." Decades earlier, Heidegger had written that "Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world." Around the same time, fascists were invoking the themes of blood and soil, nation, race, community, as intoxicating antidotes to the mass anonymity and depersonalization of modern life. Thirty years later, the New Left, in its Port Huron Statement, lamented the corruption and degradation of such values as love, freedom, creativity, and community:

Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today. These dominant tendencies cannot be overcome by better personnel management, nor by improved gadgets, but only when a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man...

Over a hundred years earlier, Karl Marx had already understood it was capitalism that was responsible for all this collective anguish. "All fixed, fast-frozen relations...are swept away," he wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, "all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned..." Home, community, the family, one's very relation to oneself—all are mediated by money, the commodity function, "reification," exploitation of one form or another.

And now here we are in 2020, when the alienation and atomization have reached such a state that it seems as if the world is in danger of ending. The phenomenology, the "structure of feeling," of living in this society is that everything is transient and "up in the air," human survival itself is in question, a hectored, bureaucratized anonymity chases us from morning till night, nothing really matters, no one gets their just deserts. Young people are refraining from having children. There is certainly no collective sense of *belonging*—that's long gone. We're *les étrangers*, passively consuming distractions as we wait for society to fall apart.

Meanwhile, we read of little else but agonized suffering, from children in cages to rainforests burning, from opioid epidemics to rampaging neofascists.

As always, it's socialism or barbarism

The case for socialism is usually made, rightly, from the perspective of its justice. It would be just to have economic democracy, for one thing because it is intrinsically right that people not be forced to rent themselves to a business owner who exploits them for profit but instead that they collectively control economic activities and distribute rewards as they see fit. Moreover, economic democracy, whether in the form of worker

cooperatives or democratic government control, would make impossible the extreme income inequality that corrodes political democracy and ultimately unravels the social fabric.

But it is also worth broadcasting the message that even from an existentialist point of view, our only hope is socialism. Certain types of conservatives (often religious) like to complain about the demise of the family, the community, non-hedonistic interpersonal ties, and the sense of meaning in our lives, a demise for which they blame such nebulous or imaginary phenomena as secularism, "humanism," "communism," and liberalism. That is, they blame everything except what really matters: capitalism, the reduction of multifaceted life to the monomaniacal pursuit of profit, property, and power. So these conservatives end up in the realm of neofascism, which promises only to complete the destruction of family and community.

The truth is that only socialism, or an economically democratic society in which there is no capitalist class, could possibly usher in a world in which the existentialist howl of Camus and Sartre didn't have universal resonance. Mass loneliness, "homelessness," and the gnawing sense of meaninglessness are not timeless conditions; they are predictable expressions of a commoditized, privatized, bureaucratized civilization. Do away with the agent of enforced commoditization, privatization, and bureaucratization—i.e., the capitalist class, which has reshaped the world in its own interests—and you'll do away with the despair that arises from these things.

Optimism of the will

It's true that the current suicide epidemic in the U.S. and the mental illness epidemic around the world have more specific causes than simply "capitalism." They have to do with high unemployment, deindustrialization, underfunded hospitals and community outreach programs, job-related stress, social isolation, etc. In other words, they have to do with

the particularly vicious and virulent forms that capitalism takes in the neoliberal period. But long before this period, widespread disaffection and mental illness characterized capitalist society.

And then, of course, there is the "material foundation" of the civilization that has sprouted such globalized despair. How much *more* unhappy would we privileged people be if we didn't live in our little spiritual cubicles walled by Netflix and Amazon, YouTube and Facebook, shopping and video games, but instead could see with a God's-eye view the inconceivable physical suffering and oppression, the *literal* homelessness, of billions! As the historian Mike Davis wrote years ago, it's becoming a planet of slums. The vast dimensions of the exploitation of humanity—for those who are "lucky" enough to be exploited, as opposed to simply being made economically redundant and cast aside to subsist on whatever leavings or charity or extra-legal opportunities they can find—are unfathomable. A social order in which even the richest nation in world history leaves 40 percent of its adult citizens without the means to afford a \$400 emergency expense cannot justify its existence, and is begging to be torn down and rebuilt.¹⁴

Now, in light of global warming and ecological destruction, it is possible that humanity won't last much longer anyway, in which case capitalism will never be overcome and our collective anguish is perfectly appropriate. But nothing is certain at this point. Except that we have a moral imperative to do all we can to fight for socialism. "By any means necessary." It is what justice demands, and it offers the only hope that even we privileged people—not to mention the less privileged majority—can know what it is to truly have a home.

See Will Daniel, "Turbulence Ahead': Nearly 4 in 10 Americans lack enough money to cover a \$400 emergency expense, Fed survey shows," *Fortune*, May 23, 2023.

THOUGHTS ON OVERCOMING DESPAIR (2018)

As a leftist, I'm used to despair. How many hours have I, like so many others with an ounce of humanity in them, sat alone in my room miserably reading about global warming, horror-struck at the scorching hellscape we're leaving our descendants? How many times have I sat frozen in rage as I thought of the impunity of the "masters of war" sheltered behind piles of money, protected from the just comeuppance due them for their genocidal war-games—for it's all a bureaucratic game for them, a very serious game involving clever political maneuvers geared to the sole objective of conquering even greater power and wealth. On the one hand are the Henry Kissingers and Barack Obamas making the cocktail-party rounds, being fêted by a fetid power-worshiping culture of amoral sycophants and groupthinking herd-people, the social climbers

never disturbed by a twinge of conscience despite the most unspeakable of crimes. ¹⁵ On the other hand are their victims: the hundreds of thousands of young people, mercenary instruments of the powerful, drawing their last agonized breath in muddy blood-puddles on the battlefield; the children clinging to their mother's mutilated corpse, looking around the street for her arms blown off her body when the bomb exploded; the father who comes home to find that his house and his family no longer exist. How can one not *grieve—forever*—from all this, and from the absurdity and meaninglessness of such a tragic, farcical world?

It's so easy to see no hope whatsoever. Or to recoil misanthropically into one's cocoon away from the stupidity and evil of late capitalism. It would seem that almost everywhere, the signs portend doom. There is no need to interpret them all, yet again. Others have done so with great eloquence, and one has but to read the daily news or contemplate mass obsessions with celebrities and the latest video games to come in danger of losing all vestiges of faith in humanity.

But then, after I turn away from the overwhelming bleakness, a contrary impulse enters my mind and I remember Goethe and Nietzsche: life-affirmation, despite everything, is a more profound truth than pessimism and despair. The latter are exactly what the bureaucrats-in-chief, the rulers of the world, want you to feel, so that you'll do nothing and let them go on getting richer. Few states of mind are less revolutionary than the collapse of the will, than apathy or absolute hopelessness. It is more challenging, more productive, and, in a sense, more *beautiful*, even moral, to affirm and not only to negate.

So, I find it important to take breaks from the dreary reading and remind myself of simple joys and hope. It's essential to periodically rejuvenate the will, an imperative I personally can fulfill only by purging my mind of everything remotely institutional and authoritarian. For instance, it is difficult for me to listen to, say, traditional Irish music while

See, for example, Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Twelve, 2002).

thinking of peasants dancing outside in the spring air, shouting, cheering, and clapping, without at the same time feeling gratitude for being alive. Just imagining the scene, this bucolic antithesis of bureaucracy and power, is enough to melt away the despair. Or I might listen to Beethoven, the greatest of all life-affirmers, whether in one of his exuberant moods or in a ravishingly lyrical one (say, the second movement of his fifth piano concerto). Good classical music is perhaps the most left-wing of all music, in its ennobling sublimity, its emotional accessibility, its democratic appeal to everyone from the age of 1 to 101, its rationalistic spirit, its being the very opposite of everything commercial, artificial, and money-produced. Nothing is less stained than Mozart.

This is the spirit that ought to, and tends to, animate the left, this freedom-loving anarchistic spirit of sheer creative individuality. Which goes along with the creative and democratic *collective*, since in a truly human society "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." We should leave everything that vitiates hope and vitality to the right-wing, since the right-wing is defined, in effect, by its commitment to the anti-human: hierarchy, defense of the powerful, capital accumulation, ecological destruction, hatred of the Other, bigoted nationalism, and the like. Apathy and hopelessness are appropriate right-wing emotions, because they're in the interests of the powerful. Bureaucracy and institutional thinking are right-wing phenomena (notwithstanding the usual reactionary attacks on "government bureaucracy"). Joy and empathy are, in a sense, inherently left-wing, because deeply human and connecting, anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical.

In the task of purging oneself of right-wing traits and maintaining a positive outlook, it is essential also to cultivate open-mindedness. One would expect those on the right to be closed-minded, not only because of the closed-off nature of the "authoritarian personality" but also because, from Joseph de Maistre to William F. Buckley, the essence

On the right's profound love of hierarchy, Social Darwinism, and other such values, see Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

of reactionary ideologies is commitment (explicit or not) to hierarchy and authority. The left-wing valorization of reason, dialogue, democracy, and empathy, however, should entail willingness to consider opposed perspectives on their merits rather than reflexively attacking them. It is unfortunate and ironic, then, that there is so much closed-mindedness on the left, so much sectarianism. Whether among anarchists, Leninists, feminists, left-liberals, or other schools and sub-schools of thought, the hostility to challenging ideas is deplorably common. That Marx and Engels themselves were sectarian is no argument in favor of it. One has but to reflect on how much damage sectarianism inflicted on the New Left in the 1960s, not to mention the Old Left in the first half of the twentieth century, to realize that it's a pretty stupid way to behave.¹⁷ With greater openness to, and willingness to ally with, other non-reactionary perspectives comes greater political efficacy, a broader sense of solidarity and consequently "empowerment," a less narrow, crabbed, misanthropic individual character, and a more expansive and generous view of humanity and life itself. This is quite apart from the principled nature of such a stance, the fact that it is itself a realization of leftist morality.

All these considerations and pleasures help me avoid a relentlessly dreary attitude, but in the age of Trump a new factor has come into play: genuine hope that a popular backlash against neoliberalism is developing. Finally! After forty-plus years, it's about time. And since neoliberalism is just capitalism on steroids, capitalism itself is becoming a target for increasing numbers of people—to the horror of "moderate Democrats." The once-vital center is disintegrating, as a semi-fascist right and a semi-socialist left rise from its ashes. Such a historical moment certainly presents dangers, but it also presents opportunities not available during quiescent or "centrist" periods. In fact, history teaches us that progress can happen most rapidly in moments of crisis, when people are open to

¹⁷ Notoriously, the unwillingness of Socialists and Communists to ally with one another in the early 1930s facilitated the rise of fascism.

radicalization. The Great Depression in the U.S. is an obvious example, for it bred popular movements that birthed both the welfare state and mass industrial unionism.¹⁸ The inevitable next economic collapse will have a similarly galvanizing effect on social movements, strengthening and radicalizing the movements that are currently in their infancy.

We can't know how the struggles will play out; we can only wage them, and analyze the historical tendencies that bear fruit in them. In the meantime, we have to ward off hopelessness—by remembering that bleak times are nothing new, that progress has been made even in darker times than the present, that life is full of pleasures we too easily take for granted, and that even non-leftists or not-yet-leftists can be appealed to on the basis of their self-interest and moral values. It's a tremendous responsibility we bear—we're responsible for the fate of the species—but it's a tremendously exciting era we're entering.

¹⁸ See, for example, Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago*, 1919–1939 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

THE REVOLUTIONARY BEETHOVEN (2020)

Two hundred and fifty years after Beethoven's birth, we're faced with something of a paradox: his music is known and beloved all over the world, probably more than that of any other composer, even as its real significance is hardly ever remarked on except in critical studies unread by the public. Familiarity, it seems, has bred, not contempt but ignorance. We hear the famous melodies for the thousandth time, whether in movies, commercials, or concerts, melodies from the third, fifth, sixth, ninth or other symphonies, or from piano concertos and sonatas or pieces of chamber music, but the *cutting edge* of this music has been dulled through overuse. That is, we have forgotten, and no longer seem to hear, the intensely *political* nature of Beethoven's music—its subversive, revolutionary, passionately democratic and freedom-exalting nature.

In the year of the great composer's 250th birthday, it would be fitting to recapture the music's essence, retune our ears to pick up its political and philosophical message. This is especially appropriate in our own time of democratic struggles against a corrupt and decaying *ancien régime*, a time of parallels with the Beethovenian era of revolution, hidebound reaction, and soaring hopes to realize "the rights of man." Beethoven belongs, heart and soul, to the political left. Centuries after his death, his music, especially if properly understood, still retains the power to transform, transfigure, and revivify, no matter how many political defeats its partisans and spiritual comrades suffer.

We might start with the most famous of Beethovenian motifs, the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony (1808). We've all heard the legend that they represent "fate knocking at the door." The source of this idea is Anton Schindler, Beethoven's notoriously unreliable secretary. Sir John Eliot Gardiner, world-renowned conductor, has a different interpretation: he detects the influence of Cherubini's revolutionary *Hymne du Panthéon* of 1794 in the famous notes. 19 "We swear, sword in hand, to die for the Republic and for the rights of man," the chorus sings, to the rhythm of *da-da-da-duuum*. Beethoven was a great admirer of Cherubini, not to mention a devoted republican, so Gardiner's theory is hardly far-fetched. In the stultifyingly conservative and repressive Vienna of 1808, Beethoven issued a clarion call to revolution in the very opening notes of one of his most revolutionary, Napoleonic symphonies. No wonder conservatives detested his music!

Some biographical details are in order. Beethoven was a child of the Enlightenment and remained so his whole life. Bonn in the late eighteenth century was steeped in the most progressive thought of the age: Kant, the philosopher of freedom, was a lively subject of discussion at the university, as was his follower Schiller, the poet of freedom, impassioned enemy of tyrants everywhere. The young Beethoven was heavily influenced by Eulogius Schneider, whose lectures he attended:

John Eliot Gardiner, "Beethoven's Symphony No. 5," *Gramophone*, October 13, 2014.

one of the most important of German Jacobins, Schneider was so radical that in 1791 he was kicked out of the liberal university, whereupon he joined the Jacobin Club in Strasbourg. (There, he was appointed public prosecutor for the Revolutionary Tribunal, enthusiastically sending aristocrats to the guillotine—until he lost his own head a couple years later.) Schneider's republicanism stayed with Beethoven, but it was Schiller whom Beethoven worshiped.

Schiller's poem "An die Freude," of course, impressed Beethoven immensely, given that he planned early on to set it to music and finally did so in the Ninth Symphony. But he was just as enamored of Schiller's idealistic, heroic plays, such as The Robbers, William Tell, and Don Carlos. In marginal notes on the latter play, he jotted down his own thoughts as a young man: "To do good whenever one can, to love liberty above all else, never to deny the truth, even though it be before the throne." Decades later, we find him exclaiming in a letter, "Freedom!!!! What more does one want???" In a similar vein, he once wrote to a friend, "From my earliest childhood, my zeal to serve our poor suffering humanity in any way whatsoever by means of my art has made no compromise with any lower motive. I am thoroughly delighted," he continued, "to have found in you a friend of the oppressed." The historian Hugo Leichtentritt concludes, "Beethoven was a passionate democrat, even in his youth; he was, in fact, the first German musician who had strong political interests, ideals, and ambitions."

Indeed, his first significant composition was his *Cantata on the Death of Joseph II*, a heartfelt and moving tribute to the enlightened reformer who died in 1790. Beethoven, who always disliked hierarchy, was wholly in sympathy with Joseph's attacks on the power of the Catholic Church and the Austrian aristocracy. His contempt for aristocrats was such that, years later, he was able to write an insulting note to his most generous benefactor, Prince Lichnowsky: "Prince, what you are, you are by circumstance and birth; what I am, I am through myself. There are, and always will be, thousands of princes; but there is only

one Beethoven." Even his fashion sense was democratic. A woman who knew him wrote a reminiscence of his behavior in aristocratic Viennese salons: "I still remember clearly Haydn and Salieri sitting on a sofa... both carefully dressed in the old-fashioned way with wig, shoes, and silk stockings, while Beethoven would come dressed in the informal fashion of the other side of the Rhine, almost badly dressed." Corresponding to this was the fact that he was "without manners in both gesture and demeanor. He was very haughty. I myself saw the mother of Princess Lichnowsky...go down on her knees to him as he lolled on the sofa, begging him to play something. But Beethoven did not."

One reason for Beethoven's decades-long fascination with Napoleon was that the latter was not an aristocrat, that he was the "little corporal" who had conquered Europe by his own efforts. "He admired Napoleon's ascent from such a low beginning," remarked a French officer he befriended in 1809. "It suited his democratic ideas." On the other hand, Napoleon's crowning himself Emperor certainly did not suit Beethoven's ideas, as we know from the anecdote of how he furiously tore up the title page of the Eroica Symphony (1803), which he had originally intended—incredibly, given the political repression in Vienna—to title Buonaparte. "So he is nothing more than an ordinary man!" Beethoven raged. "Now he too will trample underfoot all the rights of man...and become a tyrant!" And yet twenty years later, in the thick of the Restoration, his views had softened: "earlier I couldn't have tolerated him [Napoleon]. Now I think completely differently." However bad Napoleon was, he wasn't the despised Emperor Francis II—or, even worse, Prince Metternich.

The *Eroica* is arguably the most revolutionary of Beethoven's symphonies, which may be why it remained his favorite, at least until the Ninth. John Clubbe, author of *Beethoven: The Relentless Revolutionary* (2019), believes the famous first two chords, which crash like cannon shots, are indeed supposed to represent the cannons fired by Napoleon's armies as they marched across Europe carrying the banner of revolution.

"The chords recall the world of the [French] Revolution: exuberant, over-the-top, colossal. They are wake-up calls to jolt [the] somnolent audiences" in Vienna and elsewhere—for Beethoven loathed the complacent, apolitical, frivolous Viennese of his day, intimidated by repression and censorship into sybaritic silence. The symphony is full of the techniques of disruption that have come to be considered quintessentially Beethovenian, including sudden dynamic contrasts, extreme dissonance, colossal noise, massive dimensions, density of ideas, bursting of forms and conventions, even an extra French horn to conjure the atmosphere of revolution. All of it together serves to communicate the abiding essence of Beethoven's music: struggle, ending in triumph. It is not mere personal struggle, such as his struggle against deafness; it is collective, universal, timeless struggle, a war against limits, so to speak—artistic, creative, moral, political, even spatial and temporal. Gardiner's characterization is apt: Beethoven represents the struggle to bring the divine down to Earth, a struggle he shares with revolutionaries everywhere. (Gardiner contrasts this with Bach and Mozart, the first representing the divine on Earth, the second giving us the music you would hear in heaven.)

Theodor Adorno was surely right when he said, "If we listen to Beethoven and do not hear anything of the revolutionary bourgeoisie—not the echo of its slogans, the need to realize them, the cry for that totality in which reason and freedom are to have their warrant—we understand Beethoven no better than does one who cannot follow the purely musical content of his pieces." The man was so political that, by the end of his life, some of his friends refused to dine with him: either they were bored of his constant politicizing or they feared police spies would overhear him. "You are a revolutionary, a Carbonaro," a friend of his wrote in his conversation book in 1823, referring to an Italian secret society that had played a role in various national uprisings. Well past the point that it had become (to his contemporaries) anachronistic, Beethoven kept the Enlightenment faith.

CHRIS WRIGHT

It is beyond the scope of this short essay to trace Beethoven's hortatory humanism through all its musical permutations, from the bucolic poetry of the Sixth Symphony (he had a nearly pantheistic love of nature) to the "peace that passeth understanding" of the final piano sonata, with the dazzling variety of forms and content in between. We can hardly ignore, however, the one opera he wrote, whether in its initial form (as *Leonore*) or its final form almost ten years later (1814) as *Fidelio* (which he wanted to dedicate, much like Lord Byron, to the Greek freedom fighters in their war against the Ottoman Empire). Here was a chance for the great democrat to express his convictions in words, not only music. And the words, music, and plot of the opera are unambiguous: in them "the Revolution is not depicted but reenacted as in a ritual," to quote Adorno.

Fidelio gives free rein to Beethoven's unalloyed idealism, as the choral movement of the Ninth Symphony would do a decade later. The plot is simple (and ostensibly based on actual events that occurred during the French Revolution). Leonore, disguised as a young man named Fidelio, gets a job at a prison where she suspects her husband Florestan is being held for political reasons. He is, in fact, being slowly starved to death in the dungeon for having denounced the crimes of the prison's governor, Pizarro. The minister Don Fernando will arrive the next day to investigate accusations of cruelty in the prison, so Pizarro resolves to kill Florestan in order to keep his existence and unjust imprisonment a secret. Fidelio and a few others are sent to the dungeon to dig a grave; meanwhile, they set most of the prisoners free, at least temporarily, to gather in the courtyard and see the sun once again. At last the time is come for Pizarro to kill Florestan: he approaches with a dagger, but Fidelio leaps between him and Florestan and reveals herself, to everyone's shock, as Leonore. She threatens Pizarro with a pistol, but at that moment a distant bugle is heard, announcing the arrival of the benevolent minister. Pizarro ends up imprisoned himself, as Leonore

frees Florestan from his chains and is celebrated for her heroism by the crowd of emancipated prisoners.

The symbolism and allegorical meanings of the opera are not hard to discern. Beethoven believed in the courage and heroism of women just as much as men, and was just as affected by its contemplation and depiction. He was, in fact, a lifelong child, as sincere and pure in his values—as well as in his "utterly untamed personality" (quoting Goethe)—as a naïve boy reading Schiller for the first time. Doubtless it is this quality that so moves audiences, that inspires flash mobs with millions of views on YouTube, and that has made his music immortal. The greatest art is always *affirmative* in spirit, and no one is more profoundly affirmative—or more entitled to affirmation, in light of his terrible suffering—than Beethoven.

The spirit of his music is as simple as the spirits of his models (he insisted) Socrates and Jesus: good will triumph over evil; cherish freedom but live with moral seriousness, always challenging authority; love your fellow human beings, not parochially, as in the mode of nationalism, but universally; never compromise your ideals or integrity; above all, *struggle for emancipation*. "Freedom remained the fundamental motif of Beethoven's thought and music," Clubbe writes.

Lest a political conservative misinterpret this last point, I must insist that "freedom" for Beethoven did not mean the freedom to try to start a business, to rent yourself to a corporation (on pain of starving), or to enjoy the wealth you have inherited. These are deeply impoverished "freedoms," however glorified they may be in the rhetoric of modern conservatism. Richer is the republican freedom to participate actively in politics, or the freedom to create and think and speak what you will, where you will. Politics "as the art of creating society, a society that will express a richer and fuller life," was Beethoven's favorite theme, according to his biographer W. J. Turner. Indeed, there is something incongruous about the attendance of the lavishly dressed moneyed elite at public concerts of Beethoven symphonies or concertos, given the music's expression of

the revolutionary, democratic, humanitarian spirit the elite's existence is premised on crushing. But such are the ironies that result when the historical specificity of art is denied or forgotten and all that is left is a vague feeling of aesthetic enjoyment.

Still, even the pure aesthetic enjoyment is significant. The music is exquisitely beautiful in the mode of *invigoration*: no composer in history is more humanistic than Beethoven. As Leonard Bernstein once said,

No composer has ever lived who speaks so directly to so many people, to young and old, educated and ignorant, amateur and professional, sophisticated and naïve. To all these people, of all classes, nationalities, and racial backgrounds, this music speaks a universality of thought, of human brotherhood, freedom, and love.

That even our modern aristocrats and reactionaries can love Beethoven, however perversely, suggests just how universal his music is.

Let us, then, turn again with fresh ears and open minds to "the first great democrat of music," in the words of Ferruccio Busoni. Let us draw inspiration from him in our own struggles to humanize and democratize the world. And let's be sure not to forget, in the cultural wasteland that is twenty-first-century America, the nobler aspects of our civilization's heritage.

Admirers of Richard Wagner's music have been known to call it the "Music of the Future." Let's hope that Beethoven's is the real Music of the Future, and that humanity one day will be free.

CLASSICAL MUSIC VS. MEDIOCRITY (2021)

On one side is the mediocrity of all functionaries. All bureaucrats. Let's take a glance, for instance, at the *intellectual* bureaucrats. Here is a randomly selected passage from a typical academic essay (entitled "The state as social relation: Poulantzas on materiality and political strategy"):

...In this [essay], I discuss Poulantzas' work through this lens of the materiality of the capitalist state... I argue that by theorising the state as a social relation—more specifically, as a material condensation of a relationship of forces between classes and class fractions—Poulantzas was able to sidestep the theoretical dilemmas that confounded prior Marxist thinking about the state. Furthermore, Poulantzas' account

CHRIS WRIGHT

of political strategy follows from his treatment of the state as a material condensation of political forces. In particular, his conception of the state as a contradictory and uneven terrain that is potentially open to the intervention of the 'popular classes' into a given conjuncture continues to provide a foundation for a distinctly Marxist theory of politics.

The author of this passage is no worse a writer than most academics. But my god, what a load of dreck. This is what the "intellectual bureaucracy" looks like, this dull and sterile academese that specializes in saying something without saying anything. Poor Marx is spinning in his grave at the thought of his revolutionary, world-overturning writings being domesticated, via twisted academic byways over the last hundred years, into this desiccated drivel. What is being said in this passage? "A material condensation of political forces." Okay, yes, the state is a sort of microcosm of conflicts between classes, class fractions, and other groups. Nicos Poulantzas, in the 1970s, was not the first to say this; nor even was Marx, though he said it in biting and striking ways. It's common sense. But that term "material condensation"—what a vivid metaphor! And it has the word "material" in it, so it's revolutionary! What about the last sentence, the thesis of the whole article? The state is "a contradictory and uneven terrain": congratulations on finding a pretentious way to say governments are complex. As for the rest of the sentence, yes, Poulantzas and the author are both right that ordinary people can potentially, in certain circumstances, have some influence on governments. What a profound thesis! If this is the "foundation" of the Marxist theory of politics, well then it's a grand and ambitious theory after all, isn't it?

This kind of stuff is why Noam Chomsky says the social sciences are intellectually trivial. Stating truisms in such an aesthetically offensive way serves no other purpose than to help the author fill out his CV and hopefully get tenure someday.

So, on one side is *this* verbiage, which constitutes perhaps 75 percent of academic output. (Except that most academics are far from being Marxists.) On the other side is...what helps keep me going: Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and scattered composers from the century after that. Careerist obedience on the one hand, life-giving humanism on the other. The contrast could not be starker.

Leftists often have an inordinate fondness for such musical genres as punk, metal, hip hop, and the like. Much of this seems to me to be little more than creative sterility and puerility, scarcely worth any attention except as a temporary cathartic escape (or an intriguing sociological symptom to be studied). It's true these genres have some very good songs, but even those are, creatively and artistically speaking, on a lower level than the great music of the past.²⁰ And that music was as far from "elitist" or "undemocratic" as you can imagine, being little but an elevation and ennobling of *folk* music, to quote the old socialist Oscar Ameringer.²¹ People are free to like whatever they want, but leftists should know that nothing is more anti-capitalist than the music of the eighteenth and (most of) the nineteenth centuries. Pop culture, by contrast, is thoroughly integrated into commercial structures, thoroughly money-driven, business-conscious, and commodified.

However therapeutic and fun, sometimes beautiful, popular music can be, classical music *raises you above yourself*—if you really listen to it, study it, and choose good composers to listen to. Such music can have an uncanny power of washing away all the particularities, the grievances and regrets, of your selfhood so that you commune with the universal. You forget the barrenness of our bureaucratized culture, the obedience

²⁰ See James O. Young, "How Classical Music is Better than Popular Music," *Philosophy*, August 2016, 1–18.

Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1940), 265, 266. He describes proselytizing for socialism among Oklahoma farmers in the 1890s, at big tent meetings where he and his sons also played pieces by Bach, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and others. "Those simple people took to good music like ducks to water. Their minds were not yet corrupted by the Tin Pan Alley trash that later was a music for profit. Besides, 'classical music' is folk music clarified, interpreted and ennobled by the great masters, and these were folk people."

and the rank *pretense*; you have direct contact with the highest thoughts and feelings, miracles of creativity. These are the ultimate antidotes to the nihilism of life in the United States.

The magic of music is worth pondering. Consider Bach's epic Chaconne for solo violin, about which violinist Joshua Bell has this to say: "not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect." Three hundred years ago, a man returned from a trip to find his wife, who had been healthy, dead from some sudden illness. He grieved, and in his grief he wrote the greatest piece for solo violin in history. He sat down with pen and paper, heard imaginary sounds in his head, imposed a structure on them, crafted them so that they would be a perfectly formed artistic whole, and through the miracle of musical notation transmitted them to paper. Other people then read this notation and used it to reproduce, with their instruments, what the man had conceived in his bitter solitude. His silent inner thoughts were externalized and made concrete so that they could be shared with the world. Generation after generation, century after century, musicians and audiences continued to reproduce and contemplate the thoughts of that old, long-dead man from the eighteenth century who was mourning his wife. Through the media of print and musical performance, the ideas of one person were implanted in the minds of millions of others. And a musical community stretching across centuries, a community of listeners and performers, was created whenever the piece was played. People listened and actually wept, from the sheer mysterious power of sounds arranged in a certain way.

In fact, they themselves, in a sense, *re-created* the music simply by hearing it: their brains processed the sounds, organized them as human brains do, structured them harmonically and melodically such that everyone heard the same harmonies and melodies and marveled at them. What one (unconscious) part of their brain was doing, creating the music by listening to it, another part contemplated in awe.

People even translated Bach's thoughts for different instruments. Ferrucio Busoni wrote a brilliant arrangement for piano, and a hundred years later Hélène Grimaud performed both Bach and Busoni's thoughts at a piano recital one can watch on the internet. Across spans of time, people collaborated in a collective artistic project. Viewers of Grimaud's concert heard the piece and in some cases were themselves inspired to play it on their own piano, having been influenced by Bach-Busoni-Grimaud. And so the chain extended, in a continually expanding display of collective intelligence and creativity. All of which was initiated by one man's imagination as he was shut in a room somewhere three centuries ago.

Grimaud's recital is worth watching on YouTube. In the middle, for instance, after a series of variations on grief, anger, and despair (universalized, not personalized), the music shifts to a softer and more consoling register. It is quite moving. It sounds like acceptance, peaceful resignation, expressed in the rich and sonorous voice of some angelic being. And the music builds, as the sufferer is even able to find beauty in his sorrow. It builds and builds, at last reaching even joy and finally ecstasy. Eventually, however, it returns to its earlier register, and at length the piece ends on a note of cosmic darkness.

All this is the very essence of humanity's higher faculties. It is world-spanning, world-creating, world-communicating. We humans *live in each other's minds*. We *create* on the basis of each other's minds, each other's creativity. We interpenetrate, universally, such that a global community can spring from a single person's artistic imagination. What Beethoven wrote two hundred years ago unites billions. His body is long gone, but his mind, in a sense, lives on, in us all, as we live in each other's minds.

So, thank God for music, which can elevate our thoughts in this way and *transport* us out of ourselves. On the basis of music it is almost possible to achieve Nietzsche's goal of *amor fati*, love of fate, love of everything. Sorrow becomes joy. One forgets the mediocre, one sloughs it off effortlessly by being transported to a different realm. That is the

CHRIS WRIGHT

highest function of *good* music, as it is the highest function of all art. (But music is the most profound and transporting of the arts, I find.)

Listen to high art when you're sick of modern living. Quite possibly, it will revitalize you.

IN KITSCH WE TRUST (2015)

In a popular video on YouTube, George Carlin aims his caustic wit at the dread political scourge of *euphemisms*. "I don't like words that hide the truth," he kicks off his rant. "I don't like words that conceal reality. I don't like euphemisms, or euphemistic language."

Our "public discourse" is, and to some extent always has been, polluted by an epidemic of euphemisms. This category overlaps with the category of *political correctness*, but it typically serves right-wing, not left-wing, ends. It also overlaps with kitsch, the category that Milan Kundera brilliantly analyzes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kitsch is "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."

CHRIS WRIGHT

The essence of this definition applies equally to euphemisms. Both kitsch and euphemisms serve to shield us from unpleasant truths, in other words to disguise reality.

Kitsch exists wherever fake prettiness, or pretty fakeness, silences authenticity. It is at social gatherings, cocktail parties, academic conferences; it saturates interactions between salespeople and customers, and inspires the decor of every shop in the mall. It is the impulse that sustains the tourism industry. It is, in a sense, the regulating principle of institutional norms, whether in the intellectual, the political, the cultural, or the business world.

Kitsch is what coheres a consumer capitalist society, with its ubiquitous product-advertisements and self-advertisements (for the self has become but a product to be sold). In fact, power-centers in *any* advanced society will impose a regime of political and ideological kitsch on the population, for power must lie in order to extract some semblance of consent from its subjects.

Kitsch, in short, while pretending to exalt all that is wonderful and pleasant in life, manifests the anti-human. Where social atomization happens, so does kitsch. Where power happens—and bureaucracy, and the state, and "the free market," and atomizing totalitarian tendencies of whatever sort—so does kitsch. And in the realm of political kitsch, the use of euphemisms is indispensable.

George Carlin mentions a few. Consider the evolution of the old, honest World War I concept "shell shock." In World War II shell shock morphed into the more innocuous term "battle fatigue," then during the Korean War it was called operational exhaustion, only to become post-traumatic stress disorder in the Vietnam era, or simply PTSD now. So, from *shell shock* to…an acronym.

This history exemplifies the role of power-structures in the ideological sphere, namely, to squeeze the life out of life—and out of language, and out of anything that can potentially disrupt the smooth functioning of institutional relations. This is as true of academia as of

politics. The imperative is to propagate appealing myths at all times; but if it proves necessary to acknowledge the existence of something negative, at the very least change its name so that it becomes inoffensive and boring. (Ideally, put a positive spin on it as well, so the bad thing magically becomes good.) *Eradicate every vestige of humanity*: that is the imperative.

We can all easily think of examples. Torture is enhanced interrogation; slaughtered children are collateral damage; a coup d'état is regime change; terrorism we carry out is counterterrorism; invasion of another country is self-defense; destroying a country is stabilizing it; imposing reactionary regimes on hapless populations is spreading democracy.

Job-destroyers are job-creators; the right-to-scrounge is called the right-to-work; the destruction of public education is "education reform"; destroying social programs and the welfare state is "austerity"; massive corporate welfare is the free market; workers' mutually destructive competition for jobs and wages is a flexible labor market; renting yourself to a corporation is finding employment; police terrorism is called unnecessary force. The list could go on for pages.

But it isn't only current political realities that are whitewashed. Rather, a country's entire history is effaced, replaced with a mess of kitsch and euphemisms. This may be a truism, and we may know it, but it remains very difficult to extricate ourselves from all the subtle wordplays and techniques of indoctrination that have been used to make us think well of our society and its history.

For instance, Edward Baptist's recently published book *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014) at times may well strike the reader with the force of revelation, while simultaneously embarrassing him for having overlooked the truths it brings to light. Why do we use such bland terms as plantations and slaveholders? Because they're euphemisms—though we don't even know it.

CHRIS WRIGHT

Plantations were simply slave-labor camps, and we should follow Baptist in consistently calling them such. (The word "plantation" is actually appealing, quaint, conjuring images of a lovely countryside ruled benevolently by a paternalistic lord.) "Slaveholders" were *enslavers*, and we should call them such. Slaves were constantly *tortured*; that was part of their daily routine, to force them to work harder and submit to white supremacy. Half the country was a torture machine for slave labor, while the other half financed and profited from it.

The kitsch exists on a broader scale too. As Baptist makes clear, slavery was not some marginal, economically backward thing; it was the very foundation of the modern American economy and the global industrial economy. It was a remarkably efficient and effective way of producing cotton, such that from the perspective of capitalist logic it was probably *irrational* for slavery to be made illegal. Nothing is more modern than slavery and the economically productive dehumanization it entails.

The funny thing about kitsch, though, is that sometimes the truth is buried in it, peeking out ironically, only requiring a bit of excavation. Barack Obama, Marco Rubio and their ilk are right: America is an exceptional country. No other country was founded on, or owes its prosperity to, wholesale genocide of the native population together with centuries of enslavement of human beings.

It's hard to look at one's own country objectively, because one is immersed in a miasma of kitsch and euphemisms. They are absolutely everywhere; they are the air we breathe as citizens, workers, and consumers. But if we can cut through the thick poisonous atmosphere of deceit and indoctrination, we may find that everything is upside down, and appearance is the opposite of reality.

We may find that in our society, as in a stagnant pond, the scum floats to the top. We'll realize, with the historian Albert Prago, that "in an amoral society, the amoral man is best qualified to succeed." Perhaps we'll learn to look with contempt on the leaders and the "successful"—the

institutionally obedient, the non-questioners, and the greedy, the vulgarly ambitious, the rich—and admire the downtrodden for their struggles and their stoic survival.

So, whenever a person in a position of power opens his mouth, we should ask: "What is the reality that is being kitschified here?"

FREE SPEECH, HASSAN NASRALLAH, AND OTHER VICTIMS OF INTERNET CENSORSHIP (2019)

The fact that we live in a world in which the distribution of information is largely under the control of private corporations (and of governments overwhelmingly influenced by corporations) is itself a sufficient indictment of our civilization. Even if, impossibly, no other crimes ever occurred anywhere and systems of power were by and large benevolent, corporate control and distribution of information would justify attempts to reconstruct society on a new foundation. Such control is simply too

contrary to the principles of free expression and free access to information to be tolerated by a people who value democracy, truth, and rational communication. How much worse is it, though, when business control of information is an essential precondition for the non-stop commission of systematic crimes against humanity by these very corporations and governments. If the public knew of everything that's going on, it is unlikely they would tolerate it for long.

As it is, we are living in a planetary practical joke, victims of some malevolent cosmic intelligence with a sick sense of humor: in order to organize political dissent, struggle for social progress, and spread knowledge of corporate and government crimes, we're dependent largely on networks that are run and policed by these criminals themselves. We function at the mercy of their good will. Internet service providers can, whenever they feel like it, deny service to some "dangerous" individual or group; media platforms like Facebook and YouTube can suspend a user as soon as they decide they don't like what he is saying, or if he runs afoul of some algorithm; Google can steer traffic away from particular websites, as it has lately been doing with regard to left-wing sites like the World Socialist Website, AlterNet, Democracy Now, and CounterPunch. And the victims of this censorship have, in effect, no recourse, except to appeal to the public to pressure the censors.

Facebook has censored countless users who didn't deserve it, as when disproportionately targeting activists of color, suspending livestreams of police shootings, temporarily deleting TeleSur's English page, and deleting VenezuelAnalysis's page (until the ensuing public outcry got that decision reversed). Its army of content reviewers is constantly censoring individual posts in accordance with a 27-page set of rules, resulting in the suppression of posts about, for example, Indian atrocities in Kashmir, Geronimo and Zapata as heroes in the "500-year war

against colonialism,"²² and a left-wing counter-rally on the anniversary of the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The political censorship (of both the left and, sometimes, the right) is out of control: this past year, hundreds of political accounts and pages have been deleted on the pretext that they are fake or "inauthentic." Or, as always, "extremist." Not surprisingly, many or most have been quite legitimate, run by real people who were using pseudonyms for the sake of safety, or whose perspectives are designated as unacceptable just because they are contrary to official narratives. After deleting dozens of "inauthentic" accounts and pages last summer, Facebook stated that the culprits had "sought to inflame social and political tensions in the United States, and said their activity was similar—and in some cases connected—to that of Russian accounts during the 2016 election." In other words, users are now forbidden to "inflame tensions" or to act "similarly" to Russian accounts.

At least we're still allowed to share cat memes and baby photos.

But the main victim of this creeping McCarthyism has been, of course, the cause of the Palestinians, and more generally anyone who objects to Israel's generations-long orgy of bloodlust. Whether on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, or other platforms, entities resisting Israel are regularly denied a voice. Hamas's armed wing isn't permitted an account on Twitter, while the Israeli army is. Facebook blocks Palestinian groups so often—including Fatah and leading media outlets in the West Bank—that they have their own hashtag, #FBcensorsPalestine. Given that these media near-monopolies are an essential means of reaching followers and spreading a message, such censorship has a very destructive effect.

Recent outrages concern suppression of the voice of Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah. A year ago YouTube suspended a popular channel that broadcast, and provided translations of, speeches of

Matt Taibbi, "Beware the Slippery Slope of Facebook Censorship," *Rolling Stone*, August 2, 2018.

²³ Dan Tynan, "Facebook accused of censorship after hundreds of US political pages purged," *Guardian*, October 16, 2018.

CHRIS WRIGHT

Hassan Nasrallah, among other "anti-American" leaders (Putin, Assad, etc.). The channel, which had over 400 videos, had 10,000 subscribers and had racked up more than six million views, and was growing in popularity. YouTube's pretext for its suspension was "violation of the rules concerning graphic or violent content." More specifically, three videos of Nasrallah's speeches were deemed offensive: one was entitled "ISIS is Israel's ally and aims [at] Mecca and Medina," the second was entitled "We are about to liberate Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and all of Palestine," and the third was called "The next war will change the face of the region." It would be hard to argue that anything in these speeches was particularly "graphic or violent," for they contain little but sensible political analysis and exhortations to resist a brutally violent neighboring state.

The owner of the channel then created a Facebook page to post similar content, called Resistance News Unfiltered. A year later, just a few weeks ago, it was deleted. With no explanation. It had over 6,000 subscribers and was providing an important service by translating the speeches of a highly perceptive political analyst. Norman Finkelstein recently released a statement on all this censorship of Nasrallah:

It is a scandal that the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah are banned on YouTube. Whatever one thinks of his politics, it cannot be doubted that Nasrallah is among the shrewdest and most serious political observers in the world today. Israeli leaders carefully scrutinize Nasrallah's every word. Why are the rest of us denied this right? One cannot help but wonder whether Nasrallah's speeches are censored because he doesn't fit the stereotype of the degenerate, ignorant, blowhard Arab leader. It appears that Western social media aren't yet ready for an Arab leader of dignified mind and person.

The *New York Times* has reported that "Israeli security agencies monitor Facebook and send the company posts they consider incitement.

Facebook has responded by removing most of them."²⁴ In fact, typically over 90 percent of them.²⁵ Meanwhile, as Glenn Greenwald notes, "Israelis have virtually free rein to post whatever they want about Palestinians," including calls for genocide and the most grotesque celebrations of the torture and murder of Palestinian children.

All this is perfectly predictable, for the economically powerful will always cooperate with the politically powerful to suppress dissent. Companies like Facebook and Google (which owns YouTube) will always be inclined to do the bidding of the U.S. government and its allies. This fact nevertheless constitutes a terrible, proto-fascist danger to free speech that ought to be resisted as energetically as any crime against humanity concealed by such corporatist collaboration.

Only if we flood Google, Facebook, Twitter, and the others with complaints is there a chance for necessary voices like Hassan Nasrallah's to be heard. Our endgame should be to eliminate these corporations themselves and transfer the media infrastructure they own to the public, but on the way to that goal we have to keep poking holes in the corporate blackout to let in some sunlight.

Peter Baker, "Facebook Struggles to Put Out Online Fires in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," New York Times, December 7, 2016.

Glenn Greenwald, "Facebook Says It Is Deleting Accounts at the Direction of the U.S. and Israeli Governments," *The Intercept*, December 30, 2017.

THE VALUE OF NOAM CHOMSKY (2015)

At 86, Noam Chomsky is getting old. He remains indefatigable, keeping up a schedule that would exhaust a man half his age, but, unless he is indeed a demi-god, we can assume the end is nigh. The tragic day cannot be more than a few years away.

This has set me to thinking: why, after all, does it strike me that his death will mark a day of global mourning, at least among the sane and the subaltern? What is it about him that is so magnetic? There are plenty of activists around the world more heroic than he, more selfless, many people who have devoted their lives even more single-mindedly to rescuing humanity from its sinking ship, and who have, perhaps, done more concrete work to end suffering. These countless unknown people deserve as much reverence as Chomsky.

There are, of course, many reasons that Chomsky is such a cynosure. The most obvious is the quality of his mind. All things considered, he has probably the greatest mind of the twentieth century, and one of the greatest in human history. Einstein didn't have anything approaching Chomsky's breadth of knowledge (about virtually everything, it seems) or razor-sharp logical vision or remarkable memory. It is hard to imagine that anyone has ever been a better debater than Chomsky, as one can judge from YouTube videos. And, of course, he founded modern linguistics, has made important contributions to philosophy and cognitive science, and so on.

But I'll let the eulogists celebrate his intellectual powers when the time comes. There are more important topics I'd like to consider here.

Another source of his mystique is his charisma, by now a sort of shy, grandfatherly, warm and self-effacing persona, combined with an absolute self-certainty. But charisma, as such, should not impress us much: it is a sub-rational phenomenon, a form of "dominance" similar to that recognized in other mammalian species, which in itself has little or nothing to do with morality or reason. The most charismatic people can be the most irrational and immoral.

Equally striking is the fact that since the 1960s he has been a nearly ubiquitous presence, more full of energy and stamina than any other intellectual. This is impressive and helps explain the adulation he receives, but it isn't mainly what intrigues me about him, or what I find most useful about him.

His astonishing command of facts and extensive documentation of U.S. crimes—and media complicity—are among his most essential contributions, but they're too obvious to merit comment. His unusual kindness and solicitousness towards "ordinary people"—for instance, his spending many hours every day answering emails—is likewise very admirable.

But in addition to all these considerations are things I find especially noteworthy, which may be worth mentioning here because of the lessons they hold for us. For I think that he, or his public persona, can serve as a sort of moral and intellectual compass, keeping us on the road

less traveled—less traveled because it requires some effort and willful independence. It is useful to have a guide on such a path, and there is no better guide than Chomsky. To speak plainly, he can serve as a symbol of certain intellectual and moral tendencies—much as Marx does, though in a somewhat different way—tendencies that in fact amount to little more than simple humanity and common sense, but that are surprisingly easy to forget in our indoctrinated and power-hungry world.

In short, we could do worse than to take Chomsky as our role model.

*

For one thing, Chomsky is the last great Enlightenment thinker, perhaps the greatest of them. The most consistent, and maybe the most profound (unless that honor belongs to Kant). If this were an academic article I would write about his rationalist philosophy of mind; here I'll confine myself to the more "practical" side of his contributions, which is equally rooted in the Enlightenment.

One doesn't have to indulge in academic verbiage in order to express one of the central impulses of the Enlightenment: its recognition of the value of the individual. This is classical liberalism, as expressed by, say, Kant or Wilhelm von Humboldt (whom Chomsky likes to quote)—this essentially anti-authoritarian appreciation of the dignity and freedom of the individual. This is also, you may notice, morality. Respect and compassion for "the other," the other person, the other sex, the other race, the other nationality: this is the kernel of true liberalism and true morality, as encapsulated in the Golden Rule. Express yourself freely as long as you don't harm others, and express yourself so as to do good to others: liberalism and morality. These are the starting points and

²⁶ On Humboldt, see the essay below entitled "Postliberalism: A Dangerous 'New' Conservatism."

the endpoints of everything Chomsky says with regard to politics and society.

Certain Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century subscribed to this moral liberalism, but, given the time in which they lived, they were periodically susceptible to illiberal sentiments, such as contempt for Africans or women or wage-laborers. Or they tried to justify imperialistic policies. Contrary to what postmodernists might think, this doesn't invalidate the Enlightenment itself; it merely shows that humans are human, products of their society, and sometimes unable to live up to the implicit conceptual content of their philosophies.

Chomsky, however, is perfectly aware of what his liberalism commits him to, and as far as I know he has never deviated from the classical liberal path in his public statements or actions. There are two things that most deserve notice in our dealings with people and our estimation of them: first, to what extent do they recognize—fearlessly, if need be—claims of reason and logic? Second, to what extent do they act—again, with courage—on the basis of empathy and compassion (or respect for others)? These are the basic criteria we should use in judging someone's value as a human being.

Our society, of course, sees things differently, in an illiberal and immoral way, which is precisely why it has to be dismantled and rebuilt. Society judges things in terms of power, authority, wealth, race, popularity, charisma, physical beauty, and other qualities that have either no relation or a negative relation to morality and rationality. Insofar as we, as individuals, periodically succumb to these illiberal tendencies, we must try to root them out of ourselves, even if that goal can never be completely fulfilled. We're only human, after all.

But one thing we do have control over is whether we acknowledge the force of logic and can follow chains of reasoning. If we admit that morality and rationality are, so to speak, no respecters of persons, that rank and wealth and power do not pertain to the inner worth of a person, then we're committed to fighting against society in its current

form—its practices, its institutions, its cultural norms, and its authority figures. They are all apostles of illiberalism, of the coercion and injustice that radiate from what we might call *deadly snobbery*, the snobbery that happily disregards the claims to life and dignity of people without power or wealth or status (whether determined by white skin, physical beauty, wealth, or whatever).

It is the unreasoned respect for power/authority (in a broad sense) that gets you the world we have today. We unthinkingly look down on people who are "different" and respect those whom others respect, because of the human instinct to conform. So, since the amoral institutions that run society are naturally going to exalt amoral people who serve their interests—and since powerful institutions propagate the ideas and norms that influence our own ways of thinking and acting—we end up respecting amoral, irrational people, and behaving in amoral, socially irrational ways.

Thus, our anti-liberal snobbery goes hand-in-hand with our easy conformism, and both are contrary to reason and morality.

This is all implicit in Chomsky's work, and in his behavior he counters it very effectively. He exudes contempt for those with status, especially intellectuals and politicians, and respects and admires the forgotten, the millions of unknown activists, the nameless Colombian peasants who show incredible compassion in the midst of state-organized horrors,²⁷ the "unpeople" everywhere who persevere in the face of savage collective torture.

The point isn't that Chomsky is a nice guy; the point is that we must all be vigilant against the anti-liberal tendencies in ourselves. We may be compelled to obey authoritarian norms in our work lives, but inwardly, and sometimes outwardly, we should rebel.

We should recognize that, other things being equal, the more mainstream success someone has, the less respect he deserves, for success

In a video on YouTube, Chomsky describes visiting miserable, impoverished peasants in southern Colombia who had planted a forest in memory of his recently deceased wife. "It was one of the most moving things I've ever experienced," he said.

only suggests obedience, uncritical acceptance of indoctrination, and the snobbery that notices only status, not morality or rationality (or *human-ity*). In daily life such snobbery and institutional subservience are fairly innocent, if obnoxious and contemptible, but in the aggregate, on a large scale, they are what produce things like capitalist decimation of civil society and the natural environment, the U.S.'s ongoing global holocaust since World War II,²⁸ and the Holocaust itself.

The "innocent" thus merges with the evil, making all of us obedient and snobbish people complicit in the horrors of the modern world.

*

Consider Chomsky's unique intellectual cleanliness. An example is his analysis of anarchism. He points out, following Rudolf Rocker and others, that the true successor to classical liberalism is anarchist socialism. This should be common sense, but since it has been buried in the manure of centuries of capitalist propaganda, few people recognize it.

If liberalism (like morality) means concern for people's freedom and dignity, then it means suspicion of power. It means that power is not self-justifying but should be dismantled—unless it can give a convincing argument to justify itself, which it rarely can. This impulse to dismantle power-structures is the core of anarchism, and also the common sense of elementary morality, which most people implicitly agree with (whether they know it or not).

That is to say, most people are already anarchists, because the essence of anarchism is common sense. They might disagree on whether it is possible to create a large-scale society on the basis of diffused power,

Among countless other studies, see William Blum, Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CLA Interventions Since World War II (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004); Stephen G. Rabe, The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Noam Chomsky, Deterring Democracy (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991).

but, unless they're fascists or moral monsters, they agree with anarchist values, i.e., democratic values.

Chomsky is able to cut through all the nonsense of the dominant intellectual culture and state truths like these without sesquipedalian adornments, without having to indulge in elitist academic convolution. He recognizes, moreover, that we shouldn't worship "big names" like Lenin or Gramsci or Foucault (or Chomsky!) or any of the other more recent names that get thrown around in the media or in leftist subcultures, that to do so is elitist and pretentious—especially since most of what is "theoretically" valuable in the works of these thinkers is little more than an elaboration of common sense.

As for socialism, Chomsky is right that it means simply workers' control, economic democracy, and as such is but a component of "anarchy"—and of democracy. The Soviet Union, as a kind of state-capitalist society that allowed workers few rights, was the precise opposite of socialism (and communism).²⁹ Worker cooperatives, by contrast, exemplify socialism on a small scale.

There are countless other examples of Chomsky's lucid logical vision. He is right, for instance, that the "radical left" is, in a sense, the only truly conservative force in politics, for it actually believes in such traditional values as community, freedom, justice, truth, and reason. It is struggling to *conserve* society against the disintegrating tendencies of capitalism. This is a point that, once made, is obvious—and that leftists should always bring up in debates with self-styled "conservative" opponents.

Radical change is needed in order to realize conservative values. One of those ironic facts with which history is replete.

Or consider these points that Chomsky made about American imperialism in a lecture at Boston University in 2008.³⁰ "Talking about

²⁹ See, e.g., Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the U.S.S.R. (London: Routledge, 2002).

³⁰ It is available on YouTube: "Noam Chomsky Lectures on Modern-Day American Imperialism."

American imperialism is a bit like talking about triangular triangles. The United States is the one country that exists, and ever has, that was *founded* as an empire, explicitly [according to the intentions of the Founding Fathers]... Modern-day American imperialism is just a later phase of a process that has continued from the first moment without a break." When you think about this statement and what it entails, you can start to see American history in a new light.

Intellectuals typically think of American imperialism as starting with the invasion of Cuba in 1898. In reality, the nineteenth-century American expansion into the western part of the continent, which involved genocide of the indigenous population, was a particularly vicious form of imperialism. The invasion of Mexico in the 1840s was another overtly imperialistic act. And so the record continues up to the present, the imperialism taking different forms at different times.

Especially since World War II, the United States has been the scourge of the earth, intervening constantly in any country where democratic hopes threatened to puncture authoritarianism, and actively supporting every dictator imaginable (Chiang Kai-shek, Batista, Diem, Somoza, Duvalier, Trujillo, Iran's Shah, Suharto, Mobutu, Papadopoulos, Pinochet, Mubarak, Marcos, Rios Montt, Saddam Hussein, and a hundred others) as long as he was a friend of U.S. power. Chomsky's work provides all the references you need.

Consider, also, his pithy analyses of what elementary morality requires. While other intellectuals and self-styled philosophers, often mere apologists for Western crimes, wade in the muck of "good intentions" (ours are good, theirs are bad) and subjectivism and idealized thought-experiments, Chomsky states flatly and clearly that, basically, two things are involved in acting morally: applying to yourself the standards you apply to others, and choosing how to act by considering the *predictable consequences* of your actions—*not* by having "good intentions."

With these two rules in mind, we have the tools to judge our own and others' morality. Unfortunately, neither we nor others typically come out smelling like roses if we're honest in our evaluations, because it is difficult to rigorously apply to yourself (or people you identify with) the standards you apply to others. Humans are born to deceive themselves about the moral significance of their actions.

Some of us, however, can at least comfort ourselves that we're not the moral monsters who constitute the elite of powerful politicians, intellectuals, and corporate executives. We aren't directly responsible for invading and destroying countries, or for enacting policies that threaten to obliterate much life on earth, or for driving a large fraction of the world population into desperate poverty and misery.

Chomsky usefully documents how Western leaders are constantly flouting the rule of international and domestic law—their own laws, laws that they themselves have enacted. In fact, no entity more consistently violates laws than a national government, and no one is literally more of a criminal than the leaders of a country. And their friends.

The U.S. government, for instance, barely enforces many of its own labor laws, as codified in the Wagner Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and other statutes. Employers are regularly allowed to act with virtual impunity against their employees, committing wage theft, punishing or firing workers who try to unionize, violating safety regulations, engaging in sexual harassment, and so forth. In a society governed by the rule of law, a large proportion of the capitalist class and its managerial lieutenants would be behind bars.

In foreign policy, the U.S. government is not averse to violating its own Leahy Law, by giving military assistance to countries with no regard for human rights. (Israel comes to mind.) Chomsky remarks that, while it may be too much to expect the U.S. government to abide by international law, it should at least be *feasible* that it abide by *its own* laws. But, in fact, that isn't feasible.

Anyway, the point is that what a person with intellectual and moral integrity should do is to follow Chomsky's example: adumbrate

CHRIS WRIGHT

a consistent set of moral and intellectual principles, and then rigorously apply them, as objectively as possible, to oneself and to others. Don't fall victim to the "self-love" fallacy, the tendency to make excuses for your own behavior and thereby contradict your principles and sacrifice your integrity. Evaluate yourself, and your country, as you imagine an honest outsider would.

That is, "step outside yourself" and try to nullify your subjective biases.

*

Subjectivism and idealism are things I find particularly noxious, and things that Chomsky has counteracted in his work more effectively than anyone. He really is, at bottom, a Marxist, an anarchist Marxist (which is a perfectly coherent concept). He disagrees, rightly, with the orthodox Marxist theory of revolution (involving a "dictatorship of the proletariat" planning out social reconstruction in advance), but his analyses are grounded in the ideas of class struggle, the imperialistic nature of capitalist power, a reasonable sort of economic determinism, and Marxian values of workers' dignity and creativity, the evils of the capitalist state, and the evils of moneyed elites and the market economy.

He is probably the most consistent materialist alive, in his absolute rejection of the idealistic, subjectivist decadence that is postmodernism and his complete lack of interest in the discursive games that intellectuals like to play. He seems to have contempt for such self-preening verbiage machines as Slavoj Žižek, Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard, and their thousands of (sometimes unwitting) acolytes scattered across the humanities and even the political left.

But postmodernists, fixated on language, "discourse," "society's imaginary," idealistic constructions of sexuality or gender or ethnicity, are only extreme manifestations of the more general idealism of the intellectual culture. Intellectuals are naturally inclined to think that words

and ideas (rather than interests and structures of material power) are of exceptional importance, because they themselves traffic in words and ideas, and they want to think that they themselves are important. So they proclaim that discourses are what create and structure the world, ideologies are of primary importance to social dynamics, etc. It's a type of self-glorification.

An added benefit of such thinking is that it has a conservative influence, for it focuses people's attention on ideas and subjective identities rather than institutional structures and class relations. It encourages people to think that what is important is to change ideas, rather than to change economic and political power relations.

Moreover, idealism, at least in its postmodernist forms, is usefully solipsistic, individualistic, disengaging-from-social-reality. Everything is just a construct, a narrative, a perspective, a "text"; there is no such thing as objective social class or objective realities of power or objective truth in general. All depends on one's perspective or frame of reference. Such positions are calculated to turn one in on oneself, away from the outside world, and to undermine popular struggles, in part because of the relativism they imply. If there is no truth, it would seem that all points of view are equally legitimate, that the idea of "justice" is irrelevant or perhaps incoherent and society is nothing but an amoral clash of interests (or of discourses or whatever concept one likes) none of which are more just than any other. This, indeed, is the Foucauldian position.³¹

No surprise, then, that corporate capitalism has been perfectly happy with idealism and postmodernism, and powerful institutions in the media and academia have propagated them.³² Chomsky is right to have refused even to dip a toe into the bog of subjectivism, idealism, and relativism.

See, for example, Foucault's famous debate with Chomsky in 1971. "One makes war [e.g., class war] to win," Foucault said, "not because it is just."

³² For instance, whenever journalists or scholars take at face value political rhetoric about America's role in the world being to spread freedom and democracy, this is a type of naïve idealism, in that it assumes such rhetoric provides the real reasons for U.S. policy. The truth is that *interests of class and state power* are the main determinants of policy.

CHRIS WRIGHT

Social "theory" in general he is suspicious of. He doesn't like its elitist overtones, its Ivory Tower nature, and he thinks that, by and large, it isn't necessary in the first place. It doesn't require overly subtle jargonistic analysis to understand, in broad outline, how society works. One has only to recognize, for example, that certain kinds of institutions will always act so as to maintain and increase their power, and the institutions with the most resources at their command (in particular the corporate sector of the economy) will have the most political and ideological power, and class—as defined by one's location in relations of production—is the central variable in determining what sorts of resources one has access to and what kinds of ideas one will accept and what one's general lifepath will likely be, and the inner nature of economic institutions is class struggle (antagonistic interests), etc.

That is to say, all one needs is a basic Marxian materialism, because materialism is common sense. Access to resources is the key, the key to survival and to social influence and to education and to political power and to a high quality of life; and access to resources is typically determined, primarily, by class position.

As for bringing about social change, common sense, again, tells us what's necessary: education and organization. Join together with people whose interests lie in fighting progressively against the status quo and empowering the public; and listen to them, listen to their experiences, and offer your own experiences and ideas, and educate one another, and organize events to draw in more people, and gradually build up a movement. These are mere truisms of activism. We don't need fancy "theory" to understand society or change it.

Now, it is possible that Chomsky goes too far in his "anti-theoretical" stance, and that he underestimates the practical and scholarly value of, say, Marxian political economy as written by Paul Sweezy, Robert Brenner, David Harvey, John Bellamy Foster, and many others. I think that such scholarship can be useful and enlightening. (Chomsky would

likely agree, in fact.) But only because it's materialistic, and any correct understanding of society has to be based on a materialist foundation.

Fortunately, as class polarization increases and the global economy descends into stagnation and crisis, we can expect idealism to wane and materialism to rise. This is what happened in the 1930s, and structurally we are in a situation eerily similar to what precipitated the Great Depression.³³

In the coming years, as social crisis becomes the norm and the ruling class insistently professes its good intentions at every opportunity, we will do well to remember one of the lessons of Marxian and Chomskian materialism: the self-interpretations of institutional actors mean exactly nothing. The true significance of someone's acts is not given by what he thinks their significance is, because humans are born to deceive themselves (on the basis of their self-regard). Rather, it is given by analysis of his institutional functions.

People in positions of authority act as their institutions pressure them to; and if, by some miracle, they act with excessive independence, either they'll be taught a lesson and cut down to size or they'll be discarded by some means or other. So it is really the *institutions* that are the actors; the people with power are merely tools. (At high levels, people do have some freedom...but they always use this freedom only to increase their power, which is to say the power of their institution. So, again, it comes down to the objective nature of the institutional role they play.)

Thus, it is institutional analysis—grounded in materialist ideas—that matters most, not analysis of political rhetoric or self-interpretations or ideologies or "good intentions." It's fine for scholars to study such

As I've written elsewhere, "The most obvious parallel is the extreme income and wealth inequality of the two eras... This parallel is rooted, to some extent, in the comparable weakness of organized labor in the 1920s and today. Similar stock market bubbles, too, have helped cause the wealth inequality of the two analogous eras. The income of the working class has, in both cases, stagnated as expansions of consumer credit have been necessary to keep the economy growing..." Chris Wright, *Popular Radicalism and the Unemployed in Chicago during the Great Depression* (New York: Anthem Press, 2022), 1.

things, but they should have a clear understanding of their "superstructural" and deceptive nature.

Incidentally, it is worth noting again that, in a totally different sense of the word, Chomsky is very idealistic. He has the idealism that is a component in classical liberalism and morality itself: the belief in human creativity, dignity, freedom, and the capacity for generosity and love. He is convinced, with good reason—and in the tradition of Rousseau—that these traits are innate in people...just as the capacities for pathological greed, violence, power-hunger, and slavish obedience are innate. The human mind is incredibly rich, with all kinds of potentialities, both for the insatiable greed of capitalism and for the loving generosity that is normal in intimate relationships.

What matters, as Rousseau thought and common sense confirms, is the nature of the social structures in which the individual is embedded. Pathological structures produce pathological imperatives; humane and democratic structures produce more humane imperatives.

Implicit in all this, however, is recognition of the essential "equality" of human beings, even in the midst of extreme social hierarchy. We are all to some extent moldable and to some extent genetically determined; we all have various strengths and weaknesses; we all can be manipulated to act in terrible ways depending on the circumstances; and in the lives of all of us, *luck* plays an enormous role.

Any form of elitism or status-consciousness is therefore based on ignorance and unreason. What should determine how we "rank" people, in general, are only their commitments to objective reason and to morality and human welfare, because such commitments are largely within the domain of free will. We have control over them: it is up to us whether we want to be honest, compassionate, and rational.

*

In bringing this over-long encomium to a close, I would simply note that my own encounter with Chomsky was, I'm sure, similar to that of millions of other young people. When I discovered him, I found him useful as a validation of my ideas about politics and the intellectual community. He was a sort of distant mentor, who sharpened my thinking and encouraged me. In particular, his unparalleled precision of thought helped guide me.

For example, I was struck by his statement that *corporations are systems of private totalitarianism*: orders come down from above, a common ideology is enforced on all the workers, disobedience can be punished severely, structurally speaking there isn't a particle of democracy. I found this to be an obvious truth once I had heard it—and on some obscure level I had always had a similar intuition about the nature of the corporation—but his articulation of the insight fostered clarity of thought.

And that may be his greatest contribution: his absolute clarity of thought, his ability to parse complex phenomena into simple, pithy statements that capture their essence. He bypasses all the ideological accretions and intellectual chicanery, and states the truth—backed up by facts—in unpretentious, anti-"snobbish" language.

In short, Chomsky is *sui generis*. It will be a sad day for the left, and for humanity, when he departs...but at least his writings and talks will remain, to help guide us toward a better world.

In the meantime, "don't mourn, organize!"

PART TWO HISTORY

THE FOUNDING FATHERS: "NEOLIBERALS" AVANT LE MOT (2017)

"Who is to blame for the election of Donald Trump?" It's a question that has been asked more than a few times since November. We're all familiar with the answers that have been given: James Comey, the electoral college, the DNC's leaked or hacked emails, the characteristically shameful performance of the mass media in its focus on personalities rather than substance, the stunning incompetence of Hillary Clinton's campaign, the elitist insularity and corruption of the Democratic Party, etc. Longer-term causes include the decline of organized labor, which has always served as a bulwark against fascism or semi-fascism; deindustrialization, which has contributed to the economic insecurity that apparently motivated many of Trump's supporters; and the almost total capture of the Democratic Party by the corporate sector of the economy.

CHRIS WRIGHT

But one group of people has tended to escape blame, even despite widespread disgust with the electoral college: the U.S.'s "Founding Fathers." While they are distant in time from the political obscenity that was Trump's election, they are far from innocent.

This fact is clear from two books that every American should read, published in 2008 and 2009 respectively: Woody Holton's *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* and Terry Bouton's *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution*. These books reveal the extent to which nearly all the Founders loathed and feared democracy, at least between the 1780s and the first decade of the nineteenth century. (Their attitudes were more complex in the 1770s, and in their later years such (former) anti-democrats as James Madison and John Adams were repulsed by the excesses of the capitalist aristocracy.) The popular attitude of reverence for the Founders is a product of deep misunderstanding and ignorance, for it is the antidemocratic structure of the political system the Founders created that has helped make possible our new Gilded Age, and thus the political success of someone like Donald Trump.

In fact, I think it is important to spread the idea that, far from being "liberators," the Founders were, in essence, the first in America's long line of usurpers and oppressors. This idea is a simplification, but it contains a large kernel of truth. The hackneyed narrative that history textbooks still teach about the greatness and nobility of Washington, Madison, Adams, Hamilton, and the others is nothing but nationalist propaganda that serves to obscure the relative *malignity* of these people's historical impact and legacy. One might even say that their most potent legacy was the precise opposite of what we have been trained to think (and what they thought): rather than having been great figures of anti-authoritarian revolution, heroic fighters against tyranny, in effect they did much to clear the ground for the most rapacious tyranny in history, the national and eventually global tyranny of capital.

The 1780s: the Founders vs. the People

These judgments might seem excessively harsh, but consider the facts. Across the American colonies, the revolutionary 1770s were a time of relative democracy. In the struggle against the British, the gentry and the lower classes to some extent united under the banner of white male popular empowerment. States adopted strikingly democratic constitutions, none more impressive than Pennsylvania's in 1776, which established a unicameral legislature, annual elections for every representative, a weak governorship that could not veto laws the legislature passed, the *election* rather than *appointment* of most offices in the state and county governments, and the enfranchisement of nearly all adult men, even those who owned no property.

But things changed in the 1780s. The gentry had "tired of an excess of democracy," to quote Alexander Hamilton—others were less restrained, decrying "democratical tyranny," a "republican frenzy," a "prevailing rage of excessive democracy"—and tried to take total control of state governments. Given the shortage of gold and silver, during the war with Britain governments had issued paper money, which soon led to high inflation. This was blamed, simplistically, on the democratic character of the governments, the "imbecility" of popularly elected politicians; and most of the elite "gentlemen" came to view all government-issued paper money as an evil to be done away with. They also disliked the social and cultural manifestations of democracy, the leveling spirit that raised commoners in their own eyes and lowered the gentry. The ultra-rich financier Robert Morris represented his class when he resolved to strip power from all these "vulgar Souls whose narrow Optics can see but the little Circle of selfish Concerns."

The political and economic agenda that Morris and his associates championed bore a remarkable, if hardly surprising, resemblance to neoliberalism. "Morris wanted government to channel money to the wealthy," Terry Bouton writes, "either through direct payouts or by

privatizing the most lucrative parts of the state and turning them over to new for-profit corporations owned and run by the gentry." One of the most powerful figures in American history, Morris founded in 1781 the first private bank in the United States, the Bank of North America, in part to remove finance from democratic control: not governments but banks would issue paper money. Private corporations, unlike governments, would be immune to public pressure for a greater supply of money, and would therefore be able to prevent inflation. Actually, the acute shortage of money during the 1780s showed that Morris was too pessimistic: even in states where legislatures did on occasion print money, they certainly did not do so to the extent that "the people" desired.

The 1780s were a time of ferocious class conflict, with most of the eventual framers of the U.S. Constitution facing off, alongside Robert Morris and the majority of the gentry, against the middling and lower classes, overwhelmingly agrarian. On one side were the wealthy speculators in government IOUs, who had bought these bonds for pennies on the dollar from the farmers, artisans, and soldiers to whom they had been given during the war as payment for goods and services. Their original holders, expecting the bonds to depreciate and needing money right away, sold them for whatever they could get. Speculators, on the other hand, could afford to wait years for the government to redeem the bonds, and had the political clout to insist that they be paid at or near the certificates' full face value even though at the time of issuance the certificates' market value was far below this. The state and federal war debt most of which speculators thus bought up was enormous, about \$27 million.

To pay interest on the war debt, many states tended to impose the same type of fiscal and monetary regime on the populace that more recently the International Monetary Fund has favored: oppressive taxes, a tight money supply, and the curtailing of public services (such as government-run "loan offices" that gave cheap credit to farmers and artisans). Since both private creditors and bond speculators were averse to

paper money, governments compelled debtors and taxpayers to pay with gold and silver. But the war years had drained the country of gold and silver, making it impossible for people to pay. The nationwide tragedy that resulted has been compared to the Great Depression of the 1930s: tsunamis of property foreclosures swept up hundreds of thousands of families, and economic activity plummeted. "Public Trade and Private transactions of Human Life," petitioners in Pennsylvania protested, "[are] nearly reduced to a total Stagnation."

On the other side of the economic divide, then, were masses of ordinary people who found that their troubles were much worse in the 1780s than they had been in the last years of British rule, when their hardships had driven them to rebellion and war. "Have we not expended our blood and our treasure to expel from the land a set of invaders who sought to rule over us as taskmasters," they exclaimed in the mid-1780s, "and shall we now become bondsmen to people of our own country?" The irony was appalling, and the victims fought back.

In fact, they were able to extract significant concessions and relief measures. In some states, by electing legislators sympathetic to their plight, farmers and artisans benefited from temporary suspensions of tax collection. Violent resistance, such as Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786 and '87, frightened governments into being more lenient in their fiscal and monetary policies. Local and county officials often were sympathetic to the suffering of their neighbors and refused to enforce the law or carry out orders: for example, county tax officers would delay collection; some sheriffs obstructed or prevented property foreclosures; justices of the peace refused to prosecute people for nonpayment of taxes. Nor were state militias always of use in enforcing tax collection, for it was frequently militiamen who were leading the anti-tax protests. All this protest in the mid-1780s substantially mitigated hardship—which means that it was a tremendous irritant to the elite. For one thing, it prevented bondholders and creditors from being paid as much and as regularly as they wanted. For another, it fostered economic and political

CHRIS WRIGHT

uncertainty, which made for a bad investment climate. European investors, in particular, were leery of sending their capital to a land that was so riven by conflict. How could a country develop if it couldn't attract investment?

Various solutions were possible to the political and economic instabilities of the 1780s, and spokesmen of the aggrieved masses made reasonable proposals that were relatively fair to both sides of the class struggle. They called for a revaluation of war debt certificates, progressive taxation, limits on land speculation, bans on for-profit corporations, and other measures that would alleviate spiraling wealth inequality and strengthen democracy. Such proposals were consistent with the popular understanding of republicanism, an understanding that differed from that of aristocrats like Madison, Washington, Adams, Hamilton, and Edmund Randolph. As Gordon Wood describes in The Radicalism of the American Revolution, these latter men considered it axiomatic that, because only an elite of disinterested, virtuous, propertied gentlemen was capable of pursuing the *public* good over selfish private ends, the success of a republic required that such men hold power. It was necessary to tame the wildness of democracy—i.e., to effectively disenfranchise the majority—in order for enlightened civic virtue to flourish.

"The people," on the other hand, tended to have a less naïve view of the world. As yeomen from Pennsylvania said in one of their many petitions to the state government, "No observation is better supported, than this that, a country cannot long preserve its liberty, where a great inequality of property takes place." Some of their legislators agreed: they declared that for-profit corporations were "totally destructive of that equality which ought to prevail in a republic." Farmers wrote that "We observe, with great anxiety, wealthy incorporated companies taking possession of public and private property," and condemned processes that made "a few men...sufficiently powerful by privileges and wealth, to purchase, or to destroy, the property and rights of their fellow citizens." Evidently these farmers had a more sophisticated political

understanding than James Madison and his idealistic colleagues did, at least insofar as they understood that the real danger to republicanism was not democracy but rather a sharp inequality of property.

The Constitution: Triumph of Reaction

Needless to say, it was not the farmers' democratic vision that ultimately prevailed. Robert Morris and other anti-democrats across the states organized a new Constitutional Convention in 1787 to remedy the defects of the Articles of Confederation, which is to say to write a new Constitution that would more adequately insulate government from democratic control. The convention was not sold this way to the people, of course; its purpose, instead, was supposed to be to find ways to give government more power to protect shipping and to negotiate trade deals with foreign nations. Secretly, though, most delegates had one goal mainly in mind: to make America more attractive to investment, as Woody Holton argues. "And the linchpin to that endeavor," he says, "was taking power away from the states and away from the people."

In other words, the U.S. was founded from the motive, and on the principle, of *serving capital*. The very structure of its political system was chosen so as, chiefly, to attract investors, i.e., to be a tool of capital accumulation. It is probably the only country in history of which this is the case. But to those who are familiar with U.S. history, so full of subservience to capitalism, such a revelation should not be surprising.¹

Many of the devices that the Constitution's framers proposed to limit democracy were not adopted at the convention in Philadelphia. The delegates had to navigate between two contradictory imperatives: on the one hand, they wanted to make it forever impossible for states to adopt the kinds of debtor-relief and taxpayer-relief legislation that the 1780s had seen; on the other hand, they could not make the Constitution

For an account of the U.S.'s incredible slavishness to the capitalist class, see Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The War on Labor and the Left: Understanding America's Unique Conservatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1991).

so anti-democratic that the states and the people would not ratify it. Because of this second consideration, for example, Madison's proposal that the U.S. Senate be able to veto state legislation "in all cases what-soever" was rejected. The same fate befell Hamilton's extreme proposal that the Senate and President be elected for life, as a way to provide the government with maximum protection against democracy. Most delegates favored Hamilton's plan, but they knew it would prevent the Constitution from being ratified.

Nevertheless, in its finished form the Constitution was hardly a model of democracy. While senators' terms were not nine years long, as Madison wanted, six years was long enough to considerably insulate the Senate from the popular will. The Senate's very existence, of course, as a body explicitly reminiscent of Britain's House of Lords, was a significant "check and balance" against the people. As was the indirect election of its members, and of the president (by means of the electoral college). The Constitution's framers even managed to limit democracy in the House of Representatives, by making election districts so large that ordinary people would have a hard time getting elected. Men of wealth would be much more successful than others in making their names and views known in a large district. To say it differently, large districts would "divide the community," as Madison said, and make it difficult for the non-wealthy to "unite in the pursuit [of a] common interest."

Furthermore, members of the House and the Senate could not be recalled, and constituents were not given the right to instruct their representatives on how to vote on particular issues (a right that even as British colonists many of them had had).

As for the presidency, it would be a very powerful position that could veto any dangerously democratic law that somehow made it through the gauntlet of the deliberately cumbersome and convoluted machinery for passing legislation in Congress. The president would also be responsible for making most major appointments in the national

government, a power that under the Articles of Confederation had resided in the legislative branch.

The Supreme Court—appointed, not elected—had its part to play in "check[ing] the imprudence of democracy" (to quote Hamilton): through judicial review it could overturn both federal and state legislation. In this way, Madison's proposal that the national government have some means of vetoing inconveniently democratic state laws was salvaged.

In case such protections were not enough, language was written into the Constitution that expressly forbade most of the pro-debtor, pro-taxpayer laws states had passed in the 1780s. Article I deprived states of control over the war debt, thus preventing them from paying war debt speculators the market worth rather than the much higher face value of the certificates they held. (As Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton, who had been mentored by the ultra-conservative Robert Morris, gave these speculators a tremendous windfall, to the outrage of farmers.) Congress was granted the power to directly tax citizens instead of relying on states to do so, and it could break mass resistance to tax policies by bringing in militias from surrounding states. Section 10 of Article I was especially momentous: it reads, in part, "No State shall... emit Bills of Credit; make any Thing but gold and silver Coin a Tender in Payment of Debts [nor] pass any...Law impairing the Obligation of Contracts." In one swoop, this established a political-economic regime that overwhelmingly favored creditors. It prohibited states from issuing their own paper currency—"effectively destroying state-run land banks [i.e., loan offices]," as Bouton notes, "and the system of public, long-term, low-cost credit" that had been very effective and enormously popular with farmers. Debt arbitration was outlawed. In general, states were prohibited from rescuing debtors.

(It is worth noting, parenthetically, that the recent fashions of "originalism," "original intent," and "strict constructionism" in legal interpretation of the Constitution are predictable in a neoliberal context,

given that the framers and their contemporaries thought of the now-revered document as thoroughly antidemocratic. Originalism can be a useful tool of hyper-capitalism.)

Most ordinary citizens were none too fond of this elitist Constitution. But they were so scattered and had so few resources compared to the "Federalists" who supported it that it was difficult for them to mount an effective opposition. Federalists, moreover, did not play nice. They were prepared to go to almost any length to get the Constitution ratified. In some states, such as Pennsylvania, they organized a ratification convention before the opposition had a chance to mobilize, and they gave districts that favored ratification a disproportionately large number of delegates. Their ownership of most newspapers allowed them to conduct a major propaganda campaign that suppressed the voices of Anti-Federalists. Violent threats were made against Anti-Federalist printers; offending pamphlets and newspapers were "stopped & destroyed"; Federalist postmasters intercepted and suppressed Anti-Federalist mail; writers resorted to lies about the provisions that the Constitution contained and the process that had brought it into being.

On the other hand, many people were reconciled to it on the basis of legitimate considerations. For one thing, since the national government would have the power to impose tariffs on imports, most people's taxes would likely be reduced. The government could rely primarily on tariffs for its revenue, not direct taxation of citizens (as had been the case in the 1780s). Even more importantly, Federalists committed to adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution after it was ratified. This was something that middling citizens from across the country insisted on. Woody Holton makes an apt observation on this point: "It is a remarkable but rarely noted irony," he says, "that Americans owe their most cherished rights—among them freedom of speech and religion, the right to trial by jury, and protection against self-incrimination and illegal search and seizure—not to the authors of the Constitution but to its inveterate enemies." The Bill of Rights was a concession to the rabble.

If the farmers of the 1780s were alive today, however, they might feel vindicated. This isn't the place to review the entire history of the U.S.'s capitalism-on-steroids, but it should hardly be controversial to say that the antidemocratic, anti-"working class" political framework the Founders put in place has been perfectly adapted to the ambitions of a predatory economic system. It is almost as if capitalism had reached back from the future to move its pawns like chess pieces against capital's early opponents, who were finally checkmated when the Constitution was, through fair means and foul, ratified. After that, it could be smoother sailing for a developing American capitalism—although even then its development had to continually confront mass resistance. Eventually, and always with the decisive aid of the peculiar structure of the American polity, a point was reached where wealth could be so concentrated, the political system could be so captured by the corporate oligarchy, and ordinary people could be so desperate for change that they would elect a monstrosity like Donald Trump.

So here we are in 2017 still burdened with political leaders who, like the Constitution's framers, are concerned above all to protect creditors, financiers, and investors; who have the same "wisdom" as most of the Founders in their desire to undermine democracy, whether through gerrymandering, major propaganda campaigns, arcane congressional tricks of obstructing popular legislation, or simply the appointment of wealthy friends to important government posts. The growing democratic resistance is in the tradition not of the "great men" who wrote the Constitution but of their enemies.

THE GOVERNMENT VS. THE POPULATION (2015)

The public debate over government surveillance that was, if not inaugurated, at least intensified by the publication of documents provided by Edward Snowden has been, in some respects, surreal and deluded. One side claims that the NSA's mass surveillance is necessary to protect the public from terrorism, that in fact it has thwarted many "potential terrorist events." The other side claims, with much more justification, that bulk data collection does little or nothing to protect ordinary civilians. But few commentators draw another, more subversive conclusion: <code>government has little interest in protecting its citizens in the first place. In fact, its greater interest is precisely the opposite: to expose its citizens—with privileged exceptions—to harm.</code>

It sounds absurd. But consider, first, the recent historical record, which certainly does not support the idea that the U.S. government cares about protecting Americans. Exhibit A is the attacks of 9/11. It became a commonplace long ago for leftists and liberals to cite the White House memo of August 6, 2001 that bore the heading "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S.," which apparently was ignored at the time by the Bush administration. Perhaps more damning is Lawrence Wright's 2006 book The Looming Tower, which made it abundantly clear that the CIA and the FBI had not prioritized the fight against terrorism even after the 1993 Twin Tower bombing and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. If one were cynical enough, one might attribute competence to government institutions rather than mere bungling: perhaps the ridiculously counterproductive—from the perspective of thwarting terrorism—organization and efforts of the CIA and FBI before 9/11 were, by some twisted institutional logic, designed (unconsciously, as it were) to make possible precisely what happened, a major terrorist event.

Another commonplace is the observation that George W. Bush's Iraq war, far from mitigating terrorism, increased it substantially, perhaps sevenfold. This was predictable and predicted in 2003, a fact that means the Bush administration at the very least was perfectly happy to expose American (and of course foreign) civilians to greater threats. The same logic applies to Obama's global drone war, which, according to reports, has killed vastly more civilians than terrorists. Not surprisingly, it has fueled terrorism, and thus increased threats to Americans.² (In fact, the drone campaign itself is terrorism, but here I am confining myself to the conventional American understanding of the word, as applying only to people that the U.S. government doesn't like.)

One could go on listing such facts indefinitely. For instance, the sordid lesson to draw from the Hurricane Katrina debacle in 2005 is that protecting Americans from a natural disaster was not a priority

² Ed Pilkington, "Obama's drone war a 'recruitment tool' for ISIS," *Guardian*, November 18, 2015.

of government at any level, at least not of the governments involved. The deplorable actions of police in the hurricane's aftermath confirm this conclusion.³ The victims were treated as criminals, not people who needed and deserved protection.

In addition to ample historical evidence, one can also consider simple logic. Returning to the NSA's mass surveillance, it should not be hard for government officials to comprehend that the more time and resources they devote to monitoring ordinary civilians, the less time and resources they are devoting to monitoring plausible terrorist threats. In fact, almost every major terrorist attack in the West during the past fifteen years has been committed by people who were already known to law enforcement.⁴ Such was the case, for instance, regarding one of the brothers accused of the 2013 Boston marathon bombings. But the government, obligingly, was too busy spying on ordinary Americans to pay much attention to him, so he was able to carry out his attack unhindered.

But why, you ask, would it be in the interest of government to expose the public to harm? This question cannot be answered except in the context of specific historical circumstances, in this case the circumstances of neoliberal capitalism. In a society that is experiencing stratospheric income inequality, high unemployment and long-term economic stagnation, retrenchment of social welfare programs, the reality and threat of environmental collapse, and, in short, ever-greater social discontent and instability, institutional power-centers will want to increase their control over the population. As a proud plutocrat put it in a warning to his wealthy brethren, "the pitchforks are coming." And the plutocrats, together with their government representatives, want to be prepared for that.

³ See Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky, "The real heroes and sheroes of New Orleans," *Socialist Worker*, September 9, 2005.

⁴ Mattathias Schwartz, "The Whole Haystack," New Yorker, January 19, 2015.

The question is how to justify the expansion of government's surveillance and police powers that is necessary to keep the rabble in line. Clearly, pretexts are needed. And pretexts are provided whenever a terrorist attack occurs, especially if it occurs on American soil. This may be a virtual truism, but rarely is the implication articulated: in this respect, it is in the interest of government and the top "1 percent" in income/wealth for *civilians periodically to be victims of terrorism*. If the terrorist threat disappears, so does the useful pretext.

The "pretext" phenomenon has other dimensions. Naomi Klein discusses one of them in her famous book *The Shock Doctrine*, where she argues that in the last forty years, in the wake of catastrophes of whatever sort—natural, military, terrorist, economic—elites have taken advantage of popular disorientation and disorganization to force regimes of privatization upon the population. "Neoliberalism-by-blitzkrieg," one might call it. A prime example is what happened to New Orleans after Katrina: with the public's capacity to resist weakened, nearly all public schools were privatized. Under the pretext of education reform, "corporate profiteers and politicians have zeroed in on black communities, leaving behind devastation and destabilization," says a spokesperson of a New Orleans community group.

So, for the neoliberal state-corporate nexus, the devastation of a particular society, including a domestic region, can be eminently useful not only in smashing popular resistance to power but also in giving elites an opportunity to ram through programs they could not have otherwise. Convenient pretexts can always be thought of.

On a more general level, the relevant principle has been stated concisely by Noam Chomsky: the primary enemy of any government is (the majority of) its own population. For the population always wants more power and economic security than it has, and it is willing to fight for it (as the history of the labor movement shows)—which entails, however,

⁵ Sarah Lazare, "New Orleans Nearly Finished Killing Off Its Public Schools," *Common Dreams*, May 29, 2014.

the relative diminution of the power of the rich and their political minions. This corollary explains the U.S. government's continually savage treatment, through centuries, of workers, the lower classes, left-wing activists, African Americans, protesters and dissidents and "ordinary people" of all kinds. They must be humiliated, killed, beaten down, made examples of if they step out of line, kept in a state of constant fear and obedience (however impossible it may be to fulfill that goal). *Power exists but to maintain and expand itself*; that is its *raison d'être*, and that is the key to understanding its every move (at the institutional, not necessarily the personal, level).

For example, if government is not always blatantly aggressive in harming its own population, that is not because it's too moral to do so; it is because that might threaten its power, by stirring up more dissent. Concessions have to be made to the masses if in the long run they are to tolerate subordination. The appearance, and to some small extent even the reality, of protecting the population has to be maintained in order to appease the meddlesome outsiders.

None of this means that policymakers or bureaucrats or members of the ruling class have these intentions in mind when crafting policies or cracking down on dissent. Doubtless few are clear-headed enough. But the logic of the institutions in which they are embedded—the bureaucratic-expansionist, capitalistic, totalitarian logic—manipulates their minds and, by some alchemy, is sublimated into rationalizations and pretexts that are usually sincerely believed in. It isn't hard to come up with pretexts to do what is in one's institutional self-interest.

So, why not throw off all vestiges of sentimentalism about our rulers? Why not state the truth unequivocally: when a terrorist attack occurs, this is not a failure of government. It is a success; for now power-centers have another excuse to expand themselves, and to fear-monger, and to demonize the Other, and to make more money from selling military and surveillance technology, and to clamp down ever more on the domestic population.

CHRIS WRIGHT

And when the police blindly brutalize innocent civilians or protesters, this is not really a failure for government to correct. It is what the police are supposed to do, what they were designed to do and the main reason they exist in the first place.⁶ It is government acting intelligently, in its own interests and in the interests of its puppet-masters.

The population has to *protect itself* and stand up for itself, and fight for its freedom and power and security. Because the government certainly won't.

⁶ See Sam Mitrani, "The Police Were Created to Control Working-Class and Poor People, Not 'Serve and Protect," *In These Times*, January 6, 2015.

OUR PASSIVE SOCIETY (2018)

Sitting alone in my room watching videos on YouTube, hearing sounds from across the hall of my roommate watching Netflix, the obvious thought occurs to me that a key element of the demonic genius of late capitalism is to enforce a crushing *passiveness* on the populace. With social atomization comes collective passiveness—and with collective passiveness comes social atomization. The product (and cause) of this vicious circle is the dying society of the present, in which despair can seem to be the prevailing condition. With an opioid epidemic raging and, more generally, mental illness affecting 50 percent of Americans at some point in their lifetime, it is clear that the late-capitalist evisceration of civil society has also eviscerated the individual's sense of self-worth. We have become atoms, windowless monads buffeted by bureaucracies, desperately seeking entertainment as a tonic for our angst and ennui.

The formula of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott is as relevant as it always will be: "It is creative apperception more than anything that makes the individual feel that life is worth living." If so many have come to feel alienated from life itself, that is largely because they don't feel creative, free, or active.

We don't often consider society from this perspective, but it may be of interest to adumbrate the ways in which modern capitalism tends to stifle human capacities of creativity and individuality. This stifling can seem ironic, given that so many apologists of capitalism have celebrated its liberating dynamics, its unleashing of human potential, its apotheosis of freedom and competition. In his bestseller *The Reactionary Mind*, Corey Robin explains the logic of conservatives, from the nineteenth century to the present, who have seen the market as embodying the ancient agonistic ideal:

[P]ower is demonstrated and privilege earned...in the arduous struggle for supremacy. In that struggle, nothing matters, not inheritance, social connections, or economic resources, but one's native intelligence and innate strength. Genuine excellence is revealed and rewarded, true nobility is secured... Though most early conservatives were ambivalent about capitalism, their successors [came] to believe that warriors of a different kind [than soldiers] can prove their mettle in the manufacture and trade of commodities. Such men wrestle the earth's resources to and from the ground, taking for themselves what they want and thereby establishing their superiority over others.⁷

Aside from this quasi-Nietzschean aesthetic ideal, which has attracted capitalists and intellectuals of fascist persuasion, thinkers have defended capitalism on moral grounds: most (in)famously, Milton Friedman's

⁷ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

writings exemplify the argument that the market is "free, voluntary, and non-coercive" and thus a highly liberal, indeed libertarian, and *moral* institution. For ideologists like this, it would sound paradoxical to condemn capitalism and its culture as dehumanizing or as turning people into passive atoms.

We know what to think of such conservative arguments, though. They are of little intellectual or moral interest. The economist Robin Hahnel, for example, has no trouble demolishing Friedman's apologetics by pointing out that the market is hardly voluntary or non-coercive if people come to it with different amounts of capital. In a sense, yes, employees have freely chosen to work for some corporation, perhaps even in a hideous sweatshop. But they have been coerced into making that decision by their relative lack of capital. It's either rent yourself out or starve.⁸

In general, reactionary ideologies like Friedman's or those that Robin dissects function by substituting for gritty reality, forged in the crucible of conflict-ridden material institutions, an appealing, idealistic myth. In some cases the myth is heroical: free individuals, virtually bereft of socioeconomic context, battling for supremacy, bending the earth and the masses to their will; nations or races waging a similar but more apocalyptic war; or the Nietzschean notion of masters and the rabble locked in perpetual conflict, the fate of humanity and the collective will to power at stake. In other cases the myth is ethical: the United States spreads freedom and democracy abroad by invading countries; the philanthropy of the wealthy legitimates capitalism, in Andrew Carnegie's formulation; "a rising tide lifts all boats," as an American liberal might declare, etc. All these ideologies are merely pretty disguises of political-economic realities, and can be dismissed.

The truth is that after two centuries of the evolution of industrial capitalism, the individual is hemmed in by gigantic bureaucratic

⁸ Robin Hahnel, *The ABCs of Political Economy: A Modern Approach* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), chapter 10.

structures of social control and economic exploitation. Starting from puny embryos in England in the late eighteenth century, industrial capital has remade the world in its own image, as Marx foresaw: the image of universal commodification, social "reification" and depersonalization, mass regulation of labor, mass markets, mass privatization, and mass administration of society for the benefit of capital.

The early stages of this process have been analyzed by social historians in the tradition of E. P. Thompson, who, before Foucault (and more acutely and lucidly than him), showed how "the modern subject" is a product of *subjection*, how workers and citizens have had to be relentlessly disciplined for the sake of capital accumulation. In his classic The Making of the English Working Class (1963), Thompson reveals the Herculean efforts of early British manufacturers and their state to impose mechanical industrial rhythms on a workforce that had from time immemorial lived by the pastoral rhythms of the countryside. These "lazy" ex-peasants just could not get it through their heads that it was their sacred duty to God, country, and employer to submit to the clock and the overseer in a cotton sweatshop every day from 5:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Only if they were trained from the age of six and indoctrinated en masse with a submissive Methodism that preached the blessedness of poverty and hard labor and a compensation for their miseries in the hereafter was there any hope of widespread docility—although even then it was, as always, necessary to back up indoctrination with something a little more reliable, namely state-sanctioned killing. (The death penalty for Luddism, the occasional military massacre, and so forth.) And so it continued for many decades.

Women were subject to even more policing than men, in accordance with authorities' belief (since before ancient Greece) that female sexuality, maenadic and riotous, threatens social order. It has to be controlled. In her book "More Than Mere Amusement": Working-Class Women's Leisure in England, 1750–1914, Catriona Parratt describes just how much energy and how many resources authorities devoted to this effort through the

nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Their task was monumental, after all—they had to kill an "almost Rabelaisian" popular culture:

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, women were visible and vital participants in popular recreational culture. In their cottages and workshops, in urban streets and on village greens, in alehouses and on farms, they worked and socialized alongside men. In the daily ebb and flow of labor and release from labor, and in the seasonal and annual round of celebrations, feasts, and holidays...they shared in an array of amusements that were gregarious and open. They gossiped and gambled...got drunk and got rowdy at private parties and public assemblies...and trekked out into open fields and onto moors to listen to ranting preachers...

Decade by decade, magistrates, justices of the peace, and new police forces got the upper hand: "Alehouses were closed, fairs were suppressed, wakes and other customary holidays were 'tamed." Later, middle- and upper-class women promoted the "moral elevation" of the nation in their own way, by organizing "rational recreation" schemes that channeled young working-class women's vitality into safe institutions like classes (in "domestic science"), lectures, and chaperoned dances. It was a steeply uphill battle for the forces of domestication, but by the twentieth century they had made immense progress.

In fact, they were already making significant progress by the mid-nineteenth century, and even in the less industrialized United States. In 1840s' New York, Democratic politician Mike Walsh lamented that "a gloomy, churlish, money-worshipping spirit has swept nearly all the poetry out of the poor man's sphere. Ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, public games, all are either prohibited or discountenanced,

⁹ Catriona Parratt, "More Than Mere Amusement" (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 17.

so that Fourth of July and election sports alone remain."¹⁰ By the turn of the century, the U.S. was becoming the world center of pacification of the working class, which is to say suppression of its freedoms and bacchanalian tendencies.

This campaign was carried out at least as vigorously inside the workplace as outside it. In The Fall of the House of Labor (1987), the historian David Montgomery has described the epic, decades-long struggle between skilled workers, who were proponents of workers' control within the factory (collective control over their specific productive tasks), and management, which sought to strip workers of all vestiges of control. The businessman's goal, of course, was to increase productivity, lower wages, and in general create a more compliant workforce. The explosive labor unrest from the 1870s until after World War I was in part a response to this crusade to deskill work, to turn management into the brain and the worker into an appendage of the machine. The working-class ethic of "mutuality," too, had to be undermined, by hiring African Americans as strikebreakers (to foment racism), giving higher wages to certain ethnicities (to foment resentment), destroying unions, planting spies in factories, and so on. Frederick Winslow Taylor's ideology of scientific management was a quintessential, and very influential, expression of all these tendencies, for by breaking down work processes into their smallest components and transferring knowledge to the ranks of management it effectively dispossessed workers of the remnants of their autonomy. And in fact, from that time to the present, the capitalist agenda to deskill, monitor/regulate, mechanize, and finally automate has continued almost without interruption.¹¹

The one time there was something like an interruption was when the mechanisms of the capitalist economy ground almost to a halt, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. This was a remarkable time,

¹⁰ Quoted in David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58.

See Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

to which we might look for lessons about the future (about organizing the unemployed, building communal support systems, resurrecting *public spaces*, and building a laborite political party). It was the only time in the twentieth century when the drive to marketize and privatize everything, including nature and the nation-state itself, met sufficient resistance to be not only halted but even, in some respects, reversed. Because of the economic collapse, people were no longer only consumers and employees, only nodes in a network of buyers and sellers; to some extent they became actual people, with the revitalization of community, generosity, and shared struggles. Historians of that time are well aware of the glowing reminiscences of many who experienced it. Rose Chernin, for example, who was a Communist organizer in the Bronx, observed that

This struggle of people against their conditions, that is where you find the meaning in life. In the worst situations, you are together with people. If there were five apples, we cut them ten ways and everybody ate. If somebody had a quarter, he went down to the corner and bought some bread and brought it back into the council. Life changes when you are together in this way, when you are united. You lose the fear of being alone... In those years I was happy.¹²

The labor movement saw a tremendous resurgence, and working-class culture, which was quite different from the ruling-class culture of individualism, acquisitiveness, and greed, experienced one last flowering before it was finally suppressed in the postwar and then neoliberal eras.

After World War II, mass bureaucratization and corporatization came of age. The corporate counteroffensive against the leftist legacies of the 1930s and the New Deal was remarkably successful and far-reaching, such that politics and culture as a whole became, arguably,

^{12 &}quot;Rose Chernin on Organizing the Bronx in the 1930s," in Howard Zinn and Anthony Arnove, eds., *Voices of a People's History of the United States* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 340–344.

more conservative and "regimented" than ever.¹³ The gigantic industrial unions, such as the United Autoworkers and the United Steelworkers, that had been formed in the 1930s purged themselves of the radicalism that had so excited Rose Chernin and were integrated into the "corporate-liberal" political order, serving, ironically, as enforcers of properly subordinate behavior on the part of their members. The domestication of women reached new levels as working-class conditions became middle-class conditions and millions of housing-units sprouted on suburban lawns, manicured and garnished with little gardens, across the country. Meanwhile, that great instrument of atomization, pacification, and indoctrination began its conquest of the American mind: television.

Noam Chomsky, in the tradition of Marx, is fond of saying that technology is "neutral," neither beneficent nor baleful in itself but only in the context of particular social relations, but I'm inclined to think television is a partial exception to that claim. I recall the Calvin and Hobbes strip in which, while sitting in front of a TV, Calvin says, "I try to make television-watching a complete forfeiture of experience. Notice how I keep my jaw slack, so my mouth hangs open. I try not to swallow either, so I drool, and I keep my eyes half-focused, so I don't use any muscles at all. I take a passive entertainment and extend the passivity to my entire being. I wallow in my lack of participation and response. I'm utterly inert." Where before, one might have socialized outside, gone to a play, or discussed grievances with fellow workers and strategized over how to resolve them, now one could stay at home and watch a passively entertaining sitcom that imbued one with the proper values of consumerism, wealth accumulation, status-consciousness, objectification of women, subordination to authority, lack of interest in politics, and other "bourgeois virtues." The more one cultivated a relationship with the television, the less one cultivated relationships with people—or with one's creative capacities.

See Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60 (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Television is the perfect technology for a mature capitalist society, and has surely been of inestimable value in keeping the population relatively passive and obedient—distracted, idle, incurious, separated yet conformist. Doubtless in a different kind of society it could have a somewhat more elevated potential—programming could be more edifying, devoted to issues of history, philosophy, art, culture, science—but in our own society, in which institutions monomaniacally fixated on accumulating profit and discouraging critical thought have control of it, the outcome is predictable. The average American watches about five hours of TV a day, and 65 percent of homes have three or more TV sets.¹⁴

Movie-watching, too, is an inherently passive pastime. Theodor Adorno remarked, "Every visit to the cinema, despite the utmost watchfulness, leaves me dumber and worse than before." To sit in a movie theater (or at home) with the lights out, watching electronic images flit by, hearing blaring noises from huge surround-sound speakers, is to experience a kind of sensory overload while being almost totally inactive. And then the experience is over and you rub your eyes and try to become active and whole again. It is different from watching a play, where the performers are present in front of you, the art is enacted right there organically and on a proper human scale, there is no sensory overload, no artificial splicing together of fleeting images, no glamorous cinematic alienation from your own mundane life.

Since the 1990s, of course, electronic media have exploded to the point of utterly dominating our lives. For example, 65 percent of Americans regularly play video games.¹⁵ Ninety percent own a smartphone, which, from daily experience, we know tends to occupy an immense portion of their time.¹⁶ As an arch-traditionalist, I look askance at

John Koblin, "How Much Do We Love TV? Let Us Count the Ways," New York Times, June 30, 2016.

¹⁵ Crosby Armstrong, "Video Games Remain America's Favorite Pastime," Entertainment Software Association, July 10, 2023.

^{16 &}quot;Mobile Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024, at https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/.

all this newfangled electronic technology. It seems to me that electronic mediation of human relationships, and of life itself, is inherently alienating and destructive, insofar as it atomizes or isolates. There is something anti-humanistic about having one's life be determined by algorithms (algorithms invented and deployed, in most cases, by private corporations). And the effects on mental functioning are by no means benign: studies have confirmed the obvious, that "the internet may give you an addict's brain," "you may feel more lonely and jealous," and "memory problems may be more likely" (perhaps because of information overload). ¹⁷ Such problems manifest a passive and isolated mode of experience.

But this is the mode of experience of neoliberalism, i.e., hyper-capitalism. After the upsurge of protest in the 1960s and early 1970s against the corporatist regime of centrist liberalism, the most reactionary sectors of big business launched a massive counterattack to destroy organized labor and the whole New Deal system, which was eating into their profits and encouraging popular unrest. The counterattack continues today, and, as we know, has been wildly successful. The union membership rate in the private sector is a mere 6.5 percent, a little less than it was on the eve of the Great Depression, and the U.S. spends much less on social welfare than comparable OECD countries. Such facts have had predictable effects on the cohesiveness of the social fabric.

Meanwhile, as government has become less concerned with popular well-being and business has had a freer hand in how badly it can treat employees, bureaucracy has—contrary to the predictions of conservatives—only expanded. We are told by free-marketeers that the penetration of market relations into ever more spheres of life is supposed to reduce bureaucracy and increase "efficiency." The opposite is the case

Jacqueline Howard, "This Is How The Internet Is Rewiring Your Brain," Huffpost, October 30, 2013.

Scores of books describe the neoliberal crusade against democracy and the working class, but an underappreciated study is Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

¹⁹ Nathaniel Lewis, "The Welfare State Is in Tatters," *Jacobin*, March 27, 2018.

(especially if "efficiency" is defined in terms of the actual well-being of people). In *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber states his "Iron Law of Liberalism" as follows: "any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs." He continues:

English liberalism [in the nineteenth century], for instance, did not lead to a reduction of state bureaucracy, but the exact opposite: an endlessly ballooning array of legal clerks, registrars, inspectors, notaries, and police officials who made the liberal dream of a world of free contract between autonomous individuals possible. It turned out that maintaining a free-market economy required a thousand times more paperwork than a Louis XIV-style absolutist monarchy.²⁰

With the spread of privatization over the last generation, public and private bureaucracies, intermeshing, have hypertrophied. Graeber calls this the age of "total bureaucratization" (or alternatively, "predatory bureaucratization"). We all know from our own lives, from (the necessity of) our continual interactions with corporate and government bureaucracies, how maddening this development has been. No wonder that when an irate 75-year-old woman went to a local Comcast office years ago and smashed it up with a hammer, she became something of a folk hero.²¹

Speaking of Graeber, his notion of "bullshit jobs" is apropos. The kinds of jobs that were first springing up in large numbers around the time of Taylorism in the early twentieth century, namely "administrative" jobs like human resources, public relations, and corporate law (but also, more recently, academic and health administration, financial services,

David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2015), 9.

Neely Tucker, "Taking a Whack Against Comcast," Washington Post, October 18, 2007.

telemarketing, and the like), have attained unprecedented numerical heights. Millions of people fill these positions, which seem to become more numerous every year. The tragedy is that untold numbers of these people see no point to their jobs. "How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour," Graeber asks, "when one secretly feels one's job should not exist?" Such a response signifies a particularly acute condition of what Marx called "alienated labor."

In short, in less than two centuries we have gone from being free-spirited, unpolished, semi-rebellious plebeians and immigrants to being dutiful, docile, lonely bureaucrats administering fellow administrators who are administering the people who, obediently, do the actual productive work and get paid a pittance for it. We have become a society of units, a society almost perfectly "legible" to both the state and the corporate sector. Even in our forms of entertainment, we tend to be isolated and *receptive* rather than creative.

The nightclub culture, for instance, plays an important function in permitting young people to let off steam from all their weekdays of repressive rule-following. So once or twice a week they stand in a line at one of various designated spots in the city where they can go inside and let loose. In the safe anonymity of darkness, pressed against hundreds of bodies, they can lose themselves in the sensory overload of drunken dance-humping to a heavy pulsing beat under booming hiphop music interrupted only by screams in each other's ears. There may be little or nothing wrong with indulging in this sort of mass-produced, capitalist-friendly Dionysian recreation, but, whatever it is (and I find it mysterious), it is symptomatic.

And what of love and sex in this brave new world of ours? It turns out that the most common way to meet people is in the privacy of one's room, with the help of algorithms written by dating websites. In 2017, online dating became the most popular way for newlyweds to meet one another, 19 percent of brides saying they had met their spouse online. I don't mean to bash internet-searching-for-soulmates,

but there is something pathological about a society in which people are "together" with others when they're physically alone and are alone when they're in the physical presence of others. Nor is the Tinder-originated phenomenon of swiping-right and swiping-left through an endless series of faces anything but the ultimate infiltration of the consumerist mentality into the ideally most *human* of spheres, that of romance and sex. Which is becoming practically the *least* human—with the help of an infinite supply of internet pornography, which encourages the attitude of treating people as but vulgar means to one's own pleasure. There is a disturbing tendency for us all to be sex-objects for one another. Ours is a society of objects, not subjects.

Perhaps the most poignant expression of this state of affairs, and of the desperate loneliness that results from it, is the latest "revolution" in artificial intelligence: sex robots that can get aroused, can simulate orgasms, and have customizable personalities. One of them, Solana, has an app for a phone or tablet with which you can "drag her face around to make her move her head, give her commands to make her smile at you, and type in sentences for her to say."22 Another one, Samantha, "is programmed to want romance first, then get comfortable before getting sexual." She has different "modes of interaction": romantic, family, and sexy. "The objective," her creator says, "the final objective of the sexual mode is to give her an orgasm."23 Sex-doll brothels already exist, which are proving more popular than brothels with actual women—even when the women are available for the same price. But not all the new dolls are only for sex, we're assured: some of them "can have conversations about anything, from history to science to politics." This capability "lends itself to bonding," another sex-doll-maker says, "and I think a simulated male

²² Zeynep Yenisey, "This Ultra-Realistic New Sex Robot Not Only Has a Personality, She's Also Customizable," Maxim, January 12, 2018.

²³ David Moye, "Engineer Creates Sex Robot That Needs To Be Romanced First," Huffpost, March 17, 2017.

that you can talk to and bond with will appeal to women too."²⁴ Some customers have fallen in love with their dolls and married them.

Thus we reach the *reductio ad absurdum* of trends that began with, or perhaps long before, the Industrial Revolution, as people have become objects and objects have become people.

In the meantime, and correlatively, humanity continues to do next to nothing (compared to what ought to be done) about global warming and the threat of nuclear holocaust, either of which may do us in sooner than we think.

What is to be done? Now that we're approaching the literal manifestation of the capitalist *telos*, is there any hope? Or has our collective passiveness already doomed us to moral and physical oblivion?

The only hope is that, collectively, we will act to *create* rather than to *let happen*. We have to create and expand "public spaces," for there is rationality in the public and irrationality in the private. As the activists of Occupy Wall Street understood, we have to bring back sit-ins on a mass scale, on a larger scale than in the 1930s and 1960s. We have to sit in at universities, and in public parks, and in legislative chambers; we have to sit down on highways and bridges and city streets. We have to flood the centers of power with wave after wave of popular rage. We have, in short, to *disrupt*, for that is how change happens. We should emulate the Luddites, pioneers of anti-capitalism, and totally resist our final reduction to the status of appendages to the Machine.

In the coming years, the opportunity to seize our humanity again will present itself. The crisis of the old regime will lead to the birth of the new.²⁵ Institutional breakdown will open up the space for radical experimentation in new modes of production and politics, modes responsive to the popular will. And it will become possible for the disenfranchised to take the initiative again.

There is indeed hope. We have only to reject despair in order to realize that hope.

²⁴ Cy Leclercq, "AI sex dolls are just around the corner," *The Next Web*, November 25, 2017.

²⁵ See Chris Wright, "Optimism in the Face of Crisis: How the Left Will Win," *Truthout*, July 2, 2017.

THE RADICALISM OF WORKING-CLASS AMERICANS (2022)

In the United States there exists today, and has existed since at least the 1950s, a dominant political narrative according to which most Americans, indeed the very history of the country, exemplify a kind of ideological "moderateness." Democratic Party operatives and sympathizers constantly preach the virtues of occupying the political center, where most of the population supposedly resides. If the party caves in to its "extremist" left wing, it faces electoral annihilation. This narrative echoes, in a vulgar and opportunistic way, the postwar "liberal consensus" school of thought among social scientists and more generally the political culture, that the U.S. has historically been an exceptional country in its relatively middle-class and Lockean-liberal character, its individualism, its relative absence of dramatic ideological clashes, of class conflict and

class consciousness. Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, for example, published in 1955, was a classic expression of this "centrist" interpretation of American history, an interpretation that tended to explain away and criticize what dissent there was—on the left and the right—as consisting of fringe movements of status anxieties, maladjusted psychologies, anti-intellectual impulses, hysterical moralism, and the like.

For the centrist establishments, then, of both the Cold War and today, left-wing (and right-wing) dissidence is simultaneously pathological and, in the broad sweep of American history, aberrational. The U.S. is *essentially* a middle-of-the-road, bourgeois country, which is why radical movements have usually failed and are doomed to failure in the present and future.

Since the 1960s, scholars have subjected this liberal creed in its various facets to devastating criticism, but it continues to hold sway, in some form, even among sophisticated academics who ought to know better. An early critique was given by Michael Paul Rogin in his brilliant *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (1967), which systematically exposed the flaws in liberal analyses of "protest politics" (notably their assimilation of McCarthyism to an earlier tradition of agrarian radicalism, as if "irrational" left populism was to blame for McCarthy). Later scholars have shown that U.S. history contains just as much class conflict and class consciousness as the history of Western Europe; Sean Wilentz's 1984 article "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920" is a compelling statement of this point of view.

More recently, my own book *Popular Radicalism and the Unemployed in Chicago during the Great Depression* (2022) has criticized liberal analyses of the 1930s, which tend to dismiss the idea that there was much radical potential—socialist yearnings or revolutionary sentiment—in popular collective action of the time. Supposedly even in the 1930s, the quintessential "collectivist" decade, the American masses remained

broadly subject to the hegemony of bourgeois culture, loyal to the distinctive U.S. political economy, and uninterested in radical social change. After all, they adored Franklin Roosevelt and rushed into the open arms of the Democratic Party in 1936.

Given that the political economy of the United States today has ominous parallels with the economy that eventuated in the Great Depression—including extreme income and wealth inequality, limitless aggrandizement of big business, and weakness of organized labor—it might be of interest to challenge such interpretations of American history, borrowing from my book. There is in fact an enormous base of support for truly radical change today, and there certainly was in the 1930s.

Historians influenced by the liberal tradition, such as, for example, the late Alan Brinkley, Jill Lepore, and Jefferson Cowie, tend to adopt a somewhat "idealistic" perspective on society, to some extent abstracting from class conditions and class conflict in favor of an emphasis on culture, ideas, ideologies, and discourses. "The United States is founded on a set of ideas," Lepore writes in her defiantly anti-leftist bestseller These Truths: A History of the United States (2018)—and of course the ideas in question are noble ideas: "a dedication to equality... [and] a dedication to inquiry, fearless and unflinching."26 This is the way of the liberal (and many a conservative): to ground society in abstract ideas, preferably lofty ones, prioritizing "consciousness" over "social being," as if Karl Marx hadn't already shown in The German Ideology (1846) that the former is largely a sublimation (often obfuscation) of the latter. The idealistic method typically implies an ahistorical essentialism: the U.S. is "essentially" committed to equality and democracy, however rarely it may live up to "its" ideals—or it is essentially individualistic or anti-statist or capitalist or whatever other idea is favored. In abstracting from class conditions, idealism usually has conservative implications, which

For a left-wing evisceration of her book, see Nathan Robinson, "The Limits of Liberal History," *Current Affairs*, October 28, 2018.

is doubtless why it has always been preferred by ruling classes and the intellectuals who speak for them.

Jefferson Cowie is more sophisticated and less propagandistic than Lepore, but he too, like many other excellent historians, is not always sufficiently materialistic. For instance, in The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics (2016) he insists that Americans remained very "individualistic" even in the depths of the Great Depression, and that traditions of so-called individualism have contributed significantly to vitiating collectivist radicalism in the United States. Like other liberal scholars, Cowie seems to prefer explaining the defeats of the American left in terms of the stubbornness of various popular ideologies and cultures, including divisions among the working class (between race, ethnicity, skill, gender, etc., as if such divisions haven't existed elsewhere), rather than the more basic and "material" fact that America's capitalist class has historically been unusually ruthless, class-conscious, repressive, resourceful, and dominant over the state. This fact, indeed, is the real American "exceptionalism," and it is the primary explanation for the failures of the left in the United States.

As a case-study of popular consciousness, we might consider the remarkable nationwide support given to two famous left-wing "demagogues" of the 1930s, Huey Long and the "radio priest" Father Charles Coughlin. (Coughlin is sometimes called a fascist, but scholars have argued that this label isn't appropriate for him until after 1937, by which time his popularity was vastly diminished.) Historians commonly interpret the massive popularity of these two figures as, ironically, proof of the relative conservatism of Americans. Cowie, for example, in a vague and idealistic formulation (disregarding class) characteristic of liberal historiography, states that these men and their following were very individualistic: they merely hoped "to restore the republic to the little man, resurrect some version of traditional values, and deliver the individual from the crush of mass society." His interpretation echoes

that of Alan Brinkley's Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression (1983):

The failure of more radical political movements to take root in the 1930s reflected, in part, the absence of a serious radical tradition in American political culture. The rhetoric of class conflict echoed only weakly among men and women steeped in the dominant themes of their nation's history; and leaders [such as Communists] relying upon that rhetoric faced grave, perhaps insuperable difficulties in attempting to create political coalitions. The Long and Coughlin movements, by contrast, flourished precisely because they evoked so clearly one of the oldest and most powerful of American political traditions [namely, "opposition to centralized authority and demands for the wide dispersion of power"].²⁷

But what did Long and Coughlin actually say? It is revealing to look at their words. While they both denounced socialism and communism, Coughlin thundered that "capitalism is doomed and not worth trying to save." A journalist wrote in 1935 that he "talk[s] about a living wage, about profits for the farmer, about government-protected labor unions. He insists that human rights be placed above property rights. He emphasizes the 'wickedness' of 'private financialism and production for profit." The principles of Coughlin's National Union for Social Justice, founded in 1934, included the following: a "just and living [i.e., not market-determined] annual wage which will enable [every citizen willing and able to work] to maintain and educate his family according to the standards of American decency"; nationalization of such "public necessities" as banking, credit and currency, power, light, oil and natural gas, and natural resources; private ownership of all other property, but control of it for the public good; abolition of the privately owned Federal

Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 160, 161.

Reserve and establishment of a government-owned central bank; "the lifting of crushing taxation from the slender revenues of the laboring class" and substituting for it taxation of the rich; and the guiding value that "the chief concern of government shall be for the poor."²⁸

Huey Long, similarly, made fairly radical proposals, as we can read in his whimsical retrospective account of his *First Days in the White House*, a book completed shortly before he was shot. A reviewer summarized Long's post-presidential self-description as follows:

He was the man of action who in rapid succession launched a stupendous program of reclamation and conservation, who planned for scientific treatment of criminals, cheaper transportation and popular control of banking. Higher education for all became fact. Tell every parent, he said to his advisers, "I will send your boy and girl to college." There was much more, but all was overshadowed by legislation for the redistribution of wealth [by means of confiscatory taxation of the wealthy].²⁹

These are hardly ideas that shun class conflict. Nor are they obviously "individualistic." Insofar as Coughlin and Long's tens of millions of fans, in the working and middle classes, agreed with these political programs, they certainly can be said to have desired *fundamental* reforms in American capitalism, reforms that would have ushered in a much more collectivistic and socialistic society. It requires the impressive intellectual acrobatics of liberal historiography to differentiate these messages from a class-based populism and claim they can be largely reduced to an "opposition to centralized authority" or a "resurrection of traditional values."

There is more truth to the way Eric Leif Davin frames the matter in his article "Blue Collar Democracy: Class War and Political Revolution

²⁸ New York Times, March 17, 1935; "Father Coughlin's Preamble and Principles of the National Union for Social Justice," in Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 287, 288.

²⁹ Francis Brown, "Huey Long as Hero and as Demagogue," New York Times, September 29, 1935.

in Western Pennsylvania, 1932–1937": "Fundamentally, the political mobilization of the working class in the thirties was a class war for political and economic equality."³⁰ It is suspicious, after all, that intellectuals are often so determined to deny that the ideal of socialism—workers' democratic control of their economic life—has much appeal to working Americans. Why wouldn't it, inasmuch as people obviously want control over their lives and livelihood? Indeed, Brinkley admits as much when he says that Long, Coughlin, and their followers called for "a society in which the individual retained control of his life and livelihood; in which power resided in visible, accessible institutions; in which wealth was equitably (if not necessarily equally) shared."³¹ The obvious reply to this characterization is that it is little but a watered-down definition of socialism!

If American workers don't always flock to the banner of socialism or communism, the most plausible explanation, prima facie, is not that they are deeply attached to some traditional ideology or are the benighted victims of bourgeois hegemony but simply that they understand it is hopelessly unrealistic, for now, to try to achieve a democratic economy. As Vivek Chibber has recently argued in *The Class Matrix* (2022), it is their *rationality*, not their *ideology*, that generally keeps working-class Americans from throwing themselves into the profoundly difficult (and frequently criminalized) project of building a nationwide class movement that can overthrow the structures of capitalism.

As historians, rather than endlessly investigating "ideology" or "discourses," we might do better to, say, follow Noam Chomsky's practice of foregrounding brute repression and censorship. These factors have overwhelming explanatory value. This is illustrated by a forgotten incident that occurred in the spring of 1936: CBS invited Earl Browder, head of the U.S. Communist Party, to speak for fifteen minutes (at

³⁰ Eric Leif Davin, "Blue Collar Democracy: Class War and Political Revolution in Western Pennsylvania, 1932–1937," Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies, vol. 67, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 240–297.

³¹ Brinkley, Voices of Protest, xi.

10:45 p.m.) on a national radio broadcast, with the understanding that he would be answered the following night by zealous anti-Communist Congressman Hamilton Fish. Browder seized the opportunity to reach a mass audience and expounded the Marxist analysis of capitalism and prescription for a better society.

Reactions to Browder's talk were revealing: according to both CBS and the *Daily Worker*, they were almost uniformly positive. CBS immediately received several hundred responses praising Browder's talk, and the *Daily Worker*, whose New York address Browder had mentioned on the air, received thousands of letters. The following are representative:

Bricelyn, Minnesota: "Your speech came in fine and it was music to the ears of another unemployed for four years. Please send me full and complete data on your movement and send a few extra copies if you will, as I have some very interested friends—plenty of them eager to join up, as is yours truly."

Evanston, Illinois: "Just listened to your speech tonight and I think it was the truest talk I ever heard on the radio. Mr. Browder, would it not be a good thing if you would have an opportunity to talk to the people of the U.S.A. at least once a week, for 30 to 60 minutes? Let's hear from you some more, Mr. Browder."

Springfield, Pennsylvania: "I listened to your most interesting speech recently on the radio. I would be much pleased to receive your articles on Communism. Although I am an American Legion member I believe you are at least sincere in your teachings."

Harrold, South Dakota: "Thank you for the fine talk over the air tonight. It was good common sense and we were glad you had a chance to talk over the air and glad to hear someone who had nerve enough to speak against capitalism."³²

³² Daily Worker, March 13, 1936.

The editors of the *Daily Worker* plaintively asked their readers, "Isn't it time we overhauled our old horse-and-buggy methods of recruiting? While we are recruiting by ones and twos, aren't we overlooking hundreds?" One can only imagine how many millions of people in far-flung regions would have flocked to the Communist banner had Browder and William Z. Foster been permitted the national radio audience that Coughlin was.

It is true that ruling-class propaganda, constantly flooding the visual, auditory, and print media, can have a major influence on popular attitudes, manipulating the public into "conservative" political positions. But this doesn't imply the typical Democratic argument that Americans are naturally moderate or centrist, nor does it mean that because they are somehow "steeped in the dominant themes of their nation's history" they tend to reject left-wing ideas. Indeed, the very fact that it is necessary to deluge the public with overwhelming amounts of propaganda, and to censor and marginalize views and information associated with the political left, is significant. Why would such a massive and everlasting public relations campaign be necessary if the populace didn't have subversive or "dangerous" values and beliefs in the first place? It is evidently imperative to *continuously police* people's behavior and thoughts lest popular resistance overwhelm structures of class and power.

When we consider the findings of polls, we can see why the ruling class devotes such colossal spending to manufacturing consent. A few examples may suffice. In 1935, a *Fortune* magazine poll found that 41 percent of the upper-middle class, 49 percent of the lower-middle class, and 60 percent of the poor thought the government should not allow a man to keep investments worth over \$1 million. As late as 1942, 64 percent of people thought it was a good idea to limit annual incomes to \$25,000. That same year, another *Fortune* poll found that almost 30 percent of the nation's factory workers thought "some form of socialism would be a good thing for the country as a whole," while 34 percent had open minds about it—which means only 36 percent thought socialism

would be "a bad thing." Given the resources and energy the business class had dedicated to vilifying socialism, these findings are striking.³³

They may bring to mind more recent findings. Gallup polls have found that 40 percent of Americans (and a majority of Democrats) have a positive view of socialism—which is a remarkable fact, considering that the mass media's coverage of "socialism" is almost uniformly negative. For a similar reason, the 70 percent approval rating of labor unions is also noteworthy. According to the Pew Research Center, 59 percent of Americans are bothered "a lot" by the feeling that corporations and the wealthy don't pay their fair share of taxes. Sixty-four percent of people think that protecting the environment should be a top policy priority. As usual, then, the populace is largely to the left of the two major political parties, even after being continually inundated by anti-left propaganda.

But—to return to the 1930s—what about the fact of Roosevelt's great popularity? He was hardly a revolutionary figure. Given the enormity of the economic crisis, doesn't his popularity suggest that most Americans are indeed basically "liberal" at heart, congenitally averse to radical social change?

Well, the fact that he was popular doesn't mean he wouldn't have been more popular if he had pursued more transformative change. This is suggested, after all, by the stunning success of Coughlin and Long, who in 1934 and 1935 vehemently denounced Roosevelt and the New Deal for their conservatism. Historian Charles Beard observed a "staggering rapidity" in the "disintegration of President Roosevelt's prestige" in early 1935, while journalist Martha Gellhorn wrote, "it surprises me how radically attitudes can change within four or five months." Correspondents wrote to Roosevelt that he had "faded out on the masses of hungry, idle people," had served only the "very rich" and proven to be "no deferent [sic] from any other President."³⁴ "Huey Long is the man we thought

Robert McElvaine, "Thunder without Lightning: Working-Class Discontent in the United States, 1929–1937" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1974), 73, 92–96.

³⁴ Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929–1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 249, 253, 254.

you were when we voted for you," a man wrote from Montana. The so-called Second New Deal, which signified a left turn, shored up Roosevelt's popular support, but it was not nearly as radical as many millions would have liked.

Communists, too, were more popular at the time than we might think in retrospect, despite their self-sabotage by speaking in an alien jargon and consistently praising the Soviet Union's tyrannical regime. Millions of people passed through the party and its many auxiliary organizations (Unemployed Councils, the Young Communist League, the John Reed Clubs, the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, etc.)—again, in spite of the savage police repression and media censorship to which Communists were subjected. The party even had great success agitating for its remarkable, socialistic Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill between 1930 and 1936, which would have created a social democracy in some respects more expansive than that which any Western European country enacted after the Second World War. Historians have sadly neglected this bill and the nationwide wave of mass support that developed behind it, which led it to be the first federal unemployment insurance bill in U.S. history to be reported favorably out of a congressional committee (the House Labor Committee, in 1935).35

It seems, in short, that we would do well to reject liberal shibboleths about the essential moderateness of the American people. Instead, intellectuals should embrace a materialistic method that emphasizes above all else the ubiquitously ramifying class struggle. The historian Julie Greene has remarked that even "struggles over environmental justice, human rights, anticolonialism, welfare rights, or women's reproductive rights" are forms of class struggle. Class is fundamental, as Marx saw, and working people even in the "conservative" U.S. are and have been in many respects very leftist underneath all the ruling-class indoctrination to which they have been subjected.

³⁵ See Chris Wright, "Popular Radicalism in the 1930s: The History of the Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill," Class, Race and Corporate Power, vol. 6, issue 1 (2018).

Julie Greene, "Rethinking the Boundaries of Class: Labor History and Theories of Class and Capitalism," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2021): 92–112.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JIMMY HOFFA (2019)

Jimmy Hoffa used to say he'd be forgotten ten years after his death. This was an uncharacteristically unintelligent judgment. Forty-four years after his murder on July 30, 1975, Hoffa is still famous enough that one of the most celebrated movies of the year is about the man who claims to have killed him, Frank Sheeran. Called *The Irishman*, the film, directed by Martin Scorsese, stars Robert De Niro as Sheeran, Al Pacino as Hoffa, and Joe Pesci as Russell Bufalino, the Mob boss who

approved the killing. For a labor leader, such a level of fame is not only extraordinary; it is unique.³⁷

Of course, the reasons for Hoffa's fame are not entirely to his credit. He is seen as the dictatorial and corrupt union leader who was close friends with gangsters and allied his union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), with the Mafia. Bobby Kennedy went after him for years, starting with the famous McClellan Committee hearings of 1957–59 (for which Kennedy was the chief counsel), and finally got him convicted in 1964 on charges of jury tampering and fraud, for improper use of the Teamsters' pension fund. His appeals having failed, Hoffa went to prison in 1967, but was released in 1971 when Richard Nixon commuted his sentence. As described in Charles Brandt's bestseller *I Heard You Paint Houses* (2016), on which Scorsese's movie is based, Hoffa's subsequent campaign to regain the presidency of the Teamsters was sufficiently threatening to the Mafia that they had him killed.

The Irishman focuses on this seedier side of Hoffa's life, thus perpetuating the image of a wholly amoral and self-serving criminal with which the McClellan hearings made Hoffa's name synonymous. Most articles published in popular media, such as Steve Early's recent piece in *Jacobin* entitled "The Ghost of Jimmy Hoffa Won't Go Away," express a similarly one-sided view. The truth is that Hoffa's Mob connections were hardly the defining feature of his life. Rather, he deserves to be known, in large part, as the preternaturally effective and hard-working—20-hour days

This essay relies primarily on the following books: Thaddeus Russell, Out of the Jungle: Jimmy Hoffa and the Remaking of the American Working Class (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Arthur A. Sloane, Hoffa (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991); Ralph C. James and Estelle Dinerstein James, Hoffa and the Teamsters: A Study of Union Power (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1965); James R. Hoffa, The Trials of Jimmy Hoffa: An Autobiography (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970); Charles Brandt, I Heard You Paint Houses: Frank "The Irishman" Sheeran and Closing the Case on Jimmy Hoffa (Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2004); Robert F. Kennedy, The Enemy Within (New York: Popular Library, 1960); and Dan La Botz, "The Tumultuous Teamsters of the 1970s," in Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below in the Long 1970s, eds. Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner, and Cal Winslow (New York: Verso, 2010), 199–226.

six days a week—leader of what was then the largest union in American history, responsible for raising millions of truck drivers, warehousemen, laundry workers, retail clerks, and others into the middle class.

With the possible exception of John L. Lewis, no twentieth-century union leader was as beloved by the members as Hoffa. He made it a point to be approachable and endlessly responsive: in speeches, for example, he regularly gave out his office phone number and insisted that members call him at any hour of the day or night if they had problems. The contracts he secured were remarkably generous—and yet, ironically, even employers profoundly admired him, considering him a master negotiator, a "genius," more knowledgeable about the trucking industry than anyone, all in all "a great statesman" who was scrupulously honest and realistic in bargaining.

Indeed, the fundamental reason for the perennial fascination with Jimmy Hoffa may be not so much his ties to the Mafia as his sheer power and success. No other industry was more critical to the nation's economy than trucking, and Hoffa did more than anyone to rationalize and stabilize conditions in this chaotic, competitive industry (a service for which employers were grateful). Bobby Kennedy may have exaggerated when he said Hoffa was the second most powerful man in the country, but he certainly did have a degree of power unimaginable for a union official in the twenty-first century. And that's what is so interesting about him: Hoffa symbolizes a political economy long gone, an era when a union leader could strike fear and loathing in the hearts of senators and presidents, when the old industrial working class, millions strong and capable of bringing the economy to its knees if it so desired, was still the foundation of the social order. Certain sectors of the working class were even defiantly independent of the corporate-liberal "consensus" of the Cold War establishment, having carved out their own self-policed political economy with the help of organized crime, informal deals, and a willingness to meet violence with violence. The Teamsters epitomized this independent working class, and Hoffa epitomized the Teamsters.

It was the *aesthetic*, so to speak, of the Teamsters and their form of unionism to which Bobby Kennedy and other "corporate liberals" objected (together with "socially responsible" unionists like Walter Reuther of the United Autoworkers). As historian Thaddeus Russell argues, "the confrontation [between Kennedy and Hoffa] represented a cultural conflict between the rising, respectable professional class of the prosperous postwar years and the uncultured, unassimilated, and unruly industrial working class of the Depression." To have such an untamed and independent social force right at the heart of society—in the age of triumphant liberalism—was an embarrassment.

That working class is dead now. But in its heyday, it was one hell of a force to be reckoned with.

The Rise of Jimmy Hoffa

Years later, Hoffa formulated the moral philosophy he had imbibed from his early days in Indiana and Detroit:

Every day of the average individual is a matter of survival. If by chance he should go from home to work and have an accident, lose an arm or an eye, he's just like an animal wounded in the jungle. He's out. Life isn't easy. Life is a jungle... Ethics is a matter of individualism. What may be ethical to you may be unethical to someone else... But my ethics are very simple. Live and let live, and those who try to destroy you, make it your business to see that they don't and that they have problems.

It was in Detroit in the Depression years that Hoffa learned the law of the jungle. As a dockloader at Kroger's warehouse, Hoffa led a strike against the sadistic foreman, which resulted in a temporary agreement with the company that improved conditions and pay. When he was fired a couple of years later, in 1935, for dropping a crate of vegetables on the loading dock, he was immediately hired by a Teamsters official to be an organizer (or "business agent") with Local 299. He was only 21, but with his boundless energy and intelligence he proved effective.

Across much of the country, the IBT was beginning a sustained offensive in these years. In 1934 its members played a decisive role in two successful general strikes: one in San Francisco, where they joined the longshoremen's union to shut down the city, and one in Minneapolis, where the Trotskyists in charge of Local 574 led a strike that elicited shocking violence from the police and thugs hired by employers. The Teamsters' almost total victory in this strike, leading to the unionization of thousands of "unskilled" workers, began its transformation from a small conservative craft organization to a national industrial union encompassing over two million members.

The more politically conservative Detroit Teamsters were, in their own way, just as militant as the Trotskyists in Minneapolis. To organize the increasingly numerous—and abysmally paid—intercity freight drivers, Local 299's organizers favored a strategy much simpler than signing up workers and petitioning for elections that would be overseen by the newly established National Labor Relations Board. Instead, they approached an employer: "either enroll your workers with the union or we'll bomb your trucks." If he refused, they bombed his trucks. And sometimes his home. In a violent, lawless city, this strategy worked well. (They had likely learned it, in fact, from having their own cars bombed by "hired thugs.") Combined with frequent strikes and strike threats, such intimidation resulted in an influx of new members into the local and steadily rising wages.

Hoffa and his several union colleagues didn't limit themselves to organizing drivers; anyone who worked on a loading platform was fair game too. "We'd go out," Hoffa later recalled, "hit the docks, talk to drivers, put up picket lines, conduct strikes, hold meetings day and night, convince people to join the union." It was treacherous work: "My scalp was laid open sufficiently wide to require stitches no less than six times

during the first year I was business agent of Local 299. I was beaten up by cops or strikebreakers at least two dozen times that year." During one strike he was jailed eighteen times within a 24-hour period, since he kept returning to the picket line after being released. In these years he also had a list of arrests "that's maybe as long as your arm" for fighting with strikebreakers, hired thugs, and members of rival unions who were trying to organize the same workers the Teamsters were.

In 1938 two developments occurred that would later facilitate Hoffa's centralized control over the entire union. First, Dave Beck, an organizer from Seattle (who went on to become president of the IBT in 1952), formed the Western Conference of Teamsters, an administrative body covering the eleven western states and British Columbia. Such a higher-level body was necessary for coordinating organizing and bargaining in a fragmented industry that had thousands of small employers and hundreds of local Teamster unions. That very year, two thousand employers in the eleven states signed an agreement to bring higher wages to intercity ("over-the-road") drivers.

Around the same time, Farrell Dobbs was achieving a similar ambition in the Midwest. One of the Trotskyists who had led the 1934 Minneapolis strike, Dobbs realized it was inefficient and mutually damaging for locals to separately negotiate different wage scales for their own over-the-road drivers. So he and his comrades, with the cooperation of the IBT leadership, created the Central States Drivers Council (CSDC) to bargain for all unionized over-the-road drivers in the twelve Midwestern states. To force reluctant—and widely scattered—employers to come to the bargaining table, Dobbs gave them the kind of ultimatum that Hoffa used to great effect in later years: all firms with lines ending or beginning in Chicago (which meant most firms in the Midwest) would have to negotiate an areawide contract or face a devastating strike. They quickly complied, and over two weeks they and the CSDC hammered out the most ambitious and important contract the IBT had ever negotiated. Establishing uniform minimum wages,

maximum hours, seniority rights, safety guarantees, a grievance committee, and a closed shop (all drivers had to belong to the Teamsters), the contract covered 125,000 workers at 1,700 companies.

Hoffa worked with Dobbs in this historic campaign, specifically as a leader of Dobbs' effort to organize those long-distance Midwestern drivers who hadn't yet been recruited into the union. Whatever qualms he felt about Dobbs' Trotskyism, Hoffa was profoundly impressed by the man's strategic and organizational genius. "I was studying at the knee of a master," he reminisced later.

He also learned from Dobbs the usefulness of the secondary boycott. Some employers in Omaha and Sioux City had refused to accept the CSDC contract and locked out their unionized employees. Dobbs and other Teamster leaders studied the companies' routes and decided that the best way to force them to capitulate was to threaten a strike against employers in Kansas City, who made shipments for the Omaha and Sioux City operators, unless they suspended their dealings with the latter. This would cut off the holdouts in Nebraska and effectively force them to sign the contract. The plan worked—and Hoffa was made vividly aware of the power of the secondary boycott, a tactic he would never be afraid to use. (After the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 made such boycotts illegal, Hoffa found a legal loophole and defiantly continued to use them.)

This tactic also inspired a broader strategy that helped the Teamsters organize industries contiguous to trucking, thus increasing the IBT's membership considerably. Any company that depended on Teamsters for deliveries and pickups could be compelled to unionize its employees simply by being refused service and thereby shut down. "Warehouses, canneries, laundries, retail stores, bakeries, and breweries fell to this tactic," one historian writes, "which Hoffa used to make the Detroit Teamsters and ultimately the entire IBT into a boundless, multi-industry union."

CHRIS WRIGHT

Hoffa's triumphant future might have been quite different if not for a fateful decision Farrell Dobbs made in 1940: he resigned from the Teamsters to devote all his time to the Socialist Workers Party. Daniel Tobin, head of the IBT, pleaded with him to reconsider, to drop his Trotskyist politics and continue working with the union, even promising him the first available vice-presidency. Which could have been a stepping-stone to the presidency. But it was to no avail: Dobbs resigned his union positions, including negotiating chairman of the powerful CSDC. This is what made possible Hoffa's rise to national prominence, as he wrote later in his autobiography:

I was chosen to replace Dobbs as negotiating chairman. I didn't realize, when I accepted the job, along with a vice-presidency [of the CSDC, not the IBT] the following year, that it was the post that would project me into the national limelight as far as the International Brotherhood was concerned, but that job really paved the way to the General Presidency. As a rung in the ladder of my career, it provided a giant step upward.

Hoffa's star was rising on other fronts too. He had been de facto leader of Local 299 since 1936—overseeing its financial stabilization (after near-bankruptcy) and recruitment of several thousand new members—and was gradually becoming de facto leader of the Joint Council of all Detroit locals. In 1942 he was elected to the board of directors of the Wayne County Federation of Labor, but more importantly, he established the Michigan Conference of Teamsters to centralize in his hands bargaining for all locals in the state. Weaker locals regularly negotiated subpar contracts for their intracity members, which exerted downward pressure on wages across the state. With Hoffa negotiating a uniform statewide contract, the wages of thousands of workers were raised, and increasingly many members became familiar with him and intensely loyal to him.

But it was his achievements with the CSDC that ultimately made him wildly popular across the country. During World War II Hoffa's ambitions were confined within the straitjacket imposed by the National War Labor Board, but starting in 1945 he was able to negotiate contracts that contained wage increases as high as 20 percent or even 50 percent. He brought tens of thousands more drivers into the Midwestern agreement and established a Central States health and welfare program funded entirely by employer contributions. And he did what the CIO failed to do with its postwar Operation Dixie: he organized the South. Using the secondary boycott, it wasn't particularly challenging (at least in principle). He ordered warehousemen and dockworkers to boycott Southern trucking companies crossing into the Midwest unless they hired union members, which after a few years forced the large majority of Southern employers to sign with the union. And then, by the mid-1950s, he forced them to raise wages and improve working conditions to the level of the CSDC.

At the same time, the CSDC (renamed the Central States Conference) had undertaken two gargantuan projects: to negotiate uniform contracts for *local* workers—as opposed to over-the-road drivers—in the 22 states the Conference now covered, and to complete the unionization of all trucking companies in these states. By 1957, these goals were achieved.

Hoffa's meteoric rise in the IBT was cemented at the 1952 convention, when he was unanimously elected a vice-president of the union, the youngest ever (at 39). He quite possibly could have been elected president, but he preferred to engineer Dave Beck's election in return for Beck's promise not to interfere in his activities. Aside from the president, Hoffa was the most powerful union officer at the time, controlling the Southern and Central Conferences, and by the middle of Beck's brief reign (ending in 1957) he was certainly the dominant force in the entire IBT.

CHRIS WRIGHT

How did Hoffa rise so high so fast? Part of the answer, which will be explored below, is that he allied himself with a lot of useful people. But much of his success was due simply to his personality and intelligence. According to people who knew him, he had an "almost hypnotic" charisma, was a "master psychologist," "the smartest guy I know," "like an elephant with his memory—it's beyond belief," and expert in the minutiae of labor law. In the 1960s he would sometimes give talks at universities or business executive lunches, discoursing perceptively on the history of labor legislation or jousting with economists and lawyers, leaving initially hostile audiences so impressed they would give him a standing ovation (as on one occasion at the Harvard Law School Forum). He was supremely confident and supremely competent.

In addition to all this, he was infinitely ambitious.

He wanted the union to be millions strong. It's almost as if he shared the old IWW dream of One Big Union for the entire working class—even as he rejected the concept of social-movement unionism associated with both the political left and, in a diluted way, liberals like Walter Reuther. Just before Hoffa was elected president in 1957, he wrote a "policy statement" that included earmarking at least 25 percent of the IBT's income to organizing. This was at a time when the AFL-CIO, to which the Teamsters belonged, was (myopically) devoting about 5 percent of its revenue to organizing. A year later, even as the McClellan hearings—broadcast on televisions around the country—were making his name synonymous with corruption and criminality, Hoffa announced a plan to bring every policeman in the U.S. into the IBT. "It is a piece of unmitigated gall," one political official responded, speaking for multitudes. Hoffa also planned to establish a "Conference on Transportation Unity," under his leadership, that would bring together the IBT, the International Longshoremen's Association, the National Maritime Union, railroad brotherhoods, airline unions, in total more than fifty organizations in the transportation sector. Both of these projects had to be scuttled because of public opposition. But they indicate the scope

of Hoffa's dreams, which the union continued to pursue by organizing everyone from egg farmers to airline flight attendants.

The other ingredient of Hoffa's personality that was crucial to his success was the one that also led to his downfall: his contempt for bourgeois respectability, bourgeois hypocrisy, and liberal pieties.

Hoffa vs. Kennedy

Jimmy Hoffa was a contradictory man, but one quality, at least, was foundational to his character: brutal realism. He saw the world in terms of power relations; he rejected all ideological illusions and mystifications (as he saw them), from communism to liberalism to his wife Josephine's Christianity. This is how he could both support Republican politicians and frequently sound like a Marxist. It was all in the name of realism, whatever was necessary to get ahead and help certain others get ahead.

His attitude towards the legal system was characteristic. As a couple of academic observers who knew him well wrote, "To Hoffa law is not something to respect, but rather a set of principles designed to perpetuate those already in power, and something for others to 'get around.' Thus, Hoffa feels clear of conscience about his expertise in devising legal loopholes and practicing legal brinksmanship." In effect, he thought the state was a capitalist state; therefore, he had little respect for the idealistic liberal corporatism of a Reuther or the Kennedy brothers. While he recognized the value and necessity of having a welfare state, at bottom he thought the working class had to take care of itself, do whatever was necessary to survive, and constantly fight against a hostile world.

His public statements at the time of the McClellan Committee reflected this perspective. "The working man is being shortchanged every day in America." "Twenty years ago [i.e., in 1939] the employers had all the hoodlums working for them as strikebreakers. Now we've got a few, and everybody's screaming." Speaking to a television audience:

CHRIS WRIGHT

Now, when you talk about the question of hoodlums and gangsters, the first people that hire hoodlums and gangsters are employers. If there are any illegal forces in the community, he'll use them, strong-arm and otherwise. And so if you're going to stay in the business of organizing the unorganized, maintaining the union you have, then you better have a resistance.

In short, Hoffa was working-class through-and-through, the very symbol (at least to the public) of anti-establishmentarian defiance in a relatively conformist age, closer to the rank and file than probably any other major labor leader. "As he walks down the street," one observer wrote in 1964, "he often halts passing trucks for a moment's discussion with a couple of members. When away from Washington, D.C., he takes time out to tour the local trucking terminals, where he jokes, wrestles, and swears with the workers." Nothing was more apt to provoke his legendary temper than an aspersion cast on the dignity of the truck driver's occupation.

Hoffa's connections to the criminal world dated back to the 1930s and were a natural product of operating in a violent, cutthroat environment. If Local 299 and others hadn't made alliances with unsavory people, they likely would have been gobbled up by employers and/or rival unions. In the late 1930s, for instance, a jurisdictional war erupted between the Detroit Teamsters and the United Brewery Workers, both of which unions claimed the right to represent the city's beer drivers. Vicious street battles broke out while higher-level administrative bodies and even federal courts tried to mediate the dispute. The Teamsters developed a network of allies from local saloons to the Michigan statehouse, including members of the East Side Sicilian Mob and other criminals. With their help, and by bribing or intimidating some bar owners into only accepting beer delivered by Teamsters, the latter managed to keep their foot in the brewery industry.

More broadly, David Witwer points out in *Corruption and Reform* in the Teamsters Union (2003) that the IBT had both been victimized by and benefited from criminal associations for decades, but especially starting in the 1930s. Chicago and New York were the great hubs of extra-legal activity. The sociologist Daniel Bell explained long ago why trucking was particularly susceptible to crime: "racketeers were able to enter only into small, unit-sized industries where chaotic competition prevailed," meaning that "the greatest potential for racketeering is in the Teamsters union."

It isn't known for sure when the Detroit Teamsters first made really durable and extensive connections with organized crime. Some writers, such as Dan Moldea, argue it was in the early 1940s, when Hoffa's union was facing an existential threat from well-funded CIO unions that were raiding the (AFL-affiliated) IBT's turf to steal its members. Supposedly Hoffa was compelled to turn to the Mob for manpower and political influence in his many battles against the CIO.

Thaddeus Russell, on the other hand, argues the decisive events weren't until later in that decade, in connection with Hoffa's attempts to control the local liquor industry (made up of breweries, bars, groceries, liquor stores, and the state Liquor Control Commission) and to defend it from CIO incursions. By 1946 the Teamsters had organized nearly all of the industry's workers, except for those in a group of businesses owned by the Mafia. The president of the largest Mob-owned company, Bilvin Distributing Company, was William Bufalino, who was a close associate of (among others) Russell Bufalino, underboss of one of the most powerful crime families in the northeast. To break the resistance of the Detroit Mob to unionization, Hoffa hired William as president of Local 985, which covered jukebox workers. This created the first institutional alliance between the Detroit Teamsters and the Mafia, who now accepted unionization and in fact engaged in a violent campaign against scores of bar owners who didn't sign with the gangster-owned, Teamster-organized firms.

William Bufalino went on to become one of Hoffa's most important attorneys in his later legal battles. And these new (or not-so-new) connections to organized crime in Detroit facilitated IBT connections to Mob figures all over the country. In 1951, for example, Hoffa placed the Central States health and welfare fund with the Union Casualty Life Insurance Agency of Chicago, which was owned by Allen Dorfman. Allen was the son of Paul Dorfman, who was a useful ally to have in Chicago: he was friends with the city's political bosses, President Truman, leaders of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and AFL president George Meany. He was also connected to organized crime in both New York and Chicago.

In general, one of the key reasons for Hoffa's alliances with gangsters is one of the reasons politicians' later attacks on him tended to be hypocritical: the Mafia was politically influential (in addition to being inextricably intertwined with the "legitimate" business community). "The mobsters have always been wedded to the political system," one criminologist observed decades ago. "That's how they survive. Without that wedding, they'd be terrorists—and we'd get rid of them." As Thomas Reppetto has written, "in both politics and business [the Mafia] managed to link the underworld to the upper world," becoming immensely powerful in the process. In the 1940s and 50s, if businessmen, politicians, and corrupt law enforcement were all linked to organized crime, it would have been odd for an ambitious union leader operating in a viciously competitive environment not to reach out for protection and advantage to those same powerful "underworld" figures.

In an ABC News interview in the early 1970s Hoffa justified his relationships with alleged criminals and ex-convicts in terms that were, while self-serving, not implausible: "these [organized crime figures] are the people you should know if you're going to avoid having anyone

³⁸ Arthur Sloane uses this quotation in *Hoffa*, but he doesn't cite the source and I haven't been able to find it.

³⁹ Thomas Repetto, "Bring Down the Mob," New York Times, February 25, 2007.

interfere with your strike. And that's what we know them for... Know who your potential enemies are and neutralize 'em." To another reporter he insisted, "I'm no different than the banks, no different than insurance companies, no different than the politicians. You're a damned fool not to be informed what makes a city run when you're tryin' to do business in the city." On the other hand, a majority of politicians could have justly pointed out they had no ties to the Mafia. Whether they had no ties to any corrupt individuals or businesses, or even themselves weren't morally and legally compromised in numerous ways, is another question entirely.

Hoffa was certainly unusual, though, in his willingness to thumb his nose at propriety. Being convinced of the moral turpitude of the entire political-economic system, he saw no reason to take seriously the self-serving outrage—directed at unions, not corporations or politicians—of its guardians. So he dug himself deeper, as it were, even flaunting his relationships with notorious people. The Central and Southern States Pension Fund (CSPF), for example, which he browbeat employers into creating and funding in 1955, got him into trouble some years later. With millions of dollars flowing into it every month, retired union members received some of the most generous pensions in the country. (Teamsters were also, by now, receiving some of the most generous wages: there were stories of professors at elite universities quitting their jobs to become long-distance truck drivers because they could double their pay.) But all this money, hundreds of millions of dollars, had to be invested, and Hoffa was in charge of the investment decisions, as he was in charge of almost everything. The Fund gave out countless loans to a bewildering variety of people and institutions, but some were given to mobsters such as Russell Bufalino, Carlos Marcello, Santo Trafficante, Johnny Dioguardi, and Morris Dalitz, one of the Mafia figures who used CSPF money to build Las Vegas casinos. While these loans may have been legal, in the context of the McClellan hearings they were provocative.

Meanwhile, since at least the 1940s Hoffa had found it expedient to bribe public officials, including in law-enforcement and regulatory agencies, prosecutors' offices, and state legislatures. "Every man has his price," he was wont to say. No doubt he thought bribery, a well-established practice among businesses and (less so) unions through the entire industrial age (in a sense, even up to the present), was necessary to secure the cooperation of typically anti-labor governments. But its widespread practice by unions contributed to the stench of corruption that had, in the public mind, settled on organized labor by the early 1950s.

The history of the public revulsion against ostensibly corrupt "Big Labor," crystallized in the award-winning 1954 film On the Waterfront, is too well known to need retelling here. Grand jury investigations, congressional hearings as early as Senator Estes Kefauver's Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce in 1950-51, and negative media coverage hounded some of the nation's largest unions for years. This was the era, after all, when big business was conducting a colossal political, legal, and public-relations campaign to beat back the left-liberalism spawned by the popular movements of the 1930s. As historian Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has argued, there was a "unity of purpose within much of the business community on...the necessity of halting the advance of the welfare state and of undermining the legitimacy and power of organized labor."40 The more that unions could be tarred and feathered for connections to organized crime (as if business itself lacked such connections, or were selflessly devoted to the common weal and knew nothing of legal infractions!), the better it would be for the corporate offensive against labor.

Needless to say, the personal motive of self-designated crusaders against organized crime and union corruption was not necessarily to do the bidding of big business. Bobby Kennedy, for instance, who emerged as the most ferocious enemy of both the Mafia and Jimmy Hoffa, was a

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994),

highly religious man who seems to have considered it his Catholic duty to cleanse organized labor of racketeers. Unions, he thought, should be sacred institutions, a movement of the oppressed—hence his embrace of Cesar Chavez later in the 1960s. According to Arthur Schlesinger, this millionaire son of a successful businessman, brother of a senator and president, "came to identify himself with workers who were expelled, beaten, murdered." The point, however, is that whatever Bobby's motives were, his long obsession with crushing Hoffa and other despised union officials fit neatly into the political agenda that had been set by business. This fact, doubtless, is why he was given all the resources he needed to pursue his obsession.

In retrospect, the Kennedy–Hoffa war from 1957 to 1964 has symbolic, sociological significance. It was a clash of two opposite types, two personifications of diametrically opposed philosophies and social strata. On one side was the liberal "do-gooder," the idealist (in the anti-Marxian sense), the educated, elite professional who thinks society should be run by idealistic educated professionals who are noble and objective enough to have the public interest at heart. He may be inclined to think in terms of moral absolutes—"as Mr. Hoffa operates it," Bobby wrote, "[the Teamsters union] is a conspiracy of evil"—and is certain he is on the side of Good. Such a person is motivated by whatever lofty ideas he chooses, but his actual role in the political economy is typically to be a smooth-talking technocrat who enforces the rule of the capitalist class. Objectively, so to speak, he is on the side of business.

On the other side is the working-class materialist, the realist, the person whose training in the art of survival has taught him that what matters above all is the struggle for resources. He may share Hoffa's lack of interest in broad social reform, as well as his belief that a union is in essence just a business to sell its members' labor at the highest price. He may, therefore, somewhat accommodate himself to society as it is. But the reality of this person's existence is a kind of class struggle, a struggle to wrest what he can however he can. Doubtless the liberal professional

finds him—and his class—vulgar, uneducated, crassly materialistic, and potentially threatening. As Kennedy found Hoffa. But the working-class realist doesn't have the luxury (nor the liberal hypocrisy) to sneer at "materialism."

These two types tend to loathe one another.

Incidentally, there is an irony here: in some respects Hoffa had a "purer" character than Kennedy. He never drank or smoked—didn't even want people to drink in his presence—and would never have dreamed of cheating on his beloved wife, contrary to the perennially philandering Kennedy brothers (whose sexual addictions, including White House orgies, revolted him). At a San Francisco nightclub once, he was so embarrassed by a stripper's performance he turned his chair away so as not to see her. While he cursed incessantly—except around his family, where he was a paragon of a doting, gentle father and husband—he hated off-color jokes. Far from using the union as a means to enrich himself, Hoffa lived modestly, rarely even upgrading his (somewhat shabby) wardrobe, and constantly gave away large sums of money to anyone who asked for it. "He was probably the most generous, open-handed guy I've ever met," an associate recalled, being a "sucker for any sad song or hard-luck guy."

As for the Kennedys, their aversion to the Mafia didn't prevent them from hiring its members to kill Fidel Castro, as part of the secret terrorist program called Operation Mongoose. Seymour Hersh even reports in *The Dark Side of Camelot* that the Mafia, rather stupidly, got John F. Kennedy elected president by manipulating the vote in Illinois. Their reward was that Attorney General Bobby Kennedy devoted unprecedented resources to destroying them.

In effect, what Kennedy and his fellow liberals who administered the Cold War corporatist state wanted was a fully assimilated, "civilized," obedient population that wouldn't have any shadowy groups opaque to the state. Communists were illegitimate and had to be persecuted, as they were from the late 1940s on; unions that forged their own way,

not consenting to political assimilation, were also illegitimate. Hoffa's Teamsters, the most powerful union of all and the most "independent"—it even supported Republicans!—was first on the list of offenders.

Dave Beck, sybarite extraordinaire, was the first big fish to be caught in the net cast by Senator McClellan's Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field. But right around the same time he was exposed as corrupt, in early 1957, Hoffa was caught allegedly bribing a lawyer involved with Bobby Kennedy's investigation. And then began Hoffa's streak of good luck: to Kennedy's shock, a jury found him not guilty. So later that year he went on to be overwhelmingly elected General President of the IBT. Kennedy was certain the election had been rigged, and publicly said so; it turned out he was wrong. Hoffa was incredibly popular with the members, and grew more so the more he was vilified in the press. "When the government came after him," a union member said years later, "a lot of us wanted to take our trucks and run'em over certain people... Everyone I knew thought Hoffa was a great man."

His election did result in the Teamsters being expelled from the AFL-CIO. But legally his troubles were overcome one after the other, infuriating Bobby, "the only member of our family who doesn't forgive," his father said. A trial on Hoffa's alleged wiretapping of union offices ended in acquittal. An indictment for perjury before the McClellan Committee had to be dropped when the Supreme Court ruled that wiretap evidence obtained by state officials couldn't be used in federal court. Over three years, the committee subpoenaed hundreds of Teamster officials and mobsters, filled fifty-odd volumes with witness testimony, interrogated Hoffa many times, charged him with more than eighty improper activities, but in the end, remarkably, proved nothing (as regards Hoffa, that is—other targets weren't so lucky). Organized labor's national reputation had been damaged, but legally, Hoffa had weathered the greatest congressional onslaught against a single individual in history.

The committee's activities did stimulate the passage, in 1959, of the Landrum-Griffin Act, officially known as the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act. Consistent with the committee's almost exclusive focus on union corruption and blithe disregard of management corruption, this act largely ignored management and instead regulated the internal affairs of unions. For instance, people convicted of robbery, bribery, extortion, aggravated assault, or embezzlement were barred from holding a union office for five years after conviction. The act also outlawed the principal means by which Hoffa had built the Teamsters since the 1930s: picketing to force employers to recognize a union; certain forms of secondary boycotting that the Taft-Hartley Act had left legal; and "hot cargo" arrangements whereby employers would agree not to deal with another employer involved in a labor dispute. This law thus revealed what, on the broadest scale, was really at stake in the McClellan hearings, namely the business class's desire to control, hobble, and discredit unions.41

The Teamsters membership seemed to understand this fact, judging by delegates' behavior at the IBT convention in 1961. Russell describes Hoffa's reception:

On the day the convention opened, an airplane trailing a banner with the message "Re-Elect Hoffa" circled overhead as more than 2,000 delegates, nearly all wearing Hoffa hats and saucer-sized buttons, flooded into the Deauville Hotel in Miami Beach. After Hoffa was nominated by John English, who called the incumbent "the man with the most guts in America," the delegates responded with a fifteen-minute ovation and a continuous chant of "Hoffa, Hoffa, Hoffa."... The delegates then mocked the government's attempts to

During the hearings, for example, the National Association of Manufacturers and the United States Chamber of Commerce "initiated a ferocious anti-union drive," Thaddeus Russell writes, "and used as one of its selling points the issue of union corruption." See David Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), chapter 9.

impose Spartan living on their leaders by passing with roaring unanimity a resolution raising Hoffa's salary to \$75,000—the highest of any American union official at the time...

As for Bobby Kennedy, he "had long been the target of the members' insults as a 'pantywaist' and 'hatchet man' bent on taking away the comforts they had gained from the union." Except for some dissidents scattered around the country, Hoffa acquired nearly mythic status among members as he continued to grow the union and systematically raise wages in the 1960s, even as he was facing his greatest legal threats yet.

Bobby hadn't forgiven him for escaping his clutches earlier, so as soon as he became Attorney General in 1961 he formed the Get Hoffa Squad (as it was known), consisting of sixteen attorneys and thirty FBI agents. By any means necessary, including methods of questionable legality (such as wiretapping, bugging, and planting spies), they were going to destroy their target. They empaneled fifteen grand juries to investigate Hoffa. In 1962 he went on trial in Nashville, Tennessee for accepting payments from an employer in violation of the Taft-Hartley Act. The government meticulously prepared its case, and yet, once again, Hoffa bested Kennedy: the trial ended in a hung jury.

Six months later, however, he was indicted yet again, this time for jury-tampering in the Nashville case. The Justice Department had uncovered evidence that he had attempted to buy some of the jurors' votes. The trial took place in early 1964, and this time, at last, Bobby got his revenge: Hoffa was found guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison. Just a few weeks later he went to trial once more, on charges of defrauding the CSPF in an alleged scheme that was so complex and technical it took him some time even to understand what he was being charged with. In this case, too, he was convicted, on one count of conspiracy and three counts of mail and wire fraud. His sentence was five years in prison, to run consecutively after the other eight years. Five

days after the verdict, his great obsession finally consummated, Kennedy resigned as Attorney General to run for the Senate.

Thus, the Cold War state had won a major battle against a union that had stepped out of line and gotten too powerful for its own good. "The International Brotherhood of Teamsters," Senator McClellan had written in 1962 for the *Reader's Digest*, "is now powerful enough by itself to put a stranglehold on our nation's economy... If they called a nation-wide strike, you could not get ambulances to take sick people to the hospital, nor hearses to carry the dead. Farmers could not get produce to urban areas; food manufacturers could not send in canned goods..." McClellan exaggerated Hoffa's power, but his fear was shared by many people and did reflect, however hyperbolically, the very real power of the IBT. Corruption and outright lawlessness existed all over society, not least within the federal government itself.⁴² It is hardly a coincidence that officials empowered to hunt down corruption attacked, first and foremost, the largest union in the country.

Indeed, in the very year that Hoffa was convicted, the IBT was attaining new heights of power. In January of 1964, Hoffa achieved the dream both he and his mentor Farrell Dobbs had cherished since the 1930s: a National Master Freight Agreement that covered hundreds of thousands of intercity and local truck drivers. It wasn't entirely complete, not being wholly uniform and not covering all the trucking-relevant occupations of the IBT membership. But it was a magnificent achievement nonetheless, 25 years in the making.

In the years when Bobby Kennedy and his colleagues were almost single-mindedly focused on, in effect, disciplining and defaming organized labor (however they personally interpreted their actions), Hoffa was patiently laying the foundations for realizing his dream. Year by year he was consolidating his power over the two regions he didn't yet control, the East and West. Bargaining was highly fragmented in the East, wage

For examples, see William Blum, *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2004).

diversity prevailing everywhere. Both employers and local union leaders, fearful, as Hoffa said, that "they would no longer be kings of their individual little isolated area," resisted standardization. But through threats and cajolery, strikes and other kinds of leverage, Hoffa gradually imposed uniformity on West Virginia and Pittsburgh, upper New York state and New England, then Philadelphia, Delaware, and southern New Jersey, finally the troublesome New York–New Jersey metropolitan area. All these places saw conditions begin to approximate the privileged Central States area for which Hoffa had long been bargaining.

It was a similar story in the West, although in a sense his task was easier there because bargaining was less fragmented. By 1961 he had achieved near-uniformity, in the process greatly raising wages in some areas, including Los Angeles.

Having engineered a common expiration for contracts from coast to coast in 1964, Hoffa was able to bargain with employers across the country at the same time. The 47-page contract, "the most complicated one ever worked out between a union and employers" (in Hoffa's opinion), covered 450,000 drivers. For most, the generous fringe benefits and across-the-board increases of 28 cents per hour over three years and three-quarters of a cent per mile were a significant improvement over their previous contracts. In just a few decades, then, the trucking industry had gone from being completely decentralized, low-paying, and characterized by utterly inhumane working conditions to being highly centralized, high-paying, and relatively humane.

For the next couple of years Hoffa worked towards achieving the same goal of relative uniformity for other occupations in his union, such as warehousemen. But by early 1967 his appeals of his convictions had run out, and it was time for him to report to federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. "The last couple of weeks before he went to jail were hellish," said a staffer who was with him during this time. "He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He would lie on the floor and yell, 'I'm not gonna go!" But in March, he went.

The End

One can imagine that for a man with the energy of Jimmy Hoffa, prison would not be easy. In fact, one of his favorite expressions became "Prison is hell on earth, only hell couldn't be this bad." When he was released, after 58 months in an overcrowded, rape-plagued, drug-infested, violent penitentiary, his description of the experience didn't mince words: "I can tell you this on a stack of Bibles: prisons are archaic, brutal, unregenerative, overcrowded hell holes where the inmates are treated like animals with absolutely not one humane thought given to what they are going to do once they are released. You're an animal in a cage and you're treated like one."

During his confinement he constantly suffered little indignities, such as having his anus inspected for drugs after returning from the visiting room, having to wear shoes and pants that didn't fit, and getting nosebleeds from his job assignment of unstuffing and restuffing old mattresses forty hours a week.

But even in prison, the labor leader found opportunities to organize. He became quite popular with the prisoners, for whom he formed and headed a committee that brought grievances to the attention of the warden. Since officially he remained president of the IBT until just before he was released, he was able to find jobs for many parolees, as well as sending money every year to his former Teamster assistants so they could buy Christmas cards for the families of his fellow prisoners. Guards and prisoners of all racial, religious, and educational backgrounds were, by all accounts, very fond of him.

Meanwhile, his power in the IBT was waning. He had appointed the rather dull but loyal Frank Fitzsimmons as acting president in the belief that he would willingly step aside when Hoffa was released (hopefully early, on parole). But Fitzsimmons gradually began to show signs of developing an independent identity and wanting to remain in power. Not that his leadership was beneficial for the union. He was too weak to

impose his will on the vast bureaucracy, so he restored decentralization to local and regional officials. Since this allowed them to build their own structures of power—not always to the benefit of the rank and file—they found Fitzsimmons' presidency quite congenial. They also began to increase their involvement with the Mafia, which, in addition, was finding it easier to get loans from the pension fund than under Hoffa.

In contract negotiations Fitzsimmons had skills, but they weren't on the level of Hoffa's. The renewals of the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA) in 1967 and 1970 disappointed thousands of workers, who went on strike in cities across the country. Considerable violence broke out as governors mobilized the National Guard, employers sent hired goons to attack pickets, and the union sent its own officials for the same purpose. Employers were finding it easier to coordinate resistance to employee demands, in part because the NMFA had, ironically, forced unity on them, but also because the IBT's leadership was increasingly ineffectual and corrupt. Wage growth slowed at the very moment when inflation was rising (as it continued to do through the 1970s). By the early '70s, rebel rank-and-file groups were springing up in almost every major city.

In fairness to the Fitzsimmons regime, in the long run even Hoffa could hardly have been up to the challenges. The political economy that had allowed a Hoffa to seize the reins and dominate an entire industry was already coming to an end. Facilitated by technological change, employers were embarking on a productivity push that threatened Teamsters' traditions of workplace control, as Dan La Botz argues. More companies were using pallets and forklifts; truck trailer lengths were growing longer; radio dispatch increasingly directed drivers; mechanized systems of conveyor belts distributed packages. The organization of work was changing. Teamsters "worked harder and under worse conditions as new equipment and new management techniques eliminated jobs while forcing those still employed to pick up the slack."

CHRIS WRIGHT

Hoffa had foreseen the inevitability of technological change and done what he could to ease the transition for suffering workers, forcing employers, for example, to pay for new job training and the costs of workers' relocation. But just as he left the picture, change was accelerating. His departure from the scene, however adventitious, was symbolic.

As economic and political crisis gripped the country in the 1970s, the transition to a neoliberal economy began. Neither strike waves in industry after industry nor the formation of union reform movements such as the important Teamsters for a Democratic Union (founded in 1976) could prevent the economic transition, though they could, at least, discipline and even eliminate corrupt leadership that was often in league with employers. With profit-rates under attack from heightened international competition, the overriding business agenda to cut costs, no matter the consequences for workers and communities, soon became the national political agenda. Industries began to be deregulated, a trend that has continued, with interruptions, up to the present. Trucking was deregulated when Jimmy Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act in 1980. Dan La Botz summarizes the consequences:

As intended, new non-union trucking firms swarmed into the industry, union firms went bankrupt en masse, and a series of buyouts and mergers pushed the industry toward oligopoly. Part and parcel of the same processes, the IBT lost tens and eventually hundreds of thousands of unionized truck drivers and dockworkers, and within a decade the Teamsters Union had been obliged to cede its long-standing position as the dominant force in American over-the-road truck operations. Since the freight industry had been the heart of the union and freight workers the most political and active union members, the cost to the union as a fighting organization went far beyond mere numbers...

The stage was set for the Reagan years, so disastrous to the labor movement.

Hoffa was released from prison late in 1971, but Nixon had imposed a restriction on his parole, probably at the request of Fitzsimmons: he couldn't engage in union activity until 1980. He hadn't known about the restriction when agreeing to be released, and was quite bitter when a reporter told him of it. "Jimmy, do you want to be president of the Teamsters again?" he was asked. "Jack, do you like to breathe?" Hoffa replied. But, not wanting to violate the terms of his parole, for a couple of years he laid low and gave the impression of accepting the terms of his freedom.

Instead, he pursued a new passion: prison reform. He went on television shows, talked to journalists, testified before Congress, gave speeches, and did whatever he could on behalf of a new organization called the National Association for Justice, dedicated to reforming prisons. Using his negotiating skills, he was instrumental in averting several prison riots and improving conditions in an Ohio penitentiary. Meanwhile, he was deluged with letters and physical greetings from well-wishers, thousands of drivers who treated him "like the Messiah," according to one observer. All this can only have whetted his appetite to return to power.

This opens the curtain on the final act of his life: his legal battle to get Nixon's parole restriction overturned, together with his public campaign to take back the presidency into which Fitzsimmons had been elected at the 1971 IBT convention (while Hoffa was still in prison). Ever the fighter, reckless to a fault, in 1974 Hoffa began publicly attacking both Fitzsimmons and the Mafia. The terms in which he did so certainly opened him to the charge of hypocrisy: he accused Fitzsimmons of "selling out to mobsters and letting known racketeers into the Teamsters." "I charge him with permitting underworld establishment of a union insurance scheme," he declared. "There will be more and more developments

as time goes on and I get my hands on additional information." Such statements could hardly have pleased his Mob associates.

Nor did these associates want a change of administration in any case. The union was more corrupt than ever, and they were perfectly happy with that. It was starting to look like Hoffa intended to kick them out of the union's affairs, to clean things up and get revenge on everyone he thought had betrayed him. "I'm going to take care of the people who've been fucking me," he told Russell Bufalino, according to Frank Sheeran. "Everybody wants Hoffa to back down. They're all afraid of what I know."

And so, in the end, Hoffa was done in by one of the deepest traits of his character: reckless defiance. His union career had ended because of his defiance of the law—the law of a government he didn't respect—and now his life ended because of his defiance of the Mafia. On July 30, 1975 he stood waiting in a restaurant parking lot just outside Detroit. A car pulled up; inside were his foster son Charles O'Brien, his hitman friend Frank Sheeran, and Salvatore Briguglio, an associate of the vicious mobster Anthony Provenzano. The friendly faces of O'Brien and Sheeran reassured him, so he got into the car, which O'Brien—not knowing what was in store—drove to a small suburban house nearby. The meeting to "make peace" was, as far as Hoffa knew, to take place in this house. Hoffa and Sheeran got out and walked up to it as the car drove away. Once inside, Sheeran put two bullets in the back of Hoffa's head, after which two men waiting in the house brought the body to a local Mob-connected funeral parlor, where it was cremated.

At least, that's how Frank Sheeran tells the story. And a lot of knowledgeable people (Arthur Sloane, Joe Pistone, Bryan Burrough, William D'Elia, and others) find it credible.

So, in such an anticlimactic way did the remarkable life of a remarkable person come to an end, a life lived at the very center of the most dramatic events of the age.

Hoffa's disappearance did have one positive result: it jolted the federal government into systematic action against organized crime, action not just in the context of a battle against a single individual and his unacceptably powerful union but as the beginning of a decades-long war of attrition. In the following years, the FBI hunted down the men it knew were involved in the murder and imprisoned them all on one charge or another (except for those who were themselves killed). The Mafia continued to infest the Teamsters until the late 1980s and even 1990s, but federal prosecution, assisted by Teamsters for a Democratic Union and a reformist president in the 1990s (Ron Carey), finally succeeded in almost completely ridding the IBT of its ancient ties to racketeers. Today, the Teamsters isn't the awe-inspiring force it used to be, but it is still one of the largest unions in the United States, with 1.4 million members.

As for its greatest leader, Jimmy Hoffa, he'll always be something of an enigma. On the one hand, he was no saint, nor was he a hero. He sometimes acted in amoral, brutal ways. While his biographer Arthur Sloane is right that the more lurid accusations (that he ordered murders, for instance, or even the assassination of JFK) have never been proven, and also that he was more independent of the Mafia than is generally supposed, Hoffa was not the kind of man or labor leader who should be copied in every particular. What he was was a concentrated, brilliant reflection of his environment, differing from other ruthless power players of his age and ours chiefly in that the side he chose was that of the working class, not the business class. He helped create the postwar middle class, in the process becoming arguably the most popular and the most reviled labor leader in U.S. history.

But perhaps his greatest legacy can be summed up in the inscription on a plaque he displayed on his desk: *Illegitimi non carborundum*. Don't let the bastards grind you down.

CAPITALISM VS. FREEDOM: A BOOK REVIEW (2018)

Being run by business, American culture suffers from an overwhelming preponderance of stupidity. When a set of institutions as reactionary as big business has a virtual monopoly over government and the media, the kinds of information, entertainment, commentary, ideologies, and educational policies on offer will not conduce to rationality or social understanding. What you'll end up with is, for instance, an electorate 25 percent of whose members are inclined to right-wing "libertarianism."⁴³ And the number is even higher among young people. That is to say, huge numbers of people will be exposed to and persuaded by the propaganda of the Cato Institute, the magazine *Reason*, Ayn Rand's novels, and

David Boaz, "Gallup Finds More Libertarians in the Electorate," *Cato Institute*, February 10, 2016.

CHRIS WRIGHT

Milton Friedman's ideological hackery to express their rebellious and anti-authoritarian impulses by becoming "extreme advocates of total tyranny," to quote Chomsky. They'll believe, as he translates, that "power ought to be given into the hands of private, unaccountable tyrannies," namely corporations. They'll think that if you just get government out of the picture and let capitalism operate freely, unencumbered by regulations or oversight or labor unionism, all will be for the best in this best of all possible worlds. And they'll genuinely believe they're being subversive and anarchistic by proposing such a program.

The spectacle of millions adhering to such a breathtakingly stupid ideology would be comical were it not so tragic. I'm an atheist, but Christianity strikes me as a more rational—and moral—religion than this "libertarian" (really totalitarian) one of absolute faith in universal privatization, marketization, corporatization, and commoditization. To be a so-called libertarian is to be deplorably ignorant of modern history, economics, and commonsense sociology. Given this reactionary philosophy's intellectual sterility and the fact that it has been refuted countless times, it is tempting to simply ignore it. And most leftists do ignore it. But that's a mistake, as the frightening figure quoted above (25 percent of the electorate) indicates. It is necessary to challenge "free market" worship wherever and whenever it appears.

The economist Rob Larson has performed an important service, therefore, in publishing his new book *Capitalism vs. Freedom: The Toll Road to Serfdom*, the more so because the book's lucidity and brevity should win for it a wide readership. In five chapters, Larson systematically demolishes the glib nostrums of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek (in the process also dispatching those other patron saints of the right wing, Ludwig von Mises, Ayn Rand, and Murray Rothbard). Even the book's title is effective: the message "*capitalism vs. freedom*" should be trumpeted from the hills, since it challenges one of the reigning dogmas of our society. Liberals and leftists themselves sometimes buy into the view that capitalism promotes freedom, arguing only that socialist

equality and justice are more important than capitalist freedom. But this is a false framing of the issue. The fact is that socialism, which is to say workers' democratic control of the economy, not only means greater equality and justice than capitalism but also greater freedom, at least for the 99 percent. It is freedom, after all, that has inspired anarchists and even Marxists, including Marx himself.

Larson begins with a brief discussion of two concepts of freedom, negative and positive (a distinction that goes back, as he notes, at least to the philosopher Isaiah Berlin). Crudely speaking, negative freedom means the absence of external constraint, of a power that can force you to act in particular ways. Positive freedom is the ability or opportunity actually to realize purposes and wishes. It involves having the means to satisfy desires, as when you are able to assuage hunger, be adequately clothed and sheltered, and have adequate sanitation. Positive freedom can be thought of as "freedom to," whereas negative freedom is "freedom from." Classical liberals like John Stuart Mill and modern conservatives like Friedman and Hayek are more concerned with negative freedom, which explains their desire for a minimal state; socialists are concerned also with positive freedom, frequently believing that a stronger state (e.g., a social democracy) can help ensure such freedom for the majority of people.

Friedman and Hayek argued that free-market capitalism, with minimal intervention by the state, is the surest guarantee of negative liberty. Larson's book is devoted mainly to refuting this belief, which is widely held across the political spectrum; but it also defends the less controversial claim that capitalism is incompatible with widespread positive liberty too. "Capitalism," Larson writes, "withholds opportunities to enjoy freedom (required by the positive view of freedom) and also encourages the growth of economic power (the adversary of liberty in the negative view of freedom)." That concentrations of economic power in themselves threaten negative liberty might be challenged, but this would be a weak argument, among other reasons because it's clear that

such centers of power will tend to dominate and manipulate the state in their own interest. They will construct coercive apparatuses to subordinate others to their power, which will itself enable further accumulations of power, etc., until finally the society is ruled by an oligarchy. Thus, from "pure" capitalism you get an oligarchy with the power to coerce.

However obvious this point may seem, it is far from obvious to right-wing libertarians. According to Friedman, "the kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to offset the other." Here we encounter the typical naïve idealism of conservatives (and, indeed, of centrists and liberals). Rather than analyzing the real conditions of real social structures, conservatives traffic in airy abstractions about "freedom," "the separation of political and economic power," the lofty virtues of "competitive capitalism," and so on. Evidently it doesn't occur to Friedman that economic power will tend to confer political power, and therefore that, far from offsetting each other, the two will be approximately fused. The economically powerful might not directly hold political office, but because of the resources they possess, they will have inordinate power and influence over political leaders. This is intuitively obvious, but it is also borne out by empirical research.⁴⁴

It's worth pointing out, too, something that Larson doesn't really focus on: within corporations, freedom, even negative freedom, is severely curtailed. In the absence of a union, the employee has hardly any rights. There is no freedom of expression, for example, and the boss can threaten you, manipulate you however he wants, verbally abuse you, behave horrendously towards you with probably no repercussions for himself. Capitalism in fact is a kind of fragmented totalitarianism, as privately totalitarian corporate entities proliferate all over society and constitute its essential infrastructure. The more oligopolistic they

See Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2014): 564–581.

become, to some degree even fused with the state, the less "fragmented" and more dangerous the totalitarianism is. Eventually the "libertarian" millennium might be achieved in which all countervailing forces, such as unions, are eradicated and the population is left wholly at the mercy of corporations, reveling in its sublime freedom to be totally dominated.

Libertarians admit that concentrations of wealth emerge in capitalism, but they deprecate the idea that capitalism leads to competition-defeating market concentration in such forms as oligopolies, monopolies, and monopsonies (like Wal-Mart). Usually these are created, supposedly, by government interference. But most businessmen and serious scholars disagree, pointing, for instance, to the significance of economies of scale. The famous business historian Alfred Chandler showed that many industries quickly became oligopolistic on the basis, in large part, of economies of scale. Historian Douglas Dowd observes that large-scale industrial technology has made it both necessary for firms to enlarge and possible for them to control their markets, while Australian economist Steve Keen argues that "increasing returns to scale mean that the perfectly competitive market is unstable: it will, in time, break down [into oligopoly or monopoly]."

Larson might have gone further in this line of argument by emphasizing just how much capitalists *hate* market discipline—i.e., the "free market"—and are constantly trying to overcome it. They're obsessed with *controlling* markets, whether through massive advertising campaigns, destruction or absorption of their competitors, price-fixing and other forms of collusion, or the formation of hundreds of trade associations. The historian Gabriel Kolko's classic study *The Triumph of Conservatism* revealed that the hatred of market anarchy is so extreme that Progressive-Era oligopolists were actually a significant force behind government regulation of industry (to benefit business most of all), as with the Meat Inspection Act of 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act, the Federal Reserve Act, the Clayton Antitrust Act, and the Federal Trade Commission Act. Andrew Carnegie and Elbert H. Gary, head of

U.S. Steel, even advocated government price-fixing!⁴⁵ So much for the corporate propaganda about how wonderful free markets are.

If government regulation is primarily responsible for monopoly elements in industries, as Friedman and Hayek argue, then you'd think that the deregulation tsunami of the neoliberal era would have led to greater competition across the economy. Did it? Not exactly. Larson quotes a *Fortune* article in 2011:

Since freight railroads were deregulated in 1980, the number of large, so-called Class I railroads has shrunk from 40 to seven. In truth, there are only four that matter... These four superpowers now take in more than 90% of the industry's revenue... An estimated one-third of shippers have access to only one railroad.

Quod erat demonstrandum. But there are many other examples. The deregulatory Telecommunications Act of 1996 was supposed to throw open the industry to competition; what it accomplished, according to the Wall Street Journal, was "a new phase in the hyper-consolidation of the cable industry... An industry that was once a hodgepodge of family-owned companies has become one of the nation's most visible and profitable oligopolies." These trends have occurred throughout the media, on a global scale.

The same consolidation is found in the airline industry, where deregulation "set off a flurry of mergers" (as the *Wall Street Journal* notes), "creating a short roster of powerful giants. And consumers are, in many cases, paying the price." In fact, it is well known that deregulation has facilitated an enormous wave of mergers and acquisitions since the 1980s. (Similarly, the big businesses, and later the mergers, of the Gilded Age appeared in a time of little public regulation.) All this market-driven

Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History*, 1900–1916 (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 256.

oligopolization has certainly not increased consumer freedom, or the freedom of anyone but the top fraction of one percent in wealth.

Speaking of communications and the media, another classic libertarian claim is hollow: far from encouraging a rich and competitive diversity of information and opinion, the free market tends to narrow the spectrum of opinion and information sources. When Hayek writes of totalitarian governments that "The word 'truth' ceases to have its old meaning. It describes no longer something to be found, with the individual conscience as the sole arbiter... it becomes laid down by authority," referring to the "spirit of complete cynicism as regards truth... the loss of the sense of even the meaning of truth," it is easy to think he's describing the mass media in the heavily capitalist United States. For one thing, because of scale economies and other market dynamics, over time fewer and fewer people or groups can afford to run, say, a successful and profitable newspaper. Across the Western world, in the twentieth century competition eventually weeded out working-class newspapers that had fewer resources than the capitalist mass media, and the spectrum of information consumed by the public drastically narrowed. "Market forces thus accomplished more than the most repressive measures of an aristocratic state," to quote the authors of the important study Power without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting, and the Internet in Britain (2009).

At the same time, the sources of information became less and less independent, due to the development of the advertising market. Advertisers "acquired a de facto licensing power because, without their support, newspapers ceased to be economically viable." As Edward Herman says, it wasn't the final consumer's but the *advertiser's* choices that determined media prosperity and survival, and hence the content (broadly speaking) of the news and opinion pieces. Moreover, the media increasingly consisted of giant corporations that had basically the same interests as advertisers anyway. The result corresponded less to Friedman's slogan "Free to Choose" than to Edward Bernays' slogan

"Free to Imagine That We Choose" (because what we're choosing from is a narrow range of corporate and government propaganda).

Capitalism vs. Freedom also has a chapter on "political freedom," and another on the "freedom of future generations"—which is nonexistent in a strictly capitalist society because future generations have no money and therefore no power. They have to deal with whatever market externalities result from their ancestors' monomaniacal pursuit of profit. Including the possible destruction of civilization from global warming, a rather large externality. Even in the present, as Larson reports, the IMF has estimated that the "external" costs of using fossil fuels, counting public health effects and environmental ramifications, are already \$5 trillion a year. Again, this should suggest to anyone with a few neurons still functioning that markets are not particularly "efficient." Their inefficiency is especially obvious considering the existence of major public goods that are undersupplied by the market, such as roads, bridges, sanitation systems, public parks, libraries, scientific research, modern technology, public education, and social welfare programs.⁴⁶ What do Friedman and Hayek think of these things? Well, Hayek was writing for a Western European audience, so he had to at least pretend to be reasonable. "[T]he preservation of competition [is not] incompatible with an extensive system of social services," he wrote, which leaves "a wide and unquestioned field for state activity." That's a pretty significant concession. Apparently his "libertarianism" wasn't very consistent.

For Friedman, public goods should be paid for by those who use them and not by a wealthy minority that is being taxed against its wishes. "There is all the difference in the world," he insists, "between two kinds of assistance through government that seem superficially similar:

For example, state funding and state initiative have been instrumental in the creation of railroads, mass production, plastics, aviation, the internet, computing, nuclear energy, space travel, satellites, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, clean energy, touch-screen technology, GPS, nanotechnology, voice-recognition software, etc. See Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* (London: Anthem Press, 2013) and Vernon Ruttan, Is *War Necessary for Economic Growth? Military Procurement and Technology Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

first, 90 percent of us agreeing to impose taxes on ourselves in order to help the bottom 10 percent, and second, 80 percent voting to impose taxes on the top 10 percent to help the bottom 10 percent." Thus, the wealthy and powerful shouldn't have to pay taxes to maintain services from which they don't directly benefit. We shouldn't subtract any of the positive freedom from people who have an enormous amount of it (i.e., of *power*, the concentration of which libertarians are supposed to *oppose*) in order to give more positive freedom to people who have very little of it. That would be unforgivably compassionate.

Most of Larson's chapter on political freedom consists of salutary reminders of how politics actually works in the capitalist United States. Drawing on Thomas Ferguson's investment theory of party competition, Larson describes the political machinations of big business, the concerted and frequently successful efforts to erode the positive and negative freedoms of the populace, the permanent class war footing, the fanatical union-busting, the absurdly cruel austerity programs of the IMF (which, again, serve but to crush popular freedom and power), and the horrifying legacy of European and U.S. imperialism around the world. Readers who want to learn more about the dark side of humanity can consult, for starters, William Blum's Killing Hope, Naomi Klein's The Shock Doctrine (which also describes Hayek and Friedman's love-affairs with neo-Nazi Latin American generals), and Noam Chomsky's books. In light of all these practices and policies that have emerged, directly or indirectly, out of the dynamics of the West's market economy, to argue that capitalism promotes human freedom is to be a hopeless intellectual fraud and amoral minion of power.

In fact, to the extent that we have freedom and democracy at all, it has been achieved mainly through decades and centuries of popular struggle *against* capitalism, and against vicious modes of production and politics (including slavery and Latin American semi-feudalism) that have been essential to the functioning of the capitalist world-economy. Göran Therborn's classic *New Left Review* article "The Rule of Capital

and the Rise of Democracy" (1977) gives details, as does Howard Zinn's famous *People's History of the United States*.

Larson, unlike the charlatans whose work he reviews, actually does believe that "concentrated power is opposed to human freedom," so he dedicates his final chapter to briefly expounding a genuinely libertarian vision, that of socialism. Here I need only refer to the work of such writers as William Morris, Peter Kropotkin, Anton Pannekoek, Rudolf Rocker, Errico Malatesta, Murray Bookchin, and others in the anarchist and left-Marxist traditions. There is a lot of talk of socialism these days, but few commentators (except on the left) know what they're talking about. For instance, like Hayek and Friedman, they tend to equate socialism with state control, authoritarianism, the Soviet Union, and other boogeymen. This ignores the fact that anarchism, which reviles the state, has traditionally been committed to socialism. So, virtually all mainstream commentary on socialism is garbage and immediately refuted from that one consideration alone. The basic point that conservatives, centrists, and liberals refuse to mention, because it sounds too appealing, is that socialism means nothing else but worker and community control. Economic, political, and social democracy. It is, in essence, a set of moral principles that can theoretically be fleshed out in a variety of ways, for instance some preserving a place for the market and others based only on democratic planning (at the level of the neighborhood, the community, the firm, the city, the nation, etc.). The core of socialism is freedom—the absence of concentrated power—not absolute equality.

Whether a truly socialist, libertarian society will ever exist is an open question, but certain societies have approached the ideal more closely than others. The Soviet Union was, and the U.S. is, very far from socialism, while Scandinavian countries, with their robust social democracies and political freedom, are a little closer. The Bolivian Constitution of 2009 is much closer to socialism, which is to say the ideal of human dignity, than the reactionary U.S. Constitution. On a smaller scale, worker cooperatives tend to embody a microcosmic socialism.

Larson ends his book on the note sounded by Rosa Luxemburg a century ago: *socialism or barbarism*. Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration "There is no alternative" can now be given a more enlightened meaning: there is no alternative to socialism, except the destruction of civilization and maybe the human species. Morality and pragmatic necessity, the necessities of survival, now coincide. Concentrated corporate power must be dismantled and democracy substituted for it—which is a global project that will take generations but may develop momentum as society experiences ever-greater crises.

In the end, perhaps Friedman, Hayek, and their ilk will be seen to have contributed to the realization of a truly libertarian program after all, albeit indirectly. For by aiding in the growth of an increasingly authoritarian system, they may have hastened the birth of a democratic opposition that will finally tear up the foundations of tyranny and lay the groundwork for an emancipated world. Or at least a world in which Friedmans and Hayeks can't become intellectual celebrities. For now, I'd settle for that.

CAPITALISM AND COLONIALISM (2019)

As I frequently and tiresomely reiterate, academic writing tends toward sophistry, superficiality, and obscurantism. Personally, my aesthetic tastes are offended by the endless rivers of overabundant verbiage one has to wade through in scholarly articles and books. But leave that aside. It sometimes seems as if many writers specialize in missing the point. Consider the typical arguments of liberal and conservative anti-colonialists (or so they characterize themselves) who want to defend capitalism against the charge that it necessitated or directly caused the brutal imperialism and colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are various arguments you can expect to find in their writings. They will say that colonialism (e.g., the Scramble for Africa of the 1880s) was financially and economically senseless, since, supposedly, it led to the home country's net loss of income and resources as it built up infrastructure in the colonies. Some money and resources

flowed home, but even more flowed abroad. Or they will say it was not primarily economic motives that led to colonialism but rather forces like popular nationalism, the vainglorious egos of politicians, irrational racial ideologies, and the political power of the military and diplomatic corps. Strictly speaking, all this colonialism was unnecessary, in fact a terrible and bloody mistake.

So don't blame capitalism for it! Blame those stupid irrational Europeans of 150 years ago!

The historian Jonathan Daly, a great enthusiast of "free enterprise," is, like his more well-known but embarrassingly vulgar University of Illinois colleague Deirdre McCloskey, one of these writers.⁴⁷ Let's take a look at his textbook *The Rise of Western Power*:

...Economics, far from the main driving force, was often only an *ex post facto* argument for retaining colonies. Yet colonies almost never paid for themselves, enriching only some individuals or companies, and did not magically enable merchants to gain access to commodities they could not have otherwise acquired through open trading...

...[T]he intense worldwide struggle for colonies was not even a boon to the competitors. Was there a deeper reason [than economics] for the New Imperialism [of the late 19th century]? The West's raw physical power, apparent scientific mastery of nature, efficient and dynamic economy, and myriad technological advantages provoked a broader moral crisis of Western civilization involving aggressive ideologies justifying and lauding violence and struggle as central to human existence. Sigmund Freud, shocked by the carnage of World War I, hypothesized about the "collective insanity" of Europe. It does indeed seem as if some kind of

⁴⁷ For an illustration of McCloskey's vulgarity, see her article "Socialism for the Young at Heart," *National Review*, June 3, 2019.

psychosis drove the European peoples to imperialism and war at the turn of the century.⁴⁸

Some kind of psychosis. What a profound explanation.

In response to such arguments, I would say, first, that whatever the economic benefits to Europe at the time were or were not, in the long run the colonization of Africa and Asia was enormously beneficial to industrial capitalism and world economic growth. Intervention in these regions on a colossal and brutal scale was necessary in order to thoroughly integrate them into a capitalist world-system. You have to create labor markets there, dispossess peasants of their lands, uproot traditional social structures, implant modern technologies and administrative controls, remake the whole society. Once you have accomplished that, after many decades, you can let the re-socialized natives take political control again and run the new system for the benefit of international capital, as has happened to a greater or lesser degree since the 1960s. That is, once you have created new structures of internal political and economic control, you can put your past and present victims in charge of those structures and rely, most of the time, on less direct means of external control ("neocolonialism") to make sure the newly "independent" societies stay in line.49

Over centuries, imperialism and colonialism created the international division of labor that world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein and dependency theorists such as André Gunder Frank and Walter Rodney spent decades exhaustively analyzing. The imperial "core" has specialized in high-value-added production, while "peripheral" countries have largely been consigned to exporting raw materials or simple, low-value-added manufactures. This world division of labor has been so advantageous to the imperial core that diplomatic historians

⁴⁸ Jonathan Daly, *The Rise of Western Power: A Comparative History of Western Civilization* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 338.

⁴⁹ See Jason Hickel, The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions (London: Windmill Books, 2017). For a classic essay on the subject, see Kwame Nkrumah, Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism (New York: International Publishers, 1965).

like Gabriel Kolko and Thomas McCormick have argued that its maintenance has been an overriding goal of American foreign policy from the 1940s to the present.⁵⁰ The current world system could hardly have been constructed without prolonged and invasive intervention in the economies of non-capitalist regions so as to draw them into a Western-dominated capitalist order.⁵¹

Aside from the incredible benefits to future capital of the brutal restructuring of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, such restructuring was inevitable anyway. Not even liberals and conservatives can deny that capitalism is an intrinsically expansionist, dynamic, *growing* system, a system that entails perpetual growth—the hunt for and cultivation of new markets, new raw materials, and new opportunities for investment. This process necessarily continues until the whole world has been transformed in the image of capitalist relations of production, as it finally has by the twenty-first century. As industry and investors extended their tentacles to peripheral regions of the world in the late nineteenth century, it wasn't exactly *accidental* or *mistaken* that governments were prevailed upon to protect investments and trade and to facilitate the whole process legally, financially, militarily, administratively, and technologically.

So, in effect, we have already dispatched the arguments of capitalist apologists. Imperialism and colonialism were a natural and inevitable product of capitalism, and in the long run (arguably also in the short run) they very much benefited the countries, especially the dominant classes, that undertook them, contributing to further economic growth, world trade, international investment, and the accumulation of profits and resources. Societies had to be remade in the image of capitalism, and this process was never going to be peaceful or "free."

⁵⁰ Gabriel Kolko, Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1980 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Thomas J. McCormick, America's Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War and After (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

Even in the absence of formal colonialism, military force was often necessary to compel countries to trade, on disadvantageous terms, with the West. The Opium Wars between Britain and China (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) are well-known examples.

But more can be said. Did colonialism really, in most cases, not economically benefit the metropolitan country in the short term? Was it economically irrational? We can concede that it was to the greater advantage of investors, politically connected industrialists, and arms manufacturers, not to mention the military and diplomatic establishment, than of the general population. It may, in fact, have harmed the latter in some respects, inasmuch as a portion of their taxes went to pay the costs of having colonies. But this argument is of no help to the defender of capitalism, because it is an inevitable result of the ongoing accumulation of capital that some people and businesses will become much wealthier than others, and that their wealth will confer political power, with which (frequently) to manipulate government towards an imperialistic, militaristic foreign policy.⁵² So even if colonialism was not of much immediate benefit to the countries that embarked on it but primarily only to favored businessmen and the upper class, that does not get capitalism off the hook, for capitalism creates the circumstances in which these favored investors can help guide policy.

But I don't think colonialism helped only a tiny greedy elite. Even if huge sums of money did go into administering and developing a colony, it was not as if the metropolitan country got nothing for its investment. For one thing, it provided tens of thousands of men with employment abroad and at home. Government bureaucracies and militaries expanded and techniques of administration, repression, and social control were honed, frequently to later be used domestically.⁵³ The expansion of domestic and colonial bureaucracies increased aggregate demand

The "revisionist" diplomatic historiography associated with the New Left is full of examples of such business influence on imperialistic policies. See, e.g., William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972); Walter LaFeber, The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967); David Horowitz, ed., Corporations and the Cold War (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969); and Thomas McCormick, China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901 (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967). The Marxist tradition of scholarship, from Bukharin and Lenin on, is similarly compelling.

⁵³ Alfred W. McCoy, Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

(since bureaucrats have to eat too) and stimulated economic activity, thus growth.⁵⁴ Raw materials extracted from colonies fed the domestic industrial machine. One can, admittedly, indulge in counterfactual history and argue that colonialism was not necessary for the imperial power to have access to these raw materials. But at a time when Western countries were feverishly competing to industrialize—and there was no United Nations or other international legal body to regulate the anarchy of great-power competition—it was rational and highly probable for each to stake out large swathes of territory as *theirs* and keep others out. Leopold II and Belgium made quite a killing, so to speak, in the Congo after taking control of it.

In many cases, it is likely that the access to vital raw materials alone did much to justify the expense of maintaining colonies. (And, again, the mere fact that something is expensive does not mean it is harmful. Government spending, including high levels of deficit spending, can be extremely useful for generating economic growth, as America's participation in World War II proved.) Combined with the growth of colonial markets to absorb admittedly small "surplus" amounts of industrial products that could not be sold domestically—but relatively small amounts of sales abroad can mean the difference between high profits and low profits, a growing industry and a stagnating industry—these economic considerations begin to make it look quite rational to have colonies.

Besides, it is doubtful that countries would have maintained colonies for generations and sought new ones if they really had gained nothing from them or were harmed by them. Surely governments would have figured this out, sooner or later. Governments are self-interested; they act to increase their power. It would be anomalous for them to waste colossal resources on endeavors that, over many decades, yielded little or

This is a point that conservative critics of government bureaucracy consistently fail to appreciate or even think of. Bureaucracies = jobs, and jobs = economic activity. If you massively downsized bureaucracies there would be more unemployment, less demand, and less growth.

nothing. The sheer growth of state capacity and war-making attendant in colonization would have benefited national power and industry.⁵⁵

When you look at good research, it seems that having a colony could be very beneficial indeed. According to one scholar's estimate, Britain drained around 45 trillion dollars from India between 1765 and 1938.⁵⁶ Moreover, it has long been a commonplace of historiography that Britain's industrial revolution was made possible in large part by using India and other colonies as captive markets for cotton textiles.⁵⁷ There has been no shortage of excellent scholarship, whether Marxist or dependency theorist or mainstream, arguing that Europe gained immeasurably from colonialism (as from slavery earlier, and from imperialism generally).

As for the argument that nationalist and racist ideologies were important motivators of colonialism, yes, that's true. But, again, it does not get big business or capitalism off the hook. This points to a fundamental error in the usual thinking of liberals and conservatives (and postmodernists): its characteristic idealism. It attributes too much importance to ideas, "culture," and the psychology of the masses and leaders. What matters is that particular ideologies are able to dominate *because they serve the interests of institutions with resources*, which propagate them or at the very least allow them to be propagated and do not feel the need to push back with some contrary ideology. The ruling ideas are, typically, the ideas of the ruling class. Nationalism and racism were, and are, favored by powerful sectors of business, for their own purposes—such

To take one example, Avner Offer argues that "the [British] empire extended considerably Britain's capacity to wage war, by adding to its military, demographic, and economic resources." Avner Offer, "The British empire, 1870–1914: a waste of money?" *Economic History Review*, vol. 46, no. 2 (May, 1993): 215–238.

⁵⁶ See Jason Hickel, "How Britain stole \$45 trillion from India," *Al Jazeera*, December 19, 2018. The scholar who published the research is Utsa Patnaik.

For example, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution* (New York: The New Press, 1999).

CHRIS WRIGHT

as, in the late nineteenth century, imperialist expansionism.⁵⁸ The only reason such ideologies are allowed to become "hegemonic" at all is that they serve the interests of the institutions with the most resources, namely business; otherwise, they would be crushed by some other, more business-friendly set of ideas.

In general, the excuses and apologetics of intellectuals, Milton Friedmanites and others, who want to absolve capitalism of the sin of colonialism are historically naïve and transparently partisan, motivated by a childish ideology. ("Capitalism = freedom.") They're reminiscent of the right-wing libertarian denial that "pure" capitalism inevitably gives rise to politically powerful oligopolies that use their market power to disrupt the "perfectly competitive" functioning of "free markets." In the face of inconvenient history, the message of capitalist partisans is, "Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?"

A classic expression of the utility of racism to the expansionist goals of business is Senator Albert Beveridge's speech on "the Philippine Question" on January 9, 1900. In support of annexing the Philippines, he first adduces "China's illimitable markets," thus beginning with the economic reason. But then he shifts to the racism: Filipinos "are not capable of self-government. How could they be? They are not of a self-governing race." So it is the white man's burden to civilize them. (What a happy coincidence that our moral duty coincides with our economic interests!)

THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING LIBERTARIANISM SINCE THE 1950S NOTES ON A DISMAL HISTORY (2021)

Sometimes as I read books I like to simultaneously summarize them, to facilitate the intellectual digestion. I've been reading a couple of books on the rise of political conservatism in the last several generations, and since nothing is more important to the future than combating conservatism, I'm going to jot down some notes. As a historian, I'm familiar with the story. Nevertheless, Kim Phillips-Fein's *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (2009) and Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical*

Right's Stealth Plan for America (2017) are interesting enough to warrant some summarizing.

One of the useful functions of the latter book, in particular, is that it brings force and clarity to one's prior knowledge of the dangers of right-wing libertarianism—and its astonishing influence in the United States. Even people and policymakers who aren't actual libertarians (in the perverted American sense) have almost always been influenced by pro-market ideologies, because two centuries of global propaganda have made their mark. I don't want to say markets are necessarily and always destructive; I'm only saying that the denigration of government relative to markets is terribly misguided. Besides, what does "the market" even mean? When people talk about "the free market," what are they talking about? Markets, at least national and international ones, have always been shaped and structured and created and manipulated by states. That's a truism of economic history. Just read Karl Polanyi's classic The Great Transformation (1944). "The market" is a meaningless abstraction, an idealization that distracts from the innumerable ways states create rules to govern market interactions, rules that favor certain actors and disadvantage others. No national or international market has ever been "free" of political constraints, institutions, agendas, rules that are continually contested and shaped by interest groups in deadly conflict with one another.

Naturally, it took a *lot* of indoctrination, backed up by a *lot* of money, to convert untold numbers of people to right-wing libertarianism in the last sixty years. Phillips-Fein starts her story with the famous du Pont brothers who created the Liberty League in the 1930s to fight the New Deal. They didn't have much success: in the depths of the Depression, it was pretty easy for most people to see through business propaganda. It wasn't until after World War II that business was able to regroup and launch successful offensives against the liberal and leftist legacies of the 1930s. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf's *Selling Free Enterprise* gives a broad account of this counterrevolution, but Phillips-Fein's focus is narrower,

on the far-right organizations that sprang up to play the long game rather than just immediately beat back unions and Communists and left-liberalism.

One such organization was the Foundation for Economic Education, which "advocated a stringent, crystalline vision of the free market" and disseminated that vision through innumerable leaflets and pamphlets and LP recordings. It was funded by companies both small and large, including U.S. Steel, General Motors, and Chrysler. A couple of the businessmen associated with FEE helped bring Friedrich Hayek, already famous for *The Road to Serfdom*, to the University of Chicago (the libertarian Volker Fund paid his salary) and assisted with his project of building the international Mont Pelerin Society in the late 1940s. The ideas of Hayek and his mentor Ludwig von Mises (who was hired as a FEE staff member) would become gospel to the fledgling libertarian movement.

It is remarkable, and testifies to the power not of *ideas* but of *money*, that a movement that started out with a few scattered malcontents in the business and academic worlds who were fighting a rearguard action against the internationally dominant Keynesian and social democratic paradigm of the 1940s has snowballed to become almost globally hegemonic by the 2010s.

"Over the course of the 1950s," Phillips-Fein writes, "dozens of new organizations devoted to the defense of free enterprise and the struggle against labor unions and the welfare state sprang into existence." Ayn Rand, amoralist extraordinaire, had already become "tremendously popular" among businessmen. But some in the business world didn't like her rejection of Christianity, and they dedicated themselves to shaping religion in a pro-capitalist direction. "We can never hope to stop this country's plunge toward totalitarianism," wrote one of them (J. Howard Pew, president of Sunoco and a devout Presbyterian), "until we have gotten the ministers' thinking straight." (The usual irony: to avoid "totalitarianism," we have to get everyone to think like us. Only when

every individual is lockstep in agreement, marching behind us, will the danger of totalitarianism be overcome.)⁵⁹ Pew worked to support an organization called Spiritual Mobilization to get "the ministers' thinking straight," and Christian Business Men's Committees spread in a decade that saw the increasing success of anti-communist preachers like Billy Graham and the growth of fundamentalism.

One reason for the alliance between religion and capitalism in those years is obvious: they were both anti-communist. But I'd say there are other, more revealing affinities. What they amount to, at bottom, is the common urge to dominate—an authoritarianism common to both religious and business hierarchies. Most religion by its nature tends to be a rather closed-minded affair (rejection of scientific evidence, doubt, skeptical reasoning), attached to tradition—traditional hierarchies like patriarchy, white supremacy, and homophobia. The authoritarian and submissive mindset/behavior it encourages in the faithful can be useful to and coopted by business institutions that similarly demand submission and are authoritarian in structure.

It is true that in most respects, market fundamentalism and conservative Christianity are very different ideologies. And their fusion in the modern Republican Party can seem odd. The socially conservative and the economically conservative wings of the party, largely anchored in different constituencies, have by no means always been comfortable with each other. (For instance, libertarian attempts to privatize and destroy Social Security and Medicare have been resisted by the socially conservative popular base.) It is even more ironic because the religious concern for community, family, and tradition is undermined by capitalism, as has been understood at least since the *Communist Manifesto*. But the reactionary business elite needs an electoral base, so it's stuck with the "rednecks" it laughs at, because of the anti-liberalism they have in

Think of the famous Powell Memorandum in 1971: absolute panic at the fact that business didn't completely control the country—there was dissent among the young and a minority of intellectuals—and fervid determination to (re)impose ideological uniformity on the population…for the sake of the "free" enterprise system.

common. And these social conservatives in largely rural and suburban areas—but we should keep in mind that plenty of people in the business world are themselves socially conservative and religious—end up allying with business for the same reason. For both groups are *opposed to democracy and equality*. They want the federal government to *stay out of their business*, for the federal government has historically done more than state governments to empower the oppressed and undermine old hierarchies. Whether it's white supremacy, conservative Christian values, or the business desire to avoid taxes and regulation, the federal government has sometimes been the enemy—as during the era of the Civil Rights Movement and the liberal Warren Supreme Court. "Small government!" can become the rallying cry of authoritarians if government starts to challenge authoritarianism.⁶⁰

Thus arises the seemingly incongruous but immensely revealing cooperation, starting in the 1950s and continuing today, between white supremacists and "libertarians"—who thereby show their true colors. Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains* is illuminating on this point. Her book describes the career of the influential Nobel laureate economist James M. Buchanan, one of the founders of public choice theory, which is devoted to the impeccably capitalist goal of exposing and explaining the systematic failures of government. MacLean argues that John C. Calhoun, the great nineteenth-century ideologue of slavery, states' rights, limited government, and "nullification" (the idea that states can refuse to follow federal laws they consider unconstitutional), is an important inspiration for right-wing libertarianism.

Both Buchanan and Calhoun...were concerned with the "failure of democracy to protect liberty." In particular, Buchanan and Calhoun both alleged a kind of class conflict between "tax producers and tax consumers." Both depicted

Notice, however, that reactionaries love big government as long as it supports their agenda. Fundamentalists and anti-abortion types want to use government to impose their values on the country—showing how little they value "freedom"—and big business certainly has no problem with corporate welfare or high levels of military spending.

politics as a realm of exploitation and coercion, but the economy as a realm of free exchange... Both thinkers sought ways to restrict what voters could achieve together in a democracy to what the wealthiest among them would agree to.

Murray Rothbard, among other libertarians, spoke openly of the movement's debt to Calhoun. "Calhoun was quite right," he said, "in focusing on taxes and fiscal policy as the keystone" of democracy's threat to so-called economic liberty, or property rights. Property rights trump every other consideration, including the right of the majority to vote and determine policy. This is why Buchanan worked with Pinochet's government in Chile to write a radically undemocratic constitution, and why he worked with the fossil fuel magnate Charles Koch and others to find ways to limit democracy in the (already very undemocratic) United States, and why, in general, prominent libertarians have been quite open about their distaste for democracy. The famous economist George Stigler, for example, once told a meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society that "one possible route" for achieving the desired libertarian future was "the restriction of the franchise to property owners, educated classes, employed persons, or some such group."

The young libertarian movement was energized by the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Why? Not because they supported it (as *genuine* libertarians, people who authentically value human freedom and dignity, would have), but because, like segregationists, they found it an appalling instance of federal overreach. William F. Buckley and his magazine *National Review* (funded largely by Roger Milliken, a reactionary textile manufacturer)—not totally "libertarian" but very much in that camp⁶¹—published articles denouncing the Supreme Court's "tyranny." Others were excited by the prospect that the

The *National Review* is always mentioned in histories of the New Right. As Phillips-Fein says, it is "rightly known for pioneering what the historian George Nash has described as the 'fusion' of conservative ideas, joining the Hayekian faith in the market and critique of the New Deal to the larger moral and political concerns" of conservatives who lamented the decline of religion.

South's resistance offered to end public education itself. Buchanan, at the University of Virginia, wrote a proposal to sell off all public schools and substitute for them a system of tax-funded private schools that would admit or reject students as they saw fit. His plan never came to fruition, but in the following years, as the Civil Rights Movement gained steam, libertarians such as Barry Goldwater could always be found on the side of "states' rights." After all, the Civil Rights Act did interfere with property rights, by dictating to businesses what their policies had to be!

Goldwater's campaign for the presidency in 1964 was a precocious moment for the young conservative movement, and his landslide loss to Lyndon Johnson showed the country wasn't yet ready for the mainstreaming of far-right politics. Still, all the organizing during the 1950s, from the John Birch Society to the American Enterprise Association (which became the American Enterprise Institute), had clearly made an impact. Goldwater's bestselling book The Conscience of a Conservative helped his cause, as did Milton Friedman's Capitalism and Freedom (1962). Financial support for his campaign came from conservative businessmen across the country, not only big names like the du Pont family and Walt Disney but also countless small businesses (which are often more conservative than larger ones). The Republican establishment, on the other hand, was hardly fond of Goldwater: Nelson Rockefeller, for example, issued a press release that said, "The extremism of the Communists, of the Ku Klux Klan, and of the John Birch Society—like that of most terrorists—has always been claimed by such groups to be in the defense of liberty."

To try to get white working-class support, the Goldwater campaign pioneered a strategy that Republicans have used to great effect ever since: capitalize on racial and cultural fears. As one staffer wrote in a memo, Goldwater should "utilize (and build) fully the one key issue which is working for us—the moral crisis (law and order vs. crime and violence)." Instead of talking about the usual libertarian themes of the evils of unions, Social Security, the welfare state, and taxes, he should

focus on "crime, violence, riots, juvenile delinquency, the breakdown of law and order, immorality and corruption in high places, the lack of moral leadership in general, narcotics, pornography." Phillips-Fein comments: "The issues of race and culture, White [the author of the campaign memo] believed, could easily be joined to the politics of the free market. The welfare state, after all, was the product of just the same unrestrained collective yearnings that produced moral chaos." This, then, is another point of contact between free-market ideologues and social conservatives. Both groups want "law and order" and nothing more. (No equality—and no freedom for "undesirables"—only authoritarian hierarchies, whether of class, race, gender, sexuality, or whatever).

As for Buchanan, in the late 1960s, as he was teaching at UCLA at the peak of the New Left, he found himself decidedly unsympathetic to the student protests. To quote MacLean: "Despite 'my long-held libertarian principles,' he said, looking back, 'I came down squarely on the "law-and-order" side' of things. He heaped praise upon one administrator who showed the 'simple courage' to smash the student rebellion on his campus with violent police action." (Buchanan also supported the Vietnam War, except that he thought it should have been fought more aggressively.)

Meanwhile, he co-wrote a book called *Academia in Anarchy* that used public choice theory to explain—abstractly, as usual, with no empirical substantiation—why campuses were in an uproar. It had to do, for example, with students' lack of respect for the university setting because tuition was free or nearly so. Faculty tenure, too, was "one of the root causes of the chaos" because job security meant professors had no incentive to stand up to radical students. The solution was that students should pay full-cost prices, taxpayers and donors should monitor their investments "as other stockholders do," and "weak control" by governing boards must end. Such measures would facilitate social control. "In essence," MacLean comments, he and his co-author were arguing that "if you stop making college free and charge a hefty tuition...you ensure that

students will have a strong economic incentive to focus on their studies and nothing else—certainly not on trying to alter the university or the wider society. But the authors were also arguing for something else: educating far fewer Americans, particularly lower-income Americans who could not afford full-cost tuition." As we now know, the ruling class eventually adopted Buchanan's agenda. 62

The social tumult of the late 1960s and 1970s, combined with inflation, recession, and intensifying international economic competition, is what finally shocked big business into taking action, much broader action than before. The Powell Memorandum, written for the Chamber of Commerce, reflects this panic. Neoconservatives like Irving Kristol argued that, in order to be effective in the sphere of propaganda, businessmen should stop defending only such grubby, uninspiring things as selfishness and the pursuit of money and instead elevate more transcendent ideas like the family and the church, institutions that (to quote Phillips-Fein) "could preserve moral and social values and had the emotional weight to command true allegiance." Nonprofits like the American Enterprise Institute began to get a much more receptive hearing when they pressed businessmen to fund a free-market ideological counteroffensive. The Olin Foundation, among others, disbursed millions of dollars to a variety of conservative think tanks, such as the new Manhattan Institute. The Coors family were the main financers of the Heritage Foundation, created by Paul Weyrich (a conservative young congressional staffer) in 1973, which would take a more pugilistic and culturally conservative stance than the AEI. For instance, it attacked "secular humanism" and defended the "Judeo-Christian moral order" at the same time as it was attacking big government, unions, and the minimum wage.

⁶² On the privatization of education since the 1970s, see Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

Corporate Political Action Committees sprang up everywhere. Phillips-Fein:

In 1970 most Fortune 500 companies did not have public affairs offices; ten years later 80 percent did. In 1971 only 175 companies had registered lobbyists, but by the decade's end 650 did, while by 1978 nearly 2,000 corporate trade associations had lobbyists in Washington, D.C. Thanks in part to...the educational seminars sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and other business organizations, the number of corporate PACs grew from 89 in 1974...to 821 in 1978. They became an increasingly important source of funding for political campaigns, while the number of union PACs stalled at 250.

Meanwhile, the Business Roundtable "was founded on the idea that celebrity executives could become a disciplined phalanx defending the interests of business as a class." Its membership was open only to the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. As its executive director said, "Senators say they won't talk to Washington reps [e.g., lobbyists], but they will see a chairman." The Roundtable took a less blatantly reactionary approach to lobbying than many other business organizations.

The Chamber of Commerce was less genteel: it changed its character in the 1970s, becoming much more activist and politicized than it had been. It "believed in mobilizing the masses of the business world—any company, no matter how large or small, could join the organization. The Chamber rejected the Roundtable's tendency to seek out politicians from the Democratic Party and try to make common ground. It backed the Kemp-Roth tax cuts [based on the new and controversial supply-side economics of Arthur Laffer] long before most other groups..." By 1981 the group had almost 3,000 Congressional Action Committees; at the same time, it was sponsoring projects to indoctrinate students and the

general public with conservative points of view on capitalism and such issues as civil rights, gay rights, feminism, and school prayer.

The right-wing counteroffensive was so vast it can scarcely be comprehended. New anti-union consulting companies were founded, and employers became more aggressively anti-union. Legions of small businessmen, fed up with the costs of complying with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's rules, joined the movement to "Stop OSHA" that was coordinated by the American Conservative Union. Colossal efforts were directed, too, at reshaping the nation's courts so that, as one crusader said, "the protection and enhancement of corporate profits and private wealth [would be] the cornerstones of our legal system." Entities like the Liberty Fund, the Earhart Foundation, and many businesses funded Henry Manne's "law and economics" programs to train lawyers in corporation-friendly interpretations of the law. (By 1990, more than 40 percent of federal judges had participated in Manne's program at George Mason University.) A few years later, in 1982, the Federalist Society was founded—"federalist" because the idea is to return power to the states, as good white supremacists and libertarians (business supremacists) would want. Within several decades it had completely transformed the nation's judiciary.

The 1970s was also the decade when "the upsurge of religious fervor that has sometimes been called the Third Great Awakening began to sweep the country" (Phillips-Fein), "shifting the balance of the country's Christian population toward evangelical and fundamentalist churches and away from the old mainline denominations." Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other evangelical leaders preached not only the predictable homophobic, anti-pornography, anti-abortion stuff, but also libertarian ideology. As Falwell said when founding the Moral Majority in 1979, part of its job would be "lobbying intensively in Congress to defeat left-wing, social-welfare bills that will further erode our precious freedoms." (*Roe v. Wade*, of course, had helped inflame social conservatives' hostility to the federal government, providing another reason for

CHRIS WRIGHT

the affinity with economic conservatives.) Needless to say, the politicization of evangelicals has had significant consequences on the nation's politics.

And then, as if all this weren't enough, there was... Charles Koch. Whom MacLean focuses on, together with Buchanan. He has become even more influential in the last couple of decades—though MacLean surely exaggerates when she says, "He is the sole reason why [the ultra-capitalist right] may yet alter the trajectory of the United States in ways that would be profoundly disturbing even to the somewhat undemocratic James Madison"—but he was already playing a very long game in the 1960s. The son of a cofounder of the John Birch Society, he is a true ideologue, a fanatical believer in "economic liberty" and Social Darwinism, fiercely opposed to government largesse dispensed to anyone, apparently including (at least in his early idealistic years) corporations. 63 From the early days to the present, one of his favored institutions to help carry out the revolution has been the ironically named Institute for Humane Studies, successor to the Volker Fund in the mid-1960s. But in the late 1970s he founded, with the assistance of the even more fanatical Murray Rothbard, the Cato Institute, to train a disciplined "Leninist" cadre that, unlike most conservatives, would never compromise, never forsake its anti-government principles in any area of policy. Abolish the welfare state and all government regulations! Abolish the postal service and public education! Legalize drugs, prostitution, and all consensual sex! Slash taxes across the board! End American military intervention in other countries! Much of this was a bit shocking to mainstream conservatives, but Koch wouldn't stray from his divine mission.

Koch Industries benefits from an array of federal subsidies, but Koch insists (somewhat comically) that he wishes this whole regime of corporate welfare didn't exist.

With a permanent staff and a stable of rotating scholar visitors, Cato could generate nonstop propaganda... Buchanan played a crucial role in such propaganda, for Cato's arguments generally followed analyses provided by his team. Koch, meanwhile, provided new resources as the cadre brought in recruits with ideas for new ways to advance the cause. They would then be indoctrinated in the core ideas to assure their radical rigor, all of this held together with the gravy train opportunities Koch's money made available as they pushed their case into the media and public life...

Koch (and his brother David, who was less political) also supported the Reason Foundation (which still publishes the magazine *Reason*), a think tank that soon became "the nation's premier voice for privatization, not only of public education…but also for every conceivable public service, from sanitation to toll roads." And in 1984—to give just one more example of many—the Kochs founded Citizens for a Sound Economy, chaired by Ron Paul, to rally voters behind their agenda.

The conservative mobilization of the 1970s, combined with the country's economic woes and liberals' feckless policies, got Reagan elected—a pretty impressive achievement when the electorate had overwhelmingly rejected his views just sixteen years earlier, in the form of Barry Goldwater's campaign. But many libertarians were unhappy with his presidency, since he did little to shrink government. (He did cut taxes, social spending, and regulations, but in general the government continued to expand and, very disappointingly, the welfare state wasn't destroyed.)

The Cato Institute's top priority became the privatization of Social Security. Buchanan helped supply a strategy to achieve this wildly unpopular goal. It would be political suicide to just come out and state it openly; instead, devious measures were necessary. First, a campaign of disinformation would have to convince the electorate that Social Security

wasn't financially viable in the long term and had to be reformed. (You may remember this intensive propaganda campaign from the George W. Bush years.) Step two was to "divide and conquer" (in the words of MacLean): reassure those who were already receiving benefits or would soon receive them that they wouldn't be affected by the reforms. This would get them out of the fight to preserve the existing system. Meanwhile, foster resentment among younger workers by constantly reminding them their payroll deductions were providing a "tremendous welfare subsidy" to the aged. And foster resentment among the wealthy, and thus their opposition to Social Security, by proposing that they be taxed at higher rates than others to get their benefits. Eventually, popular resistance to "reform" would begin to break down. The financial sector could be enlisted in the fight too because of the windfall of money it would get by Social Security's privatization.

As always, the ultimate goal was to eliminate all "collectivism," all collective action and solidarity, which really means to get people to stop caring for one another. The world should consist of private atoms, because that means "freedom"—but more importantly because that means the elimination of resistance to capitalist power.

The Cato Institute was hardly the only conservative institution fighting to privatize Social Security, but the war was never won. Democracy and "collectivism" proved too resilient. Unexpected outcome! In the 1990s, the Kochs and other funders, Buchanan, Congressman Dick Armey, Newt Gingrich, and the whole 1994 crop of Republicans at the vanguard of the "free market revolution" struggled mightily to shackle democracy by passing a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution (along with cutting Medicare, "reforming" welfare, and so on), but again, alas, they failed.

Buchanan was particularly incensed by the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (the so-called Motor Voter Act). "We are increasingly enfranchising the illiterate," he growled, "moving rapidly toward electoral reform that will not expect voters to be able to read or follow instructions."

In the meantime, George Mason University, conveniently located right next to Washington, D.C., had become a center of the "Kochtopus," as people took to calling the vast network of institutions the brothers funded. It was the home, for example, of the Institute for Humane Studies, the James Buchanan Center, Henry Manne's Law and Economics Center, and the important Mercatus Center. Buchanan himself, who had provided so many useful ideas and academic legitimacy, was effectively pushed out of the movement as Charles and his loyal lieutenants (Richard Fink, Tyler Cowen, and others) took control at the university. And now, at last, the long march of the zealots was about to come to fruition.

The last chapter of *Democracy in Chains* is chilling. In the words of the economist Tyler Cowen, the reality that is being fashioned for us will see "a rewriting of the social contract" according to which people will be "expected to fend for themselves much more than they do now." From public health and basic sanitation to the conditions that workers toil in, the goal is to dismantle government, which is to say democracy. As the most extreme market fundamentalists have preached for centuries, only the police and military functions of government, the authoritarian functions, are legitimate.

As hard as it may be to believe, one individual—Charles Koch—really is behind a large part of the destruction that conservatives have wrought in the twenty-first century. He substantially funds Americans for Prosperity, the American Legislative Exchange Council_(ALEC), the State Policy Network, the Mackinac Center in Michigan (worth mentioning only because its lobbying played a significant role in Flint, Michigan's water crisis that began in 2014), and, in fact, uncountable numbers of institutions from university programs to legal centers.⁶⁴ His loyalists control the Stand Together Chamber of Commerce, a massive

⁶⁴ See "Koch Family Foundations," at sourcewatch.org.

conservative fundraising machine, and American Encore, a secretive but powerful nonprofit that funnels money to right-wing causes and advocacy groups. He owns i360, a cutting-edge data analytics company that has precise personal information on over 250 million American adults. It is so sophisticated it has eclipsed the Republican Party's voter files, such that the party has had to buy access to it to more effectively bombard voters with personalized messages.⁶⁵

In 2016, the "Koch network" of hundreds of wealthy right-wing donors he heavily influences spent almost \$900 million on political campaigns, which in effect made it a third major political party—and little of that money was for the presidential election, since neither Clinton nor Trump interested the man at the center. Even officials with the Republican National Committee have grown uncomfortable with the power of Koch and his allies: journalist Jane Mayer reports one of them plaintively saying, "It's pretty clear that they don't want to work with the party but want to supplant it."

Ever since the brilliant journalism of Mayer and others brought the Koch underworld out into the open more than ten years ago, much of the politically conscious public has become vaguely aware of the role of this network in funding and coordinating attacks on everything from climate action to unions to public education. But to get a real sense of the radical evil and effectiveness of this "vast right-wing conspiracy," it is necessary to read Mayer's *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (2017).

For example, the hysteria in wealthy right-wing circles after Obama's election precipitated mobilizations to create the Tea Party. Citizens for a Sound Economy had tried to create an anti-tax "Tea Party" movement as early as 1991, but these attempts had led nowhere. In 2004 CSE split up into the Kochs' Americans for Prosperity on the one hand

⁶⁵ See sourcewatch.org for information on all these Koch-dominated entities.

⁶⁶ Jane Mayer, Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right (New York: Anchor Books, 2017), 380.

and FreedomWorks on the other, the latter headed by Dick Armey and funded by, e.g., the Bradley Foundation, the Sarah Scaife Foundation, Philip Morris, and the American Petroleum Institute. In early 2009, operatives from these two groups and a couple of others formed what they called the Nationwide Tea Party Coalition to organize protests across the country, using talking points, press releases, and logistical support provided in part by the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute. To help get the word out, FreedomWorks made a deal with the Fox News host Glenn Beck: for an annual payment of \$1 million, he would read on air content that the think tank's staff had written. Pretty soon, the increasingly frequent anti-government rallies were filled with racist slogans ("Obama Bin Lyin") and racist depictions of Obama—showing, once again, the deep affinity between pro-capitalist ideologies and racism. It is hard to argue with the Obama aide Bill Burton who opined, "you can't understand Obama's relationship with the right wing without taking into account his race... They treated him in a way they never would have if he'd been white."

From these noble beginnings, the Koch network stepped up its funding for and organizing of ever more vicious attacks on Obama's agenda, such as cap-and-trade legislation and even the rather conservative Affordable Care Act. With the help of the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010, they met with extraordinary, though not complete, success. And this was in addition to the highly successful efforts to take over state governments. In North Carolina, for instance, Americans for Prosperity (significantly aided by the John William Pope Foundation and other funders, as well as an array of private think tanks) played a large role in the Republican takeover of the state's government and passage of such measures as slashing taxes on corporations and the wealthy while cutting services for the poor and middle class, gutting environmental programs, limiting women's access to abortion, banning gay marriage, legalizing concealed guns in bars and school campuses, eviscerating public education, erecting barriers to voting, and gerrymandering

legislative districts for partisan gain. State after state succumbed to such agendas. Just between 2010 and 2012, ALEC-backed legislators in 41 states introduced more than 180 bills to restrict who could vote and how.

Thus, a reactionary political infrastructure generations in the making has finally matured, even as its goal of completely shredding the social compact and leaving everyone to fend for themselves remains far out of reach (in fact unrealizable). Economic and cultural polarization, consciously planned and financed since the 1950s, has reached untenable extremes. Daily newspaper articles relate the sordid story of Republican state legislatures' ongoing efforts to decimate the right to vote, as, meanwhile, Koch and his army of allies and operatives frantically work to defeat Democrats' For the People Act⁶⁷ (described by the *New York Times* as "the most substantial expansion of voting rights in a half-century"). ⁶⁸ "The left is not stupid, they're evil," Grover Norquist intones on a conference call with Koch operatives and other conservatives. "They know what they're doing. They have correctly decided that this [voting rights act] is the way to defeat the freedom movement." The class struggle, in short, rages on, with the stakes growing ever higher.

A Marxian, "dialectical" perspective offers hope, however. Being nothing but capitalism's useful idiots, the vast horde of reactionaries whose handiwork I have surveyed is unable to see that history is cyclical. The business triumphalism of the 1920s led straight into the Great Depression, which led to left-populism and the welfare state, which led to the corporate backlash of the 1950s, which helped cause the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left, which bred the hyper-capitalist counterassault of the 1970s–2010s, which is now bringing forth a new generation of social movements. These are still in their infancy, but they might amount to something in the future. To paraphrase Marx, what the radical right produces, above all—in the long term—are its own

⁶⁷ Jane Mayer, "Inside the Koch-Backed Effort to Block the Largest Election-Reform Bill in Half a Century," *New Yorker*, March 29, 2021.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Fandos, "Democrats Begin Push for Biggest Expansion of Voting Since 1960s," New York Times, March 24, 2021.

gravediggers. For Karl Polanyi was right that before society can ever be destroyed by thoroughgoing marketization and privatization, it will always bounce back and "protect itself" (in his words).

As for libertarianism—yes, in an authentic form, a philosophy of freedom must guide us. As Howard Zinn said, Marxism provides the theory and anarchism provides the moral vision. But in order to realize freedom, what we need is the exact opposite of the tyrannical Hayekian model of society. We need an expansive public sector, a society of communal and public spaces everywhere, cooperatives and democratic institutions of every variety—libraries and schools and parks and playgrounds in every neighborhood, public transportation and housing and hospitals, free higher education and healthcare, the transformation of corporations into worker cooperatives or democratically run government institutions (whether municipal or regional or national or international). Even in the neoliberal United States, society has (barely) functioned only through hidden economic planning⁶⁹—and corporations embody sprawling planned economies⁷⁰—and without constant local planning, urban planning, planning for scientific research, industrial planning, everything would collapse. "The market" is little but a concept useful to bludgeon popular strivings for dignity and democracy. Its ideologues are the enemies of humanity.

What does it mean to be free? A robust freedom isn't centered around the property one owns; it is centered around the individual himself. Every individual should have the right to freely and creatively develop himself as he likes, provided he respects the same right in others. To respect others means to take on certain responsibilities to society—which is already a "collectivist" notion, in a sense. To respect others means to acknowledge their humanity, to treat them as you would

⁶⁹ Fred Block, "Swimming Against the Current: The Rise of a Hidden Developmental State in the United States," *Politics & Society*, vol. 36, no. 2 (June 2008): 169–206.

⁷⁰ See Leigh Phillips and Michal Rozworski, *The People's Republic of Walmart: How the World's Biggest Corporations Are Laying the Foundation for Socialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

like to be treated, to do no harm and in fact to do good—to cooperate, to work to advance and protect a society that allows everyone to live a decent life. Rights are bound up with responsibilities. And substantive freedom isn't possible in an environment of significant material deprivation, especially when others have incomparably greater resources and will use them to consolidate power (further limiting the freedom of the less fortunate). So, to permit the flourishing of freedom and thereby respect others' rights, we all have a responsibility to advocate and work towards a relatively egalitarian, economically democratic world.

Reverence for "property" (a concept defined by the state and subject to political contestation) has little or nothing to do with protecting individual liberty. It isn't impossible to imagine a world in which private property is marginal, the means of production, the land, perhaps even housing being held in common and managed through procedures of direct or representative democracy. That such a world would end up violating people's freedoms on a scale remotely comparable to that on which our own world does is far from clear, to say the least.

Right-wing libertarian arguments are bankrupt, but that hasn't prevented the movement from doing incalculable harm worldwide since the 1970s.⁷¹ We can only hope that popular movements defeat it before its environmental consequences, in particular, doom us all.

⁷¹ Again, for some readable overviews see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007) and Jason Hickel, *The Divide: Global Inequality from Conquest to Free Markets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

ORGANIZED LABOR AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY (2022)

We live in a time when it has become a boring cliché to say that democracy is under attack. Whether it's an ultra-reactionary Supreme Court, a nationwide Republican assault on voting rights, a gathering backlash against women's rights and LGBTQ rights, or the very structure of an oligarchical, billionaire-dominated political economy, circumstances are hardly encouraging for people who value democracy and human rights.

There is, however, at least one glimmer of hope for democracy, and it comes from a source that might initially, to many people, seem rather unrelated: a renascent labor movement.

Given that the primary role of unions is to advocate for the interests of their members on the job, one might wonder how they could play an essential part in protecting and revitalizing the very different institution of political democracy. How can organizations with such a *particular* mission, a seemingly narrow economic one, serve as a buttress for the *universal* interest of democracy itself? Actually, according to polls, more than two thirds of Americans approve of labor unions, suggesting they understand what a constructive force unions are. If people knew the real history of organized labor, however, the number would probably be close to 90 percent.

So, let's take a look at history to gain some insight into why labor organizations are so fundamental to democracy, and why it is so predictable that their decline in the last forty years has led to a political crisis and the rise of neofascism.

The origins of democracy

The very establishment of democracy in the first place—universal suffrage and equal voting "weight" across classes—was in large measure the achievement of unions, labor-based political parties (whether called Socialist, Social Democrat, Labor, or some other name), and mass working-class protest. To quote Göran Therborn's seminal 1977 article "The Rule of Capital and the Rise of Democracy," throughout the long struggle across the West to broaden the franchise, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, the labor movement "was the only consistent democratic force in the arena," playing a "vital role" at nearly all stages in most countries. In Britain, for example, decades of labor organizing and mass demonstrations, from the Chartists of the 1830s to the working-class Reform League of the 1860s and further union agitation up to the 1880s, were a crucial precondition for the enfranchisement of all men. By the early twentieth century, the new Labor Party also supported the women's suffrage movement.

To take another example, that of Belgium, a comprehensive study observes that "working-class pressure and particularly the use of the political strike were constant features of the process of Belgian democratization from the 1880s on."⁷² As elsewhere, it took decades of struggle to overcome the hostility of the propertied classes—many urban capitalists, agrarian landowners, and the Catholic establishment—but, in alliance with Liberals, the Belgian Labor Party was finally able to establish full male democracy in 1919.

Waves of democratization occurred in the aftermath of the two world wars, and in all or nearly all cases, labor and its representatives were catalysts. Germany's Weimar Republic, which instituted universal suffrage, was a creation of the labor-based Social Democrats. In Sweden, years of strikes, worker demonstrations, and Social Democratic pressure in Parliament culminated in the passage of universal suffrage by 1920. The achievement of full parliamentary democracy after World War II in Italy, France, Austria, Canada, eventually Japan, and other countries was a result of the world-overturning mobilization of the working class and the Left against fascism, which was defeated primarily by Communists (notably the Soviet Union).

What about the United States? "Full" democracy in this supposedly freest of countries did not exist until the late 1960s, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. We are accustomed to thinking of these legislative accomplishments as the fruit of a *religiously* grounded movement organized around black churches in the South, but in fact, "the long civil rights movement" of the 1930s–1960s critically depended on labor organizations such as the Communist Party (in the 1930s) and industrial unions.⁷³ Historians have called it "civil rights unionism." Communists organized black and white workers to challenge racial discrimination in employment and politics, not least in the white supremacist South, and unions in the CIO, and later (after

⁷² Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 89.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 4 (March, 2005): 1233–1263.

⁷⁴ Robert Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

1955) the AFL-CIO, continued this sort of work even in the repressive political climate of the Cold War. The AFL-CIO and some of its affiliated unions funded the Civil Rights Movement, actively supported its legal initiatives, and, in the case of the UAW, sent staff members into the Deep South to assist with voter registration drives. Indeed, some of the movement's major leaders, from A. Philip Randolph to E. D. Nixon (who organized the Montgomery bus boycott and chose Martin Luther King Jr. to lead it), came from a union background.

Conversely, it wasn't only *political* democracy that was at stake; the movement aimed to emulate labor movements elsewhere and establish *social* democracy. The 1963 March on Washington, for example, included in its demands decent housing, adequate education, a massive federal works program, a living wage for everyone, and a broadened Fair Labor Standards Act. King himself later embraced democratic socialism and helped organize a wide-ranging Poor People's Campaign, though he was assassinated before it came to fruition.

Even recent struggles against authoritarian governments have been driven largely by labor organizations and worker protests. From Spain in the late Franco years, Chile under Pinochet, and Argentina under neo-Nazi generals, to the Arab Spring of 2011, workers and unions have not only, through collective action, destabilized despotic regimes but have often led the resistance that overthrew them.⁷⁵ This isn't surprising, since the working class is typically the group that suffers most from a lack of democracy.

In short, it is hardly an exaggeration when yet another scholarly study concludes that "the organized working class appeared as a key actor in the development of full democracy almost everywhere."⁷⁶

⁷⁵ On the Arab Spring, see Joel Beinin, Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁷⁶ Dietrich Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Organized labor means solidarity

Evidently, then, unions and other labor organizations are not as "narrow-ly economic" as it might seem. They do exist to raise wages and expand benefits for their members, and to enhance job security and increase workers' control over their work, but their functions extend further for two reasons. First, the economic well-being of workers is not determined only on the job or through collective bargaining; it is a profoundly political issue, intrinsically connected with government policies and the very structures of the political economy. So there are powerful incentives to get involved in politics, whether that takes the form of mass protests, creating political parties, or lobbying.

Second, unions are, in the end, little else but *their members*. They are themselves, or should be, democracies. What the membership desires, therefore, is (ideally) what the union pursues. The guiding principle of business is to make profit, at all costs; the guiding principle of organized labor is simply to empower people, who can themselves determine what their goals are. So if they decide that their goal is to democratize society—as they very well might and often have—then that's what they will try to do.

For both reasons, most of the time and over a long period, the large-scale thrust of labor organizations is to increase democracy: political and social democracy, and ultimately, perhaps, economic democracy, in which workers oust the boss and run the workplace themselves. The sheer size of the membership and (frequently) the immense resources of organized labor mean that the efforts can have momentous effects.

In the absence of strong unions, on the other hand, "the general prey of the rich on the poor," as Thomas Jefferson described it, can take truly savage forms and go to lycanthropic extremes. Income and wealth inequality can skyrocket; billionaires can pay trivial tax rates of 3 percent or 4 percent, far lower than the rates that most wage-earners pay;⁷⁷

Jesse Eisinger et al., "The Secret IRS Files," *ProPublica*, June 8, 2021.

agencies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration that exist to protect workers' rights can be gutted and hamstrung; vast networks of far-right dark money, political organizations, and media infrastructure can spring up unopposed by comparable networks on the left; reactionaries find it easier to be elected and to appoint fellow reactionaries to the judiciary, which subsequently eviscerates voting rights, opens the floodgates to corporate political spending, makes it more difficult for workers to organize, and overturns *Roe v. Wade.* In general, the decline of unions means relatively untrammeled rule by big business, which itself means oligarchy.

Millions of working people who might have found a home in organized labor, as they did in the mid-twentieth century, become socially unmoored and fall prey to far-right media, lunatic ideologies like QAnon, racist demagogues, and conservative Christianity. The human need for belonging, for interpreting one's misfortunes and finding meaning in something larger than oneself, can be fulfilled in either rational or irrational ways. It is rational for wage-earners to join economic and political organizations that fight for democracy in all its forms; but when such organizations have an anemic social presence, people who have been bombarded by well-funded right-wing propaganda may irrationally join movements that, in effect, seek to strip them of their rights and eliminate democracy itself.⁷⁸

In these circumstances, the priorities of liberals, from abortion rights to anti-racism to environmental legislation, will meet failure after failure because their mass base begins to shrink, to be less readily mobilized, and to feel ever more alienated from the political system. The "professional-managerial class" isn't enough of a mass base in itself, notwithstanding the apparent belief of two generations of Democratic leaders that it is. We are seeing the dismal collapse of this illusion play out right now, along with the collapse of the attendant ideology, an

⁷⁸ On the Trump administration's attacks on working people, see Timothy Noah, "Does Labor Have a Death Wish?," *Politico*, November 7, 2017.

identity politics evacuated of class content (which means, more exactly, that it is in fact a class politics, "the politics of the left-wing of neoliberalism," to quote the scholar Adolph Reed). After all, a major reason twentieth-century liberalism ever had any success in the first place, from the 1930s to (in an increasingly attenuated form) the 1990s, was that it had organized labor on its side, and the financial, cultural, and human resources of organized labor. It turns out that when you not only take your popular constituency for granted but collude in its decimation, sooner or later your political fortunes—the fortunes of the Democratic Party and liberalism—decline.

Any liberal who actually cares about saving democracy should be cheering the resurgent labor movement and scrambling to support it in every way possible. In the long run, the only alternative to an authoritarian and neofascist politics is a labor politics. At some point you have to decide which side you're on.

Even the "cultural" issues dear to liberals have for generations seen active support from labor. In addition to anti-racism and the Civil Rights Movement, labor has often marched beside feminists in the fight for women's rights, whether pay equality, the Equal Rights Amendment (by the early 1970s, that is), or reproductive rights. Few writers have expressed themselves on these subjects as eloquently as the socialist leader Eugene Debs in 1918: "Freedom, complete freedom, is the goal of woman's struggle in the modern world... She, the mother of man, shall be the sovereign ruler of the world. She shall have sole custody of her own body; she shall have perfect sex freedom as well as economic, intellectual and moral freedom, and she alone who suffers the agony of birth shall have control of the creative functions with which she is endowed."80

⁷⁹ See Dennis A. Deslippe, "Organized Labor, National Politics, and Second-Wave Feminism, 1965–1975," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 49 (Spring, 1996): 143–165.

⁸⁰ Eugene Debs, "Freedom Is the Goal," *The Birth Control Review*, vol. 2, no. 4 (May, 1918), 7.

CHRIS WRIGHT

The natural tendency of organized labor is toward solidarity with all oppressed groups. No other social force is equally equipped to defend everyone and everything under attack today: workers, women, minorities, immigrants, the welfare state, the rule of law, and democracy. No other social force is comparably universal or has a comparable interest in resisting the predations of the oligarchy. No other force offers as much hope for humanity as the cause of labor. For labor *is*, precisely, the cause of humanity.

It is the duty of all believers in freedom and democracy to take up the banner of labor.

QUESTIONING DOGMAS

ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF RAGE FOR LIFE (2018)

"These are the times that try men's souls." How much truer is that statement now than in 1776! We're poised on the precipice, peering over into the crocodile pit below, where fascists swarm and writhe in sanguinary anticipation. Humanity is on the verge of losing its footing and plunging headfirst into the open maw of reptilian sadism. Where you stand, in this climactic moment of history, determines whether you are reptile or hominid.

We know where the majority of the ruling class stands, in their contempt for the poor, for the future, for democracy, the working class, the natural environment, social cooperation, community, and a rational public discourse: they're on the side of the reptiles. Whether it's the boorish, amoral mediocrity of a Brett Kavanaugh, the rank hypocrisy of

a Lindsey Graham or a Susan Collins, the naked cupidity of a Jeff Bezos, the proud Israel-fascism of a Chuck Schumer, the unfettered evil of a Mitch McConnell, or the undisguised corporatism of a Nancy Pelosi, a Barack Obama, and virtually every other politician on the national stage, the ruling class despises morality and law as an insolent threat to its unchecked power. Almost as offensive as these people's lack of all principles besides unwavering loyalty to the rich is their aggressive *mediocrity*, their transparent conformism and cowardice. One is struck by the gall of such insipid nonentities to believe themselves superior to the rest of us.

Even from the perspective of their intelligence, these elitists don't exactly distinguish themselves. Consider one of the more honored and allegedly intellectual specimens: Anthony Kennedy. In what I suppose constituted an attempt at self-criticism, he recently offered the following rueful analysis of the state of the nation: "Perhaps we didn't do too good a job teaching the importance of preserving democracy by an enlightened civic discourse. In the first part of this century we're seeing the death and decline of democracy." The lack of self-awareness takes your breath away. The man responsible for the supremely anti-democratic decisions in *Bush v. Gore, Citizens United v. FEC, Shelby County v. Holder* (which gutted voting protections for minorities), and *Janus v. AFSCME* (which by harming unions harms democracy), and who vacated his seat during the term of a president who prides himself on his authoritarianism and disrespect for the rule of law, is chagrined and apparently puzzled that democracy is declining.

Evidently the man is an imbecile, devoid of the capacity for self-critical reflection and empathic understanding of opposing arguments. And yet he is an esteemed member of the ruling elite. (Precisely *because*, one might maliciously suggest, of his incompetence at critical thought.)

Alexandra Hutzler, "Kavanaugh Confirmation: Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy Says We're Seeing The 'Death and Decline of Democracy," *Newsweek*, September 29, 2018.

How maddening it is that such indoctrinated fools have power! It's the blind leading the sighted!

Anyway, it is for the rest of us to decide where we stand. Will we stand idly by while what is left of society is dismantled, piece by piece, as a sacrificial offering to the great god Mammon? Or will we, fueled by sheer rage, stand up as one to the orgiastic misanthropy of our "leaders" and smash their petty little self-aggrandizing ambitions into dust? Will we march in the streets, occupy offices, organize mass strikes, take over workplaces, and confront our political "representatives" wherever they turn and wherever they are at every moment of the day? Or will we remain the domesticated dogs we have become under the long-term impact of corporatization, bureaucratization, and privatization?

In a time of universal atomization and a zombified-consumerist public life, the redemptive power of collective rage should not be scoffed at. It is in fact key to the recovery of our humanity, our de-robotization, and to the very survival of civilization. We should embrace our rage, cultivate it as though it were the tree of life, for it has the power of both motivation and social transformation.

The plaintive cries of establishmentarians to restore "civility" in the public sphere are laughably self-serving and should not be taken seriously. "You don't call for incivility," Megyn Kelly says in response to Representative Maxine Waters' call for exactly that. Angry left-wing responses to Trumpism are "unacceptable," according to Nancy Pelosi. "We've got to get to a point in our country," says Cory Booker, "where we can talk to each other, where we are all seeking a more beloved community. And some of those tactics that people are advocating for, to me, don't reflect that spirit." And poor, long-suffering Sarah Huckabee Sanders sent out a tweet of Solomonic wisdom after the owner of a restaurant had asked her to leave because of her noxious politics: "[The owner's] actions say far more about her than about me. I always do my best to treat people, including those I disagree with, respectfully and will continue to do so."

CHRIS WRIGHT

In short: let institutions operate as they're supposed to, and don't enforce accountability on public officials outside the electoral process. By all means, vote us out of office if you don't like our policies, but don't make life uncomfortable for us.

The truth is that, from more than one perspective, the decline of civility or politeness in the "political discourse" is a sign of *progress*, not regression. Politeness upholds the politics of "respectability," which is the politics of conservatism, hierarchy, and the status quo. It coddles the powerful, even as they're enacting *substantively* uncivil, which is to say destructive, policies aimed at everyone who lacks the money to buy influence. The essence of politics, which is but war by other means, has always been "incivility"—struggle over resources, competing agendas, bribery, corruption, the defense of privilege against the unprivileged and the latter's struggle to wrest power from the former. There is a "beloved community" only in the milquetoast liberal imagination of a Cory Booker. The task for actual democrats is to bring the war to the doorstep of the privileged, to make them viscerally aware of the stakes involved, even if it means directly acquainting them with the wrath of the dispossessed. They have been sheltered far too long.

Even from the other side, the side of the reptiles, there is something to be said for Trumpian insult-flinging and demagoguery. At least it serves to take the fig leaf of high principles and public-spiritedness off the reactionary policies of almost fifty years. When Obama deported millions of immigrants and separated tens of thousands of families, it seemed as if no one cared. When Trump did it (arguably in even more sadistic ways), even the establishment media expressed outrage. The vulgarity and blatant evil, in short, tend to radicalize everyone who still has a vestige of moral consciousness in him. That's useful.

Ultimately, though, it hardly needs arguing that Trumpian "incivility" is disastrous, for example, in its promotion of white rage and white supremacy. But this is exactly why the time has come for the politics of *extreme disruption*, as expounded and defended in that classic

of sociology *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (1978), by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward.

The Usefulness of Violence

As Piven and Cloward show, mass social disruption and civil disobedience were essential to the victories of several major popular movements in the twentieth century: the 1930s' unemployed workers movement (which indirectly brought forth the welfare state), the industrial workers movement that unionized the core of the economy, the civil rights movement, and the welfare rights movement of the late 1960s that forced huge expansions of welfare programs. Even the scores of urban riots between 1964 and 1968 had a partially constructive impact. In the violent summer of 1967, for example, the Pentagon established a Civil Disturbance Task Force and the president established a Riot Commission. Seven months later, the commission called for "a massive and sustained commitment to action" to end poverty and racial discrimination. "Only days before," the authors note, "in the State of the Union message, the president had announced legislative proposals for programs to train and hire the hardcore unemployed and to rebuild the cities."

Without going into further detail, the lesson is already clear: not only "disruption" but even rioting can, potentially, be constructive, given the right political environment. This doesn't mean riots ought to be encouraged or fomented; they should be avoided at almost all costs. But when conditions become so desperate that waves of riots begin to break out, we shouldn't too quickly condemn them (or the rioters) as hopelessly irresponsible, self-defeating, primitive, or immoral. The state's immediate response might be repression, but its longer-term response might be reform.

Other scholars go further than Piven and Cloward. Lance Hill, for instance, argues in *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (2004) that the tactic of nonviolence was not

particularly successful in the civil rights movement. SNCC's peaceful local organizing in the early 1960s didn't bring about many real, tangible gains: months-long campaigns succeeded in registering minuscule numbers of voters. White power-structures, racism, and Klan violence were just too formidable. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "moral suasion," his hope to shame Southern whites out of racism, failed utterly. So the strategy shifted to provoking white violence in the full view of television cameras—and, as with the Deacons for Defense in Louisiana, *inflicting* violence as well (mostly in self-defense). By 1964 things were threatening to get out of control, with riots and some white deaths, so the government was able to pass the Civil Rights Act—which it proceeded to enforce rather sporadically, usually when compelled to by violence or its threat.

Nonviolence was a useful tactic for getting white liberal support, but without the threat of black violence always lurking in the background it would have accomplished little. "One of the great ironies of the civil rights movement," Hill says, "was that black collective force did not simply *enhance* the bargaining power of the moderates; it was the very source of their power."

In general, the point is that people must act in such a way that authorities will feel compelled to give them concessions lest social hierarchies be threatened. In the long run, of course, the goal is to replace the authorities, to empower people who actually care about people. But in the meantime, it is necessary to extract concessions—by putting the fear of God, or, far more frighteningly, of revolution, into the heads of the people at the top. The credible threat of violence can bring results, as history shows.

In 2018, after the consolidation of a reactionary regime on the Supreme Court, it is long past the time for organized collective violations of "law and order" and "property rights." It's time to badger elected officials at every moment of every day, and to foster political polarization so that the ground caves in beneath the feet of the "centrists." Conditions

are not yet desperate enough for collective looting and rioting—since, after all, the economy is booming! (right?)—but it is necessary at least, in the coming years, to stoke such fears in the minds of the rich. Monolithic, sustained, savage repression cannot work forever in a nominally democratic country like the U.S. Radical reforms are inevitable—if, that is, we rise up *en masse*.

A "Crisis of Legitimacy"

The one good thing about Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court is that it completes the delegitimization of the most undemocratic and typically reactionary institution at the federal level. Having an obvious perjurer, sexual harasser, overgrown frat boy, and overtly partisan hack on the Court strips away whatever patina of honor and impartial dignity that farcical institution still had.² It has now lost all pretense of representing not only the will of the people but even the rule of law. This fact, too, will facilitate radicalization.

The entire political economy, and the august institutions that protect it, are being thrown into question.

The whiff of revolution is in the air, just starting to float, here and there, on the breezes blown back from the future into the present. The scent is positively revivifying.

It's a good time to be angry. And to translate your anger into action.

On Kavanaugh's perjury, see Nathan Robinson, "How We Know Kavanaugh Is Lying," *Current Affairs*, September 29, 2018.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SHORTCOMINGS OF KARL MARX (2018)

I often have occasion to think that, as an "intellectual," I am lucky to be alive at this time in history, at the end of the long evolution from Herodotus and the pre-Socratic philosophers to Chomsky and modern science. One reason for my gratitude is simply that, as I wrote years ago in a moment of youthful idealism, "the past is a kaleidoscope of cultural achievements, or rather a cornucopian buffet whose fruits I can sample, choosing which are my favorite delicacies—which healthiest, which savory and sweet—and invent my own diet tailored to my needs. History can be appropriated by each person as he chooses, selectively employed in the service of his self-creation!" But while this Goethean ideal of enlightened self-cultivation is important, perhaps an even greater advantage of living so late in history is that, if one has an open

and critical mind, it is possible to have a much more sophisticated and correct understanding of the world than before. Intellectual history is littered with egregious errors, myths and lies that have beguiled billions of minds. Two centuries after the Enlightenment, however, the spirit of rationalism and science has achieved so many victories that countless millions have been freed from the ignorance and superstition of the past.

Few thinkers deserve more credit for the liberation of the human mind than Karl Marx. Aside from the heroes of the Scientific Revolution—Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, and others—and their philosophical 'translators'—Francis Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Voltaire, Diderot, Hume—hardly any come close. But not only did Marx contribute to our intellectual liberation; he also, of course, made immense contributions to the struggle for liberation from oppressive power-structures (a struggle that, indeed, is a key component of the effort to free our minds). These two major achievements amply justify the outpouring of articles on the bicentennial of his birth, and in fact, I think, call for yet another one, to consider in more depth both his significance and his shortcomings.

My focus in this article is going to be on his ideas, not on his life or his activism. He was certainly an inspiration in the latter respect, but it is his writings that are timeless. The fanatical and violent hatred they have always elicited from the enemies of human progress, the spokesmen of a power-loving, money-worshipping misanthropy, is the most eloquent proof of their value.

*

The central reason for Marx's importance and fame is that he gave us the most sophisticated elaboration of the most fundamental concept in social analysis: class.

He was far from the only thinker to emphasize class. One might even say that the primacy of class verges on common sense. In his *Politics*, Aristotle already interpreted society according to the divergent interests of the poor and the rich. The semi-conservative James Madison, like other Enlightenment figures, agreed, as is clear from his famous *Federalist No. 10*:

[T]he most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes actuated by different sentiments and views.

Could anything be more obvious than this proto-historical materialism?

But Marx was unique in systematically expounding this materialism and grounding it in rigorous analysis of production relations—the concept of which he practically invented, or at least self-consciously elevated to a determining status and analyzed with exhaustive thoroughness. As everyone passingly familiar with Marxism knows, such notions as exploitation, surplus, surplus-value, and class struggle acquired a quasi-scientific—which is to say exact and precisely explanatory—character in the context of Marx's investigation of production relations, particularly those of capitalism.

Given that historical materialism is often ridiculed and rejected, it isn't out of place here to give a simplified account of its premises, an account that shows how uncontroversial these premises ought to be. This is especially desirable in a time when even self-styled Marxists feel compelled, due to the cultural sway held by feminism and identity politics, to deny that class has priority over other variables such as gender, sexuality, and race.³

For example, see Peter Frase, "Stay Classy," *Jacobin*, June 26, 2014.

The explanatory (and therefore strategic, for revolutionaries) primacy of class can be established on simple a priori grounds, quite apart from empirical sociological or historical analysis. One has only to reflect that access to resources-money, capital, technology-is of unique importance to life, being key to survival, to a high quality of life, to political power, to social and cultural influence; and access to (or control over) resources is determined ultimately by class position, one's position in the social relations of production. The owner of the means of production has control over more resources than the person who owns only his labor-power, which means he is better able to influence the political process and to propagate ideas and values that legitimate his dominant position and justify the subordination of others. These two broad categories of owners and workers have opposing interests, most obviously in the inverse relation between wages and profits. This antagonism of interests is the "class struggle," a struggle that need not always be explicit or conscious but is constantly present on an implicit level, indeed is constitutive of the relationship between capitalist and worker. The class struggle—that is, the structure and functioning of economic institutions—can be called the foundation of society, the dynamic around which society tends to revolve, because, again, it is through class that institutions and actors acquire the means to influence social life.

These simple, commonsense reflections suffice to establish the meaning and soundness of Marx's infamous, "simplistic," "reductionist" contrast between the economic "base" and the political, cultural, and ideological "superstructure." Maybe his language here was misleading and metaphorical. He was only sketching his historical materialism in a short preface, the famous Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and could hardly have foreseen that generations of academics would later pore over his words, pick at them, cavil at them, fling casuistries at each other until a vast scholarly literature had been produced debating Marxian "economic determinism." As if the relative primacy of economic institutions that are, by definition, directly

involved in the accumulation and distribution of material resources and thus power, isn't anything but a truism, and can be seen as such on the basis of such elementary reasoning as in the preceding paragraph.

The *Communist Manifesto's* epoch-making claim, therefore, that the history of all complex societies has been the history of class struggles is *not* ridiculous or oversimplifying, contrary to what has been claimed a thousand times in scholarship and the popular press. It is, broadly speaking, accurate, if "class struggle" is understood to mean not only explicit collective conflict between classes (and class-subgroups; see the above quotation from Madison) but also the implicit antagonism of interests between classes, which constitutes the structure of economic institutions. Particular class structures/dynamics, together with the level of development of productive forces they determine and are expressed through, provide the basic institutional context around which a given politics and culture are fleshed out.⁴

Thus, to argue, as feminists, queer theorists, and confused Marxists like Peter Frase are wont to, that class is of no special significance compared to identities like gender and race is quite mistaken. Neither feminism nor anti-racist activism targets such institutional structures as the relation between capitalist and worker; or rather, to the extent that these movements do, they become class-oriented and lose their character as merely feminist or anti-racist. If you want a society of economic democracy, in which economic exploitation, "income inequality," mass poverty, militarism, ecological destruction, and privatization of resources are done away with, the goal of your activism must be to abolish capitalist institutions—the omnipotence of the profit motive, the dictatorial

In my summary (on Academia.edu) of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix's 1981 masterpiece *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests*, I added the following thoughts to the foregoing account: "Class struggle is central to history in still more ways; for instance, virtually by analytical necessity it has been, directly or indirectly, the main cause of popular resistance and rebellions. Likewise, the ideologies and cultures of the lower classes have been in large measure sublimations of class interest and conflict. Most wars, too, have been undertaken so that rulers (effectively the ruling class) could gain control over resources, which is sort of the class struggle by other means. Wars grow out of class dynamics, and are intended to benefit the rich and powerful."

control of capitalist over worker—and not simply misogyny or terrible treatment of minorities. These issues are important, but only *anti-capitalism* is properly revolutionary, involving a total transformation of society (because a transformation of the *very structures* of institutions, not merely who is allowed into the privileged positions).

Moreover, as plenty of feminists and Black Lives Matter activists well know, you cannot possibly achieve the maximal goals that identity politics pursues while remaining in a capitalist society. Most of the oppression that minorities experience is precisely a result of capitalism's perverse incentives, and of the concentration of power in a small ruling class.⁵ This ties into the fact that, since the time of Marx and Engels, an enormous amount of scholarship has shown the power of the Marxian analytical framework. Even ideologies and structures of race, nation, and gender are significantly grounded in class dynamics, including slavery and its aftermath in the U.S., European imperialism, "national" mobilization for war (in the interest of dominant classes), attempts by the Victorian upper class to control working-class women's lives and sexuality, and consumerist mass marketing of "feminine" products and social roles to women. For example, Achin Vanaik notes that "the rise of capitalism created a much more complex society in which the rising class, the bourgeoisie, needed a new social glue, namely nationalism, to

Cedric Johnson, for instance, argues that racism is of far less importance to the oppression of African Americans today than simply the basic facts of neoliberal capitalism. The plight of the urban black poor "as a reserve of contingent and unemployed labor is the consequence of neoliberal rollback, technological obsolescence, and informalization, not the revival of Jim Crow racism." Cedric Johnson, *The Panthers Can't Save Us Now: Debating Left Politics and Black Lives Matter* (New York: Verso, 2022). See Chris Wright, "Only Class Struggle Can Save the Left," *Sublation*, November 4, 2022 for a review and summary of the book.

sustain its rule over the lower orders." Nationalism is highly functional for a capitalist economy.

To take another example, that of religious fundamentalism in the U.S., historians have shown that since the mid-twentieth century, conservative sectors of the business community have subsidized right-wing evangelical Christianity in order to beat back unionism and liberalism, which have been tarred and feathered as communist, socialist, and godless. More generally, for centuries the ruling class has propagated divisive ideas of race, religion, nationality, and gender in order, partly, to fragment the working class and so control it more effectively. By now, leftists see such arguments as truisms.

On the other hand, most intellectuals, including many academically trained leftists, also see Marxian "economistic" arguments as overly simplifying and reductive. Mainstream intellectuals, particularly, consider it a sign of unsophistication that Marxism tends to abstract from complicating factors and emphasize the class variable (in which, indeed, it partially grounds other factors). "Reality is complicated!" they shout in unison. "You also have to take into account the influence of cultural discourses, the diversity of subjective identities, etc. Class isn't everything!" Somehow it is considered an intellectual *vice*, and not a *virtue*, to *simplify* for the sake of *understanding*. It is true, after all, that the world is complex; and so in order to understand it one has to simplify it

Achin Vanaik, "Marxism and Nationalism," Verso Blog, January 21, 2018. Innumerable scholarly works explore how class interacts with, and helps shape, race, nation, and gender, but some examples are Theodore W. Allen, The Invention of the White Race, Vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Verso, 1994 and 1997); Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006 [1983]); Charles Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992 (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Neil Davidson, Nation-States: Consciousness and Competition (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Michèle Barrett, Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter (New York: Verso, 1988); Catriona Parratt, "More Than Mere Amusement": Working-Class Women's Leisure in England, 1750–1914 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001).

⁷ See Ken Fones-Wolf and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015); and Kevin Kruse, One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

a bit, explain it in terms of general principles. As in the natural sciences, a single principle can never explain *everything*; but, if it is the right one, it can explain a great deal.

Noam Chomsky, with characteristic eloquence, defended this point in an interview in 1990.8 I might as well quote him at length. Since he is in essence just an idiosyncratic and anarchistic Marxist—in fact one of the most consistent Marxists of all, despite his rejection of the label—his arguments are exactly those to which every thoughtful materialist is committed.

Question: But you're often accused of being too black-and-white in your analysis, of dividing the world into evil elites and subjugated or mystified masses. Does your approach ever get in the way of basic accuracy?

Answer: I do approach these questions a bit differently than historical scholarship generally does. But that's because humanistic scholarship tends to be irrational. I approach these questions pretty much as I would approach my scientific work. In that work—in any kind of rational inquiry—what you try to do is identify major factors, understand them, and see what you can explain in terms of them. Then you always find a periphery of unexplained phenomena, and you introduce minor factors and try to account for those phenomena. What you're always searching for is the guiding principles: the major effects, the dominant structures. In order to do that, you set aside a lot of tenth-order effects. Now, that's not the method of humanistic scholarship, which tends in a different direction. Humanistic scholarship—I'm caricaturing a bit for simplicity—says every fact is precious; you put it alongside every other fact. That's a sure way to guarantee you'll never understand anything. If you tried to do that in

Adam Jones, "The Radical Vocation: An Interview with Noam Chomsky," February 20, 1990, at znetwork.org.

the sciences, you wouldn't even reach the level of Babylonian astronomy.

I don't think the [social] field of inquiry is fundamentally different in this respect. Take what we were talking about before: institutional facts. Those are major factors. There are also minor factors, like individual differences, microbureaucratic interactions, or what the President's wife told him at breakfast. These are all tenth-order effects. I don't pay much attention to them, because I think they all operate within a fairly narrow range which is predictable by the major factors. I think you can isolate those major factors. You can document them quite well; you can illustrate them in historical practice; you can verify them...

When you proceed in this fashion, it might give someone who's not used to such an approach the sense of black-and-white, of drawing lines too clearly. It purposely does that. That's what is involved when you try to identify major, dominant effects and put them in their proper place.

But instead of trying to systematically explain society by starting from a general principle and evaluating its utility, then proceeding to secondary factors like race or gender and using them to elucidate phenomena not explained by the dominant principle, the approach that tends to prevail in the humanities and social sciences is either idealism or a sort of methodological relativism. In social history, for example, you are often expected just to describe things from different perspectives. You should discuss gender, and race, and class, and various relevant discourses, and how people identified themselves, how they reacted to given developments, and perhaps issues of sexuality and the body, etc. Some knowledge may be gained, but such work, not infrequently, amounts to unanchored description seemingly for its own sake. Nor is it rare for it to foreground "idealist" factors rather than materialist ones.

*

On the bicentennial of Marx's birth, it is intellectually shameful, though predictable, that idealism is still the primary tendency in scholarship and journalism.

What idealism means, of course, is an emphasis on ideas or consciousness over material factors, whether "social being"—economic conditions, institutional imperatives (the need to follow the rules of given social structures), *interests* as opposed to ideals or ideologies, and the necessities of biological survival—or, in the context of philosophical idealism such as that of Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and the logical positivists of the mid-twentieth century, the existence of mind-independent matter. Philosophical idealism, while no longer as respectable as it once was, persists in forms less honest and direct than that of Berkeley, especially in postmodernist circles and schools of thought influenced by the Continental tradition (e.g., phenomenology) and even American pragmatism. More important, though, is the type of idealism that disparages class and social being.

This idealism comes in different varieties. Its most common manifestation is the uncritical tendency to take seriously the rhetoric and self-interpretations of the powerful. As Marx understood and Chomsky likes to point out, humans are expert at deceiving themselves, at attributing noble motives to themselves when baser desires of power, money, recognition, and institutional pressures are what really motivate them. The powerful, especially, love to clothe themselves in the garb of moral grandeur. They insist that they are invading a country in order to protect human rights or spread democracy and freedom; that they are expanding prisons to keep communities safer, and deporting immigrants

For critiques of the idealism of mainstream schools of philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (New York: Verso, 2021 [1952]); Maurice Cornforth, *Marxism and the Linguistic Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1965); George Novack, *Empiricism and Its Evolution: A Marxist View* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1969); George Novack, *Pragmatism versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975).

to keep the country safe; that by cutting social welfare programs they are trying honestly to reduce the budget deficit, and by cutting taxes on the rich they only want to stimulate the economy. When journalists and intellectuals take seriously such threadbare, predictable rhetoric, they are disregarding the lesson of Marxism that *individuals* aren't even the main actors here in the first place; *institutions* are. The individuals can tell themselves whatever stories they want about their own behavior, but the primary causes of the design and implementation of political policies are institutional dynamics, power dynamics. Political and economic actors represent certain interests, and they act in accordance with those interests. That's all.

An example of academics' idealism is Odd Arne Westad's celebrated book The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times, which won the prestigious Bancroft Prize in 2006. Its thesis is that "the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics. Locked in conflict over the very concept of European modernity...Washington and Moscow needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies..." It is a remarkably unsophisticated argument, which is backed up by remarkably unsophisticated invocations of policymakers' rhetoric. It rises to the level of farce. At one point, after quoting a State Department spokesman on George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq—"I believe in freedom as a right, a responsibility, a destiny... The United States stands for freedom, defends freedom, advances freedom, and enlarges the community of freedom because we think it is the right thing to do"-Westad states ingenuously that the Iraq invasion was a perfect example of how "freedom and security have been, and remain today, the driving forces of U.S. foreign policy." As if gigantic government bureaucracies are moved to act out of pure altruism!¹⁰

¹⁰ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4, 405.

Related to this idealism is the faith of liberal intellectuals that ideals truly matter in the rough-and-tumble of political and economic life. John Maynard Keynes gave a classic exposition of this faith in the last paragraph of his *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, which has stroked academic egos for generations:

...[T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. [?!] Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas... [S]oon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.

These are backward fantasies, which grow out of a poor sociological imagination. The point is that the ideas that come to be accepted as gospel are *those useful to vested interests*, which are the entities that have the resources to propagate them. (In the typically bourgeois language of impersonal 'automaticity,' Keynes refers to "the gradual encroachment of ideas." But ideas do not spread of themselves; they are propagated and subsidized by people and institutions whose interests they express. This is why "the ruling ideas of a society are the ideas of its ruling class," which has the resources to spread them.)

Keynes' famous book itself contributed not at all to the so-called Keynesian policies of Franklin Roosevelt and Hitler and others; in fact, such policies were already being pursued by Baron Haussmann in France in the 1850s, because they were useful in giving employment to thousands of workers and raising aggregate demand and thereby

economic growth. Is it likely that had Keynes not published his book in 1936, the U.S. government during and after World War II would have pursued radically different, un-Keynesian economic policies? Hardly. Because they were useful to vested interests, those policies were bound to be adopted—and economists, tools of the ruling class, were bound to systematize their theoretical rationalizations sooner or later.

But liberals continue to believe that if only they can convince politicians of their intellectual or moral errors, they can persuade them to change their policies. Paul Krugman's columns in the *New York Times* provide amusing examples of this sort of pleading. It is telling that he always ends his analysis right before getting to a realistic proposal: he scrupulously avoids saying that for his ideas to be enacted it is necessary to revive unions on a systemic scale, or to organize radical and disruptive social movements to alter the skewed class structure. Such an analytic move would require that he step into the realm of Marxism, abandoning his liberal idealism, and would thus bar him from being published in the *New York Times*.

If I may be permitted to give another example of liberal idealism: I recall reading Richard Goodwin's popular book *Remembering America:* A Voice from the Sixties (1988), a memoir of his time as speechwriter and adviser to John F. Kennedy. It's a flabby centrist whitewashing of history, a nostalgic apotheosis of Kennedy and America and democracy, not worth reading on its merits. However—to quote a review I wrote—

The book is enlightening as a window into the mind of the Harvard liberal, revelatory of the sort of thoughts this person has, his worldview. Liberalism from the inside. A prettified ideology, bland but appealing, with the reference to spiritual truths, reason, ideals of harmony and peace, a rising tide lifting all boats, the fundamental compatibility of all interests in society (except for those we don't like, of course), the nonexistence of class struggle, government's ability to solve all social ills, history as a progressive battle between knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness, reason and unreason, open-mindedness and bigotry, and any other set of binary abstractions you can think of. The whole ideology hovers above reality in the heavenly mists of Hope and Progress. It's all very pretty, hence its momentary resurgence—which succumbed to disillusionment—with Barack Obama. And hence its ability to get through the filters of the class structure, to become an element in the hegemonic American discourse, floating above institutional realities like some imaginary golden idol one worships in lieu of common sense. It serves a very useful purpose for business, averting people's eyes from the essential incompatibility of class interests toward the idea of Gradual Progress by means of tinkering at the margins, making nice policies.

Such is the function of liberal idealism for the ruling class.

One other type of idealism that must be mentioned is the post-modernist variety (or rather varieties). It is ironic that postmodernist intellectuals, with their rejection of "metanarratives" and the idea of objective truth, consider themselves hyper-sophisticated, because in fact they're less sophisticated than even unreflective doctrinaire Marxists. They are not so much post-Marxist as pre-Marxist, in that they haven't assimilated the important intellectual lessons of the Marxist tradition.

In both its subjectivism and its focus on "discourses," "texts," "meanings," "vocabularies," "cultures," and the like, postmodernism is idealistic. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, for example, is highly abstract and pseudo-philosophical, tending to ignore class, modes of production, and the concrete realities of both state institutions and socioeconomic contexts. (More illuminating, lucid, and socially contextualized is Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's Marxist classic *Punishment and Social Structure*, published in 1939.) Things didn't get better later, as illustrated

by the writings of postcolonial scholars like, say, Ashis Nandy, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ann Laura Stoler, and Uday Mehta. In the latter's work, for instance, we find the characteristic postmodernist argument that European imperial practices were outgrowths of Enlightenment liberalism. "One needs to account," he writes, "for how a set of [liberal] ideas that professed, at a fundamental level, to include as their political referent a universal constituency nevertheless spawned practices that were either predicated on or directed at the political marginalization of various people."11 It is as if Marxism never happened. Like other postcolonialists, Mehta blames practices on ideas: "a set of ideas...spawned practices." We're back to Hegel, but without the profundity. In reality, of course, it is practices and institutional dynamics—people's material interests, the interests of power-structures and the wealthy, etc.—that spawn ideas, or at least determine what kinds of rhetoric and ideologies predominate in a given society. If the liberalism of John Stuart Mill's day tolerated, even justified, colonialism and various political exclusions, that isn't because liberalism itself is somehow "necessarily" exclusionary (or is what *caused* these exclusions); it is because intellectuals and elites accommodated themselves to the interests of powerful institutions, perverting and diluting the emancipatory content of some Enlightenment philosophies.12

The postmodern, Foucauldian discourse of "the body," too—how, in modern times, bodies are disciplined, subjected, regulated, inscribed with power relations, made docile, made a discursive site, and so on—is, ironically, somewhat idealistic. Which is to say it is more politically safe than Marxism, since it often directs attention away from class relations and socioeconomic context. Any intellectual who finds himself

Uday Mehta, "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 59, 60.

¹² For a brilliant Marxist critique of postcolonialism, see Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2013). On the decline of class analysis and rise of "culturalism" in swathes of the humanities after the 1970s, see Vivek Chibber, "On the Decline of Class Analysis in South Asian Studies," *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2006): 357–387.

being accepted by mainstream institutions, as hordes of Foucault-loving postmodernists, feminists, and queer theorists have—contrary to the treatment of materialists like Paul Sweezy, Gabriel Kolko, Thomas Ferguson, Jesse Lemisch, David F. Noble, Staughton Lynd, Michael Parenti, Rajani Kanth, Norman Finkelstein, Noam Chomsky, and others—should question whether his ideas get to the heart of the matter or do not, instead, distract from the workings of power.

Said differently, the problem with identity politics is that it doesn't completely reject Margaret Thatcher's infamous saying, "There is no such thing as society." It takes a semi-individualistic approach to analysis and activism. A revolutionary answers Thatcher with the statement, "There is no such thing as the individual"—in the sense that the focus must be on institutional structures, which mold us and dominate us. To the degree that the focus turns toward the individual, or his identity, his body, his subjectivity, the radicalism becomes more anodyne (while not necessarily ceasing to be oppositional or important).

There is a great deal more to be said about postmodernism. For instance, I could make the obvious point that its particularism and relativism, its elevation of fragmentary "narratives" and its Kuhnian emphasis on the supposed incommensurability of different "paradigms," is just as useful to the ruling class as its idealism, since it denies *general truths* about class struggle and capitalist dynamics. (See Georg Lukács' masterpiece *The Destruction of Reason* (1952) for a history of how such relativism and idealism contributed to the cultural climate that made Hitler possible.) Or I could argue that the rationalism and universalism of what the scholar Jonathan Israel calls the Radical Enlightenment, which found its fulfillment in Marxism, is, far from being dangerous or containing the seeds of its own destruction—as postmodernists and

confused eclectic Marxists like Theodor Adorno have argued¹³—the only hope for humanity.

Instead, I'll only observe, in summary, that idealism is not new: it is as old as the hills, and Marx made an immortal contribution in repudiating it. Idealism has always afflicted mainstream intellectual culture, all the way back to antiquity, when Plato viewed the world as consisting of shadows of ideal Forms, Hindus and Buddhists interpreted it in spiritual terms and as being somehow illusory, and Stoics were "telling the slave in the mines that if he would only think aright he would be happy."14 Idealism persisted through the Christian Middle Ages, Confucian China, and Hindu India. It dominated the Enlightenment, when philosophes were arguing that ignorance and superstition were responsible for mass suffering and a primordial conspiracy of priests had plunged society into darkness. Hegel, of course, was an arch-idealist. Finally, a thinker came along who renounced this whole tradition and systematized the common sense of the hitherto despised "rabble," the workers, the peasants, the women struggling to provide for their children—namely that ideas are of less significance than class and material conditions. The real heroes, the real actors in history are not the parasitic intellectuals or the marauding rulers but the people working day in and day out to maintain society, to preserve and improve the conditions of civilization for their descendants.

Had there been no Marx or Engels, revolutionaries and activists would still have targeted class structures, as they were doing before

See his (and Max Horkheimer's) book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which, in effect, puts much of the blame for the violence, authoritarianism, and barbarism of the modern world on Enlightenment-grounded ideologies of reason, science, technology, progress, liberalism, etc. This argument, again, is very idealistic and un-Marxian. The fact that modes, or techniques, of reason and science originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been used by imperialists, colonialists, fascists, Nazis, and other corporate and state tyrannies does not invalidate the Scientific Revolution or the Enlightenment themselves, contrary to the claims, or at least the implications, of the Frankfurt School and its postmodern descendants. The horrors of modernity are a product not of science or "universalizing reason" but of capitalism and modes of social control—as well as destructive technologies—that have grown out of it (including the state capitalism of the Soviet Union and other self-styled "socialist" states).

¹⁴ W. W. Tarn, Hellenistic Civilisation (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1952), 360.

Marxism had achieved widespread influence. Unions would have organized workers, radicals would have established far-left organizations, insurrections would have occurred in countries around the world. Marx's role has been to provide clarity and guidance, to serve as a symbol of certain tendencies of thought and action. His uniquely forceful and acute analyses of history and capitalism have been a font of inspiration for both thinkers and activists, a spur, a stimulus to keep their eyes on the prize, as it were. His prediction of the collapse of capitalism from its internal contradictions has given hope and confidence to millions—perhaps *too much* confidence, in light of the traditional over-optimism of Marxists. But having such a brilliant authority on their side, such a teacher, has surely been of inestimable benefit to the oppressed.

As for the narrow task of "interpreting the world," the enormous body of work by Marxists from the founder to the present totally eclipses the contributions of every other school of thought. From history and economics to literary criticism, nothing else comes remotely close.

*

Marx did, however, make mistakes. No one is infallible. It is worth considering some of those mistakes, in case we can learn from them.

The ones I'll discuss here, which are the most significant, have to do with his conception of socialist revolution. Both the timeline he predicted and his sketchy remarks on how the revolution would come to pass were wrong.

Regarding the timeline: it has long been a commonplace that Marx failed to foresee Keynesianism and the welfare state. His biggest blind spot was nationalism, and in general the power of the capitalist nation-state as an organizing principle of social life. Ironically, Marxism is crucial to explaining both, since both are largely grounded in conditions of class conflict, the social pathologies and disorders that arise out of

such conflict, and the development and needs of the maturing capitalist economy. 15

In essence, while Marx was right to locate a capitalist tendency toward relative or, sometimes, absolute immiseration of the working class, he was wrong that this tendency could not be effectively counteracted, at least for a long time, by opposing pressures. That is, he underestimated the power of tendencies toward integration of the working class into the dominant order, toward "pure and simple trade-unionism," toward the state's stabilizing management of the economy, and toward workers' identification not only with the abstract notion of a social class that spans continents but also with the more concrete facts of ethnicity, race, trade, immediate community, and nation. These forces have historically militated against the revolutionary tendencies of class polarization and international working-class solidarity. They have both fragmented the working class and made possible the successes of reformism—the welfare state, social democracy, and the legitimation of mass collective bargaining in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Marx was too optimistic.

On the other hand, he was right that capitalism is not sustainable—because of its "contradictions," its dysfunctional social consequences, and also its effects on the natural environment. No compromises between capital and wage-labor, such as the postwar Keynesian compromise, can last. The market is simply too anarchic, and capital too voracious. Permanent stability is not possible. Sooner or later, with the continued development of the productive forces, capital mobility increases, markets

On Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, for instance, one might consult G. William Domhoff and Michael J. Webber, Class and Power in the New Deal: Corporate Moderates, Southern Democrats, and the Liberal-Labor Coalition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); and Rhonda Levine, Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas). On fascism, relevant works include Robert A. Brady, The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1937); Daniel Guérin, Fascism and Big Business (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973); and Nicos Poulantzas, Fascism and Dictatorship (New York: Verso, 2018 [1974]). For a classic semi-Marxist analysis of various types of state formation, see Barrington Moore Jr., Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993 [1966]).

become more integrated worldwide, elite institutional networks thicken worldwide, and organized labor loses whatever power it had in the days of limited capital mobility. In retrospect, one can see that these tendencies were irresistible, given the distribution of power at the time between capital and labor. Genuine socialism on an international or global scale never could have happened in the twentieth century, which was still the age of oligopolistic, imperialistic capitalism, even state capitalism. In fact, it was not until the twenty-first century that the capitalist mode of production was consolidated across the entire globe, a development Marx assumed was necessary as a prerequisite for socialism (or communism).

The irony, therefore—and history is chock-full of dialectical irony—is that authentic revolutionary possibilities of post-capitalism could not open up until the victories of the left in the twentieth century had been eroded and defeated by hyper-mobile capital. The corporatist formations of social democracy and industrial unionism, fully integrated into the capitalist nation-state, had to decline in order for class polarization in the core capitalist states to peak again, deep economic crisis to return, and radical anti-capitalist movements to reappear (as we may expect they'll do in the coming decades). Many Marxists don't like this type of thinking, according to which things have to get worse before they get better, but Marx himself looked forward to economic crisis because he understood it was only such conditions that could impel workers to join together *en masse* and fight for something as radical as a new social order.¹⁶

The best evidence for the "things have to get worse before they get better" thesis is that the relatively non-barbarous society of the postwar era in the West was made possible only by the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, which mobilized the left on such an epic scale and so discredited fascism that the ruling class finally consented to a dramatic improvement of conditions for workers. Similarly, it is

Jonathan Sperber gives examples of this attitude in *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright, 2013).

possible that generations from now people will think of neoliberalism, with its civilization-endangering horrors, as having been a tool of (in Hegel's words) the "cunning" of historical reason by precipitating the demise of the very society whose consummation it was and making possible the rise of something new.

But how will such a revolution occur? This is another point on which Marx tripped up. Despite his eulogy of the non-statist Paris Commune, Marx was no anarchist: he expected that the proletariat would have to seize control of the national state and then carry out the social revolution from the commanding heights of government. This is clear from the ten-point program laid out in the Communist Manifesto—the specifics of which he repudiated in later years, but apparently not the general conception of statist reconstruction of the economy. It is doubtful, for example, that he would have rejected his earlier statement that "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class." Moreover, he seems to have endorsed Engels' statement in Anti-Dühring that "The proletariat seizes state power, and then transforms the means of production into state property." It appears, then, that both he and Engels were extreme statists, even though, like anarchists, they hoped and expected that the state would (somehow, inexplicably) disappear eventually.

In these beliefs they were mistaken. The social revolution cannot occur *after* a total seizure of state power by "the proletariat" (which isn't a unitary entity but contains divisions)—for several reasons. First, this conception of revolution contradicts the Marxian understanding of social dynamics, a point that few Marxists appear to have appreciated. It exalts a centralized *conscious will* as being able to plan social evolution in advance, a notion that is utterly undialectical. According to "dialectics," history happens behind the backs of historical actors, whose intentions never work out exactly as they're supposed to. Marx was wise

in his admonition that we should never trust the self-interpretations of political actors. And yet he suspends this injunction when it comes to the dictatorship of the proletariat: *these* people's designs are supposed to work out perfectly and straightforwardly, despite the massive complexity and dialectical contradictions of society.

The statist idea of revolution is also wrong to privilege the political over the economic. In supposing that through sheer political will one can transform an authoritarian, exploitative economy into a liberatory, democratic one, Marx is, in effect, reversing the order of "dominant causality" such that politics determines the economy (whereas in fact the economy "determines"—loosely and broadly speaking—politics).¹⁷ Marxism itself suggests that the state, in large part a function of existing economic relations, cannot be socially creative in this radical way. And when it tries to be, what results, ironically, is overwhelming bureaucracy and even *greater* authoritarianism than before. (While the twentieth century's experiences with so-called "Communism" or "state socialism" happened in relatively non-industrialized societies, not advanced capitalist ones as Marx anticipated, the unhappy record is at least suggestive.)

Fundamental to these facts is that if the conquest of political power occurs in a still-capitalist economy, revolutionaries have to contend with the institutional legacies of capitalism: relations of coercion and domination condition everything the government does, and there is no way to break free of them. They cannot be magically transcended through political will; to think they can, or that the state can "wither away" even as it becomes more expansive and dominating, is to adopt a naïve idealism.

Corresponding to all these errors are the flaws in Marx's abstract conceptualization of revolution, according to which revolution happens when the production relations turn into fetters on the use and development of productive forces. One problem with this formulation is that

¹⁷ In reality, of course, political and economic relations are interlinked. But analytically one can distinguish economic activities from narrowly political, governmental activities.

it is meaningless: at what point exactly do production relations begin to fetter productive forces? How long does this fettering have to go on before the revolution begins in earnest? How does one determine the degree of fettering? It would seem that capitalism has fettered productive forces for a very long time, for example in its proneness to recessions and stagnation, in artificial obstacles to the diffusion of knowledge such as intellectual copyright laws, in underinvestment in public goods such as education and transportation, and so forth. On the other hand, science and technology continue to develop, as shown by recent momentous advances in information technology. So what is the utility of this idea of "fettering"?

In fact, it can be made useful if we slightly reconceptualize the theory of revolution. Rather than a conflict simply between production relations and the development of productive forces, there is a conflict between two types of production relations—two modes of production—one of which uses productive forces in a more socially rational and "un-fettering" way than the other. The more progressive mode slowly develops in the womb of the old society as it decays, i.e., as the old dominant mode of production succumbs to crisis and stagnation. In being relatively dynamic and 'socially effective,' the emergent mode of production attracts adherents and resources, until it becomes ever more visible and powerful. The old regime cannot eradicate it; it spreads internationally and gradually transforms the economy, to such a point that the forms and content of politics change with it. Political entities become its partisans, and finally decisive seizures of power by representatives of the emergent mode of production become possible, because reactionary defenders of the old regime have lost their dominant command over resources. And so, over generations, a social revolution transpires.

This conceptual revision saves Marx's intuition by giving it more meaning: the "fettering" is not absolute but is *in relation to* a more effective mode of production that is, so to speak, competing with the old stagnant one. The most obvious concrete instance of this conception of

revolution is the long transition from feudalism to capitalism, during which the feudal mode became so hopelessly outgunned by the capitalist that, in retrospect, the long-term outcome of the "bourgeois revolutions" from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries was never in doubt. Capitalism, much more dynamic than feudalism, was bound to triumph after it had reached a certain level of development.

But the important point is that capitalist interests could never have decisively "seized the state" until the capitalist economy had already made extensive inroads against feudalism. Likewise, socialist or post-capitalist interests surely cannot take over national states until they have vast material resources on their side, such as can only be acquired through large-scale participation in productive activities. As the capitalist economy descends into global crisis and stagnation over the next thirty, fifty and a hundred years, one can predict that an "alternative economy," a "solidarity economy" of cooperative and socialized relations of production will emerge both in society's interstices and, sooner or later, in the mainstream. In many cases it will be sponsored and promoted by the state (on local, regional, and national levels), in an attempt to assuage social discontent; but its growth will only have the effect of hollowing out the hegemony of capitalism and ultimately facilitating its downfall. And thereby the downfall, or radical transformation, of the capitalist state.

I cannot go into the detail necessary to flesh out this gradualist notion of revolution, but in my book *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution* I have argued that it not only radically revises the Marxian conception (on the basis of a single conceptual alteration), in effect updating it for the twenty-first century, but that it is thoroughly grounded in Marxian concepts—in fact, is truer to the fundamentals of historical materialism than Marx's own vision of proletarian revolution was. The new society has to be erected on the foundation of emerging production relations, which cannot but take a very long time to colonize society. And class struggle, that key Marxian concept, will be essential to the transformation:

decades of continuous conflict between the masters and the oppressed, including every variety of disruptive political activity, will attend the construction—from the grassroots up to the national government—of anti-capitalist modes of production.

I'll also refer the reader to the book for responses to the conventional Marxian objections that cooperatives, for instance, are forced to compromise their principles by operating in the market economy, and that interstitial developments are not revolutionary. At this point in history, it should be obvious that a socialist revolution cannot occur in one fell swoop, one great moment of historical rupture, as "the working class" or its Leninist leaders storm the State, shoot all their opponents, and impose sweeping diktats to totally restructure society. (What an incredibly idealistic and utopian conception that is!) The conquest of political power will occur piecemeal, gradually; it will suffer setbacks and then proceed to new victories, then suffer more defeats, etc., in a many-generations-long process that happens at different rates in different countries. It will be a time of world-agony, especially as climate change will be devastating civilization; but the sheer numbers of people whose interests will lie in a transcendence of corporate capitalism will constitute a formidable weapon on the side of progress.

As for the details of what this long process will look like, we must follow Marx, again, in shunning speculation. He is sometimes criticized for saying too little about what socialism or communism would look like, but this was in fact very democratic and sensible of him. It is for the people engaged in struggles to hammer out their own institutions, "to learn in the dialectic of history," as Rosa Luxemburg said. Nor is it possible, in any case, to foresee the future in detail. All we can do is try to advance the struggle and leave the rest to our descendants.

*

Marx is practically inexhaustible, and one cannot begin to do him justice in a single essay. His work has something for both anarchists and Leninists, for existentialists and their critics, cultural theorists and economists, philosophers and even scientists. Few thinkers have ever been subjected to such critical scrutiny and yet held up so well over centuries. To attack him, as usefully idiotic lackeys of the capitalist class do, for being responsible for twentieth-century totalitarianism is naïve idealism of the crudest sort. Ideas do not make history, though they can be useful tools in the hands of reactionaries or revolutionaries. They can be misunderstood, too, and used inappropriately or in ways directly contrary to their spirit—as the Christianity of Jesus has, for example, and, not rarely, the Marxism of Marx.

But in our time of despair and desperation, with the future of the species itself in doubt, there is one more valid criticism to be made of Marx: he was too sectarian, too eager to attack people on the left with whom he disagreed. In this case, Chomsky's attitude is more sensible: the left must unite and not exhaust its energy in internecine battles. Let's be done with all the recriminations between Marxists and anarchists and feminists and others, all the squabbling that has gone on since the mid-nineteenth century. It is time to unite against the threat of fascism and—not to speak over-grandiosely—save life on Earth.

Let's honor the memory of all the heroes and martyrs who have come before us by rising to the occasion, at this climactic moment of history.

¹⁸ See Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

ELEVEN THESES ON SOCIALIST REVOLUTION (2021)

How should we think about "socialist revolution" in the twenty-first century? I put the term in scare-quotes because it can be hard to believe anymore that a socialist, or economically democratic, civilization is even possible—much less inevitable, as Marx and Engels seem to have believed. Far from being on the verge of achieving something like socialism, humanity appears to be on the verge of consuming itself in the dual conflagrations of environmental collapse and, someday perhaps, nuclear war. The collective task of *survival* seems challenging enough; the task of overcoming capitalist exploitation and instituting a politico-economic regime of cooperation, community, and democracy appears completely hopeless, given the overwhelming crises and bleak horizons of the present.

Some leftists might reply that it is precisely only by achieving socialism that civilization can save itself from multidimensional collapse. This may be true, but if so, the prospects for a decent future have not improved, because the timeline for abolishing capitalism and the timeline by which we must "solve" global warming and ecological collapse do not remotely correspond. There is no prospect for a national, international, or global transition to socialism within the next several decades, decades that are pivotal for addressing ecological crises. In the United States, for example, it took Republican reactionaries almost a century of organizing starting in the 1940s to achieve the power they have now, and this was in a political economy in which they already had considerable power. It isn't very likely that socialists, hardly a powerful group, will be able to overthrow capitalism on a shorter timeline. If anything, the international process of "revolution" will take much longer. Perhaps not as long as the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but certainly well over a century.

It can seem, then, naïve and utopian even to consider the prospects for socialism when we're confronted with the more urgent and immediate task of sheer survival. However guilty capitalism is of imposing on humanity its current predicament, the fact is that we can make progress in addressing the environmental crisis even in the framework of capitalism, for example by accelerating the rollout of renewable and nuclear energy, dismantling the fossil fuel industry, regulating pesticides that are contributing to the decimation of insect populations, experimenting with geoengineering, and so on. These goals—and their corollaries, such as defeating centrist and conservative candidates for political office—should be the most urgent priority of left-wing activists for the foreseeable future. If organized human life comes to an end, nothing else matters much.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't just forget about socialism for now, because it remains a distant goal, a fundamental value, and organizing for it—as by "raising the consciousness" of the working class—can improve lives in the short term as well. So it is incumbent on us to think

about how we might achieve the distant goal, what strategies promise to be effective, what has gone wrong in the past, and what revisions to Marxist theory are necessary to make sense of past failures. We shouldn't remain beholden to old slogans and formulations that were the product of very different circumstances than prevail today; we should be willing to rethink revolution from the ground up, as it were.

I have addressed these matters elsewhere, in various articles and blog posts.¹⁹ Here, I'll simply present an abbreviated series of "theses" (eleven of them, in honor of Marx's Theses on Feuerbach) on the subject of revolution that strike me as commonsensical, however heterodox some of them may seem. Their cumulative point is to reorient the Marxian conception of socialist revolution from that of a completely ruptural seizure and overthrow of capitalist states—whether grounded in electoral or insurrectionary measures—followed by a planned and unitary reconstruction of society (the "dictatorship of the proletariat"), to that of a very gradual process of economic and political transformation over many generations, in which the character of the economy changes together with that of the state. The long transition is not peaceful or smooth or blandly "reformist." It is necessarily riven at all points by violent, quasi-insurrectionary clashes between the working class and the ruling class, between international popular movements seeking to carve out a new society and a capitalist elite seeking to prolong the current one. Given the accumulating popular pressure on a global scale, which among other things will succeed in electing ever more socialists to office, the capitalist state will, in spite of itself, participate to some extent in the construction of new economic relations that is the foundation of constructing a new society—even as the state in other respects continues to violently repress dissenting movements.

E.g., "The Coming Revolution, and the Necessity for a Rethinking of Marxism," Tropics of Meta, April 30, 2020; "Revolution in the Twenty-First Century: A Reconsideration of Marxism," New Politics, May 5, 2020; "Marxism and the Solidarity Economy: Toward a New Theory of Revolution," Class, Race and Corporate Power, vol. 9, issue 1 (2021); "Why I am not a Leninist (nor an anarchist)," August 24, 2020, https://www.wrightswriting.com/post/why-i-am-not-a-leninist-nor-an-anarchist.

But the process of building a new economy will not be exclusively statist (despite the statism of mainstream Marxism going back to Marx himself). Transitions between modes of production take place on more than one plane and are not only "top-down." In particular, as civilization descends deeper into crisis and government proves inadequate to the task of maintaining social order, the "solidarity economy," supported by the state, will grow in prominence and functionality. A world of multiform catastrophe will see alternative economic arrangements spring up at all levels, and the strategies of "statist Marxism" will complement, or be complemented by, the "mutual aid" (cooperative, frequently small-scale, semi-interstitial) strategies of anarchism. These two broad traditions of the left, so often at each other's throats, will finally, in effect, come together to build up a new society in the midst of a collapsing *ancien régime*. Crisis will, as always, provide opportunity.

1

Successful socialist revolution, meaning the creation of a society that eliminates private and authoritarian ownership and control of productive resources and instead permits democratic popular control of the economy, has happened nowhere on a large scale or a "permanent" ("post-capitalist") basis. Whether in Russia, China, Cuba, or elsewhere, the dream of socialism—still less of communism—has never been realized. According to Marxism, indeed, the very fact that these were isolated islands under siege by a capitalist world indicates that they signified something other than socialism, which is, naturally enough, supposed to *follow* capitalism and exist first and foremost in the "advanced" countries. The fact that these "socialist" experiments ultimately succumbed to capitalism is enough to show that, whatever progress they entailed for their respective populations, they were in some sense, in the long term, revolutionary abortions.

2

Marx was right that there is a kind of "logic" to historical development. Notwithstanding the postmodernist and empiricist shibboleths of contemporary historiography, history isn't all contingency, particularity, individual agency, and alternative paths that were tragically not taken (because of poor leadership or whatever). Rather, institutional contexts determine that some things are possible or probable and others impossible. Revolutionary (Leninist) voluntarism, the elevation of political will above the painfully protracted, largely "unconscious" dialectical processes of resolution of structural contradictions and subsequent appearance of new, unforeseen conditions that are themselves "resolved" through the ordinary actions of millions of people, is a false (and un-Marxist) theory of social change. If the world didn't go socialist in the twentieth century, it is because it couldn't have: structurally, in the heyday of corporate capitalism (monopoly capitalism, state capitalism, imperialism, whatever one calls it), socialism was impossible.

In short, on the broadest of historical scales, the "hidden meaning" of the past—to use a phrase beloved by Marx—is revealed by the present and future, as probabilities with which the past was pregnant become realities.

3

Marx therefore got the timeline of revolution radically wrong. He did not, and could not, foresee the power of nationalism, the welfare state, Keynesian stimulation of demand, and the state's stabilizing management of the crisis-prone economy. In fact, we might say that, falling victim to the characteristic over-optimism of Enlightenment thinkers, he mistook the birth pangs of industrial capitalism for its death throes. Only in the neoliberal era has the capitalist mode of production even finished its conquest of the world—which the "dialectical" logic of historical

materialism suggests is a necessary precondition for socialism—displacing remaining peasantries from the land and privatizing "state-socialist" economies and state-owned resources. Given the distribution of power during and after the 1970s between the working class and the business class, together with the increasing mobility of capital (a function of the advancing productive forces, thus, in a sense, predictable from historical materialism), neoliberal assaults on postwar working-class gains were, in retrospect, highly probable and highly likely to succeed.

4

Despite, or because of, its horrifying destructiveness, neoliberalism potentially can play the role of opening up long-term revolutionary possibilities (even as it presents fascist possibilities as well). Its functions of exacerbating class polarization, immiserating the working class, eroding social democracy, ripping up the social fabric, degrading the natural environment, destabilizing the global economy, relatively homogenizing conditions between countries, hollowing out the corporatist nation-state, facilitating a *global* consciousness through electronic media—a consciousness, in the end, of suffering and oppression—and attenuating the middle class (historically a pretty reliable bastion of conservatism): all this in the aggregate serves to stimulate mass protest on a scale that, eventually, the state will find unmanageable.

Fascist repression, it's true, is very useful, but fascist regimes can hardly remain in power indefinitely in every country. Even just in the U.S., the governmental structure is too vast and federated, and civil society too thick and resilient, for genuine fascism ever to be fully consolidated everywhere, much less made permanent. Repression alone is not a viable solution for the ruling class.

5

Sooner or later, it will be found necessary to make substantive concessions to the masses (while never abandoning repression). Some writers argue that what these will amount to is a revitalization and expansion of social democracy, such a sustained expansion (under the pressure of popular movements) that eventually society will pass from social democracy straight into socialism.²⁰ This argument, however, runs contrary to the spirit of Marxism, according to which society does not return to previous social formations after they have departed the stage of history. Fully fledged social democracy was appropriate to a time of industrial unionism and limited mobility of capital; it is hard to imagine that an era of unprecedented crisis and decaying nation-states will see humanity resuscitate, globally, a rather "stable" and nationalistic social form, even expanding it relative to its capacity when unions were incomparably stronger than today. While social democratic policies will surely persist and continue to be legislated, the intensifying dysfunction of the nation-state (a social form that is just as transient as others) will necessitate the granting of different kinds of concessions than centralized and expansive social democratic ones.

6

Here, we have to shift for a moment to considering the Marxist theory of revolution. Then we'll see the significance of the concessions that states will likely be compelled to grant. There is a glaring flaw in Marx's conceptualization (expressed, for example, in the famous Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy) according to which "an era of social revolution" begins when the dominant mode of production starts to fetter the use and development of the productive forces. The flaw is simply that the notion of "fettering" is semi-meaningless.

²⁰ See Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

Philosophers such as G. A. Cohen have grappled with this concept of fettering, but we don't have to delve into the niceties of analytic philosophy in order to understand that the capitalist mode of production has always both fettered and developed the productive forces—fettered them in the context, for instance, of devastating depressions, disincentives to invest in public goods, artificial obstacles to the diffusion of knowledge, and, in general, a socially irrational distribution of resources; even as in other respects it still *develops* the productive forces, as with advances in information technology, biotechnology, renewable energy, and so on. In order to be truly meaningful, therefore, this concept of fettering needs revision.

7

The necessary revision is simple: we have to adopt a *relative* notion of fettering. Rather than an absolute conflict, or a contradiction, between productive forces and production relations, there is a conflict between *two sets of production relations, one of which uses productive forces in a more socially rational way than the other*. This revision makes the idea of fettering meaningful, even concretely observable. Capitalism, for example, was, in the final analysis, able to triumph over feudalism because it was infinitely better at developing productive forces, such that its agents could accumulate far greater resources (economic, scientific, technological, intellectual, cultural) than the agents of feudalism. The epoch of social revolution, properly speaking, lasted half a millennium, though it was punctuated by dramatic moments of condensed social and political revolution such as the French Revolution.

If the idea of fettering is to apply to a transition between capitalism and socialism, it can be made sense of only through a similar "relative" understanding, according to which a cooperative and democratic mode of production emerges over a prolonged period of time (hopefully not half a millennium) both interstitially and more visibly in the mainstream.

As the old anarchic economy succumbs to crisis and stagnation, the emergent "democratic" economy—which does not yet exist today—does a better job of rationally and equitably distributing resources, thereby attracting ever more people to its practices and ideologies. It accumulates greater resources as the old economy continues to demonstrate its appalling injustice and dysfunction.

8

This theoretical framework permits an answer to the old question that has bedeviled so many radicals: why have all attempts at socialist revolution failed? The answer is that they happened in conditions that guaranteed their eventual failure. There was a radical difference between, for example, October 1917 and the French Revolution: in the latter case, capitalist relations and ideologies had already spread over Western Europe and acquired enormous power and legitimacy. The French revolutionaries were beneficiaries of centuries of capitalist evolution—not, indeed, industrial capitalist, but mercantile, agrarian, financial, and petty-bourgeois. This long economic, social, cultural, and political evolution prepared the ground for the victories of 1789-1793. In 1917, on the other hand, there was no socialist economy whatsoever on which to erect a political superstructure (a superstructure that, in turn, would facilitate the further and more unobstructed development of the socialist economy). Even industrial capitalism was barely implanted in Russia, much less socialism. The meaning of 1917 was merely that a group of opportunistic political adventurers led by two near-geniuses (Lenin and Trotsky) took advantage of a desperate wartime situation and the desperation of the populace—much of which, as a result, supported these "adventurers"—to seize power and almost immediately suppress whatever limited democracy existed.²¹ The authoritarian, bureaucratic, and brutal regime that, partly in the context of civil war, resulted—and

See Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and Their Revolution, 1917–1921 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

that ultimately led to Stalinism—was about as far from socialism as one can imagine.

It is one of the ironies of the twentieth century that the Bolsheviks both forgot and illustrate a central Marxian dictum: never trust the self-interpretations of historical actors. There is always an objective context and an objective, hidden historical meaning behind the actions of people like Robespierre, Napoleon, and Lenin, a meaning they have no access to because they are caught up in the whirl of events (and, to quote Hegel, the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk, after the events). The fact that Lenin and his comrades were convinced they were establishing socialism is of no more than psychological interest. It is unfortunate that many Marxists today continue to credulously believe them.

9

Said differently, the twentieth-century strategy of "Marxist" revolutionaries to seize the state (whether electorally or in an insurrection) and then carry out a social revolution—by means of a sweeping, "totalizing" political will—is highly un-Marxist. It is idealistic, voluntaristic, and unrealistic: history moves forward slowly, dialectically, "behind the backs" of historical actors, not straightforwardly or transparently through the all-conquering will of a few leaders or a single political party. The basic problem is that if you try to reconstruct society entirely from the top down, you have to contend with all the institutional legacies of capitalism. Relations of coercion and domination condition everything you do, and there is no way to break free of them by means of political or bureaucratic will. While the right state policies can be of enormous help in constructing an economically democratic society, in order for it to be genuinely democratic it cannot come into existence solely through the state. Marxism itself suggests that the state, overwhelmingly shaped by existing economic relations, cannot be socially creative in such a radical way. Instead, there has to be a ferment of creative energy at the

grassroots (as there was during the long transition from feudalism to modern capitalism) that builds and builds over generations, laboriously inventing new kinds of institutions in a process that is both, or alternately, obstructed and facilitated by state policies (depending on whether reactionaries or liberals are in power, or, eventually, leftists).

Nearly all attempts at socialist revolution so far have been directed at a *statist rupture* with the past, and have therefore failed.²² There is no such thing as a genuine "rupture" in history: if you attempt it, you'll find that you're merely reproducing the old authoritarianism, the old hierarchies, the old bureaucratic inefficiencies and injustices, though in new forms.²³ Rather, the final, culminating stage of the conquest of the state has to take place *after* a long period of economic gestation, so to speak (again, gestation that has been facilitated by incremental changes in state policies, as during the feudalism-to-capitalism transition), a gestation that serves as the material foundation for the final casting off of capitalist residues in the (by then) already-partially-transformed state.

10

This brings us back to the question of how capitalist elites will deal with the popular discontent that is certain to accumulate globally in the coming decades. Since the political economy that produced social democracy is passing from the scene, other sorts of concessions (in addition to repression) will be necessary. In our time of political reaction

Other reasons for their failure have been operative as well, notably imperialist interference with the revolutionary process. But the effectiveness of such interference has itself shown the inadequacy of an exclusively "ruptural" strategy—the attempt to create socialism by political fiat in a still-overwhelmingly-capitalist world—because core capitalist nations usually find it easy to squash the political revolution when it hasn't been preceded by generations of socialist institution-building across the globe, including in the heart of the most advanced countries.

To repeat, this is the lesson of Marxism itself. We are embedded in the past even when trying to idealistically leap out of it and leave it behind. Insofar as Marx sometimes wrote as if a proletarian dictatorship could virtually "start anew," enacting whatever policies it wanted and planning a new society as though from a blueprint, he forgot the gist of his own thought.

CHRIS WRIGHT

it is, admittedly, not very easy to imagine what these might be. But we can guess that, as national governments prove increasingly unable to cope with environmental and social crises, they will permit or even encourage the creation of new institutional forms at local, regional, and eventually national levels. Many of these institutions, such as cooperatives of every type (producer, consumer, housing, banking, etc.), will fall under the category of the solidarity economy, which is committed to the kind of mutual aid that has been rather prominent in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Capitalism's loss of legitimacy will foster the conditions in which people seek more power in their workplaces, in many cases likely taking them over, aided by changes in state policies (such as the promotion of a cooperative sector to provide employment in a stagnant economy) due in part to the presence of more socialists in government. Other innovations may include a proliferation of public banks, municipal enterprises (again, in part, to provide jobs at a time of raging structural and cyclical unemployment), and even universal basic income.

The subject of what types of "non-reformist reforms"—i.e., reforms that have the potential to serve as stepping-stones to a new economy—governments will be compelled, on pain of complete social collapse, to grant is much too complex to be explored in a brief essay. Two points suffice here. First, the usual Marxist critiques of (worker) cooperatives and other ostensibly apolitical, interstitial "anti-capitalist" institutions—such as "mutual aid"—can be answered simply by countering that these are only *one part* of a very long and multidimensional project that takes place on explicitly political planes too. It is puzzling that so many radicals seem unaware that the transition to a new civilization is an incredibly complex, drawn-out process: for instance, over many generations, emergent institutions like cooperatives network with each other, support each other, accumulate and share resources in an attempt to become ever freer of the competitive, sociopathic logic of the capitalist economy. At the same time, all this grassroots or semi-grassroots activity contributes to

building up a counter-hegemony, an anti-capitalist ethos in much of the population. And the resources that are accumulated through cooperative economic activity can be used to help fund political movements whose goal is to further transform the capitalist state and democratize the economy.

Second, the question naturally arises as to why the ruling class will tolerate, or at times even encourage, all this grassroots and statist "experimentation" with non-capitalist institutions. On one level, the answer is just that the history will unfold rather slowly (as history always does—a lesson too often forgotten by revolutionaries), such that at any given time it will not appear as if some little policy here or there poses an existential threat to capitalism. It will seem that all that is being done is to try to stabilize society and defuse mass discontent by piecemeal reforms (often merely local or regional). Meanwhile, the severity of the worldwide crises—including, inevitably, economic depression, which destroys colossal amounts of wealth and thins the ranks of the obstinate elite—will weaken some of the resistance of the business class to even the more far-reaching policy changes. By the time it becomes clear that capitalism is really on the ropes, it will be too late: too many changes will already have occurred, across the world. Historical time cannot be rewound. The momentum of the global social revolution will, by that point, be unstoppable, not least because only non-capitalist (anti-privatizing, etc.) policies will have any success at addressing ecological and social disaster.

11

The argument that has been sketched here has a couple of implications and a single major presupposition. The presupposition is that civilization will not destroy itself before the historical logic of this long social revolution has had time to unfold. There is no question that the world is in for an era of extraordinary climatic chaos, but—if for a moment we can indulge in optimism—it might transpire that the ecological changes

serve to accelerate the necessary reforms by stimulating protest on an overwhelming scale. Maybe, then, humanity would save itself in the very nick of time. If not, well, we'll have a grim answer to the old question "Socialism or barbarism?"

One implication of the argument is that there is a kernel of truth in most ideological tendencies on the left, and radicals should therefore temper their squabbling. The old debates between, say, Marxists and anarchists are seen to be narrow, short-sighted, and premised on a false understanding of the timescales in question. If one expects revolution to happen over a couple of decades, then yes, the old sectarian disputes might acquire urgency and make some sense. But if one chooses to be a Marxist rather than a voluntarist, a realist rather than an idealist, one sees that global revolution will take perhaps two centuries, and there is temporal room for statist and non-statist strategies of all kinds.

A second implication, less practically important but of interest anyway, is that Marxists going back to the founder himself have misunderstood the prescriptions of historical materialism. There might be something like a "dictatorship of the proletariat" someday, but, since idealism and voluntarism are false, it will (like the earlier "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie") happen near the end of the revolutionary epoch, not at the beginning. It is impossible to predict what form the state will take by then, or how the final removal of bourgeois remnants from government will further transform it. What can be known is only that in order to politically oust the ruling class, the working class needs not just numbers but resources, which hitherto it has lacked on the necessary scale. With the gradual—but, of course, contested—spread of a semi-socialist economy alongside (and interacting with) the decadent capitalist one, workers will be able to accumulate the requisite resources to effectually compete against the shrinking business class, electing left-wing representatives and progressively changing the character of the capitalist state.

Meanwhile, in the streets, people will be figuratively manning the barricades, decade after decade, across a world tortured by the greed of the wealthy and the suffering of the masses. All their struggles, surely, will not be in vain.

IT'S TIME TO EMBRACE NUCLEAR ENERGY (2019)

It is a tragic irony of the contemporary environmentalist movement that in its opposition to nuclear energy, it is doing the bidding of the fossil fuel industry and increasing the likelihood of climate apocalypse. ²⁴ This is the inescapable implication of the new book *A Bright Future: How Some Countries Have Solved Climate Change and the Rest Can Follow*, by Joshua S. Goldstein and Staffan A. Qvist. The anti-nuclear stance to which Green Parties, for example, are fervently committed may seem enlightened, but in fact it is dangerous and destructive. What an informed environmentalist movement would demand above all is a rapid and globally coordinated acceleration of nuclear power plant

²⁴ Michael Shellenberger, "Why Renewables Advocates Protect Fossil Fuel Interests, Not the Climate," *Forbes*, March 29, 2019.

construction, ideally at a rate of hundreds of new reactors a year. This would set us on track to eliminate fossil fuels from the world's electricity generation within a few decades, as well as displacing coal as a heat source for buildings and industrial use. We would be well on the way to making the planet livable for our descendants.

A Bright Future is not the only recent book to make the case for nuclear power. Others include Gwyneth Cravens' Power to Save the World: The Truth About Nuclear Energy, Charles D. Ferguson's Nuclear Energy: What Everyone Needs to Know, and Scott L. Montgomery and Thomas Graham Jr.'s Seeing the Light: The Case for Nuclear Power in the 21st Century. What these and other books make clear is that the "green" shibboleths about nuclear energy's being dangerous, polluting, wasteful, vulnerable to terrorist attack, and excessively expensive are vastly overstated. The truth is closer to the opposite—although in the United States, because of the byzantine regulatory environment and the multiplicity (rather than standardization) of reactor designs built and operated by private companies, the economic costs of building a reactor are indeed very high.

The advantages of nuclear power

A Bright Future is framed by two contrasting stories: that of Sweden and that of Germany. From 1970 to 1990, due to its construction of nuclear power plants, Sweden was able to cut its carbon emissions by half even as its economy expanded and its electricity generation more than doubled. Germany has taken a different path, which has led to its emitting about twice as much carbon pollution per person as Sweden despite using one-third *less* energy per person and having approximately the same per capita GDP.

What Germany has done is to install large capacities of renewables, mostly wind and solar power, such that by 2016 they made up more than a quarter of electricity production and 15 percent of total energy

production. At the same time, however, Germany cut nuclear power by roughly an equivalent amount, which means it only substituted one carbon-free source for another. CO₂ emissions have hardly decreased at all, in fact going up slightly in recent years. German energy remains dominated by coal, and greenhouse gas emissions remain around a billion tons a year.

Decades of anti-nuclear propaganda have colored public attitudes in the West, but, as Goldstein and Qvist explain, nuclear energy has many advantages. For one thing, like renewables, it produces no carbon emissions (although over its entire life-cycle, from mining materials to decommissioning the plants, there are some emissions—as with renewables). Unlike solar and wind but like coal, it provides baseload power, which is to say it reliably and cheaply generates energy around the clock to satisfy the average electricity demand. Renewable sources can be more flexibly deployed to match changes in demand, so they have an important role to play during periods of peak energy use, but they also tend to be intermittent and unreliable, unlike nuclear.

Goldstein and Qvist give abundant evidence for the latter claim. "As a rule of thumb," they note, "nuclear power produces at 80–90 percent of capacity on average over the year, coal at around 50–60 percent, and solar cells around 20 percent." In 2013, Europe saw an entire month in which solar produced at only 3 percent of capacity because of the lack of sunshine. Wind is somewhat more reliable than sunlight: at a massive 2,700-acre wind farm in Romania, for example, which has 240 wind turbines each as tall as a fifty-story skyscraper, production in 2013 was a little less than 25 percent of capacity. And the total capacity of this enormous wind farm was 600 megawatts, a fraction of a large nuclear power plant.

In fact, the amount of space and material needed for a solar or wind farm to produce as much energy as a large nuclear plant is staggering. Take the example of Ringhals, a plant in Sweden. On just 150 acres it can produce up to 4 gigawatts of electricity, 24/7. A wind farm that was

to produce as much energy would require three times the power capacity because wind is so variable. That is, it would require about 2,500 wind turbines 650 feet high, spread over 400 square miles. And its energy production would be intermittent, sometimes much higher than demand and sometimes much lower.

A solar farm equivalent to Ringhals would need a capacity of at least 20 gigawatts and would cover 40 to 100 square miles. "Imagine driving down a highway at 65 mph, with solar cells stretched out for a mile to the right of you and a mile to the left. It would take you about half an hour before you got to the end of the solar farm."

Think of the environmental (and aesthetic) costs of building hundreds of such immense wind and solar farms to replace coal, natural gas, and nuclear.

Waste and safety

Another advantage of nuclear energy is how little waste it produces. Public fears about radioactive waste are absurdly disproportionate to the reality. In the United States, "the entire volume of spent fuel from fifty years of nuclear power—a source that produces one-fifth of U.S. electricity—could be packed into a football stadium, piled twenty feet high." Spent fuel rods can be safely stored in water for several years, becoming less radioactive, and then transferred to dry storage in concrete casks that contain the radiation. They can remain in these casks for over a hundred years. Longer-term storage, for hundreds of thousands of years, can involve burying material deep underground, as the U.S. military does for its waste from nuclear weapons.

To rebut the widespread fear of radioactive waste, it surely suffices to point out that spent fuel has been stored around the world for almost 70 years with apparently no adverse health effects at all.

Other energy sources produce waste as well. When the life of solar cells is over after twenty-five years, their waste remains toxic for many

decades and requires special handling for disposal. Coal waste, both solid and airborne, is not only orders of magnitude more voluminous than nuclear waste—as is true of solar waste, too—but is also toxic for centuries, and contains radioactive elements. Goldstein and Qvist observe, in fact, that if you live next to a coal plant you'll get a higher dose of radiation than if you live next to a nuclear power plant. (Humans are continually exposed to small doses of radiation that have zero or negligible health effects.)

In general, nuclear power is incredibly safe. Three infamous nuclear accidents have occurred: Three Mile Island in 1979, which had no health effects because of the containment structure that surrounded the partially melted core; Chernobyl in 1986, which caused a few dozen deaths in the short term (though possibly 4,000 in the long term, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency) and was the product of terrible reactor design, terrible on-site errors by operators, and terrible bureaucratic incompetence and secretiveness by the Soviet government; and Fukushima in 2011, which caused *no deaths* from radiation exposure. (The authors investigate this question in depth and conclude that, on the worst possible assumptions, several people *might* eventually get cancer because of the accident.)

How does this record stack up against other energy sources? Coal kills at least a million people every year from particulate emissions that lead to cancer and other diseases. It also has a horrible safety record, including toxic wastes that are usually located near low-income communities and coal-mining accidents that still happen multiple times a year around the world.

Methane, or natural gas, not only emits about half as much carbon dioxide as coal but also is liable to explode from time to time, killing anywhere from several people to hundreds (as when 300 children were killed in an explosion at a Texas school in 1937). And fracking, to extract oil or gas, has negative impacts on public health and the environment.

Oil, too, is less safe than nuclear (leaving aside Soviet incompetence). It spills and it blows up, as with the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, and oil trains can derail and explode, as happened in Canada in 2013, when 47 people were killed.

Hydroelectric dams are not at all safe. If a dam fails, thousands of people downstream can die. In Banquiao, China in 1975, for example, 170,000 people died when a dam burst. Dam failures have killed thousands in the U.S.; just in 2017, crises in California and Puerto Rico forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people.

Imagine if nuclear energy had a record remotely comparable to coal or hydropower! Worldwide, the whole industry would have been shut down long ago.

An uncertain future

A Bright Future is far too rich to do justice to in a single article, but Goldstein and Qvist also address the issues of possible terrorist attacks on power plants and, in more depth, nuclear proliferation. Regarding the latter, the record over the decades since nuclear technology was developed is reassuring, due in large part to the very effective IAEA and the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

But even if nuclear energy were not as remarkably safe as it is, it would likely still be worth including as a major part of a "diversified portfolio" of clean energy. Why are we willing to tolerate so many deaths and risks from coal, oil, hydropower, and natural gas while demanding none from nuclear? (And even then, nuclear has a bad reputation!) Even if a fatal accident periodically occurred from nuclear power, might that not be an acceptable cost if the benefit were a massive mitigation of climate change? We accept risks in every other sphere of life, as when driving cars, living near seismic fault lines, riding airplanes, etc. It is odd that we rail against nuclear energy because it isn't 100 percent risk-free.

The simple fact is that we cannot substantially mitigate climate change without accelerating the construction of nuclear power plants. Since the energy in nuclear fuel is millions of times more concentrated than wind or solar power, nuclear power can "scale up" much faster than renewables. "What the world already knows how to do in ten to twenty years using nuclear power," the authors write, "would take more than a century using renewables alone."

And yet in the U.S., *reverse* action is being taken. Nuclear power plants are being shut down prematurely for political reasons, as in Vermont, California, and Massachusetts, and producers are often abandoning plans to build new plants after facing endless litigation, regulation, opposition from anti-nuclear groups, and competition from cheap and highly subsidized fossil fuels. When a plant is shut down, what that means, first, is that renewables that are introduced afterwards are not contributing to decarbonization but are simply replacing a clean (and far more powerful) energy source. Second, fossil fuels have to fill most of the gap, which causes a rise in carbon emissions.

For example, after the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant closed in 2014, carbon dioxide emission rates rose across New England, reversing a decade of declines. When Massachusetts' last remaining nuclear power plant, Pilgrim, closed in 2019, much more electricity generation was lost than the state generates with all its solar, wind, and hydropower combined. Several new fossil fuel plants will mainly take the place of Pilgrim.

Thus, Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear groups with money and political clout can congratulate themselves on exacerbating climate change.

Globally there are bright spots for nuclear energy, mostly in the developing world. Goldstein and Qvist discuss this topic in detail, placing some hope in Russia, China, and India, which are much friendlier to nuclear power than the U.S. They also devote a chapter to "next-generation technologies" that are being developed, such as thorium reactors,

CHRIS WRIGHT

which have advantages over uranium, and fusion, which has advantages over fission.

But despite these and other bright spots, and despite the book's overall optimism, after I had finished reading I couldn't help feeling very, very worried about the future. We know how to address climate change. But the vast funds of the fossil fuel industry and the anti-nuclear movement, together with mass ignorance, may yet doom us. We have, it seems, a decade or two to wake up and demand government action.

RENEWABLE ENERGY IS NOT THE ANSWER; NUCLEAR IS (2019)

"It's always a good idea to start by asking about the facts." So advises Noam Chomsky. "Whenever you hear anything said very confidently, the first thing that should come to mind is, 'Wait a minute, is that true?" De omnibus dubitandum—doubt everything—was Karl Marx's motto and should be the motto of every thinking person. Question even or especially what the tribe most takes for granted.

In the era of global warming, when fossil fuels are known to be driving civilization straight into the ocean, the idea that liberal and left-wing tribes take most for granted is "Renewable energy!" It is shouted confidently from every public perch. Renewable energy, scaled up to replace fossil fuels and even nuclear, is declared the only possible salvation

for humanity. It has such obvious advantages over every other energy source that the world has to go 100 percent renewables ASAP.

Obviously!

But wait a minute—is that true?

Let's try to shed the religious thinking, look objectively at the facts, and come to a conclusion about this most important of subjects: how to power the future and hopefully save the world.

Renewable energy emits greenhouse gases

First, consider the claim that renewable energy has no carbon emissions. This is true, in a sense, for wind and solar farms (as it is for nuclear energy), which in themselves emit virtually no greenhouse gases. It isn't true for hydropower, however, which in 2016 produced 71 percent of all electricity generated by renewable sources. According to one study, hydroelectric dams worldwide emit as much methane (a potent greenhouse gas) as Canada, from decaying vegetation and nutrient runoff.²⁵ Another study concluded they produce even more carbon dioxide than methane.

"These are massive emissions," one expert comments. "There are a massive number of dams that are currently proposed to be built. It would be a grave mistake to continue to finance those with the impression that they were part of the solution to the climate crisis."

And yet in every scenario projected by renewables advocates, hydropower is essential. For instance, Stanford Professor Mark Jacobson's famous—and deeply flawed²⁶—proposal to run the U.S. on 100 percent renewables by 2050 assumes the country's dams could add turbines and transformers to produce 1,300 gigawatts of electricity, over 16 times their current capacity of 80 gigawatts. (According to the U.S. Department of

²⁵ Matt Weiser, "The hydropower paradox: is this energy as clean as it seems?," Guardian, November 6, 2016.

See Christopher T. M. Clack et al., "Evaluation of a proposal for reliable low-cost grid power with 100% wind, water, and solar," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, June 27, 2017, at https://www.pnas.org/doi/pdf/10.1073/pnas.1610381114.

Energy, the maximum capacity that could be added is only 12 gigawatts, 1,288 gigawatts short of Jacobson's assumption.)

The International Energy Agency projects that by 2023, wind and solar together will satisfy around 10 percent of global electricity demand, while hydroelectric power will satisfy 16 percent. Nearly all the rest will be produced by fossil fuels and nuclear energy.

Burning biomass, too, which is a renewable energy source, releases large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. "It does exactly the opposite of what we need to do: reduce emissions," says an expert in forest science and management.²⁷

Even leaving aside hydropower and biomass, the use of wind and solar dramatically increases greenhouse gas emissions compared to nuclear energy. This is because, given the intermittency and the diluted nature of solar and wind energy, a backup source of power is needed, and that source is natural gas. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a guru of the renewables movement, himself acknowledges this fact:

We need about 3,000 feet of altitude, we need flat land, we need 300 days of sunlight, and we need to be near a gas pipe. Because for all of these big utility-scale solar plants—whether it's wind or solar—everybody is looking at gas as the supplementary fuel. The plants that we're building, the wind plants and the solar plants, are gas plants.²⁸

Burning natural gas is better than using coal, but it is not nearly good enough if we want to solve climate change. Even worse, many millions of tons of unburned methane are leaked every year from the American oil and gas industry—and methane is more than 80 times as potent a greenhouse gas as carbon dioxide. So these leaks cancel out much of the environmental good that wind and solar farms are supposedly doing.

²⁷ Chelsea Harvey et al., "Congress Says Biomass is Carbon-Neutral, but Scientists Disagree," *Scientific American*, March 23, 2018.

²⁸ Robert F. Kennedy Jr., "Speech to the Colorado Oil and Gas Association," July 2010, available on YouTube.

In other words, the fact that wind and solar farms typically operate far below their capacity (because of seasonal changes and the unreliability of weather) necessitates that a more reliable power source "supplement" them. In fact, as researchers Mike Conley and Tim Maloney point out, strictly speaking it is the renewable source that acts as a supplement for the oil or natural gas plants linked to the renewables. A solar farm with a capacity of one gigawatt, for instance, will on average operate at only about 20 percent of its capacity, which means that if a gigawatt of energy is really to be produced, the majority will have to be provided by the "backup" fossil fuel plant(s).²⁹

The upshot is that an anti-nuclear and pro-renewables policy means an increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

California is a good example. Like other states in the U.S and countries in the Western world, it has been closing its nuclear power plants—despite their safety, reliability, effectiveness, and environmental friendliness. The carbon-free nuclear plants have been replaced by renewables + natural gas, which is to say, they have been replaced mostly by natural gas (prone to methane leaks). After it closed the San Onofre nuclear plant in 2013, California missed its CO₂ emissions targets as a result.

ExxonMobil likes renewable energy

The fact that renewable energy directly and indirectly causes far more greenhouse gas emissions than nuclear should already tell us it isn't a solution to climate change.

Indeed, the willingness of the oil and gas industry in recent years to promote and invest in renewables is itself significant. Over the last three years, the five largest publicly traded oil and gas companies have invested over a billion dollars in advertising and lobbying for renewables.

²⁹ Mike Conley and Tim Maloney, "Wind and Solar's Achilles Heel: The Methane Meltdown at Porter Ranch," *Daily Kos*, March 17, 2016.

"Natural gas is the perfect partner for renewables," ads say. "See why #natgas is a natural partner for renewable power sources," Shell tweets.

By pretending to care about the environment, these companies not only burnish their reputations but also are able to associate natural gas with clean energy, which it very much is not. The formula "renewables + natural gas" thus serves a dual purpose. In fact, it serves a triple purpose: it also distracts from nuclear power, which, unlike renewables, is an immediately viable alternative to oil and gas.

Nuclear power, not renewable energy, is what the fossil fuel industry fears most. The reason is simple: the energy in nuclear fuel is orders of magnitude more concentrated than the energy in oil, gas, coal, and every other source. (Which is why nuclear reactors produce vastly less waste than everything from coal to solar.) If governments invested in a global Nuclear New Deal, so to speak, they could make fossil fuels largely obsolete within a couple of decades. Not even Mark Jacobson's wildly unrealistic \$15-20 trillion 100 percent renewables plan envisions such a fast transition.

Because of the diffuse and intermittent nature of wind and solar energy, all the world's investment in renewables did not prevent the share of low-carbon power in generating electricity from *declining* between 1995 and 2017. Western countries' shuttering of nuclear power plants in these decades was a disaster for the environment.

Another way to appreciate the disaster is to consider that global carbon emissions are actually *rising*, even as the world spent roughly \$2 trillion on wind and solar between 2007 and 2016. (This is similar to the amount spent on nuclear in the past 55 years.) So much for the gospel of renewable energy!

Meanwhile, the fossil fuel industry has been smiling on the sidelines, giving millions of dollars to groups like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Defense Fund, and others that work to kill nuclear power and thus exacerbate climate

CHRIS WRIGHT

change.³⁰ (Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are particularly active in the war on nuclear—and they refuse to disclose their donors. Could it be because they receive an unseemly amount from oil and gas companies?)

We would do well to stop doing the bidding of fossil fuel interests and get serious about saving the world.

³⁰ Environmental Progress, "Corporate and Energy Interest Funding for Anti-Nuclear Groups," https://environmentalprogress.org/the-war-on-nuclear.

THE SECOND COLD WAR IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE FIRST (2023)

Twenty years ago, Noam Chomsky published a bestselling book called *Hegemony or Survival*. Since then, the stark choice he posed has only become more urgent. Depending on how humanity responds to the challenges of ecological destruction and imperialistic war, in the next decade that terrifying question "Hegemony or survival?" may well be answered.

Modern history shows that the most dangerous periods are when two or more great powers are struggling for hegemony. The eighteenth century in Europe was a time of "multipolarity," as Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia were almost continually at war, competing for geopolitical advantage and to divide the continent between them. The conflicts escalated in the era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic

Wars, as a mighty France, bursting with revolutionary energy, strove for absolute dominance against, in the end, Britain and Russia.

The 1815 Congress of Vienna led to a century-long balance of power presided over by an industrializing Britain, which soon became the supreme world power. Once industrialization swept the rest of Europe, however, particularly Germany, Britain's power began to be challenged, not only in the Scramble for Africa but in Europe itself. German elites wanted their country to be the next Britain, and to a great extent it was their desire for hegemony that precipitated both world wars.

Since 1945, the United States has been virtually a global hegemon. As John Ross notes in the recently published *Washington's New Cold War*, even at the height of its relative economic achievement in the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union's GDP was only 44 percent of the U.S.'s. The Soviets had vast power in their limited sphere encompassing Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but they were not a capitalistically expansive, dynamically growing imperial power in the mode of the United States—or, more recently, of a resurgent China. China's GDP is 74 percent of the U.S.'s, and its growth rate is higher (it has grown seven times faster than the American economy since 2007). Measured by purchasing power parities, the U.S. accounts for only 16 percent of the world economy, and China's economy is 18 percent larger. In short, for the first time since World War II, we are entering an era of real competition between two mammoth economies, a declining hegemon and an aspiring hegemon.

When people talk about "the China threat," this is, in effect, all they mean. In the long run, China poses a greater threat to U.S. power than the Soviet Union ever did. Mainstream commentators and politicians prate about China's threat to democratic values and human rights—there always has to be an ideological rationalization for geopolitical strategy—but American foreign and domestic policy since the Second World War tells us how much its elites care about democracy and human rights. From the Vietnam War to the catastrophic invasion of Iraq, and from U.S. support for thugs like Batista, Diem, Iran's Shah,

Suharto, Duvalier, Trujillo, Somoza, Pinochet, Marcos, Rios Montt, Mobutu, Saddam Hussein, Mubarak, Sisi, Modi, Mohammed bin Salman, and Netanyahu to CIA coups and attempted coups against many governments, it is self-evident that policymakers care little about the moral values they pretend to espouse.

Americans have to ask themselves: is it worth risking nuclear war—and an apocalyptic nuclear winter—for no loftier purpose than to maintain their country's violently enforced grasp of overwhelming global power?

Threats to U.S. Power

The current flashpoint, of course, is the war in Ukraine, which is helping to midwife a "partnership" between China and Russia, both of which are also deepening their ties with Iran. Decades ago, in The Grand Chessboard, Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that "a coalition allying Russia with both China and Iran can develop only if the United States is shortsighted enough to antagonize China and Iran simultaneously." He would presumably not be very happy with U.S. policies that are bringing about exactly this coalition. At the same time, U.S. missteps in the Middle East and its relative disengagement from the region since the Obama presidency are allowing China to improve its position there, as illustrated by the deal it recently brokered between Iran and Saudi Arabia to normalize relations. China's burgeoning economic interests not only in the Middle East but across most of the world, a function of its colossal, globe-spanning Belt and Road Initiative, require the country to play an ever-greater diplomatic role in fraught regions. Saudi Arabia, for its part, has shown it is happy to defy Washington, even joining much of the world in disregarding Western sanctions on Russia.

While Washington's failure to convince most countries to economically and diplomatically isolate Russia highlights the U.S.'s declining hegemony, the real threats to American power run deeper

than diplomatic embarrassments. In coming years, the very status of the dollar as the world's dominant currency may be threatened. A kind of "de-dollarization" has been happening for some time now, as, for example, the share of dollar reserves held by central banks declined from 71 percent in 1999 to 59 percent in 2021. But in the last few years, and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing effort by many countries to undermine the dollar's dominance of the global financial system has intensified.

In part, this is because of the U.S.'s weaponization of the dollar: in the recent past, Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Afghanistan, and Russia have all suffered from financial and trade sanctions that have included even freezing overseas assets and removal from the SWIFT messaging system that underpins the world's financial infrastructure. Other countries, understandably worried about suffering the same fate, share Russia's interest in developing new financial institutions and networks outside of the U.S.-led system. Apart from this motivation, they simply want to reduce their exposure to the effects of U.S. economic and monetary policy, which can devastate economies. And as China rises, it makes sense for it to promote use of the renminbi, or at least non-dollar currencies.

To that end, the BRICS countries, for instance, have been establishing new institutions and market mechanisms to bypass the dollar, and are even exploring the possibility of creating a new reserve currency based on the BRICS basket of currencies. Institutions like the New Development Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, new payment infrastructures that are alternatives to SWIFT, central bank digital currencies, bilateral trade conducted in currencies other than the dollar, and a renminbi oil futures market to partially de-dollarize the global oil trade all point toward a future currency regime that is at least multilateral, if not bilateral. The economist Nouriel Roubini argues that, "in a world that will be increasingly divided into two geopolitical spheres

of influence," a bilateral currency regime is likely to emerge, perhaps in the next decade.³¹

Given that the dollar's dominant position in the global financial system is the very foundation of America's power, Washington can hardly be viewing all these developments with equanimity. Loss of the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency would have severe consequences for the American economy. But this outcome is exactly the end-goal of Washington's bellicose policies toward its perceived rivals! Through economic sanctions and aggressive military actions—expanding NATO to Russia's borders and encircling China with U.S. bases, military forces, and militarized partner states like Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and even Taiwan—the United States is driving into existence a hostile bloc of great powers and medium-sized powers that are necessarily committed to its defeat. Their policies, then, will become increasingly belligerent, which will serve to justify even more belligerent U.S. policies, in a vicious circle that amounts to an extraordinarily dangerous "hybrid war" and arms race.

History shows that imperial hubris crescendos before a fall. In this case, though, it won't be only the empire that falls; it will, in all likelihood, be civilization itself.

Addicted to War

The Pentagon has made a record budget request this year of \$842 billion, which it says is necessary to counter China. This claim should inspire skepticism, given that the U.S. has around 750 overseas military bases and China has about eight—one in Djibouti and a few on man-made islands in the South China Sea. China's military budget, which has been increasing since America's "Pacific Pivot," is \$225 billion, not a small sum but still a fraction of the Pentagon's. It is an interesting thought-experiment, incidentally, to imagine how Washington would

Nouriel Roubini, "A bipolar currency regime will replace the dollar's exorbitant privilege," *Financial Times*, February 5, 2023.

react if China had scores of military bases off the U.S. coast and had deputized countries in the Americas to act as its armed sentinel states. Most probably, we would not be around to talk about it, because a world war would already have wiped us out.

In fact, contemporary China is probably the most pacific great power in world history, as Craig Murray observes.³² As the U.S. has rampaged all over the Middle East and expanded its direct or indirect military presence to virtually every region of the globe, what wars has China started? What territories has it annexed? What countries has it invaded? The usual response is that sometime in the future it might invade Taiwan—but given the harm such an invasion would likely inflict on the Chinese economy (because of Taiwan's cutting-edge semiconductor industry, whose physical facilities could well be damaged or destroyed in an invasion), we should be skeptical of this claim too. Even hawkish Chinese generals seem to think war with Taiwan would be "too costly."³³ In any event, are annual military budgets of almost a trillion dollars necessary to defend Taiwan?

The conclusion is inescapable that the U.S. is simply trying to intimidate an economic rival, a country that, like Putin's Russia (only more so), challenges its unfettered dominance of the entire world economy. The record of Washington's foreign policy since 1945 is to seek and enforce compliance in any way it can, whether through carrots or sticks—blandishments and economic or military aid in some cases, coups, invasions, sanctions, paramilitary operations, and militaristic bullying in others. Defiant regimes cannot be tolerated. Accordingly, policymakers want a compliant (or weakened) Russia and a compliant or weakened China. The calculus is evidently that military buildup, whatever crises it leads to and however unpredictable its long-term effects, is the surest means of achieving these ends. It also has the virtue of projecting overwhelming power, which is something powerful states value for its own sake.

³² Craig Murray, "Why Would China Be an Enemy?" ScheerPost.com, March 25, 2023.

³³ Jessica Chen Weiss, "Don't Panic About Taiwan," Foreign Affairs, March 21, 2023.

Even if the United States does not succeed in provoking military conflicts with China (as it did with Russia in Ukraine), the new Cold War of which Washington is the primary instigator is profoundly damaging to the interests of humanity. As the *Washington Post* reports, this new Cold War "may see the world divided into opposing camps for decades, stymieing cooperation on climate change, choking global action on human rights abuses, paralyzing international institutions and increasing tensions in contested regions."³⁴ If only for the sake of cooperating to tackle global warming, nothing is more imperative than for great powers, first among them the U.S., to adopt conciliatory policies.

But that means Americans have to pressure their government to this end. And that, in turn, means building an anti-imperialist left. From Bernie Sanders to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (not to mention right-wing legislators), there is not a single principled anti-imperialist in Congress. In a time of staggering dangers from war and ecological destruction, this is a shocking and shameful fact.

For now, it seems that humanity is choosing the path of battling for hegemony rather than surviving.

³⁴ Robyn Dixon, "As Xi visits Russia, Putin sees his anti-U.S. world order taking shape," Washington Post, March 19, 2023.

THE LEFT AND THE UKRAINE WAR (2023)

To be a leftist in the United States is a dispiriting experience, but recently one of the more dispiriting things has been to see the attitude of many leftists themselves on a subject of crucial importance: the war in Ukraine. The consensus of the Washington establishment remains that the U.S. must support Ukraine against Russian aggression, in the form of providing enormous amounts of military aid. Progressives in Congress largely share this consensus, having voted for military aid and even cravenly retracted their letter to Biden in October 2022 that suggested he pursue diplomacy. Outside the halls of power, too, many leftists effectively support Washington's policies. To be sure, they add the qualification that one must also oppose American imperialism—but when they are supporting a U.S. proxy war that is providing pretexts to

increase military spending and expand NATO (an instrument of U.S. power), this is an empty qualification. The sad fact is that there is little vocal advocacy in the U.S. today for the only moral position, namely to engage in immediate negotiations to end this horrific war.

Instead, most liberals, conservatives, and even leftists seem to support Antony Blinken's rejection of any ceasefire or negotiations that "would potentially have the effect of freezing in place the conflict, allowing Russia to consolidate the gains that it's made." In other words, negotiations have to be postponed until Russia is in a weaker position than it is now. In fact, the official U.S. war aim is "to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine," as Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin says. That means Russia has to be so devastatingly weakened—preferably defeated—that its capacity to wage war is destroyed. This, in turn, means that the war must go on for a very long time, perhaps "to the last Ukrainian," as John Quigley speculates. Zelensky, who seems "heroically" willing to countenance the ongoing destruction of his country, is now even insisting that Russia give up Crimea.

All this is madness, and ought to be seen as such by any clear-eyed opponent of the U.S. empire (which is vastly more global and dangerous to the world's population than today's Russian "empire"). Before accepting complete defeat, Putin—whom, after all, we are supposed to view as a bloodthirsty monster—would likely wage total war on Ukraine, possibly including use of nuclear weapons. So anyone who defends the U.S. war aim (and Ukraine's current war aims, as stated by Zelensky) is advocating the destruction of Ukraine and, perhaps, nuclear war.

Antony Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Virtual Panel Session on 'A Just and Lasting Peace in Ukraine," U.S. Department of State, March 28, 2023.

Missy Ryan and Annabelle Timsit, "U.S. wants Russian military 'weakened' from Ukraine invasion, Austin says," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2022.

John Quigley, "I led talks on Donbas and Crimea in the 90s. Here's how the war should end," *Responsible Statecraft*, May 9, 2022.

Aggression should indeed be opposed, but not at the expense of human survival or the survival of millions of Ukrainians.

However strenuously it has been denied by Western supporters of this war, Russia has legitimate grievances that must be addressed in order to end the killing. It is not a simple matter of evil imperialism vs. a wonderful pacifist democracy. Scores of experts, including even Cold Warriors like George Kennan, have discussed the many provocations from the U.S., NATO, and Ukraine that brought on Putin's invasion, and we need not rehash the whole history here. 38 What is at stake is, in large part, a clash of rival imperialisms—a global one (the U.S.'s) and a relatively minor regional one (Russia's)—which means there is no morally pure outcome, as there rarely is in politics. A peace settlement will have to be a compromise, which, like most compromises, will doubtless leave all parties somewhat unhappy but at least will end the slaughter. Russia, for example, may well end up retaining Crimea (which it annexed in 1783—until 1954) and certain other small strips of territory it has gained. Leftists and left-liberals who wring their hands about how this would teach the lesson that aggression sometimes pays would do well to reflect on another fact: if, somehow, NATO and Ukraine manage to inflict a terrible defeat on Russia, this will teach America that unfettered military expansion—and incitement of war—is a great way to crush one's enemies, and it will apply the lesson to China.

It is worth noting, too, that it isn't only a confrontation of great powers that is at stake, or the survival of millions of Ukrainians and their country's physical infrastructure, or an atrocious empowerment of the U.S. military industry. The longer this war goes on, the more damage is done to the natural environment, including efforts to combat global warming. In just the first seven months of the war, the fighting released 100 million metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere. Meanwhile, as a report by Chatham House notes, "across the world, countries are

See, for example, John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5 (Sept/Oct, 2014): 77–89.

building or reopening coal power stations and investing in oil and gas development."³⁹ Soaring energy prices have led to a "gold rush" for new fossil fuel projects. Oil companies are making record profits. Are we supposed to care more about punishing Russia than leaving a livable world to our descendants?

This is to say nothing of the large-scale food insecurity the war has fostered, the cost-of-living crises that are impoverishing millions, and the displacement of refugees. These problems cannot be solved until the war ends. And it can end only with negotiations. One expects neocon vampires like Anne Applebaum, Bill Kristol, and Robert Kagan—not to mention Biden administration officials like Blinken and Victoria Nuland—to experience throes of ecstasy over any war that projects American power, but when even progressives and leftists are defending U.S. proxy wars and effectively dismissing the idea of negotiations, it is clear that America's moral and intellectual rot runs very deep indeed.

Liberals and leftists ought to be embarrassed that the most vocal advocacy of the antiwar position today is from the likes of Marjorie Taylor Greene, Tucker Carlson, and right-wing libertarians. It's time that the left reclaimed its antiwar traditions.

³⁹ Oli Brown, "How Russia's war on Ukraine is threatening climate security," *Chatham House*, March 2, 2023.

WHAT "SECURITY THREAT" DOES CHINA POSE? (2023)

Everyone who abhors war and favors cooperation between nations on global warming, poverty reduction, protection of biodiversity, international disarmament, implementation of international law, and other leftwing priorities ought to be appalled by the escalating tensions between the U.S. and China and actively organizing against them. The new Cold War between "East" (including Russia) and "West" is more dangerous than the first one, not only in having already provoked a proxy war between great powers in Europe itself, and not only in undermining any progress toward goals that are urgent for all of humanity, but also in preparing the conditions for a horrific large-scale war. The coming years will, to a substantial degree, determine the future of civilization, which

puts a tremendous burden on all decent people to struggle to end the madness.

"Both sides," of course, bear responsibility for the new Cold War, just as all great powers share most of the responsibility for failing to act decisively on global warming. Given the disproportionate power and imperialistic history of the United States, however, it is this country that bears most of the blame, in both cases. So it is, first and foremost, this country's policies that we have to change. Even were this not the case, though, the principle that Noam Chomsky has enunciated would apply: it is the dangers presented by *their own* states, not enemy states, that citizens have a duty to organize against. Westerners should, primarily, criticize their own governments, which they can hope to influence. They cannot meaningfully influence China or Russia.

The question arises, then, as to how best to steer America from a course of aggression to one of cooperation and conciliation. That is, how can we build an antiwar movement? A crucial task, evidently, is to delegitimize the direction of policy vis-à-vis China that began under Trump and has continued under Biden, the pursuit of military provocation and economic warfare. This entails a relentless focus on refuting the reasons Washington gives to justify its aggressive posture.

Americans are inundated with the message that China is a "threat," and that for this reason it must be confronted. They hear it from every major media outlet. This message reflects the attitude of Washington, which obviously views China as a major threat—to American "security," "national security" (as stated for example in the 2022 National Defense Strategy). Two questions pose themselves: first, is China indeed a threat, and if so, to what, precisely? Second, is confrontation the best means to deal with whatever threat China represents?

National security

The concept of "national security" has been thrown around promiscuously for generations, not only in politics and the popular media but even the international relations scholarship. Rarely is it noticed that the term, unless clarified, is meaningless, or that its meaning varies by context. Was George W. Bush protecting America's "security" by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, thereby massively increasing terror, and terrorist recruiting, across the Middle East? Is the government protecting Americans' present and future security by subsidizing the fossil fuel industry, thus accelerating global warming? Prima facie, the most obvious meaning of security is something like Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms: freedom of expression, freedom of religious belief, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. But this kind of security for the average person—is this a high priority of the U.S. government? Is it what is meant by the mantra that China is a security threat? Is China responsible for the economic insecurity of most Americans, or their housing insecurity, or their fear of mass shootings, or their fear of getting sick because they will not be able to pay medical bills?

"Security," therefore, apparently doesn't mean the security of Americans, at least not of the vast majority. The government could invest \$800 billion in, say, upgrading infrastructures of public health and housing—you know, actual security infrastructures—rather than upgrading the military and thereby encouraging a dangerous arms race with China. Realist scholars like John Mearsheimer propose an alternative definition: security in the technical sense means the state's very survival in an anarchic system of international relations. Potential rivals exist everywhere, so states have to be prepared for military confrontations. Their need to survive, therefore, has a corollary: "great powers [seek] to maximize their relative power," Mearsheimer writes, "because that is the optimal way to maximize their security. In other words, survival mandates aggressive behavior," in order that the state can defend itself

against a potential aggressive rival.⁴⁰ The ultimate goal in this dog-eat-dog security competition is to be a regional hegemon that can trounce any opponent, and then to prevent any other country from becoming a rival hegemon.

This "realist" reasoning might sound plausible, although one can see right away that it tends to rationalize and legitimize militarism (as shown by Mearsheimer's judgment that the brutal expansionism of Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and '40s was quite rational, for they were only trying to survive). Can it really be maintained, however, that contemporary China threatens the very survival of the United States? Only through its arsenal of nuclear weapons can China even conceivably threaten the U.S., which means that the most rational American policy is not to provoke a nuclear arms race but to try to phase out all nuclear weapons worldwide. This would certainly increase America's security. Since the new Cold War only exacerbates the nuclear threat, the U.S. government's motivation for it, contra Mearsheimer, cannot be to ensure its own survival. So, if "security" concerns are, as is often said, what motivate America's confrontational policies, we need another definition of that perplexing word.

The work of earlier realists such as Hans Morgenthau, as well as Marxists, provides the answer: in the absence of genuine military threats to a country (like the very fortunate United States since 1812), security is nothing but a euphemism for state power and prestige. The struggle for power as an end in itself is what motivates all ruling elites and governments. Economic, military, geopolitical, ideological, and cultural power—even a hegemon will insatiably strive for more power, *total* power, crushing all dissent everywhere to the extent possible. "A political policy," says Morgenthau, "seeks either to keep power, to increase power, or to demonstrate power." Whether this is because of human nature, as

⁴⁰ John Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), introduction.

⁴¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

Morgenthau argues, or the inevitable dynamics of powerful institutions, or the fact that only power-hungry people rise to the top, it is a general principle.

Since Americans rarely look favorably on government as such, opponents of the new Cold War would do well to constantly emphasize that its primary purpose is to defend and assert the hegemonic power (i.e., "national security") of the U.S. government, together with certain segments of the business community—for example, defense contractors—that are closely interlinked with government. Constant exposure of the belligerence of U.S. policy, as contrasted with China's relative restraint, would undermine public support for confrontation. When American officials, in characteristic fits of mind-boggling hypocrisy, charge that China is threatening global peace and stability, one might quote Kishore Mahbubani's 2019 article in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "What China Threat?":

Quite remarkably, of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom), China is the only one among them that has not fired a single military shot across its border in thirty years, since a brief naval battle between China and Vietnam in 1988. By contrast, even during the relatively peaceful Obama Administration, the American military dropped twenty-six thousand bombs on seven countries in a single year. Evidently, the Chinese understand well the art of strategic restraint.

China is indeed a threat—to the dominance of a small American elite, centered in finance, government, and tech, over world politics and the world economy. As the journalist Deborah Veneziale explains, much of the hostility of America's capitalist class (or particular sectors of it) to China results from the difficulty of accessing its domestic market. "U.S. tech giants such as Google, Amazon, and Facebook have virtually

no market in China, while companies like Apple and Microsoft face increasing difficulties... [These companies] yearn for a change to the political system in China that would open the door to the country's massive market, and major actors in this sector are actively working to advance Washington's hostile foreign policy."⁴² Finance, likewise, is unhappy with China's capital controls, which restrict capital flows into and out of the country. George Soros expressed the frustration of many financiers when he tweeted in January 2022 that "Xi Jinping is the greatest threat that open societies face today."

Aside from grievances due to China's non-neoliberal character, a significant reason for Washington's strategy of aggressive confrontation is simply that expansion of U.S. military capacity is an end in itself, for which pretexts have to be sought. As Morgenthau might say, such a policy demonstrates (and can help keep) power, which is the whole point of being a government. It is also the kind of thing that companies like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and BAE Systems will benefit from and lobby for. It is hardly a secret that there is a revolving door between the Pentagon and private military contractors: even Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin was on the board of directors of companies like Raytheon before Biden appointed him. Cold Wars are in the interest of very wealthy corporations and very powerful government bureaucracies, which can use them to justify larger congressional appropriations and expansions of their power.

China will constrain the U.S. empire

Returning to "security" risks—risks to the security of the global dominance ("leadership" is the preferred term) of U.S. elites—it is true that as China's economy grows, its geopolitical power will necessarily grow as well, thus challenging U.S. "leadership." There is some sense, therefore, if

⁴² Deborah Veneziale, "Who Is Leading the United States to War?" in John Bellamy Foster et al., Washington's New Cold War: A Socialist Perspective (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022).

not much justice, in Biden's attempts to slow China's economic growth by restricting exports of cutting-edge semiconductor chips and other high-tech equipment. Whether such restrictions are in the interest of American consumers, or of humanity as a whole, is much more debatable. In any event, to partially delegitimize the trade wars that the U.S. is escalating, and which may well become quite harmful to Americans, it suffices for dissenters to note at every opportunity that these wars' entire purpose is to hurt China's economy so it will have more trouble challenging the global dominance of America's tech industry and the U.S. government. Most Americans are smart enough to know that their interests and those of the government do not usually coincide.

Indeed, that is the crucial question to keep asking in public forums: why should we hate and fear China so much? It makes a lot more sense to hate and fear our own government, together with the corporate sector with which it is fused. China caused none of the vast human suffering, the desolation of hundreds of millions of lives over two generations, that has brought American society to its knees; it merely benefited from the decisions by corporate executives to relocate factories abroad, where it was easier to exploit labor at a higher rate. The fight of working Americans is not with China.

But what about China's theft of intellectual property? What about its military threat to Taiwan? What about that terrifying *balloon* that floated into U.S. airspace in early 2023? Surely all this justifies a new Cold War that could last a generation or more! Well, in fact, as every reasonable person knows, the right way to deal with whatever genuine threats China might pose is to pursue diplomacy, preferably through one of the multilateral institutions that exist for precisely such cases as these, including the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. When the U.S. rejects the obvious path of diplomacy in favor of military escalation and overblown rhetoric, it is evident that it's merely seizing on real or imagined provocations as pretexts for pursuing some other goal it prefers not to publicize. This was clear when the Bush administration

flailed around for excuses to invade Iraq—from weapons of mass destruction to ousting Saddam Hussein to building a wondrous new democracy—and it's clear now, as the Biden administration orchestrates the wholly unnecessary military and economic containment of China.

In fairness, it is perfectly natural for a hegemonic government, used to getting its way and dominating the world, to try to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor. As Senator Marco Rubio said plaintively in a moment of refreshing candor, "Brazil cut a trade deal with China. They're now going to do trade in their own currencies, get right around the dollar. They're creating a secondary economy in the world, totally independent of the United States. We won't have to talk about sanctions in five years, because there will be so many countries transacting in currencies other than the dollar that we won't have the ability to sanction them." From a superpower's point of view, these are major crimes, the worst crimes possible. To constrain the ability to bully and browbeat that the U.S. has enjoyed since the late 1940s is totally unforgivable.

But the American people should question whether such a threat to their government's power is also a threat to them. Maybe a forced reining in of the U.S. empire could be *good* for Americans. Whatever constrains the power of the elite is likely to expand the power of the majority. Those who favor peace, in any case, should welcome the emergence of a new superpower that can challenge the policies of the most warmongering country on earth, such as by brokering peace agreements the United States refuses to.⁴⁴ However authoritarian China is internally, its role in the world might end up being relatively constructive.

This is especially the case given that, in its search for support among other countries and peoples, it cannot appeal to any democratic ideology

⁴³ See Ian Schwartz, "Rubio: Adversaries Creating a Secondary Economy, Will Trade in Currencies Other Than the Dollar to Avoid Sanctions," *Real Clear Politics*, March 29, 2023.

⁴⁴ Ryan Grim, "To help end the Yemen war, all China had to do was be reasonable," *The Intercept*, April 7, 2023.

it supposedly represents, as the U.S. at least rhetorically can. To win moral authority, China has to actually *deliver* rather than merely *preach*.

In the end, then, China's rise poses a straightforward security threat: it threatens the security of the old order, the Washington-directed, neoliberal, war-as-a-first-resort order. It threatens to bring about a more multilateral world, with less impunity for America's crimes and more recourses to which victims can turn. People everywhere—except the West's power centers—should cheer this fact.

NATO'S ENDGAME APPEARS TO BE NUCLEAR WAR (2024)

The world is at its most dangerous moment since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Back then, however, the fear of total destruction consumed the public; today, few people seem even to be aware of this possibility.

It is easily imaginable that nuclear war could break out between Russia (and perhaps China) and the West, yet politicians continue to escalate tensions, place hundreds of thousands of troops at "high readiness," and attack military targets inside Russia, even while ordinary citizens blithely go on with their lives.

The situation is without parallel in history.

Consider the following facts. A hostile military alliance, now including even Sweden and Finland, is at the very borders of Russia. How are Russian leaders—whose country was almost destroyed by Western

invasion three times in the twentieth century—supposed to react to this? How would Washington react if Mexico or Canada belonged to an enormous, expansionist, and highly belligerent anti-U.S. military alliance?

As if expanding NATO to include Eastern Europe was not provocative enough, Washington began to send billions of dollars' worth of military aid to Ukraine in 2014, to "improve interoperability with NATO," in the words of the Defense Department. Why this Western involvement in Ukraine, which, as Obama said while president, is "a core Russian interest but not an American one"? One reason was given by Senator Lindsey Graham in a recent moment of startling televised candor: Ukraine is "sitting on \$10 to \$12 trillion of critical minerals... I don't want to give that money and those assets to Putin to share with China."

As the *Washington Post* has reported, "Ukraine harbors some of the world's largest reserves of titanium and iron ore, fields of untapped lithium and massive deposits of coal. Collectively, they are worth tens of trillions of dollars."⁴⁶ Ukraine also has huge reserves of natural gas and oil, in addition to neon, nickel, beryllium, and other critical rare earth metals. For NATO's leadership, Russia and China cannot be permitted access to these resources. The war in Ukraine must, therefore, continue indefinitely, and negotiations with Russia mustn't be pursued.

Meanwhile, as Ukraine was being *de facto* integrated into NATO in the years before 2022, the United States put into operation an anti-ballistic-missile site in Romania in 2016. As Benjamin Abelow notes, the missile launchers that the ABM system uses can accommodate nuclear-tipped offensive weapons like the Tomahawk cruise missile. "Tomahawks," he points out, "have a range of 1,500 miles, can strike Moscow and other targets deep inside Russia, and can carry hydrogen

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," The Atlantic, April 2016.

Anthony Faiola and Dalton Bennett, "In the Ukraine war, a battle for the nation's mineral and energy wealth," *Washington Post*, August 10, 2022.

bomb warheads with selectable yields up to 150 kilotons, roughly ten times that of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima."⁴⁷ Poland now boasts a similar ABM site.

American assurances that these anti-missile bases are defensive in nature, to protect against an (incredibly unlikely) attack from Iran, can hardly reassure Russia, given the missile launchers' capability to launch offensive weapons.

In another bellicose move, the Trump administration in 2019 unilaterally withdrew from the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces. Russia responded by proposing that the U.S. declare a moratorium on the deployment of short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe, saying it would not deploy such missiles as long as NATO members didn't. Washington dismissed these proposals, which upset some European leaders. "Has the absence of dialogue with Russia," Emmanuel Macron said, "made the European continent any safer? I don't think so." 48

The situation is especially dangerous given what experts call "war-head ambiguity." As senior Russian military officers have said, "there will be no way to determine if an incoming ballistic missile is fitted with a nuclear or a conventional warhead, and so the military will see it as a nuclear attack" that warrants a nuclear retaliation. A possible misunder-standing could thus plunge the world into nuclear war.

So now we are more than two years into a proxy war with Russia that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and has seen Ukraine even more closely integrated into the structures of NATO than it was before. And the West continues to inch ever closer to the nuclear precipice. Ukraine has begun using U.S. missiles to strike Russian territory, including *defensive* (not only offensive) missile systems.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Abelow, *How the West Brought War to Ukraine* (Great Barrington, MA: Siland Press, 2022), 20.

Brennan Deveraux, "Why intermediate-range missiles are a focal point in the Ukraine crisis," *War on the Rocks*, January 20, 2022.

This summer, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Belgium will begin sending F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine; and Denmark and the Netherlands have said there will be no restrictions on the use of these planes to strike targets in Russia. F-16s are able to deliver nuclear weapons, and Russia has said the planes will be considered a nuclear threat.

Bringing the world even closer to terminal crisis, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg states that 500,000 troops are at "high readiness," and in the next five years, NATO allies will "acquire thousands of air defense and artillery systems, 850 modern aircraft—mostly 5th-generation F-35s—and also a lot of other high-end capabilities." Macron has morphed into one of Europe's most hawkish leaders, with plans to send military instructors to Ukraine very soon. At the same time, NATO is holding talks about taking more nuclear weapons out of storage and placing them on standby.

Where all this is heading is unclear, but what is obvious is that Western leaders are acting with reckless disregard for the future of humanity. Their bet is that Putin will never deploy nuclear weapons, despite his many threats to do so and recent Russian military drills to deploy tactical nuclear weapons. Given that Russian use of nuclear warheads might well precipitate a nuclear response by the West, the fate of humanity hangs on the restraint and rationality of one man, Putin—a figure who is constantly portrayed by Western media and politicians as an irrational, bloodthirsty monster. So the human species is supposed to place its hope for survival in someone we are told is a madman, who leads a state that feels besieged by the most powerful military coalition in history, apparently committed to its demise.

Maybe the madmen are not in the Russian government but rather in NATO governments?

It is downright puzzling that millions of people aren't protesting in the streets every day to deescalate the crisis and pull civilization back from the brink. Evidently the mass media have successfully fulfilled their function of manufacturing consent. But unless the Western public wakes up, the current crisis might not end as benignly as did the one in 1962.

^{49 &}quot;NATO Defence Ministers agree plan to lead coordination of security assistance and training for Ukraine," *Nato.int*, June 14, 2024.

PART FOUR IDENTITY POLITICS

DEFENDING MATERIALISM AGAINST POSTMODERNISM: A BOOK REVIEW (2022)

In the ideological disciplines—the humanities and social sciences—it is rare to come across a theoretical work that does not fetishize verbiage and jargonizing for their own sake. From the relatively lucid analytical Marxism of an Erik Olin Wright¹ to the turgid cultural theory of a Stuart Hall, pretentious prolixity is, apparently, seen as an end in itself. In such a context, one of the highest services an intellectual can perform is simply to return to the basics of theoretic common sense, stated clearly and concisely. Society is very complex, but, as Noam

¹ See Russell Jacoby's savage review of Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* entitled "Real Men Find Real Utopias," *Dissent*, Winter 2011, for an exposure of the intellectual emptiness of a certain type of "theoretical" sociology.

Chomsky says, insofar as we understand it at all, our understanding can in principle be expressed rather simply and straightforwardly. Not only is such expression more democratic and accessible, thus permitting a broader diffusion of critical understanding of the world; it also has the merit of showing that, once you shed the paraphernalia of academic writing, nothing particularly profound is being said. Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (2022) constitutes an exemplary demonstration of this fact, and of these virtues.

Chibber has been critiquing postmodern theory for some time now, ably defending Marxian common sense against generations of carping "culturalist" critics. His Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital (2013) brilliantly showed that the Marxian "metanarrative" that has come under sustained attack by poststructuralists and postmodernists retains its value as an explanation of the modern world, and that many of the (often highly obscure) alternative conceptualizations of postcolonial theorists are deeply flawed. More recently, in an article published in 2020 in the journal Catalyst ("Orientalism and Its Afterlives"), Chibber persuasively criticized Edward Said's classic Orientalism for its idealistic interpretation of modern imperialism as emanating in part from an age-old European Orientalist discourse, rather than from a capitalist political economy that—as materialists argue—merely used such a discourse to rationalize its global expansion. In more popular venues too, notably Jacobin, Chibber has argued for the centrality of materialism to the projects of both interpreting and changing the world.

The Class Matrix continues his engagement with these issues, this time in the form of a systematic critique of cultural theory, specifically of its inability to explain the sources of stability and conflict in modern society. Materialism, in contrast, is quite capable of explaining society, and can rather easily be defended against the criticisms of (some) culturalists. The book's admirable lucidity serves several functions: first, Chibber is able to present the arguments of a variety of "culturalisms," from Gramscians' to the Frankfurt School's to those of the post-1970s

cultural turn, very clearly and in a way that illuminates the stakes of the debate; second, his eloquent reconstruction of (aspects of) cultural theory lays the ground for an equally eloquent, and much more thorough, exposition of structural class theory, which is shown to have no difficulty, contrary to the claims of culturalists, in explaining the longevity and stability of capitalism; third, the discarding of all unnecessary verbiage and jargon makes it clear just how intellectually trivial these long-running theoretical debates are in the first place. One can have a perfectly defensible and sophisticated understanding of the modern world on the basis of rational common sense and knowledge of history.

Chibber starts by presenting the culturalist case. Why didn't the West become socialist in the twentieth century, as Marxists predicted? Evidently Marx had gotten something wrong. In fact, it was argued (in the postwar era), he neglected the role of culture in forming the consciousness of the working class. Mass culture and the diffusion of dominant ideologies were able to reconcile the working class to capitalism, indeed to generate active popular consent for it. This analysis amounted to a demotion of the classical Marxist emphasis on the conflictual dynamics of the class structure—which supposedly would naturally lead to proletarian class consciousness and thereby revolution—in favor of the cohesive functions of mid-twentieth-century culture. Later culturalists took this argument a step further by rejecting the Marxian theory altogether, arguing that culture is actually prior to structure: what people are really presented with are not unmediated structures or objective material interests but "constellations of meaning" (p. 6), social identities, local cultures, contingent processes of socialization that shape how actors understand the many structures they are located in. One cannot (contra classical Marxism) predict behavior from people's structural locations and the interests they supposedly define, because people first have to interpret structures, a process that is highly contingent and variable. Subjectivity, therefore, is primary, and the objectivity of class structures tends to evaporate.

CHRIS WRIGHT

Chibber's response to this postmodernist argument, in effect, is that while it is perfectly true every structure is steeped in culture and agents' subjectivity, this hardly implies the causal inertness of class location. Capitalist institutions don't impose high interpretive requirements: everyone is capable of understanding "what it means" to be a worker or a capitalist. If you lack ownership of the means of production, you either submit to wage labor or you starve. The economic structures force themselves on you. "[T]he proletarian's meaning orientation is the effect of his structural location" (p. 34). Similarly, the capitalist has to obey market imperatives (structures) in order to survive as a capitalist, so he, too, is compelled to subordinate his normative orientation to objectively existing capitalist institutions. In fact, it is the postmodern culturalists who are in the weaker position: how can they explain "the indubitable fact of capitalism's expansion across the globe and the obvious similarity in its macrodynamics across these regions" without accepting materialist assumptions (p. 45)?

Having dispatched this particular objection to materialism, Chibber moves on to other difficulties. Given the antagonistic relations between worker and capitalist, why hasn't collective resistance, and ultimately revolution, been more common? The obvious answer, contrary to cultural theory, is that the asymmetry of power between worker and capitalist is so great that workers find it very difficult to fight successfully for their collective interests. The insecurity of the worker's position (for example, he can be fired for union activity) makes it easier and safer to pursue *individualized* modes of advancement or resistance. Moreover, the intrinsic problems of collective action—such as free rider problems and difficulty in securing agreement among large numbers of workers—militate against class consciousness and collective resistance. Classical Marxists were wrong to assume that the most rational path for workers would always be the "collective" path. In fact, contingent cultural considerations play an important role in the formation, in any given case,

of class consciousness—although culture always remains constrained by material factors.

Having eloquently deployed common sense in his first two chapters, Chibber now turns, in the lengthy third chapter, to an explanation of how capitalism has endured. Here, too, he prefers common sense to the idealistic arguments of many Gramscians and New Left theorists, who pointed to bourgeois "cultural hegemony" and ideological indoctrination as having manufactured consent among the working class. One problem with this theory is its dim view of workers: "Culturalists are in the embarrassing position of claiming implicitly that while they can discern the exploitative—and hence unjust—character of the employment relation, the actors who are, in fact, being exploited, who are experiencing its brute facts, are not capable of doing so"(p. 91). There are, admittedly, other possible understandings of the basis of mass consent, more materialistic understandings, but in the end Chibber rejects these as the primary explanation for capitalist stability. Instead, he argues that workers simply resign themselves to capitalism—they "accept their location in the class structure because they see no other viable option" (p. 106). What Marx called "the dull compulsion of economic relations" keeps the gears of capitalism grinding on, generation after generation, including in the absence of workers' "consent" to their subordination. In short, the class structure itself—the enormous power asymmetry between employer and employee—underwrites its own stability, and there is no need to invoke "consent" at all (even if such consent does, perhaps, exist in certain periods).

There remain a couple of other issues Chibber has to address in order for his defense of materialism to be really systematic. First, what about the old charge from E. P. Thompson that "structural theories bury social agency" (p. 122)? Is this necessarily the case, this conflict between structure and agency? No, as long as one acknowledges the role of *reasons* in motivating people's actions. "The structure is not reproduced because it turns agents into automatons but because it generates good *reasons*

for them to play by its rules" (p. 123). A structural process may be rather deterministic in its outcome, but it "is generated by the active intervention of social agency" (p. 126). Given the structures of capitalism, people rationally adapt to them, regulating their behavior in accord with them. Structure thus exerts its causal force precisely through agency.

Of course, agency also exists in tension with structure insofar as agents can flout institutional norms or even rebel against particular structures. This point brings us to another question Chibber considers, namely the relation between structural "determinism" and contingency, another favorite concept—along with agency—of the postmodern cultural turn. His argument here is quite rich and nuanced, much too subtle, in fact, to be summarized in a short book review. One might think that such an austere structuralism as Chibber defends would be unable to account for the contingency of social processes, but through a fairly ingenious analysis he is able to answer this objection, too. Even prima facie, however, the objection doesn't hold much water, because capitalist relations are evidently compatible with an immense variety of social structures, such that between nations and even within a nation there can be great heterogeneity of local cultures. In a world of infinitely many structures and cultures interacting and overlapping, all of them being activated and enlivened by countless individual free wills, there is clearly a place for contingency on both small and large scales. Materialism can therefore accommodate the "argument from contingency."

The Class Matrix, in short, is a thorough and impressive work, not only a compelling defense of materialism but also a fair-minded if highly critical engagement with cultural theory. It isn't clear how culturalists—especially anti-Marxist ones—can effectively respond to this broadside, tightly and cogently argued as it is. They might, perhaps, be able to make the case that there is a greater role for culture than Chibber allows (although he grants the importance of cultural considerations at many points in his arguments), but they certainly can no longer sustain the claim that materialism is deeply flawed.

In fact, that claim could never have been sustained anyway, because, in the end, materialism—the causal primacy of class structures (and the theoretical implications of this doctrine)—is little more than common sense. The average member of the working class, more insightful (realistic) in many ways than most intellectuals, could tell you about the overwhelming importance of economic institutions. If classical Marxism got certain predictions wrong, that wasn't because of any inherent flaws in historical materialism. As Chibber shows, it was because the original theorists misunderstood the implications of their own theory. There was never a good reason to think socialist revolution would "naturally" happen as workers "naturally" achieved greater class consciousness. These predictions were but a projection of the hopes of Marxists, not logical entailments of materialism. In our own day, when the historic achievements of Western labor movements have been or are in the process of being destroyed, it is unclear what the way forward is—except, as ever, for working-class self-organization and critical materialist understanding of society. Toward the latter task, at least, The Class Matrix makes a valuable contribution.

"RACE REDUCTIONISM" THREATENS TO DOOM THE LEFT (2022)

The reparations debate is getting old. But it shows little sign of abating. Academic papers continue to parse the idea of reparations for slavery; books continue to be written on the subject, adding to the mountain of material that already exists; celebrated journalists give speeches to the UN advocating reparations. Democratic candidates in 2020 prominently and sympathetically discussed the issue on the campaign trail. The debate is still very much alive. It is the more unfortunate, then, that much of it is conducted in an unserious way.

The recent "national conversation" about reparations is usually traced to Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2014 essay in *The Atlantic* "The Case for Reparations," but this piece only gave a shot in the arm to a conversation that was already quite spirited and publicly visible. Talk of reparations

entered the mainstream in the 1990s and early 2000s, having been confined largely to circles of black nationalism starting in the 1960s. Lawsuits were filed, and dismissed, against the U.S. government and corporations that had profited from slavery; books such as *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000), by Randall Robinson, were published to advocate for reparations; magazines and newspapers across the country, from *Harper's* to the *Los Angeles Times*, presented the case, as did numerous academic papers and conferences. "Reparations" was in the air: Japanese-American internees during World War II had been compensated in 1988; survivors of the Holocaust were being compensated; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa recommended reparations for apartheid, and such commissions in Chile, Guatemala, Colombia, Peru, Sierra Leone, Canada, and other countries made similar proposals. Year after year, the ideological momentum behind slavery reparations increased, and Coates' essay increased it even further.

The *New York Times*' 1619 Project gave yet another boost to the demand for redress, probably the most significant boost so far. As a systematic effort to interpret U.S. history entirely in terms of the oppression of blacks, it was tailor-made to advance the reparations narrative. The immense resources of the *Times*, in collaboration with the corporate-endowed Pulitzer Center, went into designing and distributing a curriculum that schools could use to teach the 1619 Project. This massive nationwide campaign soon coincided, fortuitously, with the George Floyd protests in 2020 and the revival of Black Lives Matter. By then, black identity politics was so deeply embedded in the nation's culture that conservatives discovered they could capitalize on it by inventing a "critical race theory" boogeyman to frighten whites into supporting reactionary politicians and reactionary policies. The discourse of anti-racism and reparations continued to spread even as the right-wing backlash against it grew in intensity and effectiveness.

In the last couple of years, books on reparations have not been lacking. Their titles indicate their content: From Here to Equality:

Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century (2020); Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul? (2021); Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair (2021); Reparations Now! (2021); Reparations Handbook: A Practical Approach to Reparations for Black Americans (2021); Reparations for Slavery (2021); Time for Reparations: A Global Perspective (2021). Liberal America can't get enough of the reparations idea. Fewer books on the subject have been published in 2022, but Reconsidering Reparations, by Olúfémi Táíwò, is an exception that has gotten some attention. It may be worth briefly reviewing here, because its short-comings illustrate the shortcomings of the whole reparations discourse, indeed "identity politics" itself.

A debate rages on the left between the practitioners of identity politics and alleged "class reductionists," but the latter seem to be decidedly in the minority. This is unfortunate, because in order to defeat the threat of the far-right—whether it is called white nationalism, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, neofascism, or proto-fascism—we're going to have to build a movement on the basis of class struggle. This does not mean denying the legitimacy of the grievances of groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, but it does mean incorporating them in a broader movement organized around the old Marxian dualism: the working class vs. the capitalist class.

Reconsidering reparations

From a Marxian point of view, the inadequacies of Táíwò's book start in its first paragraph:

Injustice and oppression are global in scale. Why? Because Trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism built the world we live in, and slavery and colonialism were unjust and oppressive. If we want reparations, we should be thinking more broadly about how to remake the world system.

Apparently, the world is unjust not because capitalism is inherently unjust, but because it began, centuries ago, in slavery and colonialism. We are called to remake the world system, but the focus is on how horrible the past was, and, admittedly, how horrible the present is for non-white people because of their past. Capitalism as such is not mentioned; instead, as in all of the reparations discourse, it is slavery, the slave trade, colonialism, and racism that are emphasized. This fact, of course, is why the liberal establishment is comfortable talking about reparations and even invests enormous resources in propagating the narrative. It understands that it poses no threats to its own power and serves as a useful distraction from class conflict as such.

The purpose of *Reconsidering Reparations* is to argue that "reparation is a construction project," the project of building a new world, a "just distribution." Táíwò approvingly quotes a historian: reparation is "less about the transfer of resources...as it is [sic] about the transformation of *all* social relations...re-envisioning and reconstructing a world-system." He borrows a concept from the historian Adom Getachew that has become fashionable: "worldmaking." Just as the postwar decolonization movements were engaged in worldmaking, hoping to build a just society on a global scale, so we must continue their project, this time, importantly, taking into account the disasters of climate change that will disproportionately affect countries in the Global South. Reparation, according to Táíwò, is about more than mere income redistribution.

This line of argument is admirably dismissive of liberal technocratic tinkering with palliative policies, but there is an obvious retort to it: socialist, communist, and anarchist revolutionaries since the nineteenth century have always been devoted to this sort of "worldmaking," and there is nothing original about such a formulation. There has never been a need to justify world revolution in terms of "reparations" for past injustices; rather, the imperative has simply been that because people of all races and genders are horrifically suffering in the present, we need socialism. The revolutionary project has been justified on *class* grounds,

not racial grounds. Why the need for a new justification? The answer is clear: reparations is currently a fashionable idea, and for the sake of one's career and relevance, it makes sense to use fashionable ideas to reframe old ideologies. Doing so may be wholly unnecessary, but at least it gives one's book the appearance of originality.

It seems noteworthy that nowhere in his book does Táíwò use the word "socialism," even though his vision for the future is the traditional socialist one: "everyone in the world order should have capabilities that grant effective access to the means of maintaining their biological existence, economic power, and political agency. Our target must be a global community thoroughly structured by non-domination." Maybe he thought that using the dreaded s-word might not be wise from a careerist point of view, or maybe he thought it would associate his book with an earlier Marxist tradition and thus detract from his attempts at both originality and distinguishing his account from one that prioritizes class solidarity. Whatever the reason, the omission is telling.

Much of *Reconsidering Reparations* is dedicated to reviewing the history of what Táíwò calls Global Racial Empire and how it led to the structural disadvantages people of color face today. A historian need have no quarrel with any of this. It is an incontrovertible truth that, for hundreds of years, people of color have been systematically exterminated, enslaved, exploited, massacred, forced off their lands, stripped of their cultures, reduced to peonage, denied the opportunity to own a home, denied a decent education, disproportionately imprisoned, disproportionately consigned to unemployment, and disproportionately subjected to police brutality. A large part of the literature on reparations is concerned to establish these facts, and they certainly do need to be broadcast far and wide. Left critics of the reparations concept do not deny any of the horrifying history or the abysmal present.

What they deny, first of all, is that reparation on a scale large enough to make a difference is practicable. As Coates wrote, "Broach the topic of reparations today and a barrage of questions inevitably follows: Who will

be paid? How much will they be paid? Who will pay?" Arguably tens of millions of blacks in the United States are entitled to reparations (not to mention the many descendants of Native Americans and other groups), a number on an altogether different scale than, say, Japanese-American internees or Holocaust survivors. Each of these people, we may grant for the sake of argument, is owed a large sum of money. Táíwò endorses the idea of unconditional cash transfers to African Americans, perhaps on top of a universal basic income (UBI) for everyone. It isn't hard to imagine the vast logistical and bureaucratic difficulties of administering such a plan (not the UBI but the reparations). Táíwo's proposals are extremely abstract, like those of most reparationists, but other writers have suggested that truth commissions could assess the harm cumulatively suffered by African Americans, and on that basis the amount of each payment could somehow be determined. In Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations (2006), Roy Brooks proposes that a trust fund administer individual payments for the purposes of education and funding businesses, and the total amount of money in the trust would be determined by multiplying the average difference in income of black and white Americans by the number of black Americans.

Most writers (including Brooks and Táíwò) reject the idea of merely a one-time cash payout in favor of remedies that "deal with long-term issues in the African-American community," to quote philosopher Molefi Kete Asante. "Among the potential options," Asante says, "are educational grants, health care, land or property grants, and a combination of such grants" (cited in Alfred Brophy's *Reparations: Pro and Con* (2006)). Community development programs are a popular idea in the literature; for example, Táíwò mentions the African-American Reparations Commission's plan that money be transferred to "cooperative enterprises" and that financing be provided for the "planning and construction of holistic and sustainable 'villages' with affordable housing and comprehensive cultural-educational, health and wellness, employment and economic services."

Whatever the moral merit of these and a myriad of other vague proposals, they face obvious and intractable obstacles. First, as mentioned, is the administrative and political nightmare of determining which individuals or communities will receive reparations, how they will be distributed, and how they will be funded. Second, and even more fundamental, is the question that Adolph Reed Jr. posed in 2000 and that has not been answered, because it cannot be answered: "How can we imagine building a political force that would enable us to prevail on this issue?"2 It is a shockingly obvious problem with the whole reparations discourse, and so intractable that it utterly vitiates the latter. Are we to believe that in an age of resurgent proto-fascism, fueled in part by white fears of something as mild as "critical race theory" and the very idea that racism has played a significant role in American history, a tiny minority of anti-racist activists will be able to build a nationwide movement so overwhelming that it sweeps into power a supermajority of legislators committed to radically restructuring society on the basis of reparations for slavery? Does any serious person find this scenario remotely conceivable?

Táíwò, like nearly all reparationists, scarcely even acknowledges these problems. Why are they so rarely discussed? A cynic would have a ready answer to this question: the politics of reparations is largely performative, a way of demonstrating one's political virtue, of surfing the wave of elite liberal preoccupations and perhaps even boldly veering off to the left, thus really proving one's revolutionary bona fides. It doesn't matter if ambitious national—much less global—reparations legislation is inconceivable; the point, if you're an academic, is to have a trendy research project and to play around with various ideas for their own sake. Táíwò, for example, waxes philosophical on conceptual distinctions such as responsibility vs. liability, and on the strengths and weaknesses of certain arguments for reparations, including "harm repair" arguments, "relationship repair" arguments, and his own "constructive view" that he

Adolph Reed Jr., "The Case Against Reparations," *The Progressive*, December, 2000.

considers the most defensible. It's all a waste of time. The most important question is ignored: how are we to build a massive political movement that will crucially depend on the altruism of white people in a country where whites have been consistently more than 70 percent opposed to the movement's goals?

Most reparationists don't consider themselves Marxists, but since some do, it is worth pointing out that the movement they advocate does not make contact with Marxism. Eugene Debs was a true Marxist when he said, "Solidarity is not a matter of sentiment but a fact, cold and impassive as the granite foundations of a skyscraper. If the basic element, identity of interest, clarity of vision, honesty of intent, and oneness of purpose, or any of these is lacking, all sentimental pleas for solidarity, and all other efforts to achieve it will be barren of results." There is no shared interest or solidarity between white and black workers when the latter demand from the former (and other whites) financial compensation for centuries of white supremacy. This is instead an idealistic appeal to mass altruism, which, given the motivating force of economic self-interest for most people (of which Marxists are well aware), is unlikely to get very far.

Therefore, it is not only the practicability of material reparations (on a substantial scale) that Marxists deny. It is also the revolutionary or socialist character of the program itself. As Reed, again, has argued, the program is profoundly anti-solidaristic, in that it pits black workers against white workers. "We've suffered more than you," it says, "and therefore deserve more, even at your expense." It tends to minimize, in fact, the suffering and exploitation of white workers, so much so that even authors who consider themselves anti-capitalist, like Táíwò, are apt to recognize the systemic *class* injustice of capitalism, if at all, only in the mode of an afterthought. This is certainly true of *Reconsidering*

Eugene Debs, "A Plea for Solidarity," *International Socialist Review*, vol. 14, no. 9 (March, 1914).

⁴ Adolph Reed Jr., "Let Me Go Get My Big White Man': The Clientelist Foundation of Contemporary Antiracist Politics," *Nonsite.org*, May 11, 2022.

Reparations. The book evinces hardly any awareness that capitalism in its origins, its history, and its present has been a horror story not only for people of color but for the exploited and immiserated of all races. Europe's peasantry was not exactly coddled during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which, lest we forget, required kicking them off the land and produced centuries of mass impoverishment in cities and the countryside. Popular uprisings were crushed again and again, vast numbers were massacred, millions were subjected to forced labor of some form, millions experienced the death-in-life of slaving away in mines and early factories.

It should be unnecessary to observe, too, that even today many whites are not having an easy time of it. In the U.S., 43 percent of people on welfare are white. Death rates for whites, especially those without a college degree, have been rising for years, largely because of the "deaths of despair" phenomenon. And most white men (56 percent) lack a college degree (compared to 74 percent of black men).5 More whites are killed by police than all other races combined, although the rate at which blacks are killed is more than twice as high as the rate for whites. Weak unions and stratospheric economic inequality don't harm only people of color: poor whites are actually more pessimistic, more depressed, and more prone to committing suicide than poor blacks and Hispanics.⁶ Underlying all this is the fundamental fact of capitalism: most people of all races are deprived of control over their work and ownership of productive assets, leaving them with little defense—in the absence of unions—against high rates of exploitation, low wages, autocratic domination by investors and managers, and economic insecurity. Nor are whites unaffected by the housing crisis, the burden of student and

Marshall Anthony Jr., "Raising Undergraduate Degree Attainment Among Black Women and Men Takes on New Urgency Amid the Pandemic," EdTrust, May 13, 2021, at https://edtrust.org/blog/national-and-state-degree-attainment-for-black-women-and-men.

⁶ Carol Graham, "Why are black poor Americans more optimistic than white ones?," *Brookings*, January 30, 2018.

consumer debt, environmental crises, or the cultural and psychological pathologies of life in a viciously atomized society.

It isn't hard to make a case, therefore, that working-class whites deserve "reparations" too. As a Marxist would argue, the wealth they have produced for generations has been stolen from them, and they have suffered immensely as a result. Why don't we talk about reparations that the capitalist class owes to the working class? Why is the agenda framed in terms of whites vs. non-whites? Again, the answer is clear: this sort of "race reductionism" is, from the perspective of the ruling class that finances it,7 a fantastically useful diversion from class struggle, which in its implications leads toward the sort of race war that white supremacists advocate. We see, then, that a supposedly left discourse effectively joins hands with the far-right, and even provides it with excellent talking points. ("Those blacks, lazy parasites, want to take all our hard-earned money! We already give them welfare, now they want even more!") It helps the racists. This may be an unfair thing to say, but one recalls Marcus Garvey's flirtation with the Ku Klux Klan. Black nationalism or anything like it—anything that treats the artificial concept of "black people" or "the black community" as denoting an entity with a coherent set of interests, as though it isn't riven by its own class conflicts—is not a genuine left politics.

While it is important to talk about the specific problems faced by people of color, it is even more important, for the sake of solidarity and building a political coalition against both capitalism and proto-fascism, to talk about the *shared interests* of (so to speak) "the 99 percent." The reparations discourse does the exact opposite of this.

⁷ See Mercey Livingston, "These are the major brands donating to the Black Lives Matter movement," CNET, June 16, 2020.

Defeating the right

How can we defeat the far-right and the stagnant center? That is the urgent question. The left has to focus ruthlessly on the question of strategy.

There is a widespread belief among leftists that the only way to defeat racism and thereby achieve working-class solidarity is to constantly talk about how terrible it is to be a person of color, how oppressed such people have been throughout history, and how saturated in racism society is. We have to, as much as possible, draw attention to race rather than submerge it under the fact of shared class interests. In her book From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation (2016), for instance, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor chastises Bernie Sanders for "essentially argu[ing] that addressing economic inequality is the best way to combat racism." This is an old argument, she says, from the pre-World War I right wing of the socialist movement, which was discredited when Communist parties around the world were able to recruit millions of non-white people by recognizing the legitimacy of their own distinctive, racially inflected and colonially determined grievances. In the U.S., thousands of blacks joined the Communist Party because of the party's attention to the scourge of racism. Moreover, their recruitment to the left did much to energize it and, perhaps, radicalize it. Surely these facts validate a race-centered strategy?

What she fails to see is that the situation today is very different. Today the left has an imperative need to recruit Latinos and whites, who otherwise might join the far-right. There is little danger of blacks joining a white nationalist movement. If we want to drive economically insecure, socially unmoored, and politically despairing whites into the arms of the right, a great way to do that is by telling them, in effect, that their own suffering and anxieties are of little moment compared to the suffering of blacks, and that whites are almost universally racist. Similarly, we should tell men that their masculinity is toxic, that all of them are sexist oppressors and mansplaining chauvinists. As Steve

Bannon said in 2017, "the longer [the Democrats] talk about identity politics, I got 'em. I want them to talk about racism every day. If the left is focused on race and identity, and we [Republicans] go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats." Bannon, whatever else he may be, is a savvy political operator whose opinions on strategy should be taken seriously.

The Communist Party in the 1930s had to overcome an incomparably more virulent racism among white workers and unionists than exists today. But it did so not by *emphasizing* race, and certainly not by calling for whites to pay enormous amounts of money for reparations. That would have gotten it nowhere, just as it has gotten the left nowhere in recent years. Instead, it focused obsessively on the identity of class interests between the races. In essence, it followed the strategy of Bernie Sanders, the Marxist strategy (not that Sanders is necessarily a Marxist). It's true that, in the effort to recruit blacks, it also took up the cause of their distinct racial oppression, as with the Scottsboro campaign. But it didn't take this racial advocacy to such a monomaniacal extreme that it would alienate the masses of white workers and obscure the fundamental message about "Black and White" having to "Unite and Fight."

In truth, whatever leftists who have been steeped in critical race theory or Afro-pessimism might think, racism today isn't anything like the obstacle to working-class unity it was generations ago. Decades after the historic achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, overt displays of racism are wildly socially unacceptable and are easily shamed through iPhone videos and social media. But even if we accept the very dubious premise that a deeply rooted anti-black racism is still a major hindrance to building an anti-capitalist political movement, it makes no sense to think we can overcome such racism by expatiating endlessly on the suffering and oppression of blacks. If people are as racist as we're supposed to think, they won't care! These appeals will leave them cold, or rather will alienate them from the political organizations that are

⁸ Robert Kuttner, "Steve Bannon, Unrepentant," American Prospect, August 16, 2017.

trumpeting the message. The Communist Party was more intelligent: you overcome racism by bringing people together, and you do that by ceaselessly educating them on their common interests against the ruling class.

This obvious strategy, the Marxist one, doesn't mean adopting the caricature of "class reductionism" that no sane person actually believes, according to which only class matters or every form of oppression can be solved through an exclusively class-based politics. The absurd, bad-faith nature of the charge of class reductionism is shown by the fact that one of its alleged exemplars, Adolph Reed—whose Marxism (i.e., emphasis on class) is so controversial in DSA that he had to cancel a talk to its New York City chapter in 2020—has written a beautiful, poignant book on his experience growing up in the oppressively racist Jim Crow South. He is hardly blind to the significance of racism—which makes all the more striking his insistence that racism is fairly trivial today compared to what it was sixty years ago.

It still has to be challenged, of course, as do sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. But, in general, "telling people they're racist, sexist, and xenophobic is going to get you exactly nowhere," says Alana Conner, a social psychologist at Stanford. "It's such a threatening message. One of the things we know from social psychology is that when people feel threatened, they can't change, they can't listen." To quote another writer, Margaret Renkl, "somehow you need to find enough common ground for a real conversation about race." One way to find common ground is to talk about common interests. That can help dissolve people's defenses against hearing what you have to say. It is also useful, Renkl notes, to remember that you yourself are hardly innocent either, so you shouldn't be too condemnatory of basically decent people who, like you, are unaware of their prejudices. "Prejudice is endemic to

⁹ Adolph Reed Jr., The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives (New York: Verso, 2022).

¹⁰ German Lopez, "Research says there are ways to reduce racial bias," Vox, July 30, 2018.

humanity itself."¹¹ There is no such thing as purity, much as the woke mob may disagree.

In short, even if it is only racism and the oppression of blacks you're concerned about—for some reason being uninterested in class oppression as such, which, today, is exactly what's responsible (rather than racism) for most of the deprivation blacks experience¹²—you should still situate your discussion of race in a broader, consistent emphasis on the capitalist-engendered suffering of all races. This is especially advisable if you actually want to get policies passed, including those relating to "identity politics," since, as Mark Lilla reminds us, you first have to get people in power who share your values. "You can do nothing to protect black motorists [pulled over by police] and gay couples walking hand-in-hand down the street if you don't control Congress and, most importantly, if you don't have a voice in state legislatures." You have to get your people elected, and you do that by showing you relate to voters' shared concerns—about the economy, wages, healthcare, housing, unemployment, working conditions, wealthy tax cheats, and the like.

It is also worthy of note and bears repeating that the so-called class reductionists, the Marxists, are right that universal programs such as Medicare for All, free higher education and abolition of student debt, and redistribution of income from the wealthy to the poor would massively reduce racial inequality and achieve many of the goals of race-based reparations. This is argued, for example, in Adaner Usmani and David Zachariah's scholarly article "The Class Path to Racial Liberation" (2021), but one needs only a little common sense to see its truth. Given that blacks are overrepresented in poverty and among those without a college education, it is clear that universal programs will disproportionately benefit them. Since such programs are also, as we have seen, incomparably more politically viable than reparations—unless you think

Margaret Renkl, "How to Talk to a Racist," New York Times, July 30, 2018.

¹² See Touré Reed, Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism (New York: Verso, 2020).

¹³ German Lopez, "The battle over identity politics, explained," Vox, August 17, 2017.

a majority of ostensibly racist whites can be convinced to give up large amounts of their income to people they hate—it is very puzzling that identitarians are often unmoved by the idea of class-based legislation. In effect, their political practice sabotages the only realistic ways of realizing their goals.

Reed is right, evidently, that "some on the left have a militant objection to thinking analytically." Race-based politics tends to be grounded in *feelings*: outrage that racism still exists and that people of color are disproportionately oppressed. These are understandable feelings, but a politics of self-expression is an unintelligent and nonstrategic politics that risks handing victory to one's enemies.

The need for universalism

In a *Dissent* interview, Táíwò acknowledges that much of the reparations program will probably never be politically popular. But then he gives the game away: "a lot of the...things that could be part of a reparations drive don't necessarily need to be framed as reparations." Okay, so why did you write a book framing them as reparations? In doing so, you're only contributing to their marginalization. He goes on:

For instance, reducing fossil fuel use polls better than reparations, and it is likely to gain popularity as the climate crisis becomes more and more apparent. If we follow the divest/invest strategies that Black Youth Project and other groups have talked about...that's a win from a reparations standpoint, and you would never need to use the word. You could simply explain what pollution is and why you'd like less of it, and explain the better things that you'd like to do with those resources, like healthcare and housing, and prevention of intimate partner violence and intercommunal violence in non-carceral ways.¹⁴

William P. Jones, "How to Repair the Planet," *Dissent*, February 4, 2022.

So in the end he endorses Sanders-style universalism. Apparently we've been arguing about nothing this whole time.

The failures of Black Lives Matter illustrate the folly of a non-Marxist strategy. The BLM movement did "raise consciousness" for a while, to the point that 52 percent of the public supported it in the summer of 2020. But support has declined since then, and the movement's goals have gone mostly unrealized. The "Defund the Police" demand didn't work out so well, as cities and the U.S. government are spending more money than ever on police departments. It might have been strategically smart to emphasize that whites, too, suffer immensely from police brutality and are killed in very large numbers, but it seems that most identitarians are uninterested in the problems of white people (particularly white cisgendered men). It is unlikely, however, that any amount of campaigning on the narrow issue of police brutality would have resulted in significant change. If you want to defund the police, the way you go about it is not by centering the police but by focusing attention on positive and universal proposals regarding housing, education, employment programs, and the like.

Again, none of this is to dismiss issues of "identity," including abortion rights, trans rights, and gay rights. They deserve prominent advocacy. But they cannot be allowed to crowd out and marginalize—as they too often do today—fundamental, universal, and solidaristic issues of class. These should provide the continually emphasized ideological framework for every other demand, and, for moral and strategic reasons, should be ceaselessly championed by nearly every organization on the left.

In general, the political terrain of the twenty-first century, everywhere in the world, promises to be dominated by various types of populism. People everywhere are bitterly resentful toward the "elite," however they define the elite. It is the essential task of the left to channel this populism in the right direction, focusing ire on the *class* elite rather than the supposed cultural or "racial" or "ethnic" elite, the cultural outsiders. That way lies fascism, which is becoming an increasingly threatening global phenomenon. If we want to stop fascism, we have to be Marxists.

THE STUPEFYING MEDIOCRITY OF BARACK OBAMA (2018)

As a Marxist, I'm not very interested in the psychology of the powerful. I don't think it matters much, and it tends to be pretty uniform and predictable anyway: self-overestimation, self-justification, rationalizations for every horrendous decision made, brutal callousness to human suffering beneath (at best) a veneer of concern, energies directed to machinations for increased power, cowardly accommodation to the path of least political resistance, etc. On the other hand, as a despiser of the complacent powerful, I enjoy belittling their grandiose pretensions. So sometimes I do like to wade into the muck of their psychology.

A recent *New York Times* article entitled "How Trump's Election Shook Obama: 'What if We Were Wrong?'" provided an opportunity to indulge in this sordid pastime. According to one of his aides, after the

election Obama speculated that the cosmopolitan internationalism of enlightened intellectuals like him had been responsible for the stunning outcome. "Maybe we pushed too far," he said. "Maybe people just want to fall back into their tribe." In other words, we were too noble and forward-thinking for the benighted masses, who want nothing more than to remain submerged in their comforting provincial identities. We were too ambitious and idealistic for our flawed compatriots.¹⁵

"Sometimes I wonder whether I was 10 or 20 years too early," Obama sighed. The country hadn't been ready for the first black president and his lofty post-racial vision.

These quotations are all the evidence one needs to understand what goes on in the mind of someone like Barack Obama.

In fact, the last quotation is revealing enough in itself: it alone suggests the incredible dimensions of Obama's megalomania. It is hardly news that Obama is a megalomaniac, but what is moderately more interesting is the deluded nature of his megalomania. He clearly sees himself as the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement—he who participated in no sit-ins, no Freedom Rides, no boycotts or harrowing marches in the Deep South, who suffered no police brutality or nights in jail, who attended Harvard Law and has enjoyed an easy and privileged adulthood near or in the corridors of power. This man who has apparently never taken a courageous and unpopular moral stand in his life decided long ago that it was his historic role to bring the struggles of SNCC and the SCLC, of Ella Baker and Bob Moses, of A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr. to their fruition—by sailing into the Oval Office on the wave of millions of idealistic supporters, tireless and selfless organizers. With his accession to power, and that of such moral visionaries as Lawrence Summers, Hillary Clinton, Timothy Geithner, Eric Holder, Arne Duncan, Robert Gates, and Samantha Power, MLK's dream was at last realized.

Peter Baker, "How Trump's Election Shook Obama: 'What if We Were Wrong?" New York Times, May 30, 2018.

Obama was continuing in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionists when his administration deported more than three million undocumented immigrants and broke up tens of thousands of immigrant families. He was being an inspiring idealist when he sent arms shipments to Israel in July and August 2014 in the midst of the Gaza slaughter—because, as he said with characteristic eloquence and moral insight, "Israel has a right to defend itself" (against children and families consigned to desperate poverty in an illegally occupied open-air prison).

He was being far ahead of his time, a hero of civil rights, when he presided over "the greatest disintegration of black wealth in recent memory" by doing nothing to halt the foreclosure crisis or hold anyone accountable for the damage it caused. Surely it was only irrational traditions of tribalism that got Trump elected, and not, say, the fact that Obama's administration was far more friendly to the banking sector than George H. W. Bush's was, as shown for instance by the (blatantly corrupt) hiring of financial firms' representatives to top positions in the Justice Department. ¹⁷

And it is only because the masses are stupid and prejudiced that they couldn't see the glorious benefits they would have received from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, one of the few issues in which Obama seems genuinely to have been emotionally invested. What primitive tribalists they are to be worried about the loss of millions of manufacturing jobs, the increase of prices for medicines, inadequate protection of the environment, and in general massive empowerment of corporations.

Taken together, the two quotations above that constituted Obama's initial explanation of Trump's victory—'we pushed too far' and 'I was

David Dayen, "Obama Failed to Mitigate America's Foreclosure Crisis," The Atlantic, December 14, 2016.

¹⁷ Peter J. Boyer, "Why Can't Obama Bring Wall Street to Justice?" *Newsweek*, May 6, 2012.

David Moberg, "8 Terrible Things About the Trans-Pacific Partnership," *In These Times*, December 16, 2015; Zachary D. Carter, "Obama Fires Back at Elizabeth Warren and Trade Critics," *Huffpost*, April 24, 2015.

too ahead of my time'—also confirm the not very surprising fact that the moral issue of *class* doesn't exist for him, as (by definition) it doesn't exist for any centrist politician. Obama may have paid lip-service to it in his rhetoric, but what he cared about more was a threadbare type of identity politics, cultural inclusivity, symbols and spectacles of the post-racial, post-nationalist millennium, of which he saw himself as the great exemplar. If Trump was elected it can only be because people are not ready for this millennium quite yet. But that doesn't affect Obama's own place in history: he is certain he will be vindicated, indeed will be viewed as even more remarkable for having come too soon.

This perception probably also explains his general reluctance to publicly criticize Trump or other politicians. He simply doesn't *care* enough to do so—he has nothing like a deep outrage at the continuous injustices of Trumpian politics—because his task has already been accomplished: he has written himself into the history books by being the U.S.'s first black president. That achievement is what matters, that and his eight years of (supposed) attempts to "heal the country's divides." Again, it's too bad the country wasn't ready for him, but that isn't his fault.

Thus, rather than getting involved in any real resistance to neofascism—which might exacerbate cultural divisions, horror of horrors, and wouldn't be decorous or "presidential" (for the powerful should not criticize one another)—the Obamas are producing shows on Netflix that will be unpolitical and "inspirational." This new project of theirs is symptomatic. Powerful people like to propagate "uplifting" stories, for anything else might prick their conscience, challenge the legitimacy of the social order from which they benefit, and inspire resistance movements. Better to focus on feel-good stories that reassure people about the essential justness of the world, or that inculcate the notion that anyone can improve their situation if they only try. This is the same reason that Bill Gates' new favorite book is Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*,

which argues that things are much better now than they have ever been, so we should all be grateful.

I happened to watch a video recently in which Norman Finkelstein psychoanalyzed Obama, and his interpretation stuck with me. Not because the pathetic person who was being analyzed is of any intrinsic interest, but because the *type he represents* is always with us—and will always be popular, and will always be morally and intellectually vacuous. Finkelstein had learned from reading David Garrow's biography that, as president of the Harvard Law Review, Obama had a very conciliating style. Whenever arguments arose between the conservatives and the liberals he approached the problem in the same way: he took the interlocutors aside and said, "Don't get so excited, it's not such a big deal. Why are you getting so excited? There are bigger things in life." "Because for Obama," Finkelstein explains, "there was only one big deal in life: *me*. Everything else was just small change, except him."

That's the key. When your overriding value in life is self-glorification, what you tend to get is the moral cowardice and fecklessness of people like Obama, the Clintons, and, in truth, all centrist politicians. They will do whatever they have to do to rise to power, so they can realize their "destiny"—of being powerful. They'll always try to please "both sides"—a binary notion that leaves out the genuine left, which is to say the interests of most people—because that is the safest and surest road to power.

This brings us to Obama's real legacy, as opposed to the one he imagines. The moment he committed himself to a life of pale centrism in a time of escalating social crisis, he determined what his place in history would be. I am reminded of Georg Lukács's analysis of Germany's waffling liberal intelligentsia during the 1920s in his book *The Destruction of Reason*. The elite liberals of the Weimar Republic couldn't countenance fascism but wouldn't commit themselves to a decisive democratic program to resist it—for they feared socialism even more than fascism—so they ended up vacillating pathetically, criticizing mass democracy while

CHRIS WRIGHT

on occasion semi-defending it, fecklessly counseling moderation, thereby enabling ultra-reaction.

While the U.S. is not Weimar Germany, and the risks of full-blown fascism are not as great now as they were then, one can see parallels. Just as the feckless, vacillating liberalism of Jimmy Carter ushered in the reactionary age of Reagan, so the vacillating liberalism of Obama prepared the way for the semi-fascism of Trump and the reinvigoration of white supremacy. (So much for Obama's supposed furtherance of the Civil Rights Movement. He is arguably one of the worst things to have happened to minorities since the end of Jim Crow.) You can't be neutral on a moving train. If you try, you're actually on the side of the reactionaries.

Congratulations, Barack. You've written yourself into the history books.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IS GETTING OUT OF HAND (2019)

On June 28, the *New York Times* published an article by Bari Weiss that wasn't moronic.

Entitled "San Francisco Will Spend \$600,000 to Erase History," it was about the school board's unanimous decision to destroy a New Deal-era mural by the famous Communist painter Victor Arnautoff that is on the walls of a local high school. Called "Life of Washington," the mural depicts Washington's slaves picking cotton at Mount Vernon as a group of colonizers walks past a dead Native American. The painting is clearly meant to oppose the sanitized versions of American history that are taught in most schools.

So you would think "progressives" would support it. Instead, some of them, at least, find it so offensive they want it gone. "A grave mistake

was made 80 years ago to paint a mural at a school without Native American or African-American input," the school board's vice president told Weiss. "For impressionable young people who attend school to have any representation that diminishes people, specifically students from communities that have already been diminished, it's an aggressive thing. It's hurtful and I don't think our students need to bear that burden."

It seems that most students object to the mural's removal, although some community members support the board's decision. "We know our history already," a recent high school graduate and member of the Tohono O'odham tribe said. "Our students don't need to see it every single time they walk into a public school."

Predictably, Weiss's article confines itself to admonishing liberals and leftists for being "un-American" snowflakes, failing to point out that conservatives are typically far more eager to censor than the left is. Bashing hyper-sensitive leftists seems to be Weiss's favorite activity, aside from hyper-sensitively complaining about supposed instances of antisemitism that are usually nothing more than criticisms of Israel's horrifying militarism and near-genocidal policies towards Palestinians.¹⁹ (I didn't see her write a column bewailing what a "snowflake" Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti was for advocating the destruction of an "antisemitic" mural in L.A. that depicts Israel as the Grim Reaper.)

But leaving aside Weiss, who is nothing but a vulgar propagandist, her column does raise an important issue. Censorship, the destruction of art, and the sanitizing of history are appropriate agendas for reactionaries and establishment-types like Weiss; progressives and radicals should certainly oppose them. And yet, in the age of "political correctness," there is a disturbing tendency for those on the left to adopt the repressive tactics of their enemies.

Whether on social media, on university campuses, or in cultural spaces of whatever sort, people are shunned, shamed, and silenced for

¹⁹ See Bari Weiss, "Ilhan Omar and the Myth of Jewish Hypnosis," *New York Times*, January 21, 2019.

not adhering wholeheartedly to a party line. A whiff of dissent brings down the wrath of the mob; a statement or an image that someone, somewhere, might find hurtful is enough to end your career or ruin your life. Magazine editors are fired for defending "cultural appropriation," as in 2017 when an editor in Canada lost his job for the crime of defending the right of white authors to create characters from other backgrounds.²⁰ Safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggression reporting systems, call-out culture, and other such devices become ever more ubiquitous, threatening to neuter culture and intimidate even fellow leftists into silence.

In the end, all this excess reaches truly farcical extremes: political correctness eats itself, as a wonderful old mural that tells a people's history of the United States is destroyed for being "degrading." A paradigm of identity politics that celebrates and weaponizes victimhood brings forth practitioners who claim they are being victimized by having to be reminded of their history as victims. In the name of "empowerment," they want to whitewash a mural whose existence is a blow against whitewashed history, which is the very thing to which identity politics indignantly objects. Political correctness chokes on itself and coughs up self-refuting paradoxes.

In this grotesque autosarcophagy we see the *reductio ad absurdum* of this whole mode of aggressive liberalism: it becomes a kind of void, a black hole of infinitely dense inhumanity, the postmodern left's version of cultural totalitarianism. It becomes kitsch, virtually without content except to prevent members of "vulnerable" groups from ever feeling the slightest pang of discomfort. That is the universal standard, the standard of acceptable art, acceptable speech, acceptable politics, and acceptable thought. And if you stray outside the bounds of acceptable thought, we'll "cancel" you, hopefully most aspects of your identity: career, social life, public life, especially internet life, since the beautiful anonymity and

²⁰ Jennifer Schuessler, "Editor Resigns Over an Article Defending 'Cultural Appropriation," New York Times, May 11, 2017.

atomization of the internet are what allow us to besiege you and call out your transgressions against orthodoxy.

Now, as I said, these totalitarian trends are only the *reductio ad absurdum* of political correctness, and do not invalidate the entire phenomenon known as PC culture. Historically, this multicultural politics that emerged from the radical movements of the 1960s and '70s has had constructive effects on society. It has been integrally tied to the collective recognition of *real* history, the history of Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, women, and European colonialism. In educational curricula, it has effectively challenged the supremacy of the Western canon of white male writers, such that students now encounter voices from many different cultures and traditions.

Feminism has raised consciousness to a far more civilized level than in the 1960s, when Betty Friedan could write about "the feminine mystique" that dehumanized women. The MeToo moment is just the latest front in a long war to advance women's rights. Similarly, we have identity politics to thank for the historic victories of the gay rights movement, which have at long last made homophobia disreputable.

Even the much-derided concept of "microaggressions" denotes a real situation that minorities and women face. Nathan Robinson of *Current Affairs* gives examples.²¹ When a female physician wearing a stethoscope is repeatedly mistaken for a nurse, that surely gets irritating and can be seen as offensive. When a white woman clutches her purse as a black or Hispanic man approaches, that's a racist microaggression. A more egregious example is the time when a black student asked her academic advisor for information about majoring in biology and, "without being asked about her academic record (which was excellent), was casually directed to 'look up less-challenging courses in African American Studies instead." Whatever the Supreme Court thinks, ²² the U.S. is not

²¹ Nathan Robinson, "The 'Microaggression' Concept," Current Affairs, February 16, 2018.

²² Adam Liptak, "Supreme Court Invalidates Key Part of Voting Rights Act," New York Times, June 25, 2013.

a post-racist country, and unconscious racism frequently reveals itself in trivial social interactions.

Identity politics and political correctness are not the unmitigated evils Donald Trump and Bill Maher apparently think they are. And it is true that in popular movements, excess is inevitable. From the French Revolution to the New Left, popular enthusiasm has been apt to get out of control and become absurd and even violent. But that doesn't mean the excess should not be fought when it becomes truly damaging. When a mode of politics starts to ruin the lives of innocent people, to discourage independent and honest thinking, and advocate the destruction of valuable works of art, it is time to rein it in.

One of the most striking features of the extreme fringe of political correctness—a fringe that seems to dominate culture more and more—is one of the least talked about: often, it is just a sublimation of the very conditions of neoliberal capitalism that leftists hate. Interpersonal atomization and alienation, gleeful cruelty, schadenfreude run amok, censorship and suppression of dissent, a universal leveling that valorizes groupthink as the highest virtue, and surveillance of daily life and every interaction: these tendencies of late capitalism are somehow refracted into left-wing forms and concerns. Actually, the mechanism of this ironic 'refraction' is probably quite simple: society has become so inhuman and depersonalized, so bureaucratized and anonymized, that people all across the political spectrum—not only leftists—are made pettier, more insecure, sensitive to perceived slights, and mean-spirited (especially online).

We see the "Other" as oppressing us—however each of us defines the Other—and we lash out to punish it or those who we think manifest it at any given moment. This punitive mentality at least gives us little malicious pleasures that partly compensate for the indignities we are constantly suffering.

But while it might be understandable, it is hardly appropriate for people on the left to be so corrupted by the anti-humanism of a fragmented and paranoid capitalist society. From Karl Marx to Eugene Debs, from A. J. Muste to Noam Chomsky, the left has devoted itself to far more elevated causes than vindictively shaming people for, e.g., using the word *fútbol* despite not being Hispanic, or quietly telling a "sexist" joke to a friend within earshot of a woman who doesn't like such jokes, or in general policing the world so that every space is "safe" and people are never uncomfortable.²³ Some such policing, within reason, can be productive: people should be educated, to the extent possible, out of their unconscious biases and prejudices. But those who identify with the left should also identify with the left's traditional compassion and self-criticism. Perhaps a little less puritanism is called for, and a little more understanding that even good people are imperfect and have lapses. And that no one, including the most eager shamer, is perfect.

Indeed, I'm tempted to say that the hyper-moralistic mindset does not belong to the left at all. Its demand for purity is uncomfortably close to the puritan obsessions of the religious right, so vigilantly attuned to the merest indication of atheism, sex, homosexuality, and respect for trans people. At best, leftist puritanism represents an attenuated, enervated, decadent left, a strain of the left that has lost its love of people and become thin and narrow. Brittle, misanthropic, crabbed, ungenerous, whiny, sickly—these are the words that come to mind to describe such a "left."

How different from the humanism, compassion, and spiritual capaciousness of a Debs or a Chomsky!

The destruction of a left-wing mural for being "hurtful" may seem like a pretty minor affair, and compared to the catastrophes occurring every day all over the world, it is. But if the cultural tendencies that have eventuated in this crime against art are not checked, we will continue to see more such crimes, and not only against art. Against people, too, people who don't deserve to be publicly shamed or ruined. The left should take care lest it lose its humanity and adopt the censorship-fetish of the fascist right.

²³ See Conor Friedersdorf, "The Rise of Victimhood Culture," The Atlantic, September 11, 2015; Jon Ronson, "How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life," New York Times Magazine, February 12, 2015.

THE RIGHTEOUS OUTRAGE OF NORMAN FINKELSTEIN (2023)

As I was reading Norman Finkelstein's new book, I'll Burn That Bridge When I Get to It!: Heretical Thoughts on Identity Politics, Cancel Culture, and Academic Freedom, I thought of Obama's joke at the expense of Rahm Emanuel: "he's one of a kind, and thank god he's one of a kind." Finkelstein, too, is very much one of a kind. But the analogy with Emanuel fails, because in fact one Rahm Emanuel is far too many, whereas one Finkelstein is not nearly enough. We need hundreds of him. That is, we need hundreds of left intellectuals with the courage and intelligence to think for themselves and never sell out, to refuse to compromise—even to risk alienating fellow leftists by publicly repudiating woke culture and the more vacuous forms of identity politics in favor of an unstinting

adherence to class politics. Nor would it hurt to have more writers who are as eloquent and hilarious as him.

It is widely known on the left that Finkelstein is, as it were, a martyr to truth and justice, having been subject to outrageous calumniation and denied an academic career because of his relentless advocacy of the Palestinian cause. With I'll Burn That Bridge, he shows his willingness to burn bridges not only with the establishment but also with the "left" of today, for which he shows scarcely mitigated contempt. He considers it, or dominant tendencies within it, to have degenerated from soaring moral and intellectual heights with Rosa Luxemburg, W. E. B. DuBois, and Paul Robeson into a censorious, narcissistic, morbidly navel-gazing culture preoccupied with subjectivist trivialities like personal pronouns at the expense of solidaristic struggle for a better world. "Whenever I see he/him or she/her, I think fuck/you." ("You must be living an awfully precious life," he goes on, "if, amid the pervasive despair of an economy in free fall, your uppermost concern is clinging to your pronouns.") If the book is not simply ignored, one can expect that it will elicit a flood of vituperation from leftists and liberals: "racist, misogynistic, transphobic, white supremacist, juvenile, petty!" The intelligent reader will not be tempted by such facile judgments but instead will engage with the book's substance, because it has important things to say.

It consists of two parts: in the first, Finkelstein "deconstructs" identity politics and the cancel culture it has given rise to, focusing on five figures whom he eviscerates: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Ibram X. Kendi, and Barack Obama. In the second part, he considers a related subject with which he is intimately familiar: academic freedom. To what extent should a regime of free speech reign on the university campus, and under what circumstances should an academic's "offensive" speech in the public square result in disciplinary action? Is it wrong for universities to grant Holocaust deniers a platform? When teaching, should professors strive for "balance"—presenting with equal force all sides of an issue so that students can make up their own

minds—or should they teach only their own perspective? What should we think of campus speech codes? Finkelstein addresses all such questions at length and in a spirit of uncommon seriousness.

One difficulty with the book is that it has a sprawling and meandering character, consisting variously of memoir, brutal polemic, dense argumentation, forensic dissection of texts, scores of long quotations, innumerable long footnotes, and very funny ridicule of everything and everyone from Michelle Obama to Bari Weiss, from the New York Times to woke terms like Latinx ("why would an ethnic group want to sound like a porn site?"). At its core, however, beneath the variegated surface, the book is an anguished cri de coeur against pervasive cultural, political, and intellectual rot—an unapologetic defense and exegesis of the maligned "Western canon" (John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Kant, DuBois, Frederick Douglass, and the like), a sustained lamentation over how far the left has fallen, a furious denunciation of rampant philistinism and pusillanimous groupthink (quoting Mill: "That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time"), and a proudly unfashionable celebration of such quaint notions as Truth, Reason, and Justice (which Finkelstein capitalizes, in a consciously anti-postmodernist flourish). The book's kaleidoscopic nature and intimidating length might bewilder the reader, so in this review I propose to summarize and comment on several of its main arguments, to facilitate their diffusion.

Before doing so, however, I can't resist quoting a few Finkelsteinian zingers, to preface the following heavy discussion with a bit of levity. On MSNBC's Joy Reid: "living proof that not all yentas are Jewish and not all bovines are cows." On Angela Davis: "Once upon a time she was on the F.B.I.'s Ten Most Wanted List. Now she's on Martha's Vineyard's Five Most Coveted List." On Henry Louis Gates: "a virtuoso at crawling on the ground while typing on his keyboard." On Amy Goodman: "Goddess of Wokeness…a woke machine, churning out

²⁴ Incredibly, he called Obama a "post-modern Frederick Douglass."

insipid clichés as her mental faculty degenerates to mush." On Ibram X. Kendi: "mallet-wielding grifter...preposterous poseur...[whose] 'definitive history of racist ideas in America' reduces to a compendium of prepubescent binary name-calling." On Robin DiAngelo's morbid obsession with diagnosing "racism": "She is the monomaniacal Captain Ahab in pursuit of the White Whale. She is little Jackie Paper out to slay Puff the Racist Dragon. Her palette comprises two colors—white and black... What an unremitting, remorseless, insufferable bore!" On the widespread fascination with transgender people: "the first day of a graduate seminar, students used to describe their intellectual interests. Nowadays, it's de rigueur to declare your sexual orientation. It's only a matter of time before a student announces, 'I'm she/her and I'm packing a thick, juicy nine-incher."

In an adaptation of Emma Goldman's "If I can't dance, I don't want your Revolution," Finkelstein declares: "If I can't laugh, I don't want your Revolution." Political conservatives, too, have complained about the humorlessness of the woke crowd, but if you're alienating even die-hard leftists, maybe it's time to rethink your messaging.

Identity politics

Debates on the left over identity politics go back decades, and it is easy to be sick of them. Unfortunately, there is no prospect of their ending as long as identity politics and woke culture remain dominant on the left and in the Democratic Party—as they surely do today, at the expense of a class politics. Finkelstein is aware that the identity politics of the left isn't quite the same as that of the Democrats, but he is right that they overlap, and that such a politics is more conducive to being neutered into empty symbolism (statues, token representation in the corporate class, electing a vapid con artist like Obama) than a Bernie Sanders-style—or more radical—class politics is.

Serious leftists, like Robin D. G. Kelley, have written competent defenses of identity politics, and Finkelstein certainly isn't arguing against the necessity of incorporating anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, and other such "woke" agendas into popular movements. What he objects to are the forms that identity politics often takes, and its tendency to devolve into celebration of an insular tribal identity. The binary, balkanizing drawing of lines between groups and near-contempt for the "oppressing" group—white vs. black, cis vs. trans, straight vs. gay, man vs. woman—is, in its parochialism and vitiating of solidarity against capitalism, not what a real left politics looks like. He quotes at length some words of Frederick Douglass in 1894 that might well have gotten him "cancelled" today:

We hear, since emancipation, much said by our modern colored leaders in commendation of race pride, race love, race effort, race superiority, race men, and the like... [But] I recognize and adopt no narrow basis for my thoughts, feelings, or modes of action. I would place myself, and I would place you, my young friends, upon grounds vastly higher and broader than any founded upon race or color... We should never forget that the ablest and most eloquent voices ever raised in behalf of the black man's cause, were the voices of white men. Not for the race; not for color, but for man and manhood alone, they labored, fought and died... It is better to be a member of the great human family, than a member of any particular variety of the human family. In regard to men as in regard to things, the whole is more than a part. Away then with the nonsense that a man must be black to be true to the rights of black men. I put my foot upon the effort to draw lines between the white and the black...or to draw race lines anywhere in the domain of liberty.

Moreover, the very idea of being "proud" of what group one happens to belong to-proud of being black or a woman or gay or trans-is puzzling. "[I]t perplexes why one should feel proud of one's zoological difference," Finkelstein writes. "[W]hat sense is there in making a 'cult' of that over which one has no choice...? Shouldn't one aspire to transcend the 'inevitable' part—the color of one's skin—so as to be judged by the 'free part'—the content of one's character?" Similarly, the idea of "loving one's people" is odd, first in that it amounts to "loving one's self writ large," which, in its narcissism, hardly seems like a noble thing. It easily becomes chauvinism. Second, one would certainly not love all the individuals who are alleged to constitute "one's people." Many or most of them one would likely despise—just as, on the other hand, one would "love" many people belonging to a "different group." Too much identification with some imposed identity such as race is exactly what leads to irrational racial hostility (including against whites), sexist hostility (also against men), and other divisive social forces. Identity politics can be dangerous and destructive, not only on the right but even the left. "In their goodness and badness, there exist only persons, not peoples."

The vacuousness of contemporary identity politics is best exposed by considering its "great minds," the Crenshaws, Coateses, Kendis, and DiAngelos. For a really thorough demolition, Finkelstein would have had to review the record of feminist and queer theorists too, but it's a big enough task to critique the writers on race. Or, more precisely, that isn't a difficult task—it is so easy that Finkelstein is able to devote huge chunks of these chapters to sheer mockery—but it does require patience and a willingness to wade through endless intellectual muck. Take Crenshaw. Unsurprisingly, in her seminal 1989 article on intersectionality entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," "she conspicuously omits class in her dissection of oppression." It disturbs her that white feminists are presumptuous enough to speak for black women, but she "seems less concerned or, for that matter, even conscious that a

high-achieving Black woman speaking for Black working-class women might also be problematic."

Or take DiAngelo. She has a pathological obsession with racism and an utterly Manichean, paranoid view of the world. If you're white, you're a racist—whether you're John Brown or Jefferson Davis, a fascist or an anti-fascist. Racism is ubiquitous, "immovably entrenched in our psyches and structures" (as Finkelstein paraphrases), "the air we breathe and the water we drink," all-encompassing and constantly reproduced, she says, "automatically"—and therefore, evidently, ineradicable. At best, it can occasionally be "interrupted"—through the "diversity training" at which DiAngelo excels and for which she charges a hefty fee. Meanwhile, her book White Fragility has sold almost a million copies and has had quite an influence on woke culture, helping to instill a collective fixation on—incidentally—the same idée fixe of Ta-Nehisi Coates (according to Cornel West): the almighty, unremovable nature of white supremacy. "Whites," says DiAngelo, "control all major institutions of society and set the policies and practices that others must live by." Yes, whites are a homogeneous master-class: the billionaires and the working class, they're all equally guilty, they're all oppressors. And to blacks she says, as Finkelstein summarizes, "Beware! Don't trust white people! They're all racists, racists to the core! Every last one of them! They're hard-wired for racism; it's in their DNA." This is a message perfectly calculated to pit workers against one another. No wonder the business class has so enthusiastically promoted her book!

What about Ibram X. Kendi? Finkelstein seems to take particular pleasure in disemboweling this (as he says) non-scholar and non-activist, for his critique/massacre is a full 110 pages long and features withering juxtapositions with a titan, DuBois. It's sad that a book review can't communicate the verve or the slicing humor of this chapter (and others). Kendi's book *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, for example, whose "only novelty is to shoehorn the epithets *racist* or *antiracist*, *segregationist* or *assimilationist* into every

other sentence...[is] less a definitive history than an exhaustive, and exhausting, *taxonomy* that's as supple as a calcified femur and as subtle as an oversized mallet. It proceeds from the fatuous, almost juvenile, conceit that fastening binary, wooden labels on the actors and ideas incident to Black history will shed light on it." One problem with Kendi's and our culture's promiscuous, indiscriminate use of the label "racist" is that the concept becomes diluted: "to be a racist ceases to be what it ought to be: a scarlet badge of shame... [W]hat information is conveyed by a label that collapses the distinction between Frederick Douglass [whom Kendi considers a racist] and the Grand Wizard of the K.K.K.?" The abolitionists were all racists, as were DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Wright, E. Franklin Frasier, etc.—while Kendi singles out for praise Harry Truman, Michelle Obama, Eldridge Cleaver, Pam Grier, Bo Derek, and Kanye West. "[T]he rigor of his taxonomy recalls not the Periodic Table but, on the contrary, Pin the Tail on the Donkey."

As Finkelstein says, Kendi embraces the woke conceit that, over four hundred years, "African-Americans haven't registered any progress in the struggle against racism. Each seeming stride forward has been attended by a step backward." If anything, he implies, things have only gotten worse! Such an "analysis" recalls the flagrantly ahistorical, unabashedly gloomy academic school of Afro-pessimism, and, by reifying differences between "whites" and "blacks" and valorizing anti-white resentment among the latter, serves the same function of hindering the class solidarity necessary to achieve real progress in struggles over the distribution of wealth, working conditions, affordable housing, environmental destruction, hypertrophying militarism, and the like. (No wonder, again, Kendi has been fêted by the establishment and can charge \$45,000 for his talks. It helps, too, that his only real policy proposal is... affirmative action.)

²⁵ See José Sanchez, "Against Afro-Pessimism," *Jacobin*, June 13, 2022; Adolph Reed Jr., "Afropessimism, or Black Studies as a Class Project," *Nonsite.org*, September 26, 2022.

After Finkelstein's devastating exposure of Kendi's countless inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and idiocies—his woke dismissal of the Civil Rights Movement in favor of the macho Black Panthers (who, by comparison, achieved almost nothing); his (in Kendi's words) "striving to accept and equate and empower racial difference" even as he argues that the idea of race is a "mirage" that was invented to rationalize exploitation; his insistence that all racial disparities in society are purely a result of racism; his valorizing of racial differences (e.g., he praises the "irrepressible Blackness" of his friend) at the same time as he says anti-racists see only individuals and not racial behavior ("there is no such thing as Black behavior"); his positing of a deep separation between so-called white culture and black culture; his arguing against the racist "assimilationist" urge to value white culture over black even as he manifestly values white culture over black (lecturing before white audiences, accepting a fellowship at Harvard University, presiding over a research center at Boston University, publishing in white journals like The Atlantic)—nothing remains but the empty husk of a social-climbing charlatan. That such a person can be widely considered to be more or less on the left is a crushing indictment of the state of the left.

For charlatanry, though, few can beat the next entry on Finkelstein's shit list: Obama. "Barack Obama is the perfected and perfect instrument of identity politics, its summa summarum. He represents the cynical triumph of form over substance, color over character. He is the cool Black dude who is also the reliable—in Professor Cornel West's words—'mascot of Wall Street." Most leftists are hardly enamored of Obama, so I need not summarize the case against him. Nor would I even try, because I couldn't possibly reproduce the distinctive Finkelsteinian humor—and most of this very long chapter consists of (factually grounded) ridicule, directed at nearly everyone in Obama's presidential coterie, a "revolting retinue of bootlickers." Aside from Obama himself, the most satisfying skewering, I found, was of Samantha Power, the "Battleaxe from Hell... downright <code>evil...[whose]</code> conscience only bestirs at the suffering of

victims of official U.S. enemies." One might argue that in this chapter Finkelstein's profound contempt for the "Elmer Gantry in blackface" at the head of this gaggle of amoral mediocrities gets the best of his prodigious literary gifts, since the ruthless mockery goes on and on and becomes somewhat tiresome, but it can't be gainsaid that it's all well-deserved.

After six chapters and almost 400 pages on the subject, Finkelstein's summary of identity politics is worth quoting:

It counsels Black people not to trust whites, as their racism is so entrenched and so omnipresent as to poison their every thought and action... Then, identity politics puts forth demands that either appear radical but are in fact politically inert—Defund the police, Abolition of prisons—as they have no practical possibility of achievement; or that leave the overall system intact while still enabling a handful, who purport to represent marginalized groups, to access—on a "parity" basis—the exclusive club of the "haves." This, in effect, performance politics has spawned a disgusting den of thieves who brand themselves with radical-sounding hashtags, churn out radical-sounding tweets, and insinuate themselves into positions of prominence, as they rake in corporate donations, cash corporate paychecks, hang out at the watering holes of the rich and famous, and thence can be safely relied upon not to bite the hand that feeds them...

One might object that he is painting with too broad a brush here, that advocacy of the interests of minorities and women can, depending on the context and the cause, indeed be an essential political program, but he wouldn't deny this. He has the highest regard for the Civil Rights Movement, after all—although he would deny that that was identity politics. "The human rights of a victimized group must, of course, be uncompromisingly defended." More problematic than such defense is to

make a cult of group differences (group "pride") in the way of the woke, and to place class issues at the bottom of the heap rather than the top, where they belong. "Human dignity is not possible without the ability to pay for a roof over one's head, clothes on one's back, and food on one's table."

Whatever genuinely emancipatory political impulses once existed in identity politics have long been mostly coopted and buried under an avalanche of left-liberal virtue-signaling, preening and posing, careerism, and sabotage of a substantive left. Just consider how the woke mob reacted to the Sanders campaign, the most serious challenge to the establishment in more than a generation: they tried to "cancel" Sanders for his being a "privileged white male" with a supposed blind-spot on race. His "economic reductionism," according to Angela Davis, prevented him from "developing a vocabulary that allows him to speak...about the persistence of racism, racist violence, state violence." (Note the pretentious academic language, as if you need a special "vocabulary" to talk about racism and violence.) As Finkelstein says, "When the 'hour of serious danger'to the status quo struck during Bernie Sanders' class-struggle insurgency, the 'true nature' of woke radicalism—not just its opportunism but, even more, its rancid, reactionary core—was exposed as each and all of these erstwhile 'radicals' enlisted under the banner to stop him." Woke cancel culture cooperated with the establishment media's cancel culture to stop the Sanders juggernaut.

Cancel culture and academic freedom

"Cancel culture might be defined as the turning of a person into a non-person." By that definition, it has been around for a very long time. Arguably, it is as old as civilization. The first and second Red Scares in the U.S. were instances of cancel culture; so is the corporate media's treatment of virtually everyone on the left; so is the woke treatment of anyone who publicly strays from the party line. Even if such victims of

woke defamation campaigns usually find their footing again or don't always suffer career consequences in the first place, the mob's impulse to censor and silence remains operative and ever-vigilant. Finkelstein knows cancel culture from the inside, and it is unsurprising that he resolutely opposes it.

His defense of a regime of nearly untrammeled free speech is rooted, first and foremost, in his conviction that this is the surest way to Truth. He quotes DuBois: when free speech is stifled, "the nation... becomes morally emasculated and mentally hog-tied, and cannot evolve that healthy difference of opinion which leads to the discovery of truth under changing conditions." But John Stuart Mill's On Liberty is the text he primarily grounds his argument in, and he quotes from it liberally in his chapter on the right of even Holocaust deniers to make their case in public forums such as a college campus. "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion," Mill writes, "is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth... The beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded." As Finkelstein translates, "if you want to rationally hug your certainty, you must first meet the challenge of every naysayer." Your opponents can even be useful for prodding you to rethink weak points in your reasoning or evidentiary basis, exposing little errors in your arguments, giving you something to think about that you had overlooked, in general giving you the opportunity to more rationally ground your beliefs.

The mob's desire to silence, attack, and destroy comes from feeling threatened, not from being rationally certain and confident. The latter attitudes are more likely to yield calm composure and willingness to give opponents a hearing because you know you're able to refute them. When a mob tries to prevent someone from talking because it feels threatened by his speech, it is quite possible, often, that his speech has some truth in it. Suppressing it—unless it is merely emotive speech like

"fuck you!"—possibly allows his opponents to persist in having false or partially false views.

But someone might reply, "What if his speech is socially harmful? Isn't that a legitimate reason to suppress it?" Well, the definition of "harmful" is, of course, contested, and it evolves over time. Eugenics and forced sterilization were once considered a very enlightened movement, being supported by progressives like Bertrand Russell, Helen Keller, Jane Addams, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Now eugenics is considered downright evil. Who is to say your definition of "socially harmful" is, in all cases, the right one, or that your application of it is always right? "When it comes to curbing speech," Finkelstein says, "experience thus confirms the general rule in human affairs: humility is to be preferred over arrogance."

Moreover, if the "harmful" speech is socially marginal such that hardly anyone believes it, what is the great danger in letting someone say it now and then? If, on the other hand, it is not marginal but holds the assent of millions, letting someone express it presents an opportunity to argue against it and thus inoculate people. The strategy of pure suppression is apt to lead many to think there might be something "dangerously truthful" to it—"the establishment doesn't want us to hear this because it's threatened by its truth!"—and thus might contribute to its diffusion across the population. People might think they're being "rebellious" or anti-establishment by believing it, and furthermore that they're upholding noble values of free speech against authoritarian censoring leftists (as the reactionary right thinks today). I might also note that giving authorities the right to suppress or punish certain kinds of speech, and even encouraging them to do so, will soon lead to their suppressing speech you *like*.

The left has historically been in the vanguard of fights for free speech, from the abolitionists to the IWW (and most other unions, in fact), and from the Socialists during World War I to the Civil Rights Movement. Its departure today from these honorable traditions is yet

more evidence that it has become a pseudo-left, a reactionary left—for the empowering of authorities to regulate speech is ultimately reactionary. It is ironic that many self-styled anarchists advocate increasing the power of unaccountable bureaucrats to control what is said and what isn't.

Admittedly, it might have strengthened Finkelstein's discussion to consider in more depth possible counterarguments. It is, after all, very unfortunate that media operatives like Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones, and the whole stable of Fox News social arsonists have brainwashed millions of people. It is likely they couldn't have had such a destructive impact had the FCC's Fairness Doctrine not been repealed in 1987. Maybe it was right to repeal it, but a case can at least be made that it was wrong. Issues of online content moderation, too, come into play in any debate over censorship, and Finkelstein doesn't say much about these.

Among the many excellent points he makes is one that cuts to the heart of wokeness: the collective obsession with pinning a label—racist or not, sexist or not, transphobic or not—on every thought passing through one's head and every utterance one makes, and then cancelling all the thoughts that (and all the people who) stray an inch past what's deemed "acceptable," is ridiculous and paranoid. It's also reactionary, because it makes *solidarity* vastly more difficult. One of the more memorable passages in the book is when he imagines, in some alternate universe, a Robin DiAngelo who actually *does* care about fighting oppression of blacks and not only grifting off a culture's pathologies. Were she to speak before a group of workers, she might say something like this (italics in the original):

...Although racism is real and you should always be at the ready to fight it whenever it rears its ugly head, you all, Black and white, have a helluva lot more in common. You're all, Black and white, trapped in dead-end jobs. You all earn poverty wages... [You have to] organize together, as one because you are one, to

overthrow this wretched, corrupt, god-forsaken system. You can't eliminate every fleeting, non-p.c. thought passing through your head. The mind is a tricky business... You can't wait until everyone's thoughts are simon-pure. You don't have the time, and they never will be. You cannot police your thoughts, and it's probably better that way. Were it otherwise, you wouldn't be human. You're fallible, you're imperfect vessels. You weren't born, and your minds can't be, immaculate... If you unite to change the system, then your psyches will fall into place. It's common struggle, common sacrifice, that produces mutual respect, even mutual love. A connection that binds will be forged by you, united in the heat of battle facing a common enemy, each marching beside the other, each lifting the other, each protecting the other. You don't become better persons by each of you, singly, struggling with your racist demons. You become better persons by all of you, together, struggling against an antihuman system...

Wokeness is what happens when the destruction of the labor movement proceeds so far, and social atomization becomes so all-consuming, that even the "left" adopts an individualistic, moralistic, psychologistic, censorious, self-righteous, performative approach to making social change.

"The fight against racism must focus...not on the intangible, impalpable, unchangeable, invisible, or unprovable, but, instead, on what's substantive, meaningful, and corrigible. In the first place, securing economic opportunity and legal equality." The Sanders program was far more substantively "anti-racist" than the puny liberal programs of most of his woke critics.

The last chapter of *I'll Burn That Bridge* delves into a specific dimension of cancel culture: when is it appropriate for a professor to be disciplined for his public behavior and statements, whether on social media or in some other context? This issue bears, of course, on Finkelstein's own career, but he is hardly the only academic to have been

disciplined in recent decades for alleged "incivility" or taking unpopular political stands. The chapter is tightly argued and has a more disciplined structure than others, consisting of analyses of four academic freedom cases (Bertrand Russell in 1940, Leo Koch in 1960, Angela Davis in 1969, and Steven Salaita in 2014) and then general reflections that conclude in a discussion of his own case. He endorses the American Association of University Professors' standard that "a faculty member's expression of opinion as a citizen cannot constitute grounds for dismissal unless it clearly demonstrates the faculty member's unfitness to serve [i.e., to teach]"—which was surely not the case in the four instances he examines. But he goes much further and questions whether it should even be seen as a professional obligation that one always use civil language in one's scholarship (which Finkelstein didn't when writing about the Holocaust industry and Alan Dershowitz's lies). Given all the invective in Marx's Capital, for example, the book would never have been published by a university press today and Marx wouldn't get a position at a top university. "But if the likes of Marx wouldn't qualify for a tenured appointment at a first-rank university, isn't that a reductio ad absurdum? Doesn't it conclusively demonstrate the inanity of a standard commanding restrained and temperate language?"

One might connect Finkelstein's lengthy discussion of academic civility with his book's focus on woke politics by pointing to something his targets have in common: a preoccupation with policing language and thought at the expense of more substantive concerns. Academia insists on politeness, decorum, "neutral" language, which often serves to enforce conventions, emasculate dissent, and uphold power structures; wokeness insists on ceaselessly monitoring your own and others' language, in fact making that a priority, allowing people to feel "radical" by doing nothing that remotely challenges real power structures. (No surprise that woke culture has largely emerged from the academy.) To do justice to Truth and Justice, though, requires more than this. In the case of scholarly writing and speaking,

There are moments that might positively require breaking free of the constraints imposed by polite public discourse in order to sound the tocsin that, as we indifferently carry on in a privileged sanctuary of peace and prosperity, innocent people are being butchered by our own state. The uncivil reality, not uncivil words, should be cause for reproach and excoriation, while uncivil words might be called for to bring home the uncivil reality.

It can at least be said for Finkelstein that he practices what he preaches: his book, to put it mildly, does not shrink from uncivil words.

The anti-academic

It should be clear from what has been said here that *I'll Burn That Bridge When I Get to It* is an unusual book. It requires patience to read, but I think the effort is worth it. It's not a "polished" work, but in an academic and literary environment that sometimes seems to value polish above all else, including moral and intellectual substance, one appreciates something a little more raw. And someone with the courage to *tear down*—in order to build up.

Finkelstein is in the tradition of the great incorruptible truth-tellers. He relates an anecdote from when he was a graduate student at Princeton in 1984: his work exposing a bestselling scholarly hoax on the Israel-Palestine conflict had gotten the favorable attention of the editor of the *New York Review of Books* and his friend (Arthur Hertzberg) at Columbia University, and he sensed that career possibilities were opening up for him. But then, in a meeting with Hertzberg, he was bluntly asked, "Are you in Chomsky's stable?" Despite knowing the probable consequences of giving the wrong answer, he unhesitatingly said he deeply admired Chomsky and was grateful for his support—which, of course, was the wrong answer. He never heard from the men again. Even so, "I was proud of myself," he writes, "not to be tempted, at all, by the

CHRIS WRIGHT

lure of fame and fortune, and I was grateful for this test of my fidelity to Truth (and Chomsky), so that I could prove in my own person dead wrong the cynics who imagine, or console themselves, that everyone has a price."

That unshakeable commitment, that unwillingness to conform, combined with intellectual power, is chiefly what has set Finkelstein apart from most of his peers. One hopes that his book and his example will inspire young idealists to follow in his path.

THE ORIGINS OF PATRIARCHY (2023)

One of the reasons that any left that emerges from academia—as does much of today's "left"—is doomed to ineffectiveness is that academia tends to be an anti-intellectual place. Truth, reason, and justice are of less concern to it than careers, politics, and adherence to institutional norms. The result is that intellectuals can sometimes be blind to the most obvious facts, preferring to "complicate" even the essential, albeit simple, insights that are much more far-reaching than the "problematizations" that are preferred. Turbid and pretentious thinking blocks the way to both truth and a rational politics.

Some aspects of contemporary feminism are a case in point. No reasonable person could deny that women, like men, have a right to economic and social well-being, but reasonable people can certainly object to some of the confusions and dishonest fixations of feminism. These

revolve around the concept of "patriarchy," that nefarious thing that has existed for thousands of years across the world. So what is patriarchy?²⁶

In the most general sense, it just means male domination. It has many dimensions, from intimate relationships to the possession of power in political and economic institutions. Wherever it exists, there is said to be misogyny and oppression of women; thus, it is always rooted in "men behaving badly." If men would simply respect women, and if patriarchal indoctrination were eradicated, male domination would wither away and the sexes would finally be treated as equal.

According to these notions, which have become feminist dogmas, male dominance is as unjust and oppressive as, say, capitalist domination and exploitation of workers, or imperialist domination and exploitation of foreign countries. Men are the main problem, and they have to be educated, lectured, browbeaten, and ridiculed (as they often are in liberal and left spaces) into a deep awareness of their undeserved privilege, so that they'll be persuaded to give up their privilege for the greater good. This massive project of dismantling patriarchy will doubtless alienate much of the public, both men and women, pushing them away from the left and into the arms of the far-right, but that, supposedly, is the price of progress.

One of the latest sallies in this long-running feminist crusade is a book published in 2023 entitled *The Patriarchs: The Origins of Inequality*, by science journalist Angela Saini. It's a sprawling survey of the alleged origins of patriarchy, of myriad examples of it around the world, of its academic theorizations, and of resistance to it. While the book is not without merit, its chief interest is in its manifesting the intellectual shallowness and self-deception with which feminism itself is plagued. It presents an opportunity, therefore, to dispel some common confusions that have had baleful political consequences. Maybe if we can give more plausible answers to questions around "patriarchy," this will discourage

On this subject, see my "Critical thoughts on feminism and social constructionism," May 30, 2022, https://www.wrightswriting.com/post/some-desperately-needed-common-sense-on-feminism.

frivolous pseudo-political research and activism in favor of attention to more urgent issues such as the revival of the labor movement, the resurrection of social democracy, and mitigation of global warming.

As a social constructionist feminist, Saini premises her entire account on the obligatory, but false, denial that there is anything natural about male domination. She quotes primatologist Frans de Waal: "I think when people say that patriarchy is sort of natural for the human species,...that male dominance and male violence are natural, I think they are totally exaggerating." Here we have a characteristic instance of sloppy thinking. Male *physical* dominance is entirely natural: on average, men are stronger, larger, and taller than women. So, this dimension of "patriarchy" is indeed dictated by nature.

Moreover, given that the anthropological consensus is that a strict matriarchy has (probably) never existed whereas social systems manifesting some degree of patriarchy have been overwhelmingly common in history, if not universal, in what sense is male dominance not "natural"? There is evidently something about human nature that causes patriarchy to keep reappearing again and again, countless times, in societies many of which have had no contact with one another, from probably the Paleolithic era to the present. The Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier went so far as to argue that even in the most egalitarian societies, "in the last analysis" it is likely that men have always "occupied the summit of the power hierarchy"—doubtless because, in the last analysis, questions of power are grounded in questions of physical force.²⁷ In principle, if men wanted to, they could always band together and forcibly have their way with the women. Brute facts of physiology therefore mean that women and children are in some respects subject to male power, and that it is men's good will that keeps their potential violent self-assertiveness in check.

²⁷ Maurice Godelier, "The Origins of Male Domination," New Left Review, 1/127 (May/June, 1981).

Feminists have sometimes denied the salience of male physical strength, size, and aggressiveness, but their arguments have been unconvincing. Consider one example: in her overrated classic *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett stated that "male supremacy...does not finally reside in physical strength but in the acceptance of a value system which is not biological." But value systems can certainly be grounded in biology, so this statement is not quite true. (For instance, the value placed on sex and procreation is clearly biological in origin, as is the value placed on muscular strength.) Similarly, Millett averred that "superior physical strength is not a factor in political relations—*vide* those of race and class." This seems true enough, until one reflects that if some race of people were discovered who happened to be physically weak, we would hardly be surprised to find that they were, for example, frequently enslaved by others. That is to say, contrary to social constructionist orthodoxy, "nature" (in addition to nurture) is very relevant to social relations.

The postmodern feminist insistence that "culture" is everything and "nature" is nothing does not withstand a moment's scrutiny. It is still denied that sex hormones, for instance, are among the causes of gendered behavior, but this is a ludicrous anti-scientific idealism (culturalism) that has been refuted countless times.²⁹ Even apart from male physicality, there are natural tendencies toward masculine dominance. The ubiquitous identification of masculinity with such qualities as relative autonomy, detachment, strength, self-control, and self-possession, all of which are valorized as manifesting a kind of dominance, does not come out of thin air. It results from the average behaviors and psychologies

²⁸ Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 27.

See, for example, Scott Barry Kaufman, "Taking Sex Differences in Personality Seriously," *Scientific American*, December 12, 2019; David P. Schmitt, "The Truth About Sex Differences," *Psychology Today*, November 7, 2017; Eric W. Dolan, "Study finds early exposure to testosterone predicts gender-role behaviors in boys," PsyPost, June 2, 2022; Sheri A. Berenbaum and Adriene M. Beltz, "How Early Hormones Shape Gender Development," *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 7 (February, 2016): 53–60; Debra Soh, *The End of Gender: Debunking the Myths about Sex and Identity in Our Society* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2020).

of the sexes, not from some malevolent conspiracy of misogynists to oppress women and spread groundless stereotypes.

One doesn't need acute observational skill to notice that, cross-culturally, women tend to laugh and cry much more often than men, to have more intense emotions, and to be more excitable, more *in-the-moment*, than the somewhat "detached," "sober" male. To take a trivial example: the female tendency to scream and run at the sight of a mouse or a cockroach or some other critter, and to appeal to a nearby man to deal with it, doesn't exactly exude dominance or self-control. Neither do tendencies to cry or "giggle" far more easily than the opposite sex. The experiences of a trans woman like Julia Serano are of interest here: in *Whipping Girl* (2016), Serano writes about how her emotions became more intense after her hormone therapy, as did her senses of touch and smell, and her sexual sensitivity and pleasure. Susceptibility to emotions—things that *happen to* you, that you can't really control—and sensitivity to physiological sensations are, again, antithetical to the valorized concept of self-control.

Given all these biological facts, and the fact that it is natural for the sexes to define themselves in relation to each other, it is perfectly rational for women, on average, to embrace their comparative advantage in attributes such as "nurturing," feminine physical beauty, attractive anti-masculine behavior such as childlike giggling, and empathetic receptiveness. It happens that these traits do not lend themselves to asserting dominance. But they are attractive to men, just as masculine confidence, strength, height, financial prosperity, and charisma are attractive to women. It isn't "misogyny" that draws the sexes to each other

That sentence might sound like mockery, but it isn't. It's a true statement of how people, both men and women, perceive certain kinds of "feminine" behavior in relation to "masculine" behavior. These simple, daily behavioral tendencies, which in the case of this example are hardly a product solely of "socialization" or "culture," influence how people think of women and men in relation to each other (e.g., less-dominant vs. more-dominant, on average). It is puzzling that most gender theorists and feminists are blind to the significance of these behaviors. (Or rather it *would* be puzzling if we didn't know that gender theory and feminism are ideological, not scientifically disinterested.)

in this way, with contrasts being drawn such that the dominance of one sex is valued by both. It is just the natural dialectic of sexual attraction.

Indeed, in light of women's valorization of relative male dominance in romantic and sexual contexts, it can be annoying that feminists denounce this same dominance as being terrible and misogynistic. On the one hand, women will not rarely want a man to protect them, which is to say have a higher status than them (for one's protection of a weaker, more defenseless person indicates one's higher status). In the realm of dating, they will often say they want a man who can "make them laugh," a desire and phrase that indicates a self-conception of relative passivity. Or they will want a man to take them to dinner or a movie, to buy them flowers or jewelry, or more generally to provide for them, all desires that place women in a position of passivity in relation to the man.

On the other hand, the very notion of male dominance is supposed to be morally odious. It's no wonder that a lot of young men today are confused about what is expected of them. But if you take seriously the implications of feminist dogma, you should consider female desire itself morally odious! A large proportion of women, for instance, enjoy rough sex, which is to say overt male dominance.³¹ Sex in general is a pretty "patriarchal" affair: one party is being penetrated, acted on (acted in), ejaculated into, ecstatically subjected to the perceived muscular strength of the other. The radical feminist Andrea Dworkin even compared sex to territorial occupation. Sex is rather important to human life, so one suspects that its mechanics of male assertiveness and female receptiveness might condition general patterns of human psychology.

Being a doctrinaire social constructionist, Saini mentions none of this. In fact, she never really answers the question of how male domination began or why it is so universal, probably because doing so would necessitate acknowledgment of these unsayable facts. Instead, in an attempt to sum up her discussion, she says, "States institutionalized human categorization and gendered laws; slavery influenced patrilocal

³¹ Alisha Hrustic, "62% of Women Like Rough Sex," Men's Health, April 18, 2017.

marriage; empires exported gendered oppression to nearly every corner of the globe; capitalism exacerbated gender disparities; and religions and traditions are still being manipulated to give psychological force to the notion of male domination." Doubtless all this is true, and one can agree that some forms of patriarchy can and ought to be dismantled. But it is wrong to deny obvious facts just because they conflict with feminist ideology.

If no aspect of male dominance is grounded in biology, does that mean male dominance in sports and athletics has nothing to do with biology? Men are overwhelmingly responsible for building the physical infrastructure of civilization (which raises their status): is this unrelated to their greater strength, or their typically greater visual-spatial abilities³² and interest in mechanical problems?

Men's sexual arousal is stimulated in large part through the visual sense. Since the sexes want to attract one another, it is, therefore, rational for women to beautify and objectify themselves, even if this also causes them sometimes to be treated more as objects than subjects. The infamous "male gaze" that can, indeed, be dehumanizing is not merely a social artifact but is partly an expression of male biology. To demonize the male sex for its "objectification of women," as if that is always misogynistic, is thus to demonize how the male brain works.

Relative male dominance is so deeply embedded in society and the human mind that it can never be wholly extirpated. It is everywhere. Every chivalrous gesture expresses masculine authority. When couples marry, the woman often wants to adopt her husband's last name. In ballroom dancing, men are the customary "leaders," which is apparently a form of patriarchy (because it's male domination). Men are expected to refrain from hurting women's feelings, in fact to treat them with greater respect and kindness than they treat other men—evidently because women are seen as more emotionally fragile, or "sensitive," than men.

³² See, for instance, "Sex Difference On Spatial Skill Test Linked To Brain Structure," *Science Daily*, December 18, 2008.

Implicit in a man's romantic attraction to a woman is a kind of condescension, a *protective* urge, not very different from his urge to protect his children.

None of this means men are "superior." On average, women are superior in some ways, men in others. (And there are always exceptions.) Value-judgments are not the point, and only an immature or damaged person would care about them. The point is to understand, not make cheap judgments.

One wishes, in short, that feminists would show a little more understanding of women and men, a little more intellectual honesty and insight. The habit of demonizing men, the treatment of them as little more than oppressors, is intellectually, morally, and politically indefensible. Some kinds of "patriarchy" are both natural and good, and are appreciated by women (even if not all will admit that to themselves). Some kinds of sexism, such as protecting women and being kinder to them than men, are good and are widely valued.³³ It may be unfair that masculinity tends to be respected more than femininity, but this is hardly the only instance of unfairness in life. It is also unfair that, *ceteris paribus*, tall men are valued over short and strong over weak, and that physically attractive people are preferred to the unattractive, and the charismatic to the uncharismatic. Nature is unfair: the emotional and cognitive structures of the human brain did not evolve to primarily heed the moral quality of "fairness."

Not all feminism, however, is trivial or deluded or consists of barely concealed misandry. Materialist feminism, in particular, is essential: all women should have the right to free childcare, extended maternity leave, pay for household work, strong unions, generous wages, high-quality education, and a rewarding job. It should be widely accepted for women to have positions of power in political, economic, and cultural institutions. Even foreign policy ought to be considered a feminist issue: militaristic

Incidentally, these are examples of female privilege, which, contrary to feminist dogma, is just as real as male privilege.

policy is hardly in the interests of women and children abroad and domestically. (It is telling, then, that feminists rarely have much to say about it and do even less to organize against it.) Addressing all these injustices, in fact, would be the most effective way of raising the "cultural" status of women with which academic feminists are so concerned.

If the feminist movement were to prioritize issues of economic security, it could become a major asset to the left. It could help draw people away from a Republican Party that ridiculously claims to speak for the working class; it would help revive a labor movement that is crucial to elevating women's conditions. But in order to rise to this level, it first has to shed its academic influences and theoretical pretensions. It has to treat its culturalist preoccupations with theorizing gender and critiquing some monolithic thing called patriarchy as being, at best, secondary or tertiary concerns. Whether in the coming years feminists will be able to shift their priorities remains to be seen, but few political projects can be more urgent.

POSTLIBERALISM: A DANGEROUS "NEW" CONSERVATISM (2023)

In Wilhelm von Humboldt's book *The Limits of State Action*, one of the most thoughtful expressions of classical liberalism, these passages appear:

The true end of Man...is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes... Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being but still remains alien to his true nature; he does

not perform it with truly human energies but merely with mechanical exactness...

[T]he principle of the true art of social intercourse consists in a ceaseless endeavor to grasp the innermost individuality of another, to avail oneself of it, and, with the deepest respect for it as the individuality of another, to act upon it... The very variety arising from the union of numbers of individuals is the highest good which social life can confer, and this variety is undoubtedly lost in proportion to the degree of State interference. Under such a system, we have not so much the individual members of a nation living united in the bonds of a civil compact, but isolated subjects living in relation to the State...³⁴

The entire book is an elaboration of these ideas. In them, we do not see a vulgar individualism, a reduction of humans to mere nodes in the cash-nexus who buy and sell to one another and need protection from each other, the kind of anti-humanism for which traditionalists and Marxists have criticized classical liberalism. We see, instead, an appreciation of the richness of every individuality; an emphasis on the human need for community, respect, friendship, and love; an anarchist critique of coercive institutions, in particular the state; a proto-Marxist theory of the alienation of labor; socialistic intimations that people have the right to control their own labor; in short, a liberal humanism of the sort that leftists of various persuasions would embellish in the following two centuries.

If one were to believe the "postliberals" who have burst onto the ideological scene in recent years, liberalism does not have the moral or intellectual resources for such a mature humanism. It seems they have not read Humboldt.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969 [1792]), 16, 23, 24, 28, 32.

Postliberalism has emerged in the U.K. and U.S. during the last ten years as a reaction against the manifest failures of what its thinkers call liberalism. The economic, social, political, and environmental crises that afflict the world they attribute to a systemic lack of regard for the "common good," which, in turn, they attribute to a liberalism that has been horribly successful in its reduction of humans to atoms—"increasingly separate, autonomous, nonrelational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone." So writes Patrick Deneen, professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame, in his 2018 book Why Liberalism Failed.35 Other vocal postliberals include Adrian Vermeule, Sohrab Ahmari, Yoram Hazony, Adrian Pabst, Chad Pecknold, Gladden Pappin, and some other writers associated with such magazines as American Affairs, UnHerd, and Compact. For all their differences, these writers share a rejection of any one-sided fixation on liberty, whether it be that of right-wing libertarianism—the "free market" doctrine to which the Republican Party is at least rhetorically committed—or left-wing social liberalism, the liberalism of identity politics. They seek to resuscitate ideas of social obligation, duty, community, and tradition, for example in the forms of family, church, and nation. The modern understanding of liberty is unhealthily and immorally *licentious*; better is the ancient and Christian conception that true freedom consists in self-control, self-discipline (under the constraints of tradition and religion), rather than slavish submission to base and hedonistic appetites.

Postliberals, therefore, criticize the modern gospel of "progress" and its ideological cognates, alleged solvents of social bonds, such as "Enlightenment rationalism," or the application of critical reason to all forms of order and authority for the sake of dismantling whatever is not emancipatory, liberal, or conducive to economic growth. Their perspective is reminiscent of that of the social theorist and historian Christopher Lasch, whose 1991 book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its*

Patrick Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 16.

Critics was an extended critique of the ideology of progress and a history of its dissenters in the United States. Preferring an honest recognition of ineluctable *limits*—not least ecological limits—over modern liberalism's faith in endless economic growth, endless moral progress, and liberation from the benighted parochialism of the past, Lasch turned to the culture of the lower middle class as a more human and realistic alternative. Without denying the historical vices of this culture ("envy, resentment, and servility"), he was nevertheless impressed by "the moral conservatism of the petty bourgeoisie, its egalitarianism, its respect for workmanship, its understanding of the value of loyalty," in general its *rootedness*, so different from the deracinated *future*-fixation—detachment from the past—of contemporary liberal elites.³⁶ Postliberals share these concerns and values.

What postliberalism amounts to, then, is a rejection of dominant tendencies of modernity. Some writers are more willing than others to acknowledge the positive achievements of liberalism—for instance, in *The Politics of Virtue* (2016), John Milbank and Adrian Pabst grant that liberalism "has afforded some protection against the worst transgressions upon the liberty of some by the liberty of others"³⁷—but, on the whole, postliberals are attracted to a kind of Burkean conservatism. "Rightwing on culture, left-wing on the economy" is how they are usually characterized. Through this formula, they think, it may be possible to bring back social cohesion, "the wisdom of tradition," and respect for "the common good."

Two books published in 2023 by leading lights of postliberalism, Patrick Deneen and Sohrab Ahmari, provide an opportunity to critically evaluate this "new" school of thought (perhaps not so new). On the one hand, Deneen's *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* illustrates the weaknesses of the ideology; on the other hand, Ahmari's *Tyranny, Inc.:*

³⁶ Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 17.

John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (New York: Roman & Littlefield, 2016), 2.

How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It illustrates its potential strengths. Ultimately, however, despite its mutability, postliberalism is misguided and dangerous in its idealism, its theoretical confusions, its political naïveté, and many of its political commitments. It too easily slides into proto-fascism. What is valid in it can be and has been expressed with more sophistication by the Marxist left.

Since it has the ear of some right-wing populists, such as J. D. Vance and Josh Hawley, and it seems to be growing in influence, this ideology should be taken seriously. Leftists may be able to find common ground with its advocates on certain issues, but in general, they should strongly resist this latest brand of conservatism.³⁸

The Idealism of Postliberalism

One of the major analytical flaws of postliberalism is, in fact, one of the weaknesses of all conservatism: its anti-Marxian idealism. In all his romantic talk of reverence for ancestral traditions, Edmund Burke abstracted from the actual daily functioning of these traditions, from their foundations in appalling violence, in constant violations of the dignity and freedom of the lower classes, in the irrationality of a nation's being subject to the will of some arbitrary monarch who happened to be born to a previous monarch. A very different conservative, Milton Friedman, similarly abstracted from the daily realities of capitalism—the indignities of working for a boss, the suppression of the right to unionize, the violence in which the rule of capital is grounded—in his simplistic paeans to "freedom." (His famous book Capitalism and Freedom consists of abstract idealizations like this one, chosen at random: "The kind of economic organization that promotes economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way

For a concise history and critique of postliberalism, see Chris Wright, "Postliberalism: A BriefHistory of a Resurgent Ideology," *Reset Dialogues on Civilization*, February 19,2025, at https://www.resetdoc.org/story/postliberalisms-brief-history-resurgent-ideology-chris-wright/.

enables the one to offset the other."³⁹ As if, in the real world, economic power doesn't tend to confer political power!) Fascism was even worse: it idealized will, nation, race, the state, the Leader, and war, abstracting from the grubby realities of all these things.

Being a type of conservatism, postliberalism does the same. Its very name is idealistic and simplistic. "Liberalism" cannot be the fundamental problem we face today for the simple reason that there isn't only one liberalism, there are many. Among the classical liberals, there were British, French, American, and German figures, as diverse as John Locke, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Kant, Thomas Paine, William Godwin, John Stuart Mill, and Tocqueville. There were socialists, anarchists, and capitalists. There were deists, Protestants, Catholics, and atheists. There were democrats, republicans, and monarchists. And in the twentieth century, liberalism evolved in even more complex ways, towards social democracy and its protection not only of "negative liberty" but also "positive liberty," as in the freedom of people to have a living wage, a home, an education, and affordable healthcare. Even the anarchist communism of Peter Kropotkin can be said, in some respects, to belong to the liberal tradition. In short, the core intuition of liberalism—"a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life," as Lionel Trilling described it40—can be fleshed out institutionally in innumerable ways, including in socialism (which is not Sovietism). (In fact, one can argue that Marxism is but a continuation and conceptual deepening of the best traditions of liberalism.)

Patrick Deneen's two recent books—Why Liberalism Failed and Regime Change—exemplify the idealism of conservatism. Again and again, imposing a false unity on the liberal tradition, he blames liberalism for things that are more realistically attributed to capitalism. When he refers to "[recent] decades of liberal dismantling of cultural norms and

³⁹ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002 [1962]), 9.

⁴⁰ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950), v.

political habits essential to self-governance," what he means is capitalist dismantling. Liberalism is but an ideological attitude, a constellation of philosophies; capitalism—how people work, how they acquire property, how they exchange goods, how class relations are structured, how culture is produced and politics is organized—is the real basis for a way of life.

When Deneen, in *Why Liberalism Failed*, writes that "[liberalism] has remade the world in its image, especially through the realms of politics, economics, education, science, and technology, all aimed at achieving supreme and complete freedom through the liberation of the individual from particular places, relationships, memberships, and even identities,"⁴¹ one recalls the words of an infinitely more profound thinker:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations... It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation... All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...⁴²

No mere ideological "tendency" (to quote Trilling again) could achieve all this. It is the class structures of capitalism that have remade the world.

Regime Change is shot through with idealism. The basic structure of the book is reasonable enough: in the first two chapters, Deneen diagnoses the faults of liberalism, including not only its ostensible ripping apart and atomizing of the social fabric but also its elevation of hypocritical liberal elites ("the managerial class," the real power elite) who do not care about "the people" but use identity politics to pretend

⁴¹ Patrick Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 16.

⁴² Karl Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party, chapter 1.

they do, shredding the last vestiges of traditional norms in the process. In the next three chapters, he presents the postliberal vision. He calls this "common-good conservatism," associating it with Burke, Benjamin Disraeli, and G. K. Chesterton, but more generally with "the classical and Christian tradition of the West—a common-good political order that seeks to harmonize the various contentious elements of any human society." This conservatism aligns itself with the "common sense" of ordinary people, who "seek stability, predictability, and order within the context of a system that is broadly fair." The solution to contemporary social ills is to implement the political philosophy of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, a "mixed constitution" (democratic and aristocratic) in which an elite much more noble than that of today will "work to improve the lives, prospects, and fate of the people," as the people, in turn, demand excellence from the elite and themselves are influenced by the virtues of the new aristocracy.

In the final two chapters, Deneen fills out his Aristotelian vision, which he calls "aristopopulism," while also gesturing towards an answer as to *how* this glorious new society will be realized. His answer is not particularly satisfying: "an ennobling of our elite" will come about "through the force of a threat from the *popolo* [people]," that is, "through the efforts of an energized, forceful, and demanding populace." This is pretty much all he says on the matter. Likewise, his sketches of the better world to come consist of empty bromides and exhortations. Rather than meritocracy, we need a society that integrates the "working-class ethos of social solidarity, family, community, church, and nation" with the "virtues of those blessed by privilege." To combat racism, we should not embrace affirmative action or other divisive approaches but should resurrect Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a "deeper 'integration." Tepidly criticizing the ardent nationalism of people like Yoram Hazony (author

⁴³ Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (New York: Sentinel, 2023), 95.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 185.

of *The Virtue of Nationalism*), *National Review* editor Rich Lowry, and other "national conservatives," Deneen proposes instead "a new form of integration of local, national, and international" (italics in the original). What that concretely means he leaves unsaid. His practical program for reinfusing religion into social life is similarly perfunctory, containing little more than such vague entreaties as "a simple first step would be to publicly promote and protect a life of prayer." Politics should be "a place for prayer, since politics is how we together seek to realize the good that is common."

One of the greatest swindles of postliberalism is its nostalgia for an idealized past. According to Deneen, the Enlightenment project of individual liberation required the overthrow of "older social forms that had taught and reinforced the cultivation of virtue." Traditional institutions "protect the stability and order that most benefits ordinary people," and in fact are deeply democratic "because they are the creation of countless generations of forebears" and "largely develop from the 'bottom up." As it happens, feudalism wasn't a particularly democratic institution that cultivated virtue. Nor was absolute monarchy. Nor was the Catholic Church, which, until the spirit of liberalism finally began to permeate it, was a rapacious tyranny that burned heretics, policed thought, crusaded against the advance of knowledge, and made common cause with autocrats everywhere. (Also, of course, it now has the distinction of having systemically aided and abetted child abuse.) However inspiring the figure and philosophy of Jesus may be, history has shown that religious institutions, like all administrative hierarchies, are prone to abusing their power unless suffused with the liberal spirit of respect for individual rights.

This worship of religion is a classic instance of mistaken idealism. Postliberals are enamored of Christianity, attributing much of what is good in our civilization to its religious inheritance and much of what is bad to its abandonment of religion. Most of the time, they ignore

⁴⁵ Ibid., 210, 225, 236, 237.

questions about whether, after all, it is *true* that something called "God" exists or that Jesus is His son and was resurrected after dying for our sins, or any of the other dogmas of Christianity (or Judaism)—and rightly so, for in order to evaluate the plausibility of any proposition, it is necessary to use the Enlightenment's "rationalistic" method they dislike. With regard to socially relevant questions, they appear to have a pragmatist conception of truth: if a belief is useful, we might as well believe it. But is religion in fact useful? Its violent, tortured, bigoted history suggests otherwise. Nor is it at all clear that humans need religion in order to enjoy a healthy communal and family life or to heed the moral duties that bind us all together.

Often, religion has functioned to undermine the well-being of communities and families. It isn't a secret that conservative politicians use appeals to religion to convince people to vote against their economic interests. An infamous example is that of Governor Sam Brownback of Kansas, a religiose Christian who passed radical tax cuts in 2012 that, as the Brookings Institution summarizes, "led to sluggish growth, lower-than-expected revenues, and brutal cuts to government programs" like schools, housing, infrastructure, and police and fire protection.⁴⁶ Similarly, for over a hundred years, businesses in the American South have used conservative Christianity to ward off the threat of unionism, helping to keep the region in a state of relative poverty. In Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South, historians Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf describe how corporate executives in the postwar era relocated their factories to this region, where "chambers of commerce advertised the benefits [of] locating in a 'distinctly religious city' where the 'labor is of native Anglo-Saxon stock—loyal and efficient."47 The CIO's Operation Dixie was unable to overcome the resistance that evangelical Protestantism (among other forces) put up to unions.

William G. Gale, "The Kansas tax cut experiment," *Brookings*, July 11, 2017.

⁴⁷ Ken Fones-Wolf and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 93.

On the whole, then, postliberals have a rather uncritical attitude towards tradition and religion, as conservatives usually do. They are nostalgic for a lost social cohesion, the lost unity of "Western culture." As Adrian Pabst writes in *Liberal World Order and Its Critics*, identity politics (combined with "corporate crony capitalism") is "changing the fundamental character of Western civilisation from being a cultural community bound together by common values that define shared interests to a 'business community' based on sectional interests that promote divisive values." But when, exactly, was "Western civilization" such a unitary entity? The history of Europe is the history of constant clashes, constant wars, constant struggles between different value systems and interests and cultures, long centuries of violence and bloody suppression of innumerable popular uprisings. Divisiveness *is* history. And idealism is false history.

Buried under all the confusions and shallowness of postliberalism, however, there is a truth: throughout its five-hundred-year history, riven by war, privatization and the destruction of the commons, mass immiseration, and the crushing of democracy, capitalism has profoundly disrupted communities and uprooted identities. This is precisely why, or one reason why, leftists and "the people" have fought against it. Genuine leftists are very aware of the human need for roots, for order and stability and community. The great anarchist mystic Simone Weil even wrote a book entitled *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*. "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul... Money destroys human roots wherever it is able to penetrate, by turning desire for gain into the sole motive." There is no reason such a recognition should be incompatible with the best traditions of liberalism, for instance Humboldtian liberalism. That is, there is no reason a philosophy of individual rights and individual

⁴⁸ Adrian Pabst, Liberal World Order and Its Critics (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35.

⁴⁹ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards mankind* (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1949]), 40, 41.

CHRIS WRIGHT

dignity should preclude a recognition of mutual obligations and the essentially *social* nature of humanity, including even a valorization of *honorable* traditions and shared norms that constrain unfettered liberty. This is not the place to delve into the philosophies of communism, socialism, and anarchism—the writings of William Godwin, Kropotkin, Tolstoy, Anton Pannekoek, Rudolf Rocker, Murray Bookchin, etc.—but the societies they envision are hardly licentious or degenerate or atomized. (Or remotely similar to the Soviet Union's state capitalism, with which socialism and communism are absurdly associated.) They are eminently ordered, communal, and democratic, *because* they are grounded in a liberal humanist sensibility.

Indeed, one might even say that the real reason the world is in such an awful state is the opposite of that given by postliberals: there is too little freedom, not too much. There is too much authoritarianism, not enough liberalism or democracy. In particular, the authoritarian structures known as corporations have overwhelming power—including over governments—which they certainly do not use in the interests of humanity, community, or social harmony. Noam Chomsky is surely right that classical liberalism, or libertarianism, in its profoundest forms is not only not fulfilled in capitalism but is actually incompatible with it, inasmuch as capitalism tends to violate both the negative and positive liberties of ordinary people. A vast literature of the left, of journalism, and of historical scholarship exposes the tyrannical nature of capitalist institutions; for example, in 2017, the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson published a well-received book entitled Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It). (A corporation is "a government that assigns almost everyone a superior whom they must obey... [T]here is no rule of law... Superiors are unaccountable to those they order around. They are neither elected nor removable by their

inferiors," etc.)⁵⁰ The most recent addition to this literature may be a surprise, though: Ahmari's new book.

Tyranny, Inc. could not be more different from Regime Change. It appears, in fact, that Ahmari is undergoing a semi-conversion to the left, or to aspects of the left. It is striking, after all, that a postliberal should have written a book the very subtitle and substance of which valorizes "American liberty." Whereas Deneen wallows in a lazy idealism that traffics in windy abstractions like virtue, excellence, and tradition, Ahmari investigates the material conditions workers have faced under the neoliberal onslaught, together with the corrupt political economy that has brought about these abysmal conditions. Where Deneen believes that an enlightened Aristotelian aristocracy will magically come into being and work to uplift the people, Ahmari comprehends the essential fact of class struggle and advocates the resurrection of strong unions and social democracy. He even uses Marxist language: "cultural norms, practices, and beliefs...rest on a material substrate that includes law, politics, and economics." In short, while Deneen and his co-thinkers blame a unitary ideology of their imagination called liberalism, Ahmari, at least in this book, blames capitalism.

One can't help wondering if the postliberal gang is a little unhappy with Ahmari's semi-apostasy. Consider his criticisms of conservatives in his concluding chapter:

[C]onservative defenders of the [social] system are often the first to lament its cultural ramifications: ...a decline in civic and religious engagement, particularly among the poor and working classes; low rates of marriage and family formation; and so on.

...[What results] is a downright ludicrous politics centered on preaching timeless virtues while denying what political theory going back to the Greeks has taught, and

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 37.

what every good parent or teacher knows: that cultivating virtue requires tangible, structural supports. A child will struggle to master honesty if his parents routinely model dishonesty; a body politic will likewise spurn the virtues if subjected to merciless economic exploitation.

It's true that more populist conservatives these days are prepared to defend right-wing cultural values against "woke capital." But few if any dare question the coercive power of capital itself. Dig into the policy platforms of tub-thumping GOP populists, and you will likely find effusions of unreserved praise for capitalism.⁵¹

Here, he is coming close to the realization that right-wing populism is completely phony, that it has always functioned to distract from the class conflicts that are fundamentally responsible for popular suffering, so that a large portion of the public instead rages against LGBTQ people, liberals, Muslims, immigrants, Jews, Communists, China, and anyone else *not* big business. To be sure, postliberals don't effusively praise capitalism, as some other populist conservatives do. But if they really valued "the common good" about which they prattle, they would, like leftists and the new-and-improved Ahmari, direct their ire at the chief agents of the collapse of community, family, morality, and the natural environment, namely the capitalist class. Otherwise they are in danger of being useful idiots for this class that is interested only in further shredding the social compact.

Tyranny, Inc. is dense with journalistic investigations of a litany of types of "coercion" corporations inflict today on employees and the public, informed by a competent telling of the history behind it all (relying on scholars like Karl Polanyi, John Kenneth Galbraith, and David Harvey). Among other topics, Ahmari illuminates the many ways in which the sacred doctrine of "liberty of contract" between employer and

⁵¹ Sohrab Ahmari, Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—And What to Do About It (New York: Forum Books, 2023), 195.

employee conceals chasmic disparities in power that can ruin people's lives. He illustrates the capture of the judiciary by the corporate sector. He exposes the predations of private equity, including its use of private emergency services (firefighting firms, ambulance companies) to fleece unsuspecting innocents of tens of thousands of dollars. He discusses the ongoing evisceration by Big Tech and Big Finance of the U.S.'s newspaper industry, which has seen almost a third of its newspapers shutter since 2005 (while many of the remainder are gutted by their new Wall Street owners). And so on. The most viable solution to all these tragedies, he argues, is to revive Galbraithian countervailing power. "Once more, it's up to the American worker to drag our politicians and corporate leaders into a new consensus."⁵²

Insofar as Ahmari remains a postliberal, his book shows the mutability of this ideology. Its proponents can choose any particular agenda to devote their energies to, whether reconstituting unions and social democracy, advocating a Catholic theocracy (like Adrian Vermeule), fighting against the rights of non-heteronormative people, seeking a much more restrictive immigration regime, denouncing so-called "liberal" interventionist foreign policy, or prohibiting the teaching of the history of racism in the U.S.'s public schools. Rhetorically at least, all of this can be defended in terms of shoring up the disintegrating social order and protecting "communal solidarity." In a sense, this mutability can be considered a strength, for it allows postliberalism to appeal to people of very different values and interests. But it is the strength of fascism, an ideology that likewise prided itself on being postliberal. Fascism was no less resourceful in appealing to different groups of people, including peasants, landowners, industrialists, the petty bourgeois, racists, traditionalists, even a small minority of workers, who were told their interests would be represented in the great community of the nation bound together by common traditions. In practice, of course, fascism, as a species

⁵² Ibid., 197.

of conservatism, ended up representing above all the interests of the ruling class, while crushing unions and working-class political parties.

The Proto-Fascism of Postliberalism

Tyranny, Inc. shows that leftists can find common cause with postliberals on some issues. To the extent that someone of the right really does care about the common good, or rather the good of the vast majority (to which the good of the ruling class tends to be inimical, since its power rests on the exploitation of others), a socialist might well be willing to work together with him. Such an alliance, necessarily limited and conditional, is often ridiculed as "red-brownism" by leftists, but it does happen in politics that people of different ideologies cooperate on a political campaign or policy that will conduce to the greater good. A politics that rests on maintaining one's purity is unlikely to get very far.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that postliberalism is very dangerous, potentially fascist. Insofar as it is *anti*-liberal—which left-leaning postliberals, such as Adrian Pabst, are not—this isn't a difficult case to make. "Within the West, Hungary has set the standard for a reasonable approach," Gladden Pappin believes. Vermeule deplores the expansiveness of liberal rights: "Yesterday the frontier was divorce, contraception, and abortion; then it became same-sex marriage; today it is transgenderism; tomorrow it may be polygamy, consensual adult incest, or who knows what." In *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (2022), Yoram Hazony argues that "cultivation of the national religion is an indispensable purpose of government." He goes so far as to affirm, quoting Irving Kristol, that "there is no inherent right to self-government if it means that such government is vicious, mean, squalid, and debased." But who is to make such a judgment? Why is your definition of what is right and good necessarily better than someone else's? Are you infallible? What gives a reactionary

⁵³ Adrian Vermeule, "A Christian Strategy," First Things, November 2017.

religious nationalist like Hazony the right to impose his vision of the good life on an entire society?

Apart from the noxious political commitments of most postliberals, there is an even deeper problem: in conditions in the United States today, to ground one's politics in attacking liberalism is to undermine *postliberals' own professed values* of "national resilience," "common purposes," and the "social covenant" (to quote Adrian Pabst's *Postliberal Politics*). This is because the chief beneficiaries are the forces most aggressively sabotaging these values, the Republican Party and reactionaries in the business community.

To put it bluntly, postliberals' embrace of politicians like J. D. Vance, Josh Hawley, even (in some cases) Donald Trump, and their hope for an authentically populist, working-class Republican Party, is incredibly naïve. Nor is it new. At least since (in fact, before) Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, Republican politicians have been clothing themselves in populist garb, stoking culture wars and denouncing liberal elites in order to cleave the "working-class" vote from Democrats. As Nixon's vice president, Spiro Agnew traveled the country attacking "permissivists," "elitists," "radical liberals," "thieves, traitors, and perverts." Reagan liked to invoke the "postliberal" themes of family and community: "When they [Democrats] talk about family, they mean Big Brother in Washington. When we talk about family, we mean 'honor thy father and mother."54 These themes, of course, have been a mainstay of Republican rhetoric for generations. "I am here to say to America," Bob Dole pontificated at the 1996 Republican convention, "do not abandon the great traditions that stretch to the dawn of our history. Do not topple the pillars of those beliefs—God, family, honor, duty, country—that have brought us through time and time again."55 George W. Bush preached the virtues of compassionate conservatism, which proved to be just as

⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Columbus Day dinner in West Orange, New Jersey," October 12, 1988.

⁵⁵ Bob Dole, "Remarks by Senator Bob Dole—Dole Accepts Nomination," August 15, 1996.

oxymoronic as common-good conservatism will doubtless be. Today, the enemies du jour are critical race theory, transgenderism, and wokeness, but the underlying strategy is always the same.

And what does that strategy eventuate in? Tax cuts for the rich, gutting of regulations to protect the environment, and a war on workers and the poor. According to the Economic Policy Institute, Trump's NLRB waged an "unprecedented" attack on workers' rights. His administration weakened or eliminated over 125 policies that protected the country's air, water, and land.⁵⁶ His budgets savagely slashed benefits for low-income Americans, continuing a longstanding Republican practice.⁵⁷ The great "populist" senators Hawley and Vance give, at best, tokenistic and rhetorical support to the working class: neither has even cosponsored the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, and Hawley, according to the AFL-CIO, has almost always voted against the interests of workers. Vance, a venture capitalist, finds it much more congenial to spout racist "great replacement" nonsense and blame those with a low income for their own failures than to actually do anything to help the latter. Meanwhile, the Republican Party remains rock-solidly opposed to even the mildest proposals to address global warming, which threatens not only working people but all life on earth. If this sabotage of life itself is what the postliberal common good looks like, one might even prefer the classical fascists.

Analytically, a key error that helps make possible postliberal political naïveté (assuming the likes of Patrick Deneen and Yoram Hazony are acting in good faith) is to associate together, in one overarching nefarious tradition, classical liberals, modern economic conservatives, New Deal liberals, contemporary centrist liberals, woke identitarians, and "liberal" imperialists from Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson to Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. In a sense, even Marxism is included

Juliet Eilperin et al., "Trump rolled back more than 125 environmental safeguards," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2020.

⁵⁷ Nathalie Baptiste, "Trump's Budget is a \$292 Billion Attack on Poor Americans," *Mother Jones*, February 10, 2020.

in this tradition, inasmuch as it shares the orientation towards *progress* of all these groups, their detachment from and denial of the virtues of tradition. (As if the left doesn't want to *preserve healthy traditions* and *abandon unhealthy ones*.) This is a hopelessly confused classification, wholly superficial because of its idealistic focus on the supposed shared commitment to vague concepts of progress and freedom. In order to understand political history, you have to consider the material interests that these different groups and ideologies serve.

For example, economic conservatives like Milton Friedman or Paul Ryan are liberal or libertarian in name only. Their talk of free markets is a fig leaf for outright authoritarianism in the form of slavish support for corporate tyrannies (as Ahmari describes), which would have horrified classical liberals like Adam Smith. Most conservatives don't care about a mythical free market anyway, as shown by their enthusiasm for exorbitant government spending on the defense industry and for munificent tax breaks and subsidies for corporations. Capitalism could not survive without these sorts of government interventions, nor can markets operate without some firms soon exerting "illiberal" market power; so it is idle for postliberals to talk about a nonexistent economic liberalism.

New Deal liberals were and are totally different from self-styled economic liberals, serving a *popular* constituency—so it is odd that Deneen attacks them, too. After all, they often acted—as progressives still act—in approximately the same way as his ideal aristocracy would, "work[ing] to improve the lives, prospects, and fate of the people." If one cares about the common good, why denounce social democracy, which more than any other capitalist formation protected families and communities? But because the progressive state was irreligious, non-traditional, and supposedly inspired by elite fear and loathing of the people (?), it was and is bad. (Deneen also opines that redistribution of wealth to workers has "led to extensive damage to the broader economic order," citing no evidence.) His preferred reforms include increasing the size of the House of Representatives to 6,000 members; requiring that every

CHRIS WRIGHT

American serve one year in the military; "substantially reducing" university education and investing in more vocational education; breaking up monopolistic companies; investing more public funds in infrastructure and manufacturing; penalizing companies that employ undocumented immigrants; banning pornography and passing laws that promote "public morality"; and enacting policies that reward marriage and family formation, such as Hungary has instituted under Orbán. Predictably, he says nothing about labor unions, except, as a parenthesis, that strengthening them is "a worthy undertaking."

Leftists would be more sympathetic to postliberals' contempt for the conventional centrist liberalism of the Democratic Party today, albeit not necessarily for the same reasons. Indeed, many are similarly disdainful of the performative, business-friendly identity politics that has become a dominant ethos in the "professional-managerial class" that postliberals despise. But to call this "class" the real power elite, the real oppressors—as Deneen and others do—is both laughable and proto-fascist. This thesis is a core premise of right-wing postliberalism, for, if you can find a villain that is not the capitalist class, you don't have to locate yourself uncomfortably close to the left. The PMC will do the job nicely, since it is a diffuse category of people, many of whom have an elite status, that pervades and partially runs society's hegemonic institutions. Its members tend to be culturally different from the masses of Americans without a college degree, so it's easy to stir up resentment against them, which can be used to elect reactionaries who will do the bidding of the *real* ruling class (while blaming woke liberal professionals for the suffering that results).

Deneen's treatment of the "managerial elite" is influenced by a favorite text of postliberals, Michael Lind's *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite* (2020), which itself is influenced by James Burnham's famous book *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). Burnham posited that ownership and control were separated in modern corporations, and that, as a result, a new managerial class was replacing

capitalists as the ruling class. This was a flawed analysis: for one thing, despite the transformations of the economy that had indeed occurred in preceding decades, corporations were still subject to the logic of capital, which required that they squeeze profits out of the exploited labor of workers. Capitalism was not ending. But whatever plausibility the thesis may have once had was long gone by the time of the 1980s' shareholder revolution, which Deneen and Lind seem not to have heard of. The stubborn fact is that some people still make their money from ownership and investments, while others make money by selling their labor-power. These two groups tend to have antagonistic interests, an antagonism rooted not in the vague cultural differences between the "meritocracy" and "the people" that Deneen describes—such as (he says) the former's mobility, its "disconnection from a shared cultural inheritance," and its identity politics—but rather in objective structures of how money is made and how power is distributed in the workplace and the economy.

It is true that most professionals occupy an ambiguous place between capitalists and the larger working class. Barbara and John Ehrenreich theorized this ambiguity in their landmark 1977 essay "The Professional-Managerial Class," and Marxists since then have devoted a great deal of effort to making sense of this huge group of people, some of whom have more interests in common with the traditional working class and others with corporate executives and owners. Since its emergence in the early twentieth century to help manage "the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations," the PMC has, most of the time, not shown much solidarity with the blue-collar working class. In fact, in their 2013 essay "Death of a Yuppie Dream," the Ehrenreichs argue it "has played a major role in the oppression and disempowerment of the old working class." Professionals (usually more or less politically centrist, or "liberal" in today's jargon) are easy to dislike, since they often

Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Radical America*, vol. 11, no. 2 (March-April 1977): 15.

Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream: The Rise and Fall of the Professional-Managerial Class," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, February 2013, 11.

exhibit the vices of high-status groups everywhere: they are prone to being smug, elitist, hypocritical, conformist despite their pretensions to independent thought, complicit in the neoliberal evisceration of society, etc. Leftists are, perhaps, almost as fond of ridiculing them as conservatives; see Catherine Liu's *Virtue Hoarders: The Case against the Professional Managerial Class* (2021) and Amber A'Lee Frost's "The Characterless Opportunism of the Managerial Class" for examples.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, if you want a more communal, just, and sustainable social order, you have to think about strategy. No class exemplifies virtue. The question is whether your agenda will be to dismantle corporate power, the real engine behind the atomization that postliberals decry, or to attack the relative peons of the PMC, who (as the Ehrenreichs note) are beginning to succumb to the disintegrating economic and political forces that have decimated the old working class. The second path is the road of fascism, the search for a scapegoat that only ends up empowering the most vicious elements of the ruling class. The first path, according to which professionals in precarious economic circumstances ought to be appealed to instead of vilified, is the road to genuine social change.

In other words, postliberals have to make a decision: do they want to concentrate on combating social liberalism—banning pornography, criminalizing gender-affirming health care for those who suffer from dysphoria, erecting draconian barriers to immigration, banning "liberal" books and school curricula that address America's real history—thereby empowering faux-populist Republicans who will cut social programs, attack unions, increase military spending, accelerate environmental destruction, give corporations and the wealthy even more power than they have, and devastate families and communities? Or do they want to concentrate on tackling the latter crises and forego a war on social liberalism? They cannot have it both ways, because only the left will ever honestly confront the material catastrophes that are savaging

⁶⁰ Amber A'Lee Frost, "The Characterless Opportunism of the Managerial Class," *American Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2019).

working-class communities. The left itself would do well to start prioritizing class solidarity rather than identity politics, but at least it is trying to do far more for the working class than the right is (since the right, after all, exists to serve business). Even Biden's 2021 Build Back Better bill, which could not pass because of Republican opposition, would have enormously benefited working families through its investments in child-care and preschool, paid family and medical leave, community college, child tax credits, physical infrastructure, affordable housing, health care, and environmental protection.

Thus, because of its alleged interest in the public good but its conservative (Republican) orientation, postliberalism is ultimately incoherent. It is not a new ideology, being in many ways a return of paleoconservatism, of the anti-modernism of Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan, even of the—admittedly more extreme—alt-right of several years ago, which shared some of the reactionary cultural grievances of postliberals. Deneen & Company try to make their ideas more respectable by invoking Aristotle, Aquinas, Tocqueville, Pope Leo XIII, and other exalted names, but this is a transparent exercise in idealistic mystification. The proto-fascism is right below the surface.

There is a particle of hope, however. If more postliberals choose the left-wing path of *Tyranny, Inc.* than the far-right path of *Regime Change*, they might manage to make a positive contribution to American politics. But this will require shedding their illusions about the likes of J. D. Vance, Marco Rubio, and Josh Hawley, and instead following the example of, say, Bernie Sanders. That's where a humane, working-class politics is to be found.

HOW TO REBUILD THE LEFT (2023)

One might as well state the matter clearly: given the realities of global warming, rampant environmental destruction, escalating imperialistic clashes, and a crisis-prone global economy, there is no hope for the world unless an international left can be resurrected. A left at least as powerful as the one that created social democracy in the wake of World War II. As complex in their origins as the world's ills are, they can be expressed and explained in a single sentence: internationally, there is a political right, a proto-fascist far-right, and a stagnant though tenacious center, but, in effect, no left. That is, there is no real force that represents the interests of the exploited and immiserated majority. No wonder things are so bad. The burning question is: how to build such a left?

How *not* to build it is clear: devote overwhelming attention to issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, a major reason the left is so weak today is that for decades it—or something that has claimed the

mantle of the left, in academia, the media, and politics—has focused disproportionately on such issues, neglecting grievances that unite people across boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. The ineffectual nature of such a "left" should be obvious from one consideration alone: "universal" issues—which affect working people whatever their identity—of wages, workplace conditions, income and wealth distribution, scarce housing, unemployment, public health, student and consumer debt, ecological destruction, the shrinking and starving of public goods, murderous imperialism, and the very survivability of human civilization are scarcely touched by discourses and activism around racial and gender disparities. ("We want to have it as good as white cisgendered men!" Okay, meanwhile you'll still be dealing with all the crises I just listed.) If you want to build a new world, you don't go about it by ignoring working-class grievances as such, attending only to matters that affect, say, women, gays, and black people; you target the very structures of capitalism, the class-defined exploitative institutions that have oppressed billions (of white men too, even heterosexual ones, believe it or not!) for centuries.

It has been fashionable among liberals and "leftists" for years to ridicule this so-called "class reductionism," but thankfully resistance is finally building to reactionary postmodern notions of the priority of racial and gender oppression over class. Adolph and Touré Reed are well known for exposing the follies of what they call "race reductionism"—for example, the gloomy and ahistorical academic school of Afro-pessimism—and their colleague Cedric Johnson has published a book called *The Panthers Can't Save Us Now: Debating Left Politics and Black Lives Matter* that eviscerates the current faddish nostalgia for Black Power.⁶¹

Examples could be multiplied, but Musa al-Gharbi has already performed this service in a recent *Compact* article entitled "Woke-ism Is Winding Down." If it is true that wokeness has passed its peak and is

⁶¹ For a review of this book, see Chris Wright, "Only Class Struggle Can Save the Left," *Sublation*, November 4, 2022.

on the decline, this is likely not something to be uncritically celebrated. Nevertheless, it may open the space for a more serious left politics that tackles agendas such as rolling back American imperialism and rebuilding social democracy. Or even, perhaps, advancing the distant goal of economic democracy. Somehow, this traditional lodestar of the left has been almost totally forgotten and abandoned.

Left academics have honed the art of "problematizing" political common sense, for example by inventing a concept called "racial capitalism" and using it to argue that "white supremacy" is a pillar of capitalism no less foundational than class exploitation itself—as if Shanghai or, say, Lagos, Nigeria, not being ruled by whites, are not capitalist cities—but people with a modicum of analytical intelligence will see through these woke gambits. The fact that the *New York Times*, quintessential outlet of liberal business, has been happy to propagate the narrative of "racial capitalism" already refutes the radical credentials of that concept. Liberals understand it's better to talk about *racial* capitalism than simply *capitalism—racial* exploitation than *class* exploitation—*reparations* (at the expense of white workers) than *socialism*. The reparations discourse is a brilliant way to destroy working-class solidarity.

With a kernel of political rationality, one can see that it is necessary to reach out to white workers, not alienate them or ignore them. Leftists could learn a thing or two from, of all people, Ralph Waldo Emerson, of whom a woman who frequently heard his lectures said, "Whatever else it might be that I cannot understand, he tells me this one thing, that I am not a God-forsaken sinner. He has made me feel that I am worth something in the sight of God, and not a despised creature." The contemporary "left," from feminists to anti-racists, essentially tells white men (and the women who identify with them) that they are despised creatures worth nothing in the sight of God. It shouldn't be a surprise

⁶² Quoted in D. Witherspoon Dodge, Southern Rebel in Reverse: The Autobiography of an Idol-Shaker (New York: The American Press, 1961).

when people take this message to heart and turn to a Republican Party that cares not a whit about their well-being but at least *tells* them it does.

It is common sense that empathy, rather than demonization, is necessary for organizing a movement. If, like most liberals and leftists, one does not live among the mythologized and despised "white working class," one can at least read about their experiences, thus undermining one's own prejudices and finding common ground on which to educate and organize. Take a book like Arlie Hochschild's Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right, published in 2016. She makes it clear that, however misguided are supporters of Donald Trump's Republican Party, the large majority are not neo-Nazis, virulent racists, or wealthy cynics eager to crush the working class. "Blue-collar" white men across the South, and the communities they represent, are "victims" no less than the victimized groups celebrated by liberals. Neoliberal capitalism has left them behind, as they suffer from stagnating or declining wages, environmental pollution and destruction, decaying infrastructure, decaying communities, and poor public health outcomes. Meanwhile, they are conscious of their low status: "we're seen as backward and poor." Hochschild's exercise in empathy, as in the following passage, is sadly lacking among most liberals and leftists today:

You [an average white man in the South] are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored...

You turn to your workplace for respect—but wages are flat and jobs insecure. So you look to other sources of honor. You get no extra points for your race. You look to gender, but if you're a man, you get no extra points for that either. If you are straight you are proud to be a married, heterosexual male, but that pride is now seen as a potential sign of homophobia—a source of dishonor. Regional honor? Not that either. You are often disparaged for the place you call home. As for

the church, many look down on it, and the proportion of Americans outside any denomination has risen... People like you—white, Christian, working and middle class—suffer this sense of fading honor demographically too, as this very group has declined in numbers.⁶³

To begin to wrest power from a depraved Republican and Democratic elite, a corporate sector that cares about literally nothing but profits, it is necessary to appeal to "white America" no less than "black America" (to use race-reductionist metaphors suggested by identity politics). As always, you start by emphasizing what you have in common with people, for instance that you care deeply, as they do, about community, family, economic security, a healthy natural environment, and that you resent no less than they do impersonal government bureaucracies that tax your hardearned money to wage wars abroad and in fact—here is an opportunity for education—redistribute income upwards, to wealthy investors and big business. You don't talk about how racist whites are-after all, everyone is a little racist (including against whites), a little sexist (against men too: "Men are arrogant and misogynistic!"), and has numerous prejudices and unappealing traits—but instead you argue that people of all races are being exploited and victimized, and that ostensibly "lazy" black people work just as hard as whites to get ahead but are just as burdened by taxes and bills and debt. It does not require much imagination to find common ground with struggling whites. Over time, using the "class reductionist" strategy of Bernie Sanders, you educate people and build a movement that promises to transform society much more radically than little identitarian programs of reducing disparities will.

None of this requires that you sacrifice the interests of minorities. It is rather the only way to fully realize those interests, given both the necessity of a broad popular movement and the (in most respects) shared interests of minorities and working-class white men. Through common

Arlie Hochschild, Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right (New York: The New Press, 2016), 144.

CHRIS WRIGHT

struggle, not through woke demonization, you'll succeed in reducing the incidence of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other such vices.

In short, it is urgent for leftists—many of whom, despite themselves, are little more than left-liberals—to shed their race obsessions and gender obsessions and remember the Marxian lesson that class solidarity, albeit incorporating identitarian goals, is the *sine qua non* of a revolutionary movement. Hardly anything is more important today than organizing to make class struggle the defining issue of, for example, the left wing of the Democratic Party.

Two generations of failed leadership and failed ideas have got us to the point where there is barely a Left to speak of. It's time to start anew.

Nearly fifty years of outright class war against America's working and middle classes have brought the country to the brink of social and political collapse. According to some sources, 60 percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck. Since 1975, \$80 trillion has been transferred from the bottom 90 percent of earners to the top 1 percent. Meanwhile, little action is being taken to mitigate global warming and ecological destruction, while military budgets, used in part to wage disastrous wars and genocides, climb annually.

There isn't much hope for the United States, or indeed for civilization, unless we can forge an international left that prioritizes class struggle above all else. It is time to fight back, by any means necessary, against a ruling class interested in nothing but profits and power. In this book, a historian of the U.S. labor movement attempts to advance this agenda through a series of essays on everything from right-wing libertarianism to the inadequacies of identity politics, from the career of Jimmy Hoffa to the catastrophic consequences of American imperialism. Victory in a war for the future of humanity is far from assured, but we're lucky enough to be living in a time when there's still some hope. It is our duty to act on this hope.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chris Wright is a lecturer at Hunter College, where he teaches courses in U.S. history. He is the author of Popular Radicalism and the Unemployed in Chicago during the Great Depression and Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States. He has published in Dissent, the Washington Post, Truthout, Socialist Forum, and other venues.



