

AGAINST THE CURRENT

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



Confronting the Deadly Feedback Loop of Climate Apocalypse & Authoritarian Rule

♦ ADAM DYLAN HEFTY

Nicaragua, 1979-2019

♦ ERIC TOUSSAINT & NATHAN LEGRAND

♦ DIANNE FEELEY

Fidel Castro's Legacy

♦ SAMUEL FARBER

Indonesia Today

♦ ALEX DE JONG



A Letter from the Editors: How Many More Wars?

SOMEWHERE IN THE depths of his prodigious ignorance, it evidently dawned on Donald Trump that his national security advisor and the Secretary of State are pushing the United States toward war with Iran. That's exactly the kind of ruinous conflict that Trump said he'd avoid when he became President — but on an even larger scale than his predecessors' disastrous adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Confusion rules. One day's headlines indicate that war somewhere is imminent, the next day's that tensions are easing, depending on the reading of the latest tweets. With the chaotic swirl of messages coming from this administration — on Iran, on North Korea, on Venezuela, on trade with China, Japan and Europe, and so much more — the actual odds of threats turning into reality are frankly imponderable. *Certainly, the U.S. population does not want war anywhere.* But what are the forces that can resist and block a road to catastrophe?

After the departure of Trump's initial foreign policy team and many of their replacements, strategic power positions fell to the likes of John Bolton, a discredited neoconservative architect of those earlier debacles, who can see one last desperate chance for his long-dreamed ambitions of "transforming the Middle East" through U.S. military and political muscle.

A look at the multiple fronts on which U.S. imperialism is operating — in particular the Middle East, Latin America and the growing confrontation with China — shows widely differing scales of strategic importance, but with some common elements.

One of the most important and too little appreciated facts is *the brutal use of economic sanctions* against less powerful countries designated as enemy regimes. While a handful of Democratic politicians have spoken in opposition to U.S. invasion, hardly any have called attention to the murderous effects of sanctions — which as we know from the example of Iraq are not a substitute for war, but preparation for it.

Latin America: Imperial Sadism

The sanctions against two disobedient Latin American states, Venezuela and Cuba — two-thirds of Bolton's absurdist "troika of tyranny," along with Nicaragua — are basically acts of imperial sadistic cruelty. A leading international economist, Jeffrey Sachs, has estimated that U.S. economic sanctions against Venezuela have caused 40,000 excess deaths. This comes on top of the miseries caused by the implosion of the "Bolivarian revolution" under the weight of collapsing oil prices, bureaucratic mismanagement and corruption.

Trump's reimposed sanctions on Cuba have also seriously exacerbated the hardships of life there. The squalid domestic political calculation behind torturing Venezuela and Cuba is to strengthen the rightwing exile support for the Republicans in Florida, whose thin majority is threatened by the influx of Puerto Ricans fleeing the island's climate change driven hurricane calamities.

Tactically, strangling Venezuela was to induce an anti-Maduro military coup and possibly civil war. As it turned out, the coup spectacularly failed either to fracture the officer command or to bring civilian masses into the streets. Washington's threats of military intervention may have been

JULY, 2019 MARKS a bittersweet 40th anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, the overthrow of the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship. This year is also the 60th anniversary of the Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro's guerilla forces. In this issue of *Against the Current* we present retrospectives on the fate of the Nicaraguan revolution by Eric Toussaint and Dianne Feeley, and on the legacy of Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba by Samuel Farber. We also present Catherine Sameh's review of an important book on the thought and legacy of Iranian activist and intellectual Ali Shariati, whose rediscovery is part of the fervent struggle against both imperial-colonial domination and the brutal social and political repression in the "Islamic Republic."

mainly bluster, but one never knows.

Strategically, Washington's goal is to align Venezuela and every major South American country with the new far-right bloc headed by Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil and the reactionary regimes in Ecuador and Colombia along with Argentina. Getting Venezuela's huge oil reserves into the clutches of U.S. corporations would also be a huge prize.

Still, nothing about this is *necessary* for imperialism. Venezuela *today* is no "revolutionary threat" to the United States. The populist inspirational example that Hugo Chavez represented has long since dissipated. Cuba is no threat either, let alone Nicaragua in its present immiserated condition.

The threat actually arises from the danger of U.S.-instigated civil war in Venezuela. That nightmare could not

only bring a new refugee migration, but possibly spill into Colombia and reignite the long civil war there. While Washington's cynical disregard of millions of Latin American lives knows no limits, other countries (Mexico and Uruguay) in defiance of U.S. orders are working for a negotiated Venezuelan political solution, which is probably the least bad outcome in the desperate circumstances.

Middle East: The Next Catastrophe?

Much more than the headline-grabbing military movements — after all, 1500 more U.S. troops to the Middle East is hardly a game-changer — it's the U.S. campaign to strangle Iran's economy and oil industry that threatens to touch off the next Middle East conflagration.

The second prong of Trump's policy, Jared Kushner's pending "deal of the century," aims at the final liquidation of the Palestinian people's struggle for self-determination.

"Reducing Iran's oil exports to zero," the policy proclaimed by Secretary of State Pompeo, is intended to provoke a response from the Iranian regime that would provide the pretext for a U.S. attack. Threatening reprisals against any country's businesses or banks doing business with Iran is also an attempt by the U.S. administration to show that it truly rules the planet.

To the extent that one can interpret Trump's befogged brain through the twitstorms, he doesn't appear to want an actual U.S. war with Iran. On the record, however,

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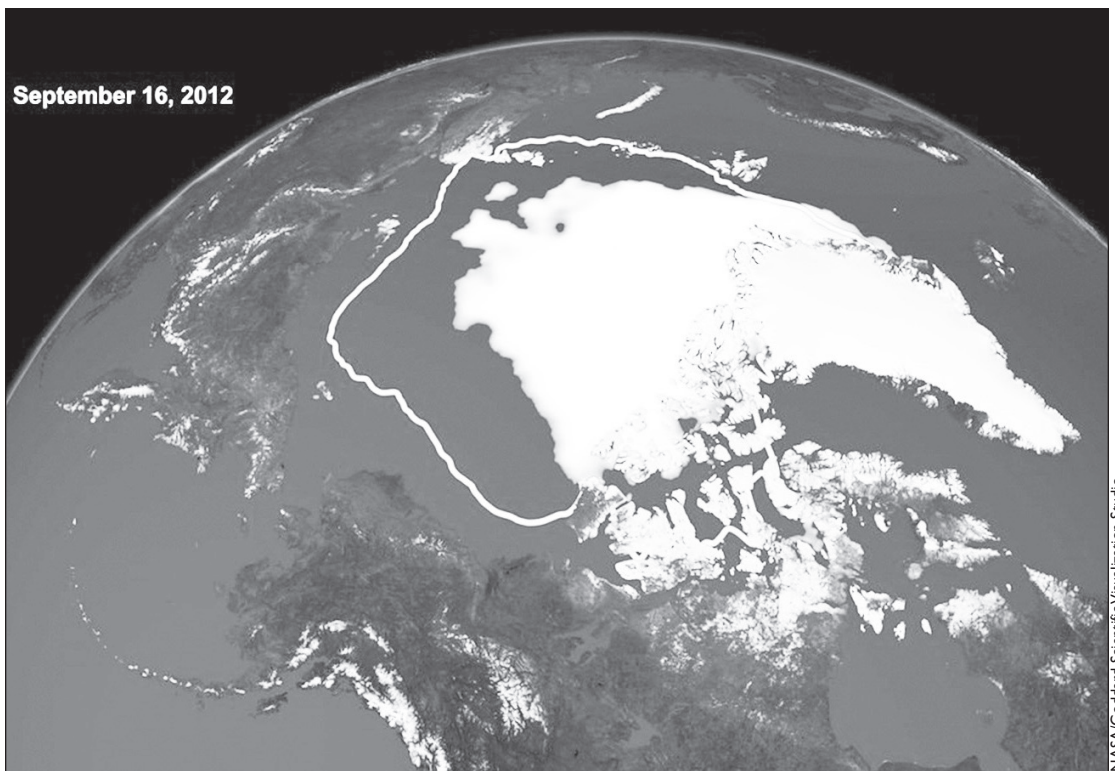
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September 16, 2012



NASA/Goddard Scientific Visualization Studio

Since 1979 ice has diminished in the Arctic area, as the white line graphically illustrated the retreat in 2012.

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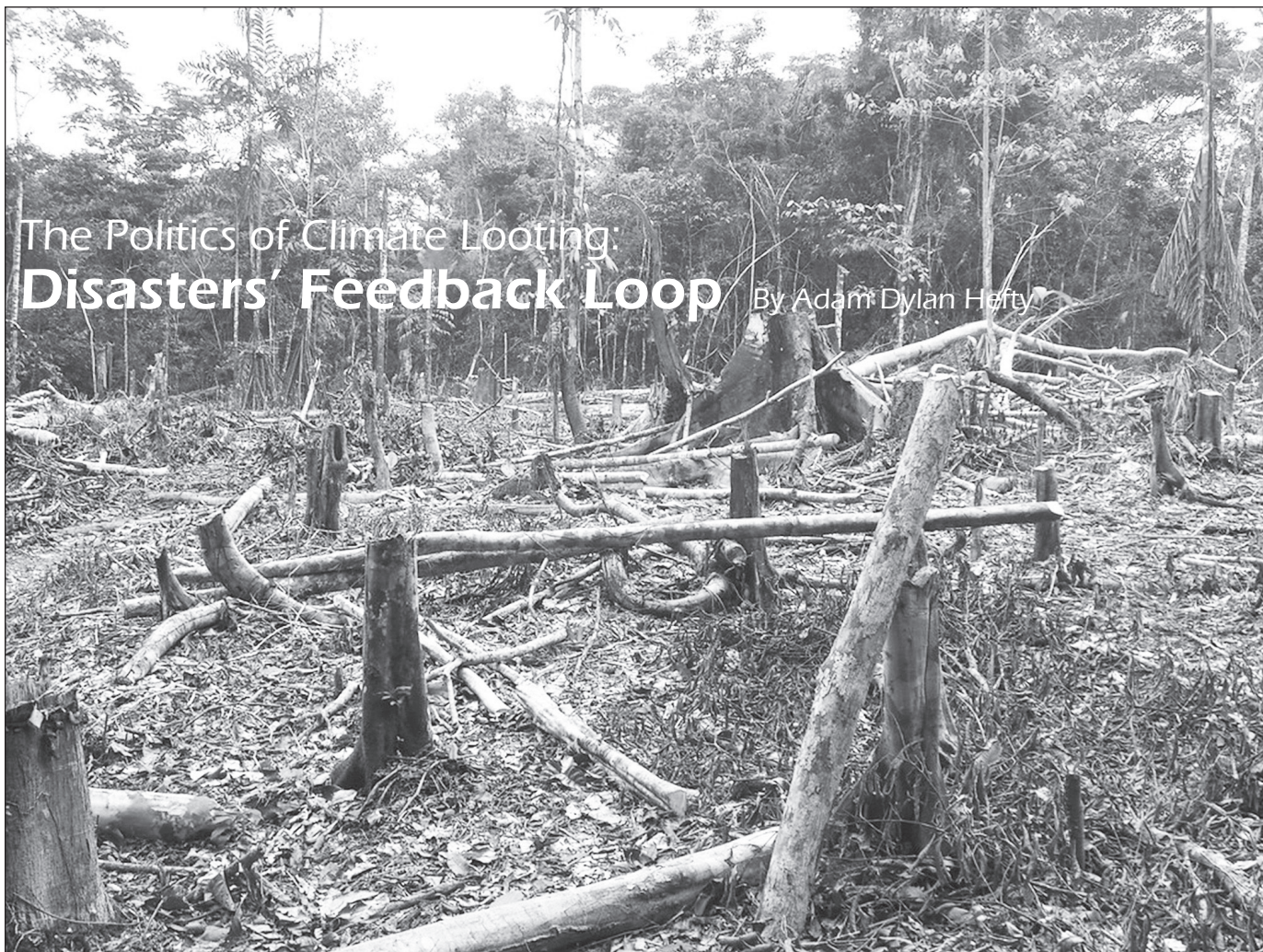
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Cover: Detroit's zip code, 48217, home of Marathon Oil, two steel mills and more than a dozen other industries, has the highest air pollution in the country. Children suffer particularly high rates of asthma. Jim West / www.jimwestphoto.com

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The Politics of Climate Looting: Disasters' Feedback Loop

By Adam Dylan Hefty

Bolsonaro's vision of development: Slash and burn agriculture in the Amazon (2007).

Matt Zimmerman

ON OCTOBER 8, 2018 twin disasters were announced on opposite sides of the world:

- In Brazil, as votes were counted from the first round of presidential elections, Jair Bolsonaro won 46% of the vote — enough to make it clear he would probably cruise to a second-round victory three weeks later.

- In Incheon, South Korea, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) revealed the findings of its special report: limiting global warming to 1.5° C “would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” within the current generation.¹

It was a banner moment for pessimism of the intellect; the years we will need to struggle against right-wing nationalism, defeat its reactionary climate policies, and adopt a sane approach are years we don't have. These two disasters create a feedback loop with each other over time, each making the other more impossible to solve.²

Adam Dylan Hefty is an editor of ATC. He was active in student and labor movements in California for several years and is currently working as a humanities professor in the Middle East.

As climate change fuels real and imagined social emergencies, in the absence of a mass-based politics of solidarity, fear-based calls to secure resources for one community against the needs of others resonate with many people. Of course, centrist half measures such as the Paris accords were never grounds for much hope — even if the politics of the world that created them hadn't been thrown off course by the rise of right-wing nationalism.

Bolsonaro has directly targeted the Amazon rainforest and indigenous communities who live there. Shortly after taking office, he signed an executive order transferring the regulation of indigenous reserves to the agriculture ministry, which is controlled by agribusiness interests, though this move later suffered a setback in Congress. Encouraged by his election, illegal logging and land-grabs by gangs of thugs have risen, particularly in districts that voted for him, along with attacks on indigenous communities.

Members of Bolsonaro's government have moved to open farming and mining rights to non-indigenous people, arguing that

this will allow indigenous people to reap an economic benefit from their land. One top adviser, General Augusto Heleno Pereira, rejected the idea that the Amazon is a World Heritage site, calling for development and arguing that it “should be dealt with by Brazil for the benefit of Brazil.”³

It would be difficult to find a clearer example of what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” where public and natural resources are expropriated, using extra-economic and sometimes extra-legal means, in order to facilitate further exploitation.⁴

Harvey argues that legal, regularized exploitation of workers' labor is only one of the dynamics of how capital is accumulated, and that the ongoing processes of capitalism also rely on what Marx considered “primitive accumulation,” accumulation of capital through such means as privatization of public goods, military and paramilitary appropriation, and theft.

Harvey uses this concept primarily to analyze dynamics of neoliberal policy such as privatization and financialization, but it seems equally applicable to the legal and

extralegal seizures of natural resources by various private interests (usually with strong connections to elements within national governments) in the face of climate crisis.

Resource Pillage Meets Climate Denial

Around the world, Bolsonaro's explicit agenda to pillage the world's natural resources, and ensure the survival and wealth of "us" vs. "them" in relation to climate change, is not an outlier but a salvo as the nationalist, far right's approach to climate change transforms along with the planet.

Traditionally, climate change activists demanded that the world wake up to the reality of climate change, while climate change denialists stuck their heads in the sand. Big oil companies and industrial polluters that used to drag their heels or promote climate change denialism today have embraced the language of mitigating environmental harm and pricing it under capitalism, while denialism has become the refuge of open revanchists like Donald Trump.

Even for them, however, denialism has become a message for a niche audience — red meat to fire up the base, while behind their backs they direct a pillaging form of accumulation. For many leading social groups that are leaning in the direction of neo-fascism or right-wing nationalism, facing the reality of climate change is less about stopping it and more about jockeying for political and economic power, safeguarding control of resources and seizing more.

The imperative of "economic development" and establishing control of resources as a way of arguing about climate is coming more into the open as human-triggered climate change has accelerated.

For example, just a few weeks before the IPCC report was released, the Trump administration's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration released a report based on a scenario that global temperatures would rise a staggering 4° C (more than seven degrees Fahrenheit) by 2100.⁵ The rationale here was supporting Trump's decision to freeze federal fuel efficiency standards.

The NHTSA realized that limiting the damage of climate change to 1.5° C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society — and concluded, well, since obviously that's not going to happen, we might as well go ahead and keep burning fossil fuels, as the overall portion of that rise caused by relatively lax U.S. fuel efficiency standards would be small.

Similarly in May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suggested that melting sea ice in the Arctic represented not a crisis but an opportunity for trade between Asia and the West, provided that Western countries act assertively with respect to competing territorial claims with rivals such as Russia and

China.⁶

Vying for a prize for the agency determined to push this to the farthest extreme, the Department of Energy has started referring to fossil fuels as "molecules of U.S. freedom to be exported to the world."⁷

Conflicting Reactionary Extremisms

Far-right responses to the reality of climate change vary, of course, between nationalist heads of state and online extremists of various stripes. On the genocidal fringes of the far alt-right, eco-fascism is an emergent trend. It burst into the real world with the Christchurch shootings in March 2019. The shooter's manifesto identified himself as an "ethno-nationalist, eco-fascist."

While environmental radicals and even eco-terrorists have most often been motivated by ideologies that derive from the left, eco-fascism imports ideas from deep ecology into a white nationalist value system.

Eco-fascists have developed an anti-immigrant form of "lifeboat ethics" which holds that races of people should stay in their traditional homelands, that society should adopt a vegan, preindustrial way of life, and that in the face of environmental collapse, some people should be allowed to die.

"What to do," asks Finnish deep ecologist Pentti Linkola, a favorite theorist of eco-fascists, "when a ship carrying a hundred passengers suddenly capsizes and there is only one lifeboat? When the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try to load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides."⁸

It isn't hard to point out obvious inconsistencies in this argument, for example when white nationalists claim some kind of natural dominion over colonized lands such as Australia or New Zealand. The point here is taking these ideas seriously not as a value system that must be answered, but rather as an ideological symptom.

While even the farthest right of parliamentary parties would reject mass shootings, the prevalence of increasingly virulent forms of anti-immigrant rhetoric within mainstream political discourse across Europe, North America and Australia have allowed fetid corners of the internet to gather confidence and take action in the world. They have taken inspiration both from less overtly political mass shooters in the United States and from media-savvy, ultra-violent terrorists such as ISIS. Eco-fascism and "lite" forms of an ecologically aware, white nationalist right may solidify their niche in far right subcultures.⁹

Social Stress Multiplier

Effects of climate change have already contributed to the social stressors that have driven large numbers of migrants and refu-

gees from their homes. A drought in Syria from 2007-2010 exacerbated rural poverty and migration to urban centers, contributing to the factors that drove the 2011 uprising, and eventually, of course with a host of other factors, civil war and a refugee crisis.¹⁰

Droughts in Central America have made life harder in an already impoverished region. Bangladesh is expected to be hit hard by climate change, suffering from severe flooding, and the area of Cox's Bazaar, where Rohingya refugees from Myanmar are living, may be especially vulnerable.

India expects changes to its monsoon season. Rising temperatures and water scarcity in Kashmir could contribute to India-Pakistan tensions.¹¹

North Africa is expected to get dryer and hotter. Crises in Darfur, Nigeria and Somalia have been exacerbated by drought and food shortages. An interdisciplinary group of scholars suggested in 2009 that climate change could contribute to a more than 50% rise in armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa.¹²

It would be a mistake to rest the blame for particular conflicts largely on climate change when a host of political and economic factors which are more easily within short- to medium-term human control are also critical. However, looking at the global picture, it is clear that, barring structural changes to society, we should expect more rather than fewer of these human crises in years to come.

Over both the short and the long term, a feedback loop starts to emerge between the politics of immigration and refugee crises on the one hand, and the crisis of the rise of far-right nationalist and neo-fascist politics on the other.

For example, Donald Trump's border crisis was, during his campaign and the first two years of his presidency, more rhetoric than reality. When Trump took office, apprehension of undocumented people crossing the border had declined for years, and there was a net outflow of immigrants returning to their home countries during and after the economic crisis of 2007-09.

In the 2010s, economic and political crises in Central America have worsened, fueled by U.S. foreign policy, drought, and political impasses. In a short-term example of the feedback loop, Trump turned his attention from the travel ban to the border, ratcheting up threats to build a wall and separating families.

Word started to spread in some Central American communities that if you were considering joining a caravan, now was the time — before Trump was successful in closing the border completely. All this has contributed to a dramatic spike in undocumented border crossings, though levels

are still well below pre-2008 levels.¹³

In much of Europe, the feedback loop between climate change, both the real presence and the specter of migrants and refugees, and far right politics is already quite open, although the form of this varies widely across the continent. Brexit was driven in part by xenophobia, although this was directed partly against Eastern Europeans coming for economic opportunities as well as European Union refugee policies.

Italy's Matteo Salvini has risen to prominence in Italy, eclipsing his more environmentally friendly coalition partners of the Five Star Movement, by emphasizing hard-line and often dramatic anti-migrant policies.

In France, the National Front has staked a claim to being the strongest single party, even if the political mainstream can still unite to deny it real governing power. The crisis that led to the Yellow Vests movement shows how technocratic plans to mitigate the harms of climate change by increasing the cost of living for working- and middle-class people may face protest and popular rejection.

In Denmark the nativist Danish People's Party faded in the polls as mainstream parties embraced xenophobia. The Social Democrats won a resounding victory in June, stealing the right's thunder by endorsing anti-migrant policies.¹⁴

In Greece, Golden Dawn activists regularly engage in physical attacks against migrants. Meanwhile, migrant support and solidarity work have become a key component of the work of the activist left as hopes of any kind of parliamentary or mass action solution to Greece's economic woes have faded.

Hungary's Victor Orbán has finally gotten a bit of international legitimacy with a visit to the Oval Office, and Poland's ruling Law and Justice party rails against immigration even though Poland has seen very few migrants or refugees.

Anti-federal government ranchers and rural business interests in the western United States and Australia associated with the "sovereign citizen" movement have been among the staunchest holdouts of climate change denialism. The underlying issue here mirrors Brazil: a battle over the use of public lands, whether they should be managed in the public interest or submitted to "Wise Use" by private interests.¹⁵



Trump and Bolsonaro at the White House.

The logic of freeing up public lands for drilling or grazing — in the face of competing demands to leave fossil fuels in the ground, fight climate change and drought, and respect indigenous sovereignty — reflects the same logic of accumulation by dispossession: establishing control of resources by any means necessary, up to and including the use of extralegal militias.

Climate Change Gentrification

The politics of expropriation and exploitation of land and natural resources and strict border regimes, in the face of climate change and the specter of migrants, fit as an archetype with the ascendant far right around the world. However, they do not always take this form; they can take the genteel, liberal form of "climate change gentrification" as well.

Real estate prices have doubled in Miami's Little Haiti as residents with sea-level homes sought to escape rising waters.¹⁶ Flagstaff, Arizona has seen an influx of people escaping rising temperatures in Phoenix.

As wildfires in California threaten to become a way of life in wealthy areas like Malibu, and insurance companies charge astronomical rates or refuse to subsidize rebuilding yet again, many residents will decide to relocate to "gem in the rough" neighborhoods farther from the forests, with the real estate industry eager to facilitate.

This raises the question of how liberalism and much of the left respond to the rise of right-wing nationalism, neo-fascism, and climate catastrophe. At its worst, there

can be a tendency to isolate ourselves in silos of partly rhetorical or cultural resistance without realizing that we have limited ourselves to an enclave.

The easy targets here are policies such as banning straws as a way to address climate change, but it goes much further. The notion of ethical consumption as "voting with your dollars" for "things you can control" can be related to the logic of the enclave if it stays as it is and does not open onto a systemic understanding.

Liberal cities in California like San Francisco and Santa Cruz have become gentrified to the point that they may lack an objective basis for the progressive politics they have long symbolized. If a border relies on agencies such as ICE and the border patrol, and secessionist land holdings rely on a militia, the enclave relies similarly on the police.

There becomes a tacit understanding: you can have your free speech, your rich cultural world, your ethnic and gender diversity, and your oppositional politics within the enclave, but policing is going to maintain a fundamental economic and racial order. Thus in some ways the liberal enclave can be objectively on the side of "fortress Europe" barring its doors to migrants or areas controlled by western U.S. secessionist militias.

The mainstream and organized radical left has mostly ignored these changes in rhetoric and practice by the far right and right-wing nationalist leaders. At times, it seems like we are still fighting a battle of ideas against yesterday's climate change denialism. Relatedly, outmoded ideas about how "climate change effects all of us" sometimes get repackaged as new ideas in the environmental movement.

For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, a historian who writes on subaltern studies and ecology, argues that even though the impact of climate change will be experienced differently by rich and poor, climate change transcends the class dimension of Marxism, because, "Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged."¹⁷

This may be true in the sense that the children of today's wealthy and middle-class people will inherit a world that is biologically impoverished compared to the world of their grandparents, but it misses the ideological aspect of the environmental crisis. It also did not see how fraught the "lifeboat" metaphor would become.

Even if lifeboats won't work well, in the end, fascist logic would dictate beating someone else over the head to ensure you have a lifeboat. This lifeboat logic extends to some proposed technological "fixes" for climate change which are less about making the world a better place and more about creating a post-human future in which a wealthy few can escape a doomed planet.

Some, hopefully many wealthy and middle-class people may essentially become class traitors and push for a better world for everyone, but the path of least resistance will be for them to embrace the looting of remaining environmental resources, using the borders of nation-states and enclaves, whether urban or rural, to keep out the rabble.

Climate crisis does not transcend the class element; it exacerbates it, stokes the neo-fascist element of it, and makes the alternatives of *ecosocialism* or *ecobarbarism* incredibly stark. The neo-fascist impulse is accelerationist with respect to climate change even as it promulgates fantasies of restoring control and making the nation-state great again.

Confronting the Death Wish

Rei Terada pointed out that dealing with the politics of looting and border violence "needs a language for how fascism engages people's death wishes that most politics doesn't have."¹⁸

One can catch a glimpse even in the most quotidian rhetoric. "Make America Great Again" is often traced to its Reagan-era origins, but one striking difference was Reagan's capacity to project an infectious optimism to his supporters.

If you were one of the others of Reagan's America, it was vomitous, but it was a story about America's role in the world and "free-market" capitalism that supporters could cheer without irony.

In contrast, Trump's "we'll win so much you get tired of winning" has an edge of the heroic "Lost Cause" rhetoric of irredentism. It's impossible to return to the "glory days" of 1950s USA, whether one takes this to be about Keynesianism and secure jobs or a "gentlemanly" form of white supremacy and respect for traditional gender hierarchies.

The consciousness of Trump supporters may be fully ignorant about some things, but it is not naive; it is in fact world-weary at least among the alt-right and the broader millennial and Generation X milieu from which the alt-right is drawn.

These Trump supporters don't think we can really go back. They want someone to fight for them (the perceived "we" of whiteness and traditional gender/family values); and they want someone to see their enemies suffer. It may be horrible to watch

the world burn, but they embrace what they find thrilling in the prospect.

To return to a rather tired phrase, engaging the battle of ecosocialism or ecobarbarism will require escaping the logic and the limits of the enclave. Fighting for an ecologically just future can no longer be seen as an alternative to immediate environmental justice struggles.

The view that climate change can provide a common cause for humanity needs to be understood as a form of idealism, which may be useful for galvanizing class traitors but will stand in the face of a scramble to accumulate control over land and resources. Environmental justice is the class-driven, racialized here-and-now of climate struggle.

Standing Rock was perhaps the inaugural political struggle of this era. The Lakota Sioux Tribe and environmentalists from all over the country converged in a political fight that symbolized the close of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump era.

Around the world, young people have gone on strike from classes to call for radical action to confront the climate crisis. Today's fights such as the Green New Deal must be seen not as a legislative package that would be sufficient to solve or mitigate the harms of climate change within a capitalist framework, but as a transitional demand in the old sense, linking the present impossibility of full climate and social justice with a program for much more fundamental changes which allow for the possibility of solidaristic life on a damaged planet. ■

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TWU Local 100

The 12-day 1966 transit strike resulted in the arrest of nine leaders including Michael Quill and ended with workers winning a 15% wage increase.

Reform in TWU 100—Thirty Years On By Steve Downs

TRANSPORT WORKERS UNION of America's (TWU) Local 100, representing most of New York City's subway and bus workers, has a proud history as a militant union that has won solid gains in wages and benefits for its members. Credit for this is often given to Michael Quill, the union's central leader from its founding in 1934 until his death in 1966.

Quill deserves a lot of credit, but he didn't act alone. Obviously, the members who supported Quill, his leadership team, and their successors were critical to shaping the union's history. Just as critical were some of the members and officers who challenged Quill and the officers who came after him. There was rarely a decade since its founding in 1934 that Local 100's leadership did not face an organized electoral and/or political opposition.¹

Some of the opposition came from the right, like the Catholic trade union groups that challenged the Communist Party-linked leaders in the 1940s and '50s. By the 1960s, though, opposition groups were more likely to be critical of the TWU leadership from the left. They pressed for a more militant stance toward management and demanded greater democracy within the union.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, the demand for greater democracy also reflected a push for more control of their union by African-American and Puerto Rican workers, who made up an increasing majority of the members in a local with

Steve Downs is a retired subway train operator and TWU 100 union officer. He ran for Local Recording-Secretary on the New Directions slate in 1988.

an overwhelmingly white leadership. The political challenges were often overlaid by generational ones.

Fighting Management, Reshaping the Union

Members' dissatisfaction with wages and working conditions helped push the leadership to strike in 1966. In 1979, three opposition groups won a slim majority on the Local's Executive Board. Their demands and votes on the Board drove the Local to strike in 1980. But no opposition group was successful in winning control of the Local until the New Directions (ND) slate won in 2000. Their victory set the stage for the strike in 2005.

New Directions emerged in the fall of 1988, when a young African-American train operator, Tim Schermerhorn, ran for president of TWU 100 against the white incumbent president of the union. Schermerhorn received 22% of the vote and won Rapid Transit Operations (RTO). This contest gave birth to the New Directions caucus, whose support grew from year to year and department to department until they won the Local presidency and other top offices in 2000.

A critical early base of support for ND was the small layer of people hired in the early 1980s who had been involved in the social movements of the 1970s — such as opposition to the war in Vietnam, struggles for Black Liberation or Puerto Rican independence, fights against municipal austerity. They supported the push for a more militant and democratic union kicked off by the even smaller number of activists, including

Schermerhorn, future Local 100 president Roger Toussaint, and this writer, who brought the politics and skills they had learned from the struggles of the 1970s, and their participation with radical political groups, into the TWU.

They provided a ready base for the organizing for a more militant and democratic union kicked off by the even smaller number of activists, including Schermerhorn, future Local 100 president Roger Toussaint, and this writer, who brought the politics and skills they had learned from the struggles of the 1970s, and their participation with radical political groups, into the TWU.

The 1988 contest gave birth to the New Directions caucus, whose support grew from year to year and department to department until they won the Local presidency and other top offices in 2000.²

Between 1988 and 2000, New Directions organized members to fight back against management's speed-up and productivity drives. ND mounted its own contract campaigns, challenging the union's officers to win better contracts. This resulted in the first-ever rejection of a contract in 1992.

They also ran candidates for union office. ND's share of union offices grew with each election.

ND's organizing resulted in:

- Improved working conditions
- Reductions in staff salaries and benefits to bring them more in line with those of the members
- The election of VPs solely by department rather than local-wide³
- By-laws amendments that require annual membership meetings (in 1999, ND

forced the Local to hold its first local-wide meeting in a generation)

- Establishment of a new norm: members receive a full copy (not just highlights) of a proposed collective bargaining agreement before they vote on it

In 2000, the New Directions slate won 60% of the vote (in a three-way race) and control of TWU 100. Roger Toussaint, ND's candidate, was elected president and Tim Schermerhorn was elected VP of RTO.

The new officers immediately set out to increase the union's presence on the job through training stewards and safety reps; they worked to raise the Local's political profile; and began preparing for a contract fight in 2002 against a hostile Republican governor. They were immediately confronted with a crisis of funding for medical insurance, and responded with mobilizations of thousands of members in the street and the threat to strike rather than accept any cuts.

They were immediately confronted with a crisis of funding for medical insurance, and responded with mobilizations of thousands of members in the street and the threat to strike rather than accept any cuts.

Through these actions, the union was able to keep management from making any cuts. The issue of funding for benefits was addressed and resolved during contract negotiations in 2002.

After New Directions

Unfortunately, New Directions did not survive its move from opposition to administration. Concerned about what they viewed as Toussaint's undermining of elected representatives and the right of members to be represented by those they elected, several former leaders of ND ran against Toussaint's slate in 2003 as part of a slate headed by the Local's Recording Secretary, Noel Acevedo. Toussaint was re-elected, but four of the seven VPs were elected from the challengers' slate.

In December 2005 president Toussaint, with an eye to the Local's upcoming election (fall 2006), led the Local on a three-day strike. Former ND allies of Toussaint opposed the resulting contract and were central to the campaign against it. The contract was narrowly rejected (11,234 "no" to 11,227 "yes"); it was later imposed via binding arbitration.

Although the New Directions caucus did not hold together after its victory in 2000, there is a direct line from Schermerhorn's run in 1988 to Toussaint's win in 2000 to the transit strike in 2005. That line continued through to the membership's rejection, in early 2006, of the contract that came out of that strike.

Strikes by public employees are illegal under New York State law. As a consequence, in 2006 each member lost a day's

pay for each day they were on strike (on top of the day lost during the strike).

The union was fined \$2.5 million; Roger Toussaint was sentenced to 10 days in jail for violating an injunction; and, starting in mid-2007, the union lost dues checkoff, forcing it to collect dues directly from its members. (Dues checkoff was restored in the fall of 2008, after Toussaint signed a statement to the effect that TWU did not assert a right to strike.)

In 2006, Local 100's Executive Board made it easier to qualify to run for office. This resulted in a five-way race for president. Toussaint was reelected, but with less than 50% of the vote.⁴

In 2009 John Samuelsen, a close ally of Toussaint's until the fall of 2005, challenged Toussaint's team (Toussaint had left the Local for a job at the national union), heading a slate — Take Back Our Union (TBOU) — made up mostly of officers and members who had opposed the contract in 2006.

TBOU included former New Directions members, as well as supporters of the administration that New Directions had defeated in 2000 (including current president, Tony Utano). Samuelsen won; his slate took control of the Local with five of the seven VP spots and a majority of the Executive Board.⁵

Unlike the ND slate in 2000, which won at the head of an energized membership following 10 years of organizing, Samuelsen and TBOU won in a union whose membership had become demoralized after the 2005 strike. About half the members still owed dues from the period when checkoff was suspended. Few members were active and the Local was almost broke.

Samuelsen's administration set out to rebuild the local. The leaders emphasized bridging the divide between factions within the union; training new officers; bringing members back into good standing; growing the Local's treasury; and training stewards to strengthen the union's presence on the job.

These efforts were part of preparing for contract negotiations against a hostile Democratic governor in 2012. The Local also made a renewed commitment to organizing among non-union workers.⁶ Samuelsen won re-election in 2012 and 2015, before becoming TWU's national president in 2017.

True to TWU's history, Samuelsen faced an opposition slate each time he ran for reelection. Joe Campbell, who ran against Samuelsen twice, had been on the local's staff under Toussaint; his slate was composed principally of the remains of the Toussaint administration. In 2012 and 2015, Campbell's slate won the VP position in the



Car Equipment Department.

Thirty years after Tim Schermerhorn's first run for president, a young African-American conductor, Tramell Thompson, ran for president of TWU 100 against the white incumbent president of the union. Thompson received 16% of the vote and won RTO.⁷ It remains to be seen whether Thompson and his slate, Progressive Action, will develop the kind of support and influence earlier opposition groups had.

A Reflection of 1988?

While we can't know where Thompson and Progressive Action will end up, we can look at where they come from and what they have in common with as well as how they differ from Schermerhorn and New Directions. For starters, these contests, 30 years apart, are each rooted in specific characteristics of RTO, as well as generational challenges to the broader existing leadership of the union.

RTO is the department of TWU 100 that represents NYC's subway operating crews, i.e. Train Operators, Conductors and Tower Operators. It was an important base of support for dissidents who challenged the local's leadership in the late 1970s and backed the transit strike in 1980.

RTO provided the core support for Schermerhorn in the 1988 union election and the New Directions caucus that grew out of that race. In the 2018 election, it was the one department won by the first-time challenger, Tramell Thompson, and his slate, Progressive Action. What's with RTO?

The key to RTO's support for union dissidents is the disparity between the potential power that subway crews possess to disrupt the trains — and the city — and the union's failure to build a strong presence on the job to make that potential a reality.

Train operators and conductors know that their work is critical to the (relatively) smooth functioning of NYC. It's not unusual to hear them comment, "If we followed the rules to the letter, nothing would move."

From time to time, whether during contract fights or in response to provocations from politicians or management, crews have put this knowledge into practice — more often than not, without the support of the union's top officers — slowing trains down to put pressure on management and to give a taste of what might happen if management pushes them too far.⁸

However, TWU has not been able to build an infrastructure that can maintain a union presence in the terminals, yards and crew quarters and organize the members to use that power on a regular basis to resolve the problems crews confront every day.

The failure to build a stewards system is not because union officers haven't recognized the need to build one. At times, this

failure did reflect the deliberate policy of the administration because, as more than one officer has said over the years, “we’d just be training the people who will run against us.”

A more fundamental reason for the failure, however, is the nature of work in RTO. The majority of subway crews work in passenger service. They operate the trains that carry passengers throughout Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens. They spend most of their work day on the trains, away from their co-workers.

They get short breaks at the end of each “run,” and in mid-shift 30-45 minutes for lunch. That’s when they have a chance to sit in a crewroom and catch up with their co-workers. (If there are delays on the trains, the time for their breaks will be cut.)

They might work five days on the same line, but they might not. The people working the runs before and after them might be the same every day, but they might not.

Every six months, a new “pick” goes into effect and everyone has a chance to change their hours, days off, and the line they work. Stewards work under the same conditions, spending most of their working day away from other workers and seeing a continually changing set of co-workers when they are in the crewroom. This goes on across dozens of terminals, yards, and crew quarters.⁹

Since 2001, although a few officers remained reluctant to train the people who might run against them, under presidents Roger Toussaint and John Samuelsen several thousand workers (including a few hundred in RTO) were recruited and trained to be stewards and/or safety reps.

This increased the union presence in some departments, but neither administration committed the time or resources necessary to overcome the instability imposed by the structure of work in RTO.

Generational Challenge

Both Schermerhorn and Thompson were part of a new generation on the job and in the union. Both had roughly five years on the job when they first ran for president. Each ran against officers with more than 30 years on the job. Both came on the job a few years after a transit strike (1980 and 2005) that had altered the political dynamics of the union.

Both also found support among newer workers adversely affected by changes to the pension plan (which is set by the state legislature, not the union contract). In 1976, the state legislature raised the retirement age for new hires in most city and state titles to 62 (from 55) and the years of service required for a full pension to 30 (from 25). The cost that individual workers had to pay into their pensions also increased.

Improving the pension was a core issue for Schermerhorn and those hired after

the change. As the percentage of members covered by the 30/62 pension grew, so did the pressure to do something to regain the 25/55 pension. Along with some other public worker unions, TWU 100 took up this fight and, by the late-’90s, transit workers (and others) had won back the 25/55 pension.

Then, in 2012, New York’s Governor Cuomo pushed changes through the state legislature that raised service and age back up to 30/62 for most public workers in the state. The legislature again raised the cost of the pension for each worker, at the same time as it reduced the benefit that would be received at the time of retirement.

Even police, firefighters and corrections officers, who had long been able to retire after 20 years of service, had their years of service requirement raised. Unlike the other big state or city unions, TWU was able to preserve the 25/55 pension. However, incoming TWU members were hit by the changes that raised the cost and lowered the eventual benefit. TWU has taken up the fight to reverse these changes.

The generational challenge is real, but shouldn’t be overstated. While Schermerhorn and Thompson were from a new generation of workers, Campbell, who won more votes than Thompson last fall, is not. He’s a former officer whose slate is still built upon the remains of the Toussaint administration that Samuelsen’s slate defeated in 2009.

More important, unlike the leadership in 1988, the established leadership of the union, since 2010, has recognized the need to prepare the next generation of union leaders. Many if not most of the candidates on President Utano’s slate in 2018 below the level of VP became active as a result of the steward training provided by the union. Like Schermerhorn in the ’80s and Thompson today, they, too, represent a new generation on the job and in union office.

Running to Build or to Win?

Unlike other opposition groups before and after, New Directions did not run to win in its first few local-wide races. Instead, it ran to build. The difference reflects not only differing assessments about what was possible, but also different strategies for reforming Local 100.

By running to build in 1988 and 1991, Schermerhorn and ND acknowledged that they did not have a broad enough base in the local to win the top spots. More important, this expressed the view that the surest way to change the union was to organize the members to push back against the boss, and to demand leadership that would support that.

Running to win usually reflects both an exaggerated sense of the support the challengers have and the (generally) unspoken view that change comes from the top,

not the bottom of the union. The tension between running to build and running to win came to a head in the 1994 election.

Some in New Directions (including this writer) approached the election as essentially another opportunity to build ND and the rank and file movement it depended on. Others thought there was a real opportunity to win and the campaign should have been run accordingly.

The fact that Schermerhorn received 45% of the vote suggests those pushing for a run to win were right. ND’s approach to elections shifted to running to win after 1994.

There are key differences between 1988 and 2018 oppositions. Despite some surface similarities and the common roots in RTO of Schermerhorn’s and Thompson’s campaigns, the messages of the campaigns, their strategies for changing the Local, and their stances toward management are very different.

Schermerhorn and New Directions, like almost every other opposition slate during the last half-century, were unflinchingly opposed to management. They were clear that the workers were subjected to poor working conditions, speedup, violations of the contract, punitive discipline, disrespect from supervisors, etc., because management saw those practices as necessary to run the buses and subways.

Schermerhorn and ND focused their efforts on organizing among TWU 100 members not only to demand better representation from the union, but also to push back against management by taking direct action on the job. They organized among their co-workers to make their potential power a reality. Despite their differences with TWU 100’s leadership, they never took management’s side against the union.

Thompson, on the other hand, has shown himself to be much friendlier toward management. His Twitter feed and Facebook postings make clear that he thinks the central issue is that senior management is unaware of the nature and extent of problems on the job and that, if only they would talk to him, he would make them aware and they would then take steps to correct the problems.

He has compounded this softness toward management with a readiness to take positions that weaken the union’s ability to fight for its members. The most glaring example came during contract talks in late 2016.

A few weeks before the contract expired, then-President Samuelsen, noting that little progress had been made in negotiations, raised the possibility that TWU 100 would strike. Thompson quickly posted a comment to his Facebook page. It began with, “*I will not strike. I don’t trust John*



https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=475276

Picketing during the 2005 transit strike at Kingsbridge Bus Depot, 207th Street Yard.

Samuelsen,” and concluded with,

Dear MTA, Progressive Action & myself are available for work if Samuelsen calls a strike, no worries

Thompson actually offered to help break a strike! He placed his personal hostility toward Samuelsen above the most basic union principle. Without even being asked which side he was on, Thompson took management’s side. In addition, he has encouraged members not to make contributions to COPE, which would starve the Local of funds needed for political action — including the effort to improve pensions.

In December 2018, after seeing the results showing he had won only in RTO, Thompson called for RTO to split off from the TWU. Such a split would weaken not only TWU 100, but RTO itself as well.¹⁰

A New Cycle of Reform?

Looking back, it’s clear that the local election in 1988 marked the beginning of a period of heightened member activity in TWU 100 in support of a more militant stance by the union toward management and greater democracy within the union.

That activity resulted in job actions, mass demonstrations, rank-and-file mobilizations for good contracts, highly contentious elections, a system-wide transit strike, rejections of contracts 1992 and 2006 — and election to the leadership of the union candidates from a radical opposition caucus.

There have been significant gains as a result of the struggles since 1988. Of course, much remains to be done. There are still compelling reasons for transit workers to organize against management. In 2018, as in 1988, RTO is dissatisfied. Throughout the local, a new generation is asserting itself.

This is bound to produce opposition to the union’s leadership, and slates that embody that opposition. That’s nothing unusual for TWU 100. Most of its elections for more than 40 years have been contested.

Challengers have always won low-level offices. Now, after the changes to the by-laws in 1999, it is not unusual for VPs to

be elected from opposition slates. But it will remain very rare for a presidential candidate from an opposition slate or caucus to win.¹¹

Whether new organizing among the members happens mostly through the structures of Local 100 or outside of them is not yet clear. There are two key questions unanswered:

Will members support leaders committed to challenging management or those who seek accommodation with them?

Will TWU’s officers be willing and able to welcome new activists and build up the union’s presence on the job?

As in 1988, progress for transit workers in 2019 and following years will depend on changing the balance of power with management to push back against petty supervisors, win better working conditions and contracts, and bring forward a vision of the transit system that better serves the people who run it and the people who use it. ■

Notes

1. TWU 100’s internal life is unusually well documented, by both outside observers and participants. See, in particular, *In Transit* by Joshua Freeman; *More Profile Than Courage* by Michael Marmo; *Underground Woman* by Marian Swerdlow; *Subway After the Irish* by Horace Mungin; *The Transformation of U.S. Unions* edited by Ray Tillman and Michael Cummings; *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in TWU Local 100* by Steve Downs; *An Early Challenge to the Age of Austerity and Inequality: Re-Examining New York City’s 1980 Transit Strike from the Bottom-Up* (paper submitted to NY Labor History Association) by Marc Kagan; and numerous articles in *Against the Current* and *Labor Notes* by Steve Burghardt, Steve Downs, Marian Swerdlow, and Josh Fradstern.
2. Union opposition groups take many forms. Two of the most common are “slates” and “caucuses.” I consider slates to be groups that come together primarily to contest elections. Caucuses, while they generally participate in elections, exist between them and look for additional ways to organize the members and present their ideas about what the union should do. Caucuses are more likely to have a clear political identity in the union than slates do.
3. In 1988, VPs, even though they supposedly represented one of the Local’s seven departments, were elected local-wide. As a result, even though New Directions won RTO in 1988 (and other departments in subsequent elections), it did not win any VP spots. Those went to the person who lost their own department, but won because of votes from other departments. In 1999, fearing they would lose all VP spots in the event of a New Directions victory, the administration agreed to ND’s long-standing

demand that VPs be elected solely by the department they would represent. This change made it possible for Thompson’s candidate for VP of RTO and Campbell’s candidate for VP of Stations to win their departments and become VPs of TWU 100 in 2018.

4. For more about the rise of New Directions, and the experience and consequences of the 2005 transit strike, see the pamphlet *Hell on Wheels: The Success and Failure of Reform in TWU Local 100*. This pamphlet can be ordered for \$2 (including postage) from Solidarity, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210.

5. As a result of the loss of dues check-off, in 2009, almost 40% of the local’s members were not in good-standing because they did not pay their full dues while dues check-off was suspended. These members did not have the right to vote. Since then, the percent ineligible to vote has fallen below 10%.

6. TWU 100 has organized — and won contracts covering — several thousand workers in the last several years. These include technical workers at the transit agency, school bus, bike share (in six cities) and tour bus workers (also in several cities). As a result, the local has grown from 38,000 in 2010 to 46,000 today.

7. The winner of the 2018 election was Tony Utano. A year earlier, Utano had been appointed to complete the term of John Samuelsen, who was elected president of the national TWU. Joe Campbell, also ran for president in 2018, receiving 20% of the vote. This was his third run for president and his worst showing. After winning Car Equipment in the two previous races, in 2018, he won in Stations, the department representing Station Agents and Cleaners.

8. The most transparent, and widely-reported, job action took place in 1983. A management consultant said motormen “operating like cowboys” caused a series of derailments that were actually the consequence of governors’ and mayors’ failure to properly fund and maintain the system. In response, motormen (now called Train Operators), many wearing cowboy hats, slowed their trains to a crawl for several days. Mayor Ed Koch, publicly apologized for the consultant’s comment and stated the workers were not to blame for the derailments.

9. Stations Department, which also supported an opposition slate in 2018, is the one department where building a union presence on the job is even harder than in RTO. Station Agents and Cleaners work in hundreds of locations. In the course of a workday, a Station Agent might only see two co-workers — the person they relieve and the person who relieves them. But workers in Stations do not have the same sense of potential power as workers in RTO have. They have rarely been at the forefront of supporting dissidents or opposing contracts, as RTO has.

10. In February 2019, after a few years of calling Samuelsen and Utano corrupt, racist and anti-union, Thompson issued a “call for unity” and stated his support for Utano as the Local prepared for contract talks.

11. One difference that should concern everyone in the union is the decline in voter turnout over the last few elections. Turnout steadily increased through the 1990s, reaching over 50% — sometimes over 60% — of eligible voters. It has declined since 2009 and fell to almost 30% in the 2018 election. In RTO, the turnout was closer to 20%.

Ghosts of the New Order: Indonesia's Election and Polarization

 By Alex de Jong

THE INDONESIAN ELECTIONS of April 2019 were a competition between a disappointment and a thug. Incumbent president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo defeated former army officer Prabowo Subianto, but there remains little of the enthusiasm of his 2014 victory. But compared to Prabowo, a political criminal campaigning on a combination of authoritarian leadership, chauvinism and political Islam, Jokowi appeared to many as the preferable option.

Even before the official results came in, it was clear that Jokowi had defeated Prabowo, and that Prabowo would not accept this. As he did five years ago, Prabowo blamed his defeat on fraud, but this time he chose to escalate the situation.

The Prabowo camp called for massive street rallies and defiance against the government, what it called "people power." The protests escalated into riots that left at least six deaths and over 700 injured. Both sides, Prabowo's supporters and Jokowi's government, blame each other for the violence.

Prabowo remained silent when violence broke out and his supporters circulated rumors aimed at increasing sectarian and ethnic violence. One such message for example claimed that "China has sent security forces to Indonesia disguised as foreign workers."

Andreas Harsono, Indonesian researcher for Human Rights Watch, stated: "These groups, including Prabowo and many of his advisers, have a dark reputation of using ethnic and religious sentiment, including anti-Chinese racism, in mobilizing people to get power," adding that "they did it in Java in 1998 with the anti-Chinese riots and they are trying to do it again today."

Prabowo, however, seems to have overplayed his hand as security forces took control. Several (retired) army officers linked to Prabowo are accused of organizing the violence and of planning killings to destabilize the government. Prabowo left the country in his private plane for "medical care."

The elections were a huge undertaking; in more than 800,000 election locals some 193 million voters could vote for the presi-



Joko Widodo (above) was re-elected president, defeating Prabowo Subianto (right) a second time, but without the enthusiasm of his 2014 victory.

dency, as well as for national, provincial and local parliaments. In total, there were over 245,000 candidates.

But the political system in no way reflects the diversity and inequality of Indonesian society. Capitalist development across the 5000 kilometers of the archipelago has been extremely uneven; the GDP of the highest grossing district is over 400 times that of the lowest grossing district.

The so-called "miracle of Indonesian development" during the '70s and '80s relied on the exploitation of a workforce that was deprived of political rights and trade unions, and on the plunder of natural resources.

Indonesian "industrialization" mainly consists of mining (important resources are gold, coal and oil), and the manufacture of

low-end products like textile, paper and simple, labor-intensive electronics in relatively small enterprises. But the Indonesian working class is without political representation. No labor-party or left-wing party was able to participate in the national elections.

Indonesian politics is a business for the rich. Many of the parties charge candidates a fee in return for a place on their list. The higher on the list, the higher the fee. Candidates negotiate with "political financiers" to provide them with the cash to buy gifts for potential voters and communities. In return, if elected, the candidate will provide the financier with protection and government contracts.

Competition among these parties is competition for spoils. Actual political disagreements are secondary, if they exist at all. The main parties all support extractivist

and export-oriented "development" policies that rely on the exploitation of the country's cheap and young labor force, the unsustainable use of natural resources, and infrastructure projects that provide plenty of opportunities for kick-backs and lucrative government contracts.

Writing before the 2019 elections, leftist intellectual Martin Suryajaya declared that the Indonesian left lacked the potential to have significant impact on the elec-

tions, estimating that even if taken together the left would mobilize less than one per cent of the vote.

High demands are placed on parties before they can present themselves in the elections. For example, they are required to have a significant presence throughout the whole country before they can register for the elections. This makes it very difficult for newer parties without wealthy backers to participate.

But most of all, the Indonesian left remains crippled by the decades of violence



Alex de Jong is co-director of the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam.

and repression of Suharto's dictatorship.

Legacy of Suharto's New Order

From 1965 to 1998, Indonesia was ruled by general Suharto, whose "New Order" regime received considerable support from Western powers. The regime was the product of a coup against the country's founding president Sukarno, who in the '60s had increasingly leaned towards China and the Indonesian Communist Party.

The New Order, in which the army played an important role, established its power over the country by massacring over half a million leftists in late 1965 and early 1966.

In the '70s and '80s, the New Order regime was praised internationally for supposedly modernizing the Indonesian economy and bringing prosperity to broader layers of the population. "Development" was the watchword of the regime.

With Western aid, followed by the oil boom and the kind of "industrialization" described above, the New Order regime achieved relatively high growth rates — until the Asian economic crisis of the late '90s.

The New Order's statist development schemes lead to some modernization of the country, but despite its natural wealth, Indonesia in many ways remained behind its neighbors Malaysia and the Philippines.

In 2008, after the death of Suharto, Benedict Anderson pointed out that per capita GDP was about \$12,100 in Malaysia, \$5100 in the Philippines and \$3600 in Indonesia. And "given the enormous inequality prevailing especially in the Philippines and Indonesia, the real annual 'product' for the mass of people is substantially lower than these figures suggest."

The corruption and plunder Suharto and his cronies engaged in is difficult to overestimate. Suharto himself is alleged to have embezzled between U.S. \$15 to \$25 billion.

After the Asian crisis and social unrest led to the fall of Suharto, Indonesia went through several rounds of "structural adjustment" programs. These led to increased inequality as well as renewed economic growth. Most of this growth benefited the better off.

According to World Bank figures, 15 years of sustained economic growth after the turn of the century "primarily benefited the richest 20% and left behind the remaining 80% of the population." The richest 10% of Indonesians own over 75% of the country's wealth. Half of the country's assets are owned by a literal one percent.

Disappointment and Opportunism

Five years ago, Jokowi aroused hopes among many liberal and progressive Indonesians that he would tackle some of the worse inequalities and legacies of the New Order. Unlike his predecessor, Jokowi

had no links with the dictatorship. Neither was he one of the oligarchs who dominate top-level politics.

He had been a modest businessman and mayor of a small city before becoming governor of the region of Jakarta, the country's capital, with a population of over 10 million. He cultivated the image of an honest man of the people, a defender of the country's pluralism against religious and ethnic bigotry, and promised to look into human rights violations committed by the dictatorship.

Once elected, Jokowi disappointed his idealistic supporters. Going against Indonesia's culture of impunity for human rights violations, or consistently defending the country's minorities, would require confronting established political forces and influential leftovers from the New Order regime. Jokowi did not come from the political elite, but his party does, and he has proven to be unable to go against his political protectors.

One of the first signs that Jokowi would be a disappointment was his pick for minister of defense: a former general who has been accused of human rights violations in West Papua. Jakarta continues to treat West Papua as essentially a colony.

Sectarian hostility increased with massive rallies against Jokowi's successor as governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, in 2016. Ahok was (unjustly) accused of blasphemy, and the movement against him was fueled by bigoted hatred of his Christian beliefs and Chinese ethnicity. Ahok was sentenced to two years in prison.

Jokowi not only failed to oppose the sectarian and racist attacks against his former friend and ally — he further legitimized such views by picking Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate in 2019. Ma'ruf heads the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), a semi-official government body which issues fatwas, and supported the sentencing of Ahok.

Human Rights Watch describes him as "fueling worsening discrimination against the country's religious and gender minorities." HRW reports: "Over the past two decades at the MUI, Amin has helped draft and been a vocal supporter of fatwas, or religious edicts, against the rights of religious minorities, including the country's Ahmadiyah and Shia communities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people."

Especially Ahmadiyahs, a minority current in Islam, have been attacked, murdered, and their houses destroyed by far-right groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

Jokowi's main priority was always economic growth. In 2014, he set a goal of seven percent yearly growth. That goal was not met, but with around five percent economic growth was still considerable.

Infrastructure was improved and Jokowi's government implemented some social reforms: health care was extended, condi-

tional cash subsidies to the poor established and subsidies on oil retained.

A Product of the New Order

Just as five years ago, Jokowi faced off against Prabowo Subianto. Prabowo is Suharto's former son-in-law; his father was minister during the dictatorship.

Prabowo joined Kopassus, the country's elite forces, shortly after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. This was the beginning of a quarter century of brutal occupation that led to around 200,000 Timorese dead. Prabowo took part in campaigns against the East Timorese resistance, and received "anti-terrorist" training in Germany and the USA, rising to the rank of Lieutenant General.

In 1998, as the New Order regime crumbled, Prabowo was involved in a secretive group of army officers, businessmen and Muslim leaders that tried to preserve the army's political power and fend off the democratic movement.

In Jakarta they incited pogroms against the Chinese-Indonesian minority, killing hundreds. Dozens of Chinese-Indonesian women were the victims of rapes. Stoking sectarian and ethnic violence in Jakarta and elsewhere was an attempt to divert discontent, and create renewed support for an authoritarian regime.

Prabowo was also involved in the abduction, torture and murder of pro-democracy activists, including members of the radical left Partai Rakyat Demokrat (PRD, People's Democratic Party).

After the end of the dictatorship, Prabowo for a few years went into voluntary exile in Jordan. After returning to Indonesia, he went into business, joining his brother who had become rich as a Suharto crony. Prabowo's properties include oil, gas and coal companies as well as palm oil plantations.

Since 2004 he has been trying to make it to the country's top position. To support his ambitions, he built a coalition of some of the most reactionary forces in Indonesian society, leftovers of the New Order regime, those nostalgic for the "peace and order" of dictatorship, and increasingly forces of political Islam.

While the Jokowi camp basically argued for politics as usual, Prabowo in classic far-right fashion used social demagoguery, and railed against foreigners exploiting the country — while hiding his own links with Indonesian oligarchs.

Inviting the obvious comparison, Prabowo in one speech asked: "Why are the Indonesian people afraid to say Indonesia first, make Indonesia great again? Why are there no Indonesian leaders daring to say the important thing is jobs for Indonesian people?"

During the campaign, Indonesian social media were inundated with assertions that Jokowi was secretly Christian, Chinese, even an undercover Communist.

Rise of the Religious Right

The 2016 protests against Ahok, as well as Prabowo's campaign, attracted international attention to the growing influence of fundamentalist Islamist forces in Indonesia.

Almost 90% of Indonesia's population of over 260 million identify as Muslim. In addition, the government officially recognizes five other religions: Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian. Atheism is not legally banned but is taboo, and people who declared atheist views have been prosecuted under blasphemy laws.

Support for political Islam in the widest sense, meaning a political current that wants to make Islam the foundational principle of politics and the state, is not a new development in Indonesia. From the late '50s to 1965, president Sukarno was not only opposed by army leadership but also by the leaders of political Islam. Many of them were landowners and merchants who saw that the left threatened their privileges.

But what today exists as political Islam is a product of the authoritarian capitalist development and class differentiation under the New Order regime. The regime initially made use of Islamist forces to destroy the Indonesian Communist party and the left more generally, but political Islam was marginalized by the dictator.

Only in the later years of his regime did Suharto reach out to Islamist hard-liners, partly as a counterweight to rivals in the Indonesian army, partly to integrate potential opposition forces into the patronage networks of the regime.

Throughout the New Order regime and beyond, parts of the Indonesian security apparatus cultivated links with radical Islamic groups. They did this to flush out Islamic radicals, but also saw such groups as potential tools against the left and social movements.

The FPI for example, which supported Prabowo, has its roots in such maneuvers. It was established in 1998 with support of then military commander-in-chief Wiranto. Wiranto was also responsible for organizing militias that attacked anti-Suharto protesters and is implicated in massacres during the New Order regime. Jokowi made him a minister.

But the fall of the dictatorship and democratization did not only make visible already existing support for political Islam. The country's Muslim majority is not a homogeneous category, and deep disagreements exist about what it means to be a believer. But for the past two decades a turn has been taking place towards more

restrictive and more literal interpretations of religious doctrine, away from the syncretism (religious admixture) that was considered typical of Islam in Indonesia.

This turn is partly responsible for the growth in support for political Islam. Since the late '90s, it has grown in influence on politics and won increased popular support. It is a varied movement, encompassing those who want to make Indonesia an Islamic state; those who want to apply Shariah legal law either for all Indonesians or for Muslims; and supporters of terrorist violence as well as of electoral politics.

Indonesian Islam can not be divided into a "good," traditional and syncretic Islam and a "bad," non-traditional purist political Islam. Parts of NU, the largest movement of traditional Muslims, are known for their sectarian hostility toward non-Muslims as well as against minority groups in Islam, such as the Ahmadiyah and Shia.

All the mainstream Muslim organizations were part of the architecture of the New Order regime. On the other hand, most of the supporters of the Indonesian left were and are Muslims, although today there are only lingering influences of left-wing Islam in Indonesia.

The growth of political Islam results from the urbanization and modernization of Indonesian society. The cadres who build the organizations of political Islam and the intellectuals who interpret it for Indonesian society often come from the urban middle classes. They find support in regions that are known to be religious and conservative, but in the rapidly growing cities a new potential for Islamist mass politics has grown.

As society modernized, tradition lost power as the criterion for right and wrong. Parts of the new urban population found answers in international strands of political Islam, breaking with inherited interpretations of Islam. The well-educated cadres of the movement view the syncretism of traditional Indonesian Islam as the result of the mixing of so-called "real Islam" with local superstition.

The appeal to international sources as the genuine authorities on Islam becomes a way for people from the new middle classes to emancipate themselves from traditional authority figures. Their education and international links enable them to present themselves as the experts in, and carriers of, "genuine Islam," thereby claiming positions of power and influence.

In a way, such activists are following in the footsteps of the landowners and merchants who led political Islam over half a century ago. But after the destruction of the left, in place of a progressive alternative, political Islam became a major articulator of social grievances during and after the New Order regime. Political Islam thus acquired

much more a mass character than previously.

Out of strategic considerations and shared hostility to emancipatory movements, parts of the movement have allied with Prabowo, who is not particularly religious himself. In fact, Prabowo's campaign became so closely associated with radical Islamists that some of his supporters began worrying that it was scaring off potential voters.

Jokowi's record is tattered, but it was enough for him to win a victory of around 55% over his rival. It is clear many voted for Jokowi as a form of self-defense against the sectarian forces supporting Prabowo. In addition, for people on the edge of absolute poverty, Jokowi's social measures can make a crucial difference.

Indonesian politics is a business for the rich. Many of the parties charge candidates a fee in return for a place on their list. The higher on the list, the higher the fee.

Rebuilding the Left

Despite the crisis of 2008, and the slowing down of economic growth, the numbers of the industrial working class have grown considerably in the last decade. Industrial workers have shown a large potential for mobilization, facilitated by their concentration in special economic zones.

After 2011, the country saw large labor mobilizations with millions of workers on strike. This movement succeeded in forcing significant concessions from bosses and the state. Several times, minimum wages were increased by over a quarter and healthcare coverage was increased.

Spread throughout the country, there are many other social movements, sometimes very combative. Environmental activists and peasants fight the destruction and pollution of the countryside, and human rights activists defend civil rights, challenge the culture of impunity and oppose the army's renewed attempts to claw back political influence it lost after 1998.

In Jakarta, hundreds of thousands rallied against gender-based violence and child marriage. Despite a wave of anti-LGBT rhetoric, often from government figures and heterosexual violence, LGBT activists continue to organize.

The capitalist class, however, retaliated. New legal limits were put on the right to strike and on the minimum wage. Social movements were further weakened by an ideological offensive against progressive and leftist ideas, and by a right-wing shift in the leadership of the important Confederation



In June 2018 more than 500 workers in two different locations organized a three-day strike against one of Indonesia's largest pulp and paper mills. The workers are employed by five different outsourcing firms but work for Tanjungem Lestari Pulp and Paper company. As a result, they won guarantees for their working hours, on-the-job safety and for some, the possibility of permanent employment by the company.

IndustriALL Global Union

of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI).

KSPI includes the Metalworkers Trade Unions Federation (FSPMI) which was at the heart of many of the mobilizations. Its uniformed stewards, the Garda Metal, were literally in the front line of many mobilizations, together with supporters of much smaller but radical “red unions.”

Realizing that the increased militancy was opening up space for left-wing ideas among workers, the conservative KSPI leadership dialed back its support for mobilizations. They instead turned towards making deals with right-wing and Islamist forces.

This year, instead of joining other movements rallying in Jakarta for the commemoration of May Day, KSPI organized its own meeting, and called on its members to support Prabowo.

The New Order did not only destroy the Indonesian left in 1965, but until 1998 systematic propaganda attacked all progressive ideas. To prevent a potential rebirth of the left and social contestation, the regime pursued a policy of dismantling any kind of popular organization and turning the popular classes into what it called a “floating mass” to be excluded from politics.

Even the parties that were controlled by the regime were not allowed to operate on the village level. The most important trade union organization, the PKI-aligned union central SOBSI, was destroyed. The remaining trade unions were forcibly merged into a single trade union central that was incorporated into the New Order’s structure.

When after more than three decades the New Order fell in 1998, its combination of

repression and social engineering left deep marks on society. For radicals, there is no center-left current to relate to, nor is there a trade-union movement or other social movement that could provide a home and field of activity for activists. The left had to be rebuilt from scratch.

Central to the rebirth of socialist activism in Indonesia was the PRD. Originally established in 1994 by left-wing student activists, the party adopted a socialist platform. It was quickly repressed by the New Order, but re-emerged after 1998.

PRD activists played an important role in establishing a left-wing of the new trade-union movement that took shape after 1998. The PRD, however, did not succeed in establishing itself as a national force. Its attempts to organize united fronts and participate in national elections failed, and in the first decade of the new century the party entered a process of fracturing and splits.

Many of the different socialist groups in Indonesia trace their existence to the PRD. Some of the PRD’s activists had received training from the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). But the PRD did not adopt a Maoist-guerrilla strategy, instead focusing on the organization of the urban working class.

In terms of organizational practice however, the CPP model had a more significant impact. Like the CPP, the PRD went on to establish its own social organizations, the leadership of which was the party, and which were expected to become the party’s base.

This organizing model was retained by different groups coming out of the PRD.

Even very small groups attempt to set up their own “mass organizations,” including their own trade unions. Such “red unions” are quite militant, boosting protests, but have difficulty uniting. The red unions also remain much smaller than the main trade union centers that rely on clientelism and deals with politicians.

Among leftists, but also among disappointed former supporters of Jokowi, there was a call to boycott this year’s elections as a first step to building an independent alternative. But the road to this goal is still long.

At the height of the workers’ protests, there was renewed discussion among activists on establishing a new party based on the labor movement, but with little concrete results so far.

The counter-offensive by the bosses and the state, and

the divisions inside the trade-union movement, make the need to organize a political answer only more urgent.

To provide a center of gravity for the various existing movements, a new political left needs to have sufficient social weight. It seems that only the trade-union movement can provide this.

After the Elections

Some relief that we don’t have to add Prabowo’s name to the authoritarian rulers’ list of Duterte, Trump, Bolsonaro etc. is understandable, but Jokowi’s reelection solves nothing. The unsustainable development model, the mass poverty and inequality, the anger this generates and its uses by reactionary forces and political manipulators who learned their tricks during the New Order, religious and ethnic bigotry and hate — none of this will go away.

With the recent violence by Prabowo supporters on one side, and on the other side security forces commanded by his former colleague Wiranto, it could not be clearer that Indonesia is still not free from the legacy of the New Order. Jokowi’s government only offers more of the same — which brought the country to this condition in the first place.

Parts of society are polarizing around sectarian and regional lines, while a real social alternative is lacking. A left with some social weight could channel part of the anger and provide a counter-weight to regressive tendencies. Every day it becomes only more needed. ■

Revolution and Betrayal: Nicaragua from 1979-2019

By Eric Toussaint and
Nathan Legrand



The Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 was a genuine popular triumph.

THE NICARAGUAN GOVERNMENT'S violent repression against demonstrators protesting its brutal neoliberal policies, resulting in more than 300 people being killed by regime forces since April 2018, is only one of the reasons why various leftist social movements have condemned the Nicaraguan regime led by President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President Rosario Murillo.

The Left has many more reasons to denounce the policies of the regime. To understand this, we must go back to 1979. That year saw the victory of an authentic revolution in Nicaragua that combined a popular uprising, self-organization of cities and neighborhoods in rebellion, and the action of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* — FSLN), a political-military organization inspired by a Marxist-Guevarist/Castroist model.

The revolution put an end to the 42-year authoritarian rule of the Somoza dynasty, which had appropriated the state — its armed forces, administration and significant parts of its economic assets — and established a strong alliance with the United States. The Somoza dictatorship proved to be an effective bulwark against progressive political forces. Multinationals could maintain and increase their plundering of Nicaragua's

national resources in exchange for commissions that added to the increasingly important wealth of the ruling family.

The FSLN was founded in the 1960s as a leftist group opposing the government mainly through guerrilla warfare. It was not until some of its guerrillas took high-ranking members of the Nicaraguan ruling classes as hostages, in December 1974, that it was considered a potentially serious threat to the dictatorship. After the spectacular action of the Sandinista guerrillas, the regime declared a state of emergency, increased its repressive grip over Nicaraguan society and hunted down the FSLN.

Earlier that year, liberal factions of the bourgeoisie, opposing the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the Somoza ruling clique, had already formed the Democratic Union of Liberation (*Unión Democrática de Liberación* — UDEL) under the leadership of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, editor of the liberal newspaper *La Prensa*. They hoped to gather political momentum and force the regime to liberalize.

The FSLN eventually split into three factions. The “prolonged people’s war” faction remained committed to the strategy of accumulating forces in remote areas until they would have enough strength to liberate entire regions of the country and launch a final assault against Somoza’s army.

The “proletarian tendency” emerged to challenge the prolonged people’s war strategy, considering it inadequate given the absence of a permanent occupying army. They argued

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that since the rural populations would not directly witness the imperialist endeavor, they would not join the guerrillas in massive numbers.

Furthermore, the development of capitalist production in the country with the economic development of the 1950s and 1960s had given rise to an agricultural and industrial proletariat, constituting respectively 40% and 10% of the active population by 1978. The “proletarian tendency” therefore focused on organizing mass working-class organizations in urban areas, gaining the support of industrial workers with the perspective of launching a swift insurrection when the conditions to do so would be met.

Finally, the “*Terceristas*,” whose main figures included Daniel Ortega and his brother Humberto, also advocated an insurrectional strategy, but were open to tactical alliances with the liberal factions of the bourgeoisie opposing Somoza. While the “proletarian tendency” stressed the need for a mass uprising and self-organization, the “*Terceristas*” displayed substitutionist tendencies that implied an armed insurrection led by organized guerrillas, but without a simultaneous mass uprising, would be sufficient to overthrow the regime and take power.

Eventually the regime lifted the state of emergency in 1977, thinking that the guerrilla movement was defeated and the conditions for entering negotiations with the liberal opposition were ripe. But FSLN factions were prompt to resume their armed actions in urban areas. In January 1978, the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal by regime soldiers was caught on video. It sparked tremendous anger among the liberal opposition as well as among the population.

A general strike supported by the liberal bourgeoisie was launched while FSLN groups staged armed actions against Somoza’s National Guard. In August another general strike was called. Sandinista guerrillas staged an assault against the National Palace, where a joint session of both chambers of the parliament was taking place, taking hundreds hostage. This resulted in the liberation of several political prisoners from Somoza’s jails.

More importantly, spontaneous uprisings took place against the regime, enabling the Left to gain momentum over the liberal opposition. After the FSLN called for insurrection, several urban uprisings erupted in September 1978. While these were decisively defeated by the National Guard, this scared the liberal opposition, whose representatives sought to enter negotiations with the regime that were to be mediated by the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS). The “*Terceristas*” denounced this turn of events and withdrew from the Front they had helped to build with the liberal opposition.

In January 1979, Somoza turned down the proposals of the liberal opposition. The momentum was then with the Sandinistas, who reunited and created, the following month, the new “Patriotic National Front” (*Frente Patriótico Nacional* — FPN) in which they were the politically dominant force.

As the FSLN prepared to launch a broad military offensive, they called for a general strike in June. As mass urban uprisings occurred, the armed insurrection quickly moved in to liberate areas of the country, one after the other. Somoza’s army disintegrated. When the army stronghold in the capital was finally liberated on July 19, 1979, its remnants had no choice but to flee, in particular to neighboring Honduras.

In the new FPN government, the revolutionary political

forces pledged to install a democratic regime, guarantee a non-alignment of Nicaragua’s foreign policy — thus putting an end to the alliance with the United States — and develop a “mixed economy.” The development of cooperatives and state-owned enterprises would be encouraged while the existence of private capital would not be fundamentally threatened as long as it was perceived as “patriotic,” that is, loyal to the Sandinista Revolution rather than to the overthrown Somoza regime or U.S. imperialism.

During the next two years, several developments illustrated how different Nicaragua was from other cases in which the Left had come to power through elections in Latin America. These included Chile in 1970, Venezuela in 1998-1999, Brazil in 2002-2003, Bolivia in 2005-2006 and Ecuador in 2006-2007.

Due to the destruction of Anastasio Somoza’s army and the flight of the dictator, the FSLN not only assumed governmental power but also replaced the Somocista military with a new army that was put at the service of the people. It also took control over the banks and decreed a public monopoly on foreign trade.

Over the 1980s, major social progress was made in the areas of health care, education, improving housing conditions (even if they remained rudimentary), fuller rights to organize and protest, as well as access to credit for small producers (thanks to nationalization of the banking system). These represented undeniable progress.

But the FSLN government was forced to fight a decade-long war against counterrevolutionary forces known as the *Contras*, who were heavily supported by the United States. Unable to satisfy its ambition of direct military intervention, Washington settled for a “low-intensity” conflict that would strangle Nicaragua economically and isolate the FSLN politically. U.S. imperialism and its vassals (such as the regime of Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela, and regional dictatorships as in Honduras that served as the *Contras* staging base) found it necessary to contain the spreading of this extraordinary experiment in social liberation and renewal of national dignity. In fact, social revolt was rampant in the region, in particular in El Salvador and Guatemala where revolutionary forces close to the Sandinistas had been active for decades.

However in 1990, the FSLN lost the general election to the Right, with Violeta Chamorro, the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, elected president. Under Chamorro, Nicaragua was to fully embrace the neoliberal austerity promoted by the “Washington consensus.” By the end of the decade Nicaragua became the second poorest country in the Americas, after Haiti.

Assessing the Sandinista Experience

In the 1990s, as a result of disappointed hopes, there were those who posited that what was needed was to try to “change society without taking power.” Unfortunately, it is not possible to change society unless people take power at the level of the State. The question is rather: How to build an authentic democracy — that is, power exercised directly by the people for the purpose of emancipation?

In Nicaragua, it was necessary to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship through the combined action of a popular uprising and the intervention of a political-military organization. As

such, the victory of July 1979 remains a popular triumph worthy of celebration. Without the ingenuity and tenacity of the people during the struggle, the FSLN would not have succeeded in striking the decisive blow against the Somoza dictatorship.

Several questions arise. Did the FSLN “go too far” in the changes it made in the society? Did it take the wrong direction? Or are the disappointing subsequent developments the result of aggression by North American imperialism and its allies — in Nicaragua and elsewhere in the region?

In fact, the FSLN leadership *did not go far enough in its radicalization*:

First, the FSLN leadership did not go far enough in implementing radical measures to support segments of the population who were the most exploited and oppressed, beginning with the poor rural population, but also with underpaid factory, health care and education workers. It made too many concessions to agrarian and urban capitalists.

Second, the FSLN with its slogan “National Directorate — Give us your orders!” did not provide sufficient support to self-organization and worker control. It placed limits that were highly detrimental to the revolutionary process.

Of course, responsibility for the outbreak of the war lies exclusively with the enemies of the Sandinista government, which had no choice but to confront the aggression. Nevertheless errors were made in the means of waging the war: Humberto Ortega, the head of the army, formed a regular army equipped with expensive heavy tanks, unsuitable against the guerrilla methods of the Contras. Further, the mandatory conscription of the country’s youth was unpopular.

This, combined with the errors made in the area of agrarian reform, had damaging consequences. In a recent interview, Henry Ruiz, one of the nine members of the national leadership in the 1980s, pointed out: “*The campesinos were not favored [in agrarian reform]; on the contrary they were affected by the war. The war waged by the contra and the war waged by us.*”

Agrarian reform was seriously insufficient and the Contras took full advantage of that fact. Much more land should have been distributed to rural families, giving them title to the property. Instead, the Sandinista leadership nationalized the major Somoza estates, but spared major capitalist groups and powerful families whom certain Sandinista leaders wanted to turn into allies or fellow travelers.

Compounding this error, the FSLN wanted to quickly create a State agrarian sector and cooperatives to replace the large Somozist estates. Priority should have been given to small (and medium) private farms, distributing property titles and providing material and technical aid to the new *campesino* owners. Additionally priority should have been given to support production for the domestic market. Improving and increasing the domestic and regional market would have made maximum use of organic-agriculture methods.

On the one hand the leadership of the FSLN made too many concessions to bourgeois forces who were considered allies and, on the other hand, engaged in excessive statism or artificial cooperativism. The result was



The government could have called for citizen participation in auditing Somoza’s debts.

not long in coming: a part of the population, disappointed by the decisions of the Sandinista government, was attracted to the Contras.

The latter had the intelligence to adopt a discourse aimed at the disillusioned *campesinos*, telling them that *they* would help them overthrow the FSLN. This would then result in a fair distribution of land and agrarian reform. It was deceitful propaganda, but widely believed in the countryside.

Certain people within the Sandinista movement conducted surveys on the ground and alerted the leadership to what was happening. These included work coordinated by Orlando Nuñez, who remained loyal to Ortega despite his initial left-wing stance.

Work done by others independent of the government and related to Liberation Theology came to the same conclusions. A number of rural organizations linked to Sandinism (UNAG, ATC, etc.) were also aware of the problems, but engaged in self-censorship. Internationalist experts specializing in the rural world also sounded the alarm.

Concessions were made to local big capital, wrongly perceived as being patriotic and an ally of the people. Wage increases were limited and the bosses received fiscal incentives in the form of lower taxation. Such an alliance should have been rejected.

At each important stage, criticism from within and outside of the FSLN emerged. The magazine *envío*, for instance, was founded in 1981 “as a publication that provided ‘critical support’ to Nicaragua’s revolutionary process from the perspective of liberation theology’s option for the poor.” But such criticism was not taken into account by the leadership, which was more and more dominated by Daniel Ortega, his brother Humberto, and Víctor Tirado López.

All three supported the “*Tercerista*” faction (which did not have a full understanding of the necessity of self-organization, and was inclined to alliances with the bourgeoisie). They were joined by Tomas Borge and Bayardo Arce of the “prolonged people’s war” faction. Further, the four other members of the national leadership did not form a bloc to oppose the continuation and deepening of the errors.

It is important to point out that proposals for alternative policies were formulated both inside and outside the FSLN.

Constructive critical voices did not wait for the 1990 electoral failure to propose new directions, but they received only a limited hearing and remained relatively isolated.

Illegitimate and Odious Debt

The leadership of the FSLN should also have questioned repayment of the public debt inherited from the Somoza dictatorship and broken with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As a dependent country aligned with the United States, Somoza's Nicaragua received a massive amount of foreign lending in the 1970s. In addition to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF there were several international private bank lenders. While the loans were officially for development, they were used to strengthen the authoritarian regime and increase the wealth of Somoza and his clique.

After the latter left the country with most of their assets, the new Sandinista government was in dire need of funding in order to implement progressive policies and encourage industrialization. Somoza's debt would soon impede the implementation of such policies.

When the FSLN took power, the foreign debt stood at \$1.5 billion. By 1981 its servicing represented 28% of the country's export revenue. Admittedly, it would not have been easy for the government of a country like Nicaragua to face its creditors alone. But it could have begun questioning the legitimacy of the debts from the very institutions that had financed the dictatorship. The Sandinista government could have launched an audit of these debts by calling for citizen participation and could have gained support by the broad international movement around the demand that the debts be abolished.

Agreeing to repay the debt meant defending the interests of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie who had invested in the debt issued by Somoza and borrowed from U.S. banks. For the Sandinista government, repayment also avoided confrontation with the World Bank and the IMF. Even with the government's efforts to maintain collaboration, these institutions decided to suspend their financial relations — demonstrating how useless it was to make the concessions.

Yet after the external debt reached seven billion dollars, the FSLN government implemented a structural adjustment plan that degraded the conditions of the poor without affecting the rich. The plan, introduced in 1988, resembled the usual conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank — even while these institutions had still not resumed financial relations.

The FSLN government policies were leading the revolutionary process straight into a wall. This resulted in the Right's victory in the February 1990 election. In short, the government maintained an economic orientation that was compatible with the interests of Nicaragua's wealthy bourgeoisie and major private foreign corporations. It was an export-oriented economy based on low wages in order to remain competitive on the world market.

What prevented the revolution from advancing was the failure to put people at the core of the transition that followed the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, not overly radical policies. But this was not doomed to happen — the government should have paid more attention to the needs and aspirations of the people, in rural as well as urban areas.

To break away from the export-oriented extractivist model

that depends on competitiveness on the international market, the Sandinistas could have gone against the interests of the capitalists that still dominated extractivist industry. They could have done more to gradually implement protectionist policies in favor of the small and medium-sized producers who supplied the domestic market, and limited imports. This would not have required peasants and small and medium enterprises to sacrifice for the international market.

Instead of encouraging the masses to follow orders given from the top of the FSLN, self-organization by citizens could have been promoted at all levels; with citizens given control over the public administration as well as over the accounts of private companies. The political institutions developed under the FSLN government were not fundamentally different from those of a parliamentary democracy with a strong presidency. This structure could not, and did not, provide the basis for a counter-power when the Right was elected in 1990.

Refusal to stand up to creditors that demand repayment of an illegitimate debt is generally the beginning of the abandonment of the program of change. *If the burden of illegitimate debt is not denounced, people are condemned to bear that burden.*

We stress the issue of illegitimate debt because, should the oppressive regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo be replaced, it would be essential for a popular government to call into question debt repayment. Should the Right take leadership in the overthrow of the regime, we can be certain that it will not call the debt into question.

In 1989 the FSLN government reached an agreement with the Contras that put an end to fighting, which was of course a positive development. Yet it was a Pyrrhic victory.

When the Sandinista leadership called a general election in February 1990 it felt certain it would win. Having just negotiated a peace agreement, they expected to reap 70% of the votes in the elections; they were flabbergasted by their loss. The result struck the Sandinista leadership with an overwhelming wave of panic. The Right won partly by threatening that the war would resume with an FSLN victory. The FSLN leadership hadn't perceived the growing discontent within a large portion of the population. (Many observers attributed the result to president Daniel Ortega's failure to abolish military conscription — ed.)

This illustrates the gap between the majority of the people and a leadership that had become used to giving orders. Many people wanted to avoid further bloodshed and thus reluctantly voted for the Right, hoping for a permanent end to war. Others were disappointed by the FSLN government's policies in the countryside (deficient agrarian reform) and in cities (negative consequences of the austerity measures enforced by the structural adjustment program begun in 1988), although Sandinista organizations could still rely on support among young people, workers and civil servants, as well as among a significant number of farm laborers.

After the stunning electoral defeat, Daniel Ortega adopted an attitude that swung back and forth between compromise with the government and confrontation. The Sandinista leadership, with Daniel and Humberto Ortega at its head, negotiated the transition with Violeta Chamorro's new government.

Humberto was still General in Chief of a starkly reduced army. The most left-wing members of the army had been dismissed. Further, on his order four Sandinista

officers were imprisoned under the pretext that they supplied missiles to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which was attempting an uprising in El Salvador.

A few months into Violeta Chamorro's term, a movement protesting massive layoffs in the public services gathered steam. Trade unions launched a general strike and Sandinista barricades were set up in Managua and cities across the country. But the struggle was cut short with the FSLN working out a compromise with Chamorro's government.

While some austerity measures were withdrawn, others remained; part of the Sandinista grassroots were disgruntled by the terms of the settlement. This was to be the pattern: the grassroots would mobilize, the FSLN would work out a compromise, and austerity continued. The public sector in both agriculture and manufacturing was reduced, the public banking sector dismantled and the State's monopoly on foreign trade ended. Chamorro incorporated former Contras into the police force. Austerity advanced.

It must be acknowledged that after the victory of the Right, a significant part of the estates formerly expropriated from the Somocistas after the 1979 victory were appropriated by a few Sandinista leaders. Those who organized this "piñata" claimed to be securing assets for the FSLN against a government that might want to confiscate the Party's assets.

Daniel Ortega's Consolidation of Power

A grouping of Sandinista militants from the revolutionary period came to reject the leadership's orientation in the years that followed. That took time, and Daniel Ortega took advantage of the slow dawning of awareness to consolidate his influence within the FSLN, marginalizing or excluding those who defended a different orientation.

Simultaneously, he succeeded in maintaining privileged relations with a number of leaders of popular Sandinista organizations who felt that in the absence of anyone else, he was the leader most likely to defend the gains made during the 1980s. That explains in part why in 2018 the Ortega regime still retained the support of part of the population. This remained true despite his use of extremely brutal methods of repression.

Ortega's consolidation of power within the FSLN in the 1990s is best summed up by in a 2014 article by Mónica Baltodano, former guerrilla commander, former member of the FSLN leadership and now a member of the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo (*Movimiento por el Rescate del Sandinismo* — MpRS):

"The dispute within the FSLN between 1993 and 1995 [which culminated in a large number of professionals, intellectuals and others splitting away, many of them to form the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), which is different from Mónica Baltodano's MpRS that was founded later] persuaded Ortega and his iron circle of the importance of controlling the party apparatus. That became more concretized precisely in the FSLN's 1998 Congress, in which what remained of the National Directorate, i.e. the Sandinista Assembly and the FSLN Congress itself, were replaced with an assembly whose participants were mainly the leaders of the grassroots organizations loyal to Ortega. Little by little even that assembly stopped meeting. At that point an important rupture occurred. By then it was already evident that Ortega was increasingly distancing himself from leftist positions and centering

his strategy on how to expand his power. His emphasis was power for power's sake."

Mónica Baltodano goes on to explain the building of alliances that ultimately led to Daniel Ortega's coming back to the presidential office:

"An alliance-building process started then to increase his power. The first was with President Arnoldo Alemán, which produced the constitutional reforms of 1999-2000. Ortega's central aims in that alliance were to reduce the percentage needed to win the presidential elections on the first round, divvy up between their two parties the top posts in all state institutions [such as the Electoral Council, the Court of Auditors and the Supreme Court] and guarantee security to the FSLN leaders' personal properties and businesses [acquired during and after the piñata]. In exchange, he guaranteed Alemán "governability" by putting a stop to strikes and other struggles for grassroots demands.

"The FSLN stopped opposing the neoliberal policies. In the following years, the main leaders of the party's once mass organizations became National Assembly representatives or were brought into the structures of Ortega's circle of power. With that they obviously stopped resisting and struggling for all the things they had once believed in. Those years also saw the forming of "ties" — I wouldn't call it an alliance — with the head of the Catholic Church, Cardinal Obando. The main purpose of that linkage was control of the electoral branch of government through Obando's personal, intimate relation with Roberto Rivas, who had been heading the electoral branch since 2000. It also bought Ortega increased influence with both the Catholic faithful and the church hierarchy."

After Alemán was charged with corruption and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment, the agreement he had concluded with Ortega proved to be profitable: Ortega saw to it that the men he had placed in the judicial system arranged preferential treatment for Alemán, allowing him to serve out his sentence under house arrest.

Later, in 2009, two years after his election as president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega gave his support to the Supreme Court's decision to quash Alemán's conviction and release him. A few days later Alemán returned the favor by ensuring that the parliamentary group of the Liberal Party he led voted for the election of a Sandinista at the head of the National Assembly.

The constitutional reforms of 1999-2000 reduced the percentage needed to win the presidential election on the first round to 35% of the votes if the candidate has a five percent margin over the candidate coming in second. Ortega was elected with 38.07% of the votes in November 2006 and took office in January 2007. He was re-elected in November 2011 and again in November 2016. In the 2016 election, Ortega's longtime partner Rosario Murillo ran and was elected as his vice president. (She had long been government spokesperson.)

Revolution Betrayed

Since 2007, the policies which have been implemented by Ortega and Murillo have looked more like the policies pursued by the three right-wing governments that succeeded one another between 1990 and 2007 than a continuation of the Sandinista experience from 1979-1990.

Over the past 12 years, Daniel Ortega's government did not carry out any structural reform: there was no socialization of the banks, no new agrarian reform despite the very important concentration of land in the hands of big landowners, no



Hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguans heeded the Catholic bishop's call for a "March for Peace and Dialogue" on April 28, 2018 in Managua (pictured here) and in departmental capitals around the country. Demonstrators wear blue and white or carry blue and white flags that represent the Nicaraguan flag, differentiating themselves from the traditional red and black FSLN colors.

tax reform in favor of more social justice.

Free-trade zone regimes have been expanded. Contracting of internal and external debt has been pursued under the same conditions that favor the creditors through the interest payments they receive and that allow them to impose policies in their favor through blackmail.

In 2006, the Sandinista parliamentary group voted hand in hand with the right-wing MPs in favor of a law totally prohibiting abortion. There are no exceptions whatsoever, including cases of danger to the health or life of the pregnant woman or pregnancy resulting from rape. Under his presidency Ortega has refused to call the measure into question. In fact the prohibition was included in the new criminal code that entered into force in July 2008.

This retrograde legislation was accompanied by serious attacks on organizations defending women's rights. And over the years they have been among the most active in opposition to the Ortega government. In another very troubling development, references to the Catholic religion have been systematically used by the regime, in particular by Rosario Murillo, who has made a point of denouncing women's rights organizations and the support they receive from abroad in their struggle for the right to abortion as being "the Devil's work."

Nicaragua is still characterized by very low wages. ProNicaragua, the official agency promoting foreign investment in the country, brags of "[t]he minimum wage [being] the most competitive at the regional level, which makes Nicaragua an ideal country to set up labor-intensive operations." Over the recent years, labor insecurity starkly increased: the informal

economy represented 60% of the total employment in 2009, a figure which stood at 80% by 2017.

While the number of millionaires increased, no progress was made towards a diminution of social inequalities. The growth in wealth, with the help of Daniel Ortega's government, has mainly benefitted national and international capital. Furthermore, Ortega and his family have become wealthier.

The main trigger of the social protests that started in April 2018 was the announcement by Ortega's government of neoliberal measures to be taken concerning social security, in particular pension reform. These measures were advocated by the IMF, with which Ortega has maintained excellent relations since he took office.

In a statement published in February 2018, the IMF congratulated the government for its achievements: "Economic performance in 2017 was above expectations and the 2018 outlook is favorable ... Staff recommends that the INSS [Nicaraguan Social Security Institute] reform plan secures its long-term viability and corrects the inequities within the system. Staff welcomes the authorities' efforts to alleviate INSS' financing needs."

The most unpopular measures were a five percent decrease of the pensions meant to finance medical expenses and a limitation of the annual indexation of these pensions over the inflation rate. Future pension benefits for the close to one million workers affiliated to the pension system would be based on a less favorable calculation, resulting in deep cuts in benefits.

These were the measures that sparked a mass protest movement, at first mainly composed of students and young

people. Other protest movements, especially the mainly peasant- and indigenous-based movements against the construction of a transoceanic canal, quickly joined. (The canal, meant as an alternative to the Panama Canal, would, if built, endanger both the environment and livelihoods of peasants along the proposed route.)

Ortega did postpone the social security reforms but not before he initiated a spiral of repression which resulted in more than 300 protesters being killed by security forces and pro-regime militiamen.

Joining the protesters was a population horrified by the government's repressive response. The protests radicalized, demanding not only the release of those imprisoned, but demanding the fall of the regime.

While unable to provide any evidence, the government accused the protesters of being right-wing "golpistas" and "terrorists" who were working towards regime change with the support of U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, Ortega and Murillo strengthened their use of religious fundamentalist references and denounced the protesters as having "Satanic" rituals and practices, as opposed to the rest of the Nicaraguan people, "because the Nicaraguan people are God's people!"

On 19 July 2018, during the rally on the anniversary of the Sandinista revolution to try and strengthen his legitimacy, Ortega repeated these absurd "Satanic" claims and called on the Catholic bishops to exorcize the protesters and chase out the devil which supposedly had taken possession of them.

By the middle of July, the government's policy of terror regained control of the streets. Subsequently mass arrests took place and several hundred people, labelled as "terrorists" by the government, remain imprisoned, some tortured and forced to give false confessions.

By Way of Conclusion

The Sandinista Revolution started as an extraordinary experience of social liberation and renewal of national dignity in a dependent country whose status as a backyard for U.S. imperialism had been accepted by its authoritarian, dynastic rulers for decades.

The achievements of the Sandinista government between 1979 and 1990, while they allowed for significant improvements of the living conditions of most of the Nicaraguans, did not break with the export-oriented extractivist model dominated by big capital. Nor did they promote active citizen participation in the economic and political decision-making



Amaya Coppens was one of the many arrested and detained students.

processes.

The fact that the political institutions and internal organization of the FSLN were left undeveloped allowed neoliberalism to regain a foothold. Further, there were no tools people could use to prevent the Ortega regime from corrupting the other government institutions.

This understanding of the Nicaraguan revolution and its degeneration stresses the need for revolutionaries and socialist activists to encourage the broadest possible participation of the masses in the fight for their emancipation as well as to maintain their self-organization.

A corollary is the need for revolutionaries to struggle against the bureaucratization of their organizations' leadership — beginning with building organizations that respect internal democracy.

This was underestimated by the FSLN, which remained a political-military organization after it had seized power. It did not even organize its first congress as a political organization until 1991.

After the victory of the Right in 1990, the subsequent steps taken by the FSLN leadership under Daniel Ortega were clearly meant for him to return to power for power's sake. The left wing of the FSLN, which organized critical currents during the 1990s, was too timid in its opposition.

Finally, the international Left needs to have a materialist analysis of social and political processes. There is no reason to cling to fantasized ideas of "really existing socialism." The evolution of the FSLN and the policies they led in Nicaragua since 2007 should be analyzed for what they are, rather than on the basis of what Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo presumably stood for as FSLN activists during the 1970s and 1980s.

Clearly Ortega and Murillo's deepening of the neoliberal policies pursued by their right-wing predecessors, as well as their total ban on abortion, should be denounced by the international Left. Furthermore, the Left should strongly oppose the repression currently organized against the protesters and demand the immediate release of all political prisoners.

In adopting such a stance, the Left should in no way compromise itself by supporting a right-wing, pro-imperialist opposition. On the contrary, this stance should be accompanied by an effort to link with, and reinforce, the critical Sandinistas and other members of the progressive opposition to Ortega and Murillo. We need to look toward the youth who have mobilized strongly since April 2018, to the feminist movement, and to the peasant and indigenous movements who have opposed the transoceanic canal and other destructive projects linked with the export-led capitalist model. ■

“Sandinismo Is in the Streets”

By Dianne Feeley

MORE THAN 100,000 U.S. citizens went to Nicaragua between the 1979 overthrow of the Somoza regime and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas (FSLN) in 1990. I was among them, planting trees in Managua while my own government armed the Contra war. Others went on health brigades, bringing needed medicines to hospitals and clinics, or volunteered on farms.

Wherever we went, we met Nicaraguans who were transforming their lives. I was there for a month in the fall of 1984, during the first election campaign. As the right wing boycotted the election, I attended various debates among leftist candidates. It was an exciting moment.

When the Sandinistas were defeated in 1990 by center-right politicians backed by Washington, I was shocked. Yet I realized the brutality of the Contra war had worn people down. The Sandinista government, in placating the wealthy, had placed the heavy burden of conscription on poor and working people. People desired peace.

Despite the various errors of the FSLN, I hoped that they would “govern from below,” and that a vibrant civic movement could limit the right’s ability to roll back reforms. But even during the transition, FSLN politicians grabbed state property for themselves.

Failing to distinguish between what belonged to the party and what to the state had been a problem from the beginning, but now leaders took what they said belonged to them for all of their years of struggle.

The second problem surfaced when Daniel Ortega’s stepdaughter accused him of sexual molestation. Her mother, Rosario Murrillo, Ortega’s longtime partner and today the country’s vice president, denied the accusation. Although supported by feminists, Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo was

*Dianne Feeley is an editor of Against the Current. She has followed the process of the Nicaraguan Revolution since her month-long visit in 1984. Most of her material is based on articles from *envío* magazine, NACLA’s Report on the Americas and the New York Times. In recent years ATC has run an occasional article by Midge Quandt on the independent women’s movement and more recently Mike Gonzalez’s review of Dan LaBotz’s What Went Wrong. The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis (see ATC Sept./Oct. 2017).*

unable to have her case heard by the FSLN ethics commission. Eventually she felt forced to leave the country.

The internal life of the FSLN became even less democratic as Daniel Ortega consolidated his political machine and moved to the right. Historic leaders from the Sandinista government — including former Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal, Vice-President Sergio Ramirez, and Dora María Téllez, the first Minister of Health — withdrew when they were unable to effect change within the party.

Ortega made a pact with the conservative Liberal Alliance headed by Arnoldo Alemán. Further, just a month before the elections, he cemented his alliance with the reactionary Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo by arranging for FSLN legislators to replace the longstanding therapeutic abortion law with a stricter one.

The following year a Human Rights Watch report, “Over Their Dead Bodies,” outlined the effects of the blanket ban. It not only cut access to abortion, but created a climate of fear so that women with pregnancy-related complications felt they had no one to turn to.

Ortega regained the presidency in 2006 with 38% of the vote. Eric Toussaint’s article in this ATC discusses his moves to consolidate power by denying political opponents ballot status and using his office to remold and corrupt the judicial, legislative and electoral branches of government.

Despite the authoritarianism of the regime, until recently Ortega has been able to maintain his popularity. Partly that is because Washington has always opposed him, partly because he maintained an anti-imperialist rhetoric and partly because he paid attention to his base of support in the street.

During Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez government, Nicaragua received more than 90% of its oil at very favorable prices. As a result, Ortega had an extra annual \$500 million to use without any institutional oversight. Approximately 38% of the sum subsidized various low-income projects; the remainder was invested in profit-generating businesses or set aside as reserves. Since 2015 Venezuela cut its oil exports by two-thirds; the low-income projects have diminished.

Confrontations

On April 3, 2018 a forest fire in the Indio-Maiz Biological Reserve blazed out of control. Initially Rosario Murrillo minimized the extent of the blaze and rejected help from Costa Rican firefighters. Three days later, students at Central American University (UCA) protested this indifference. They held the government responsible for the invasion of non-indigenous settlers that led to the fire.

Within the week 300 students from various universities were demonstrating in front of UCA. Then an ever larger crowd decided to march through Managua, demanding information. Anti-riot police tried to stop them, beating several.

The fire lasted 10 days, destroying 5,500 hectares and a portion of the sanctuary for endangered species such as jaguars and tapirs. One environmental scientist called it “the greatest ecological catastrophe in our nation’s history.”

Just days after students returned to class, the head of the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute (INSS) announced an increase in social security taxes for both employers and workers along with cuts to pensioners’ benefits. Business leaders from COSEP, who had previously supported Ortega’s programs, had previously walked out of the talks.

When a small group of pensioners gathered on April 18 to protest the cuts, some students responded to a social media alert and joined up with them. Within a few minutes, 150 members of the Sandinista Youth (JS) showed up armed with clubs and metal tubes. They beat protesters and stole the cameras of independent journalists. Only after the appearance of 200 anti-riot police did the protesters flee, first toward an upscale mall, which closed its gates to them, and then back to the campus, which offered protection.

All this was documented by cell phones and shown on independent TV channels. The government’s response was to cut the transmissions of four TV channels. But that didn’t stop marches from spreading.

The following day, Managua residents joined the students and pensioners in hours-long confrontations. Police used bullets and snipers fired from rooftops. In the end three were dead and dozens wounded,

including one policeman. The following day Ángel Gahona, a journalist, was shot to death while covering protests in Bluefields.

On April 21, 2018, just back from a trip to Cuba, Daniel Ortega appeared in public and described the protesters as belonging to “pro-imperialist groups.” Yet the following day he withdrew the INSS “reforms” and agreed to participate in a “national dialogue” with business leaders and worker representatives. However, the business leaders conditioned their participation on an end to the violence. Ortega refused to accept the precondition.

Meanwhile COSEP leaders called for an April 23 “March for Peace and Dialogue.” Thousands joined the five-mile march as police stayed away.

Bouyed by that success, the business leaders called for expanding the dialogue to include civil society and broader issues, including an investigation into the murders, reform of the electoral system, elimination of corrupt practices and a resolution of the social security crisis. This is how the Civic Alliance came into being as a broad front and how business broke with the regime.

For their part, Catholic bishops, who Ortega had invited to participate in the dialogue, called for a “Pilgrimage for Peace.” On April 28 hundreds of thousands marched in Managua with parallel actions in departmental capitals. Once again police stayed away.

Peasants from the Council in Defense of the Land, Lake and Sovereignty arrived in truck caravans and joined the pilgrimage. They had formed five years previously in order to oppose the government’s plan to construct an environmentally damaging transcontinental canal. Their attempts to organize national protests against the canal project had been blockaded by police and some of their leaders arrested as terrorists.

This unification of urban and rural forces further strengthened the Civic Alliance. Yet the violence continued as anti-riot police and armed paramilitaries attacked students who had taken over Managua’s Polytechnic University and UCA’s Managua campus. Police attacks in Masaya, and particularly its indigenous *barrio* of Monimbó, led the population to erect barricades in what had been a historic Sandinista site.

Dialogue and Brutality

The televised dialogue sessions began on May 18 at the national Catholic seminary. Student and peasant leaders confronted Ortega and Murillo, demanding their resignation and an end to the repression.

When Ortega said he would look into the deaths if they sent him the names, one student immediately stood and began to read the names off. After each name the others shouted *¡Presente!*

Just the day before a 15-person delega-

tion from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS), arrived. After hearing testimony from 3,000 people in Managua, León, Masaya and Matagalpa, they issued a preliminary report on May 21 with 15 recommendations. The first called for an immediate end of repression and arbitrary detention.

Although the government accepted the IACHR recommendations, the violence escalated. As for the dialogue, on May 23, seeing an impasse, the bishops suspended further meetings.



April 18, 2018 anti-corruption demonstration in León: “We demand an audit of the social security system!”

After the Dialogue, More Repression

The 300,000-person Mother’s Day march on May 30, 2018, honoring mothers whose children were killed the month before, saw a resurgence of police repression: 14 killed, more than 100 wounded. Protesters did not anticipate that police would attack the march of mothers, but they did with particular brutality.

Government orders also prevented hospitals from receiving and treating the injured. Medical personnel who dared to help were subsequently fired.

In response to continuing arrests, roadblocks went up on highways and barricades built in cities. Local residents guarded them day and night. Traffic throughout the country and at the border was halted. Police trucks, accompanied by bulldozers, were deployed to destroy one after another. The last of the 200 was toppled just in time for what observers felt was a staged celebration on the anniversary of the revolution.

Between April 19 and August 4, 2018 the Nicaraguan Human Rights Center (CENIDH) estimated that 306 people were killed (21 under 17), roughly 2200 injured, 300 kidnapped (without a judicial order) of whom 148 were accused of terrorism, 180 disappeared (some of whom have resurfaced, having been tortured), 2500 jailed but released and 23,000 who went across the border, mostly to Costa Rica.

Last December the FSLN-dominated National Assembly revoked the legal status of nine non-profit organizations, accusing them of U.S. ties. This included CENIDH,

the most respected human rights organization in the country. By February 2019 the Committee of Political Prisoners listed 777 people (714 men, 60 women and three transgender women) as either in prison or under house arrest. Recently three peasant anti-canal leaders were convicted and sentenced to a total of 585 years!

The demands of the broad protest movement remain the immediate freeing of all prisoners, the resignation of the Ortega-Murillo regime and the convening of new and transparent elections. (Currently elections are scheduled for the fall of 2021.)

Of course this situation has provided Donald J. Trump and his advisors — especially Senators Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Marco Rubio (R-Florida) — with an opportunity to intervene. On November 27 Trump signed an executive order giving the Treasury Department the go-ahead to block the property and interests of specific political actors.

Other sanction tools have been applied under the Global Magnitsky Act, but most importantly last December Congress passed the Nica Act. As a result, international financial agencies have been instructed to cut off all loans.

The problems of the economy are growing under the imposition of U.S. sanctions. Compounding the current economic and political crises was passage, in early 2019, of the law increasing social security taxes and reducing pensions of future retirees.

Impasse and Conclusion

The Nicaraguan government, IACHR and the OAS had agreed that IACHR’s Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEI) would document the violent events of April and May. But December 16, the day before they were scheduled to present their findings, GIEI — along with IACHR — was “temporarily expelled.” Foreign Minister Dennis Moncada stated that the government would not accept a report full of lies.

Nicaragua, a country of nearly seven million and today primarily urban, now faces the devastating blows of both political repression and economic sanctions. Perhaps to buy more time, Daniel Ortega called for re-establishing negotiations with the opposition — while still referring to the April demonstration as an “attempted coup.”

Meanwhile, with the OAS scheduled to discuss Nicaragua at their upcoming meeting, and with the U.S. sanctions coming into force, the government began releasing political prisoners. This was to fulfill one of the IACHR recommendations the government signed in March 2018. Although the Red Cross was assigned to guarantee that the

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Fidel Castro's Rule & Legacy — Part II: Support, Manipulation & Repression By Samuel Farber

THE FACT THAT the new Cuban revolutionary government was undemocratic did not mean that it was not popular, particularly during its first 30 years. Fidel's regime enjoyed a great deal of popular support until the early nineties, when the collapse of the Soviet bloc produced a severe economic crisis in the island that alienated a substantial part of the population, especially the youth.

This support was based on four principal factors: *First, the regime was perceived by most Cubans as being honest*, an important departure from the popular view of practically all previous Cuban governments. The top revolutionary leadership surely enjoyed a much higher standard of living than the majority of the population, but based on their privileged access to all kinds of consumer goods (including travel abroad as part of official delegations) and not on their theft of public monies or in any kind of racketeering (drugs or gambling) inside Cuba.¹

Second, the regime established, with massive Soviet subsidies, an extensive and generous welfare state, particularly evident in the areas of health and in a system of education that went from universal elementary education and literacy to secondary and university education for a significant proportion of the population.

This helped to consolidate an austere but secure standard of living assuring the minimal material needs of the great majority of the population, although — like every economy based on the Soviet model — it was chronically affected by serious shortages of consumer goods and a permanent housing crisis.

Third, the departure of the upper classes and major sections of the middle classes, and a substantial population growth until the late '70s created room for considerable social mobility notwithstanding the very mediocre rates of economic growth during the entire revolutionary period.²

Last but not least was the early radicalization of large sectors of the population, and the resurgence of mass anti-imperialism, dormant since World War II, brought back to life by the threats and aggressions of U.S. imperialism, which in turn contributed to the legitimacy and support for the revolutionary government.

Samuel Farber was born and raised in Cuba and has written numerous books and articles on that country. His most recent book The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice was published by Haymarket Books in 2016. Verso Books has recently reprinted his 1990 book Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy. The first part of this article appeared in the journal International Socialist Review 112 — Spring 2019, (46-65) which has ceased publication. Of related interest, his article "Building Socialism in Cuba" (Jacobin, December 10, 2016) also appears in a newly published collection Decolonial Communism, Democracy and the Commons (Resistance Books, IIRE and Merlin Press, 2019) edited by Catharine Samary and Fred Leplat.

Fidel Castro adroitly manipulated this real and authentic support in his favor, particularly in the first years of the revolution, when he and his inner group would make fundamental decisions regarding the road the revolution would take without giving any previous clue as to what they had in mind.

Fidel's *modus operandi* involved proclaiming totally unanticipated policies never previously mentioned, much less open to any kind of discussion beyond his inner circle, and then organizing great mobilizations to show support for what he and his close associates had already decided.

Perhaps the best example of this was the Agrarian Reform law of May 1959. Even though talk about a new agrarian law had abounded since the revolutionary victory, nobody, including the mass media of all political colorations, had any idea of what it would entail and how radical it would be.

That is why even the big landlords and sugar mill owners "supported" the notion of agrarian reform and donated significant amounts of money and agricultural equipment to the new government with the clear hope of influencing its content. Once the law was promulgated, however, they fiercely opposed it since it sharply limited landholding size, established the compensation of the confiscated land based on the undervalued estimates that the owners had declared for tax purposes, and made it payable with 20-year bonds (which, in the end, were never issued.)³

To be sure, Fidel Castro's method was effective in surprising and throwing domestic and foreign enemies off balance, at least in the short term. Most important, however, was that his sudden and unexpected communication to the public, from the top, of major policy decisions like this one, prevented the autonomous political development and organization among the supporters of the revolution themselves, two indispensable elements of an authentically democratic revolution from below.

For those opposed to or critical of his decisions, Fidel resorted to an extensive and ever present apparatus of control and repression. To be sure, the saliency and importance of these repressive mechanisms varied substantially throughout his regime.

One of the first was the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), founded in September 1960. Their principal purpose was vigilance and repression, as Fidel Castro himself indicated when he called on the Cuban people to "establish against the campaign of imperialism a system of collective revolutionary vigilance, in which everyone knows who everyone is, what each person who lives on the block does, what relations he had with the tyranny, to what he is dedicated, whom he meets, and what activities he follows."⁴

Every Cuban citizen was supposed to participate in

the CDR, and those who declined were seen as not “integrated” in the revolutionary process, which seriously affected their higher education and employment prospects. With the passage of time, the CDRs acquired other functions besides political vigilance, particularly in the area of social assistance. However, with the onset of the Special Period that began in the 1990s, their functioning substantially deteriorated.

Cuban social scientists Armando Chaguaceda and Lennier López described, in a recent article, how CDR meetings and neighborhood patrols that characterized the earlier decades became extremely rare, and the fact that younger people did not care to assume the leadership of the committees at the local level.⁵ Thus, while the political control of Fidel’s regime continued to be extraordinary, it increasingly became more dependent on the supervision and surveillance of government agencies, such as State Security (*Seguridad del Estado*).

The repression of political dissidents started early on in the first years of the revolution, and included right-wing counterrevolutionaries, many of them organized and supported by the CIA, as well as supporters of the revolution. One of Fidel Castro’s first acts of repression was the purging, and in some cases the imprisonment, of local union leaders who resisted the takeover by the old Communist Party and its allies of the union confederation in 1959 and 1960.

The repression of leftists also touched the old Communist leader Aníbal Escalante, first, in 1962 for his sectarian attempt to accumulate power by excluding from government positions revolutionaries who had not belonged to the old Communist Party. He was purged and arrested again in 1968, when he and a group of his followers were accused of forming a party “micro-faction” critical of Fidel Castro’s economic policies and of attempting to rally the support of East European diplomats with whom he had regular contact.

Escalante and his closest collaborators were given long prison sentences. What distinguished this particular purge from any other is that for Fidel — and his brother Raúl, assigned to officially charge Escalante — the “micro-faction” represented an organized threat to the monolithic conception of the party that he and his brother shared and that they were trying to implement.

Besides the fact that many of the “micro-faction” criticisms of Fidel Castro’s economic policy proved to be correct later on — such as what turned out to be the disastrous effort to have a 10 million ton sugar crop in 1970 — no evidence was ever presented that Escalante and his little group were conspiring to remove or overthrow the Cuban government with or without the active support of any Eastern European Communist diplomat.⁶

Rather than combat Escalante’s “unpatriotic” behavior through political means, police methods were used instead. Of course the issue here is not that of sympathy for Escalante’s hardcore Stalinism, but whether his group was entitled to factional rights in the Cuban Communist Party rather than being criminally prosecuted for their dissent.

A much lesser known but far more significant purge of



the pro-revolutionary left involved Walterio Carbonell (1920-2008), a Cuban exponent of a particular version of Black Power politics.

Carbonell had originally been a member of the PSP (the old pro-Moscow Cuban Communists). Ironically, he had been expelled from the party for supporting Fidel Castro’s attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953. After the revolution, he served as Cuba’s Ambassador to the Algerian FLN (National Liberation

Front) then located in Tunisia.

In 1961, he published his *Crítica: Como Surgió la Cultura Nacional (Critique. How [Cuba’s] National Culture Emerged)* asserting that Black Cubans had played a major role in Cuba’s wars of independence and the establishment of the republic, and that this fact had been subsequently erased by the pre-revolutionary white racist culture and institutions.

Moreover, Carbonell argued, it was the Black Cuban experience that was at the heart of the Cuban Revolution’s radicalism. Fidel’s government, about to proclaim that the revolution had eliminated racism as part of its campaign for “national unity,” labeled Carbonell as a racially divisive figure and began to persecute him.

In 1968 Carbonell, a leading figure of a group of Black Cuban intellectuals and artists calling on the government to actively intervene against racism in the island, was arrested. He endured various forms of detention between 1968 and 1974, including compulsory labor. After his release in 1974, and as a result of continuing to defend his ideas, he was interned in various psychiatric hospitals where he was subjected to electroshock and drug therapy for another two to three years.⁷

Meanwhile, his 1961 book disappeared from circulation. It became available much later, in 2005 when, in a relatively more liberal period, the director of the National Library, where Carbonell was working as a little-known researcher, made it available on line.⁸

At various times Fidel Castro admitted the existence of large numbers of political prisoners in the island, mentioning 15,000 political prisoners at one time after having previously mentioned 20,000.⁹

These political prisoners — many, although by no means all, were right-wing opponents of the regime some of whom were also involved in the commission of violent acts with support from the U.S. government — were most often found guilty of vague, frameup charges such as enemy propaganda, contempt for authority (*desacato*), rebellion, acts against state security, clandestine printing, diffusion of false news, pre-criminal social dangerousness, illicit association, meetings and demonstrations, resistance, defamation and libel.¹⁰

Typically they received long-term sentences, frequently 20 years or longer in prison. (Under Raúl Castro, the emphasis changed from long-term sentences — there are now some 140 long-term political prisoners — to making thousands of short-term arrests every year both to prevent and to punish dissident political activity.)¹¹

It is worth mentioning that Cuba under Fidel had a very large number of common prisoners. This pattern continues

under Raul: In May 2017, Cuba occupied, with a ratio of 510 common prisoners per 100,000 persons, the sixth place among 223 prison systems in independent countries and dependent territories, surpassed only by the Seychelles, the United States of America, St. Kitts and Nevis, Turkmenistan and the U.S. Virgin Islands.¹²

Repression under Fidel's regime not only included criticism or opposition to his regime, but a much larger set of practices — for example, membership and activities in religious organizations, which in Cuba included the African religion of Abakuá, and the Jehovah's Witnesses — that escaped the control of the state, or those, like homosexuality, that shocked and did not conform to the officially accepted norms of conduct, and stood against the New Man that Fidel wanted to create.

In 1965, Fidel's government established the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (Military Units for Aid to Production) camps, where for about three years gays, along with Jehovah's Witnesses, many committed Catholics, members of the Afro-Cuban secret, but non-political, societies such as Abakuá, were forced to provide cheap, regimented labor for the Cuban State.¹³

The repression of gays was intensified at the onset of the *Quinquenio Gris* (*The Grey Quinquennium*) in 1971,¹⁴ with the declaration by the National Congress of Education and Culture that “notorious homosexuals” were not going to be tolerated in spite of their “artistic merits” because of the influence they could have on the Cuban youth.

Homosexuals who had direct contact with young people regarding cultural activities of any kind were to be transferred to other organizations and workplaces. The Congress also declared that people with “morals undermining the prestige of the revolution” would be prevented from joining any group of performers representing Cuba abroad.¹⁵

Contrary to what some North American liberals and radicals have argued, the big push for this anti-gay campaign did not come from the old pro-Moscow sector of the new Cuban Communist Party, but from a Fidel Castro determined to create among the youth a military-style discipline with a marked anti-urban bias.

Thus, in Fidel's March 13, 1963 speech at the University of Havana, he blasted the “bourgeois children” who imitated Elvis Presley and presented “freelance effeminate” shows, and then noting that given that it was not easy to straighten out adult homosexuals — “a tree that had grown twisted” — no radical measures would be taken against them, but that the young “aspiring” to be homosexuals were a different matter.

He then pointed out that rural Cuba did not produce the “subproduct” of homosexuality.¹⁶ That is why, at about the same time that the UMAPs were established, the Cuban government opened the Center for Special Education for boys considered to be “effeminate” and for those raised by single mothers believed to be at risk of becoming homosexuals. The obligatory separation of these children from the public schools was based on the notion that they could “infect” their fellow students.¹⁷

The UMAP experience and the long-lasting discrimination and persecution of Cuban gays, which seriously began to diminish only in the 1990s,¹⁸ is a test of the commonly brandished argument justifying the Cuban government's repression as a response to the real (and imagined) subversion of U.S.

imperialism and its Cuban right-wing agents.

Evidently, these repressive “cultural” campaigns had nothing to do with such enemies; instead they were aimed at the creation of Fidel's version of the New Man, instilled with Spartan military virtues, who worshiped the Cuban state and rejected the degeneracy of city living, which not incidentally facilitated Fidel Castro's aim to wholly control the life of Cubans.

Much of the admiration and respect that people in the Global South, especially Latin Americans, have for Fidel Castro comes not necessarily from his having established Communism in Cuba, but from having challenged outright the North American empire not only by affirming Cuban independence but also by sponsoring movements abroad against the local ruling classes associated with the U.S. empire.

This deepened Washington's hostility to the Cuban regime leading the United States not only to establish the economic blockade of the island but also to sponsor military invasions, terror campaigns and assassination attempts on Fidel Castro.

While it is true that Fidel Castro maintained his opposition to the U.S. empire to his last breath, his foreign policy, particularly after the late 1960s, was moved more by the defense of Cuban state interests as he defined them and by his alliance with the USSR than by the pursuit of anti-capitalist revolution.

Foreign Policy between Revolution and Reasons of State

In the early and mid-'60s, Fidel Castro sponsored revolutionary guerrillas in several Latin American countries. In the late '60s, however, the Soviet Union, interested in upholding the then-existing international balance of power that assigned Latin America to the U.S. sphere of influence, began to apply strong political and economic pressure on Cuba to play down its open support for guerrilla warfare in that part of the world.

Fidel responded by reducing, in the '70s, his support of guerrilla warfare in Latin America and turning instead to Africa, aware that his interest in supporting African liberation movements was strategically more compatible with Soviet interests in spite of their many subsequent tactical disagreements. It is this strategic alliance with the USSR that explains in many ways Fidel's apparently contradictory policies in the African continent.

On the one hand he very actively pursued a left-wing policy, with the support and collaboration of the USSR, of fighting alongside the left-wing nationalists in Angola against the right wing UNITA and the forces of South African Apartheid. On the other hand, he pursued a right-wing policy in the Horn of Africa, also in accordance with the USSR, of supporting the “leftist” bloody dictatorship in Ethiopia against Eritrea's independence movement.

That is why Fidel Castro directed the Cuban armed forces to relieve the Ethiopian troops fighting on the Ogaden front, where the war between Ethiopia and Somalia was being played out, which allowed the Ethiopians to continue their war versus the Eritreans.¹⁹ For Cuba, the support for Ethiopia's war, especially in the Ogaden region claimed by Somalia, was a war of choice, since it was neither an anti-imperialist war, and much less a war in defense of Cuban sovereignty. In this war against the Somali government, Cuba deployed, during the first quarter of 1978, no fewer than 17,000 of its troops.²⁰

In a speech delivered on April 26, 1978, Fidel Castro tried to justify his government's new position of opposing Eritrea's

independence from Ethiopia (which he had previously supported) by comparing the Eritrean liberationists to the secessionists in the American South who provoked the American Civil War.

As Nelson P. Valdés pointed out, this was a baseless comparison for a number of reasons, including the fact that the American South had been an integral part of the United States since its inception and did not constitute a separate nation. Besides, the Eritrean struggle was an authentic popular movement untainted by the racism of the Southern secessionists.²¹

In fact, the main reason why Fidel Castro changed his earlier position was that the new “left wing” Ethiopian government, unlike Haile Selassie, had taken the side of the Soviets in the Cold War.

It was for the same reasons that, to the great surprise and disappointment of the Cuban people, Fidel Castro supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, although it was also clear that Castro’s political dislike for Dubcek’s liberal policies played an important role in his decision to support the Soviet action.

Castro was also critical of the USSR, and sarcastically wondered whether Moscow would come to Cuba’s military aid in the event of a U.S. invasion. He also supported, at least implicitly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, although with much discomfort and in a low-key manner because of the high political cost that his support entailed for his leadership, since 1978, of the non-aligned movement, the great majority of whose members were strongly opposed to the Soviet intervention.²²

Even in the most radical stages of his foreign policy in the early ’60s, Fidel refrained from supporting opposition movements against governments that had good relations with Havana and rejected U.S. policy towards the island, independently of the ideological coloration of those governments.

The most paradigmatic cases of his “reasons of state” approach to Cuban foreign policy was the highly cordial relations that his government maintained with the Mexico of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and with Franco’s Spain. His support, or lack thereof, for the guerrilla and opposition movements then ongoing in Latin American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Venezuela depended on the degree to which they agreed with Cuba’s favored guerrilla strategies and political approach to the governments that the guerrillas were combating.

The Cuban Economy under Fidel

The triumph of the Revolution of 1959 ushered among the great majority of Cubans great expectations for the Cuban economy. Short term, they were looking forward to an agrarian reform and a program of economic diversification that would diminish sugar monoculture and radically improve the living standards of rural Cuba.

Responding to those expectations, the early months of the revolution saw a program of industrialization, supported by an import substitution policy, animated by the government’s popular slogan “*compre productos cubanos*” (buy Cuban products), expected to help address the chronic unemployment that not only affected rural Cuba but a high proportion of urban youth entering the labor market.

In the long run, as a 1956 study of the United States Bureau of Foreign Commerce explained, the goal of the Cuban aver-

age working person was “to reach a standard of living comparable to the American worker.”²³

During Fidel Castro’s rule, sugar production was dramatically reduced (a 57% drop between 1989 and 2000), and by the time of his death in 2016, it ranged from one to one and a half million tons a year compared with the 5-7 million that had prevailed in the 1950s. In 2018 only 1.1 million tons were produced, and Cuba had to buy sugar abroad to complete the quota assigned to Cubans in their ration books.²⁴

But this decline was not the result of a successful agricultural diversification and industrialization program. Instead, Cuba became even more dependent on imports from abroad for most of its food and industrial products. Quite aside from the problems that Cuba, like all sugar producers confronted in the international market, the Cuban government’s failure to maintain and modernize its sugar mills and the lack of diversification into various sugar byproducts sealed the fate of the industry.

Thus, for example, while Cuba reduced its capacity to produce sugar, Brazil was expanding and modernizing it, with the ability to flexibly move from the production of sugar to alcohol produced to be used as fuel.²⁵

Although sugar decay in Cuba started long before the collapse of the Soviet bloc, it was undoubtedly aggravated by it. As the reign of sugar declined under Fidel Castro’s rule, Cuba became heavily dependent on remittances from Cubans abroad and especially from the United States, the export of services such as the foreign sale of medical services and tourism, the export of nickel (Cuba is the 10th largest producer in the world), and a promising but yet relatively small pharmaceutical industry.

From a longer and comparative perspective, Cuba’s economic performance throughout Fidel’s 47 years-long regime was rather unimpressive.

Gross Domestic Product figures, an admittedly crude and problematic but still useful indicator of economic dynamism, which the Cuban government itself uses as a yardstick — although with revisions to include the social services provided free of charge in the country — show the Cuba of 1950 as ranking tenth in per capita GDP among 47 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Almost 60 years later in 2006, the year that Fidel Castro retired, Cuba ranked seventh from the bottom and was ahead of only Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia, El Salvador and Paraguay. While its overall growth rate during the period of Fidel Castro’s rule (1959-2006) was only 0.92%, it varied widely during those 47 years but was nevertheless never higher than the 2.04 percent growth it achieved for the period 1971-1989 that included the sugar boom of the ’70s.²⁶

For purposes of comparison, the rate of GDP growth in the pre-revolutionary period of 1950-58 was 1.61%, also unimpressive, but still higher than during the subsequent revolutionary period.²⁷

Supporters of the Cuban government would argue that, although useful, those figures are less revealing than the various indices published by the United Nations, and especially the Human Development Index (HDI) compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

The HDI is based on three criteria: health, education, and per capita Gross National Income. Since it was first published

in 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuban ranked seventh among the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean, and continued to rank seventh in the 2007/2008 rankings right after Fidel Castro retired.

By 2018, Cuba's ranking had descended to 73rd in the world and the 11th in Latin America and the Caribbean behind Chile (44), Argentina (47), Bahamas (54), Uruguay (55), Barbados (58), Costa Rica (63), Panama (66), Trinidad and Tobago (69), Antigua and Barbuda (70) and Saint Kitts and Nevis (72).²⁸

Thus Cuba certainly fared better in the comparative HDI scores, under Fidel and also under Raúl. However, the Index was primarily designed to measure the hardships in underdeveloped capitalist countries, and not for countries that, like Cuba, combine the problems of underdevelopment with those of Soviet-type societies.

In the specific case of Cuba, those systemic problems have included food shortages, particularly for the more than one third of the population that does not receive hard currency remittances from abroad and is disproportionately Black; scarcity of housing, clothing and toiletries;²⁹ poor public urban and interurban bus and railway transportation, except for those paying with hard currency; lack of road maintenance; irregular and sporadic garbage collection; and inadequate delivery of water and electricity, except for those lucky enough to live in or near a tourist zone.

The case of water is very revealing. On one hand, Cuba has reported being able to deliver drinking water to 95% of its population. Yet Cuba has never been able to solve the serious water shortages it has chronically experienced before the revolution, since the late 1940s.

The most important contemporary cause of that shortage has been the very deteriorated infrastructure — broken pipes and numerous leaks — a problem that originated before the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and 1990 (recently worsened by recurring droughts). As a result, 58% of the water pumped by the country's aqueducts is lost, a situation that is even worse in the case of the Havana metropolitan area, where 70% of the water is lost.³⁰

The accumulated spilled water has led to epidemics, such as the Dengue epidemics spread by the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito, that have periodically affected Cuba throughout Fidel and Raúl Castros' rule. While some of the problems listed above are common to Cuba and capitalist underdeveloped countries, others are the result of the specific problems that affect Soviet type economies in such areas as agriculture, consumer goods, such as toiletries, and personal services.

Fidel Castro continually pointed at the U.S. economic blockade, instituted in the early '60s, as the single most important explanation for the economic problems of the island. The criminal blockade undoubtedly dealt a big blow to the Cuban economy. It was particularly damaging in the early days of the revolution, when the island was totally dependent on U.S.-made machinery, technology and services for the functioning and maintenance of its infrastructure.

As a result of the blockade, much of the capital stock and inputs of the Cuban economy had to end up being replaced with equipment and other materiel resources from the Eastern bloc. It's also clear that the abolition of that blockade would have substantially benefited the island's economy during

that period.

There is no doubt that the complete abolition of the criminal blockade — already significantly modified with such measures as the authorization to sell U.S. agricultural goods to Cuba in 2001, and the liberalization of restrictions decreed by Obama, such as the recent resumption of regularly scheduled commercial flights to the island — would be a welcome development and benefit the Cuban economy, particularly in the rapidly growing tourist industry and in biotechnology and pharmaceuticals.

Unfortunately, Donald Trump's measures against Cuba, while less severe than was expected due perhaps to the pressure of the pro-Cuba-trade business lobbies such as agribusiness and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, undoubtedly constitute a setback to such prospects.

Under Trump's new rules, travel by Americans (other than Cuban-Americans) to Cuba was significantly reduced and since then the active discouragement of travel to Cuba by the State Department and the withdrawal of most U.S. diplomatic personnel from the island has further reduced the number of travelers from the United States and made it much more difficult for Cubans to obtain U.S. visas.

The latter Trumpian moves were supposedly adopted as a response to the mysterious "sonic attacks" suffered by U.S. and Canadian diplomats, although it is perhaps possible, as Peter Kornbluh has argued, that since no tourists were affected and that many of those harmed were CIA agents,³¹ the mysterious sonic phenomena were possibly the result of mismanaged CIA operations.³²

In April of this year, the U.S. government adopted new measures against Cuba in the context of its growing intervention in Venezuela to overthrow the Maduro government, a close ally of the Cuban regime.

Following the lead of John R. Bolton and Senator Marco Rubio who for a long time have been trying to "tighten the screws" on Cuba, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the full implementation of Title III of the Helms-Burton Act that will allow U.S. citizens to bring lawsuits against entities "trafficking in confiscated property" in Cuba effective May 2. This section of the Act had previously been waived by each administration since the Act's adoption in 1996.

Trump's actions will particularly affect foreign investors in Cuba who may be utilizing plant and other facilities previously confiscated from U.S. capitalists. Canada and the European Union have registered their strong objection to Title III since the legislation was adopted and continued to do so in the wake of the recent Washington measures.

As part of the April measures, the Trump administration will further restrict nonfamily travel to Cuba and will also limit money sent to the country to \$1,000 per person, per quarter. While it is true that this measure will have little effect on the great majority of remittances since these average \$200 to \$220 a month, it will have a negative impact on the relatively small but significant number of large remittances that are used in Cuba for such purposes as house renovations (often to rent them to tourists) and the opening of small businesses.

In any case, there are important facts that undermine Fidel's blaming the blockade for Cuba's economic ills in major ways. First, the United States was the only major capitalist country that boycotted Cuba. Canada, Spain, France and the

rest of Western Europe did not, and since the 1960s they have played an important role in Cuba's economic life.

The principal problem in Cuba's economic relations with these countries has been the overall scarcity of goods and services it has been able to offer for sale, and as a result, the insufficient amount of hard currency it has to pay for imports.

It is very telling that when Cuba obtained large amounts of foreign income as the result of the rise of the world price of sugar to record levels during the commodities boom of the first half of the 1970s (it increased 15-fold from 1968 to 1974), it dramatically increased its trade with the capitalist world. While the non-Communist world's share of Cuban exports (mostly sugar) rose to an all-time high of 47.3% in 1972, and remained high at 43.3% in 1974, its share of Cuban imports reached 39.5% in 1974, and peaked at 51.4% in 1975.³³

Beyond trade itself, the European capitalist countries were willing to expand their economic relations with the island. Thus, the Cuban government received more than six billion dollars in credits and loans from many of these European industrialized capitalist countries until its economic problems led it to suspend the service of these debts in 1986 — several years before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Cuba managed to negotiate this extant debt with the Paris Club only in December of 2015 when it was forgiven some of its obligations and allowed to resume the gradual repayment of the remaining debt.³⁴

Most significantly, from 1960 to 1990 Cuba received approximately \$65 billion from the Soviet Union on very favorable terms, in addition to other credits and aid from other East European countries and China. Even the most conservative estimates place the Soviet aid well above Cuba's losses from U.S. economic aggression during that period.³⁵

Thus, even though the U.S. blockade has certainly harmed the Cuban economy, it was less important than internal factors in determining its poor performance. Fidel's Cuba replicated in all its essentials the Soviet economic model, where a bureaucratic ruling class appropriates the economic surplus without any democratic planning or institutional constraints by unions or other independent popular organizations — thereby depriving the system of a mechanism equivalent to the regulating and disciplining role of the capitalist market.

It is a centralized bureaucratic system that lacks any transparency in its managerial conduct and decision making, and where managers avoid taking responsibility for economic decisions for fear of being overruled and punished by those above them, resulting in economic inefficiency and even chaos.

For their part, workers have little motivation to work since they neither have material incentives (adequate salaries and satisfactory access to consumer goods) nor political incentives (a real say and democratic control of their workplaces and communities). This lack of motivation is evident in the lack of care in the performance of their work in every sector of the state-run enterprises.

Observers of the Cuban economy reported inefficient factories under Fidel (as under Raúl Castro's rule), inflating their expenses to obtain more financial subsidies from the government, and a generalized lack of attention to the costs of production, leading to situations such as a plastics factory investing \$1.15 for every dollar's worth of merchandise produced.³⁶

These widespread patterns are part of the phenomenon of "soft budgets" of public enterprises in Soviet-type economies, and are a key element of what the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai called "shortage economies" with their accompanying waste and inefficiency. Cuba's central bureaucratic planning has produced the long-standing problems of the economy under both Fidel and Raúl Castro.

Even the Cuban government press has acknowledged the waste of resources, the overuse of energy carriers, and the existence of idle plants in enterprises. But the blame for these problems has been assigned to the lack of "economic culture" rather than to the structure and organization of the economic system itself.³⁷

Like other Soviet-type economies, Fidel Castro's Cuba was characterized by what the social scientist Charles E. Lindblom called an economy of "strong thumbs, no fingers." A "strong thumbs" economy, typical of a centralized bureaucratic administration, is one where the government is able to mobilize large numbers of people to carry out homogeneous, routine and repetitive tasks that require little variation, initiative, or improvisation to adapt to specific conditions and unexpected circumstances at the local level. Examples of such tasks are the systematic, military style preparations in anticipation of natural disasters and massive vaccination campaigns and other preventive and standardized medical tests.

In contrast, a "nimble fingers" economy allows the system to efficiently and effectively deal with issues of variety, size, design and taste in consumer goods and to adequately organize the timely coordination of complex processes inside and among the different sectors of the economy.

The consequences of having a "strong thumbs, no fingers" economy in Cuba are evident in the agricultural sector, mostly because of the inevitable and unpredictable changes in climate and local conditions, which require more local initiative, intensive care and individual motivation than in the industrial sector — and also because of the complex and time-consuming bureaucratic hurdles involved in the process of conveying the agricultural goods, which become easily damaged or quickly spoiled from the farm to the consumer.

Just a couple of years after Fidel Castro retired, a foreign journalist residing in Cuba reported that the long bureaucratic road from farm to consumer established under Fidel Castro included eleven transfer points.³⁸

Fidel's' personal interventions considerably aggravated the problems of his already malfunctioning economy. In contrast with his younger brother Raúl, who as the long-time head of the Armed Forces since the early '60s got used to delegating power through the established military hierarchies, Fidel was a micromanager, often ignoring the judgment of local workers and managers intimately familiar with the situation at hand.

Considering himself an expert after having read a few books and articles on a given issue, he would also disregard the advice of the professional experts and initiate predictably unsuccessful and wasteful projects, such as developing a new breed of the so-called FI hybrid cows, which he insisted on against the advice of the British experts he himself brought to Cuba in the 1960s.³⁹

Most disastrous of all was his campaign to achieve a totally unprecedented 10 million ton sugar crop in 1970, which not only failed but also greatly disrupted the rest of the economy

by deviating transportation and other resources from other economic sectors.

Like so many other dictators, Fidel was also inclined to gigantism, whether ordering the construction of an Olympic size swimming pool in a local recreation center when a smaller pool would have been fully adequate for the purposes at hand, or, on a far larger scale, insisting in an unnecessarily wide and wasteful eight-lane highway traversing much of the island.



This gigantism in the execution of new projects was, in many ways, the other side of the economic coin of paying little attention to the modernization, maintenance and upkeep of existing facilities, as in the case of the sugar industry which he just let fall apart.

The already meager resources of the island were thus further depleted with these and other economic interventions. The last ones Fidel undertook, based on his so-called “Battle of Ideas” campaign, took place from 2000 to 2006, when at the head of the “*Grupo de Coordinación y Apoyo del Comandante en Jefe*” (Commander in Chief’s Coordination and Support Group) that he formed outside and independently of the established agencies and institutions of his own government, he set out to “solve” certain problems meriting his attention.

One of those problems involved the educational sector affected by the massive flight of poorly compensated teachers and other professionals to the tourist industry. By fiat Fidel created a program for “emergent” teachers involving 18 and 19 year-old people, fresh out of high school, who with very little training were given teaching positions with very poor educational results.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, disregarding the economic plans and budgets set by his own government, he arbitrarily appropriated material resources for his own pet projects, such as the reconstruction of the University of Havana Law School building, which he had attended many decades earlier. When Fidel was forced to retire due to poor health in 2006, Raúl Castro immediately disbanded most of these projects along with the *Grupo de Coordinación*.

After Fidel: Raúl Castro’s Reforms

The fundamental outlines of the society built under Fidel Castro remain, although the reforms introduced by his brother Raúl in the last ten years have modified and softened some of its hardest edges.

Prompted by the urgent need for economic modernization and growth, Raúl, ever the pragmatist of the two Castros, has been trying to establish a modified version of the Sino-Vietnamese model that maintains the one-party state built by Fidel while partially opening the economy to self-employment, private enterprise and the market, resulting in some 25-30% of the active labor force becoming independent producers and service providers.

In the political realm, the state’s control of its citizenry has been liberalized. But this hasn’t been matched by the rec-

ognition of citizen rights and any degree of democratization. For example, the 2012 emigration reform, and the subsequent revisions thereof, have facilitated the movement of Cuban citizens in and out of the country, but do not recognize travel abroad as their right.

Thus, many dissidents have been prevented from leaving the country or their trips abroad have been delayed until after the events they were trying to attend have taken place. Meanwhile, the structures and politics of the one-party state with its so-called mass organizations as its transmission belts remain, along with a state-controlled monolithic mass media and the omniscient State Security who have even reached beyond Cuba to train and advise the intelligence systems of foreign countries such as Venezuela.

The new Cuban Constitution approved on February 24, 2019 does not change this political reality, leaving aside the fact that it was approved under the Cuban Communist Party’s monopoly of the mass media and the impossibility for dissenting views to organize in order to present and campaign for alternative constitutional visions.

This contrasts with the progressive Constitution of 1940, where a variety of political parties, including the Cuban Communists who played an important role in the Constitutional Convention, offered alternative views that were partially incorporated into the constitutional text.

Reluctant to deviate too much from the Soviet model of economic control he inherited from his older brother, Raúl’s reforms have been relatively modest and contradictory, as shown by the almost cyclical restrictions and subsequent relaxation of the rules for urban self-employment,⁴¹ probably stemming from the government’s fear of losing control of the economy, but which is hardly reassuring to the small, sometimes tiny, businesses operating in the island.

Another, very important example are the agricultural reforms Raúl Castro introduced early on to solve the shortage of agricultural products, granting leases to individuals to work the land. The 169,434 people who obtained those leases from 2008 until 2016 have been facing numerous obstacles that have prevented the reform from yielding positive results.

Most of these obstacles are government made: In contrast with the five-year and permanent leases typically granted by the Chinese and Vietnamese governments, Raúl’s government only granted 10-year leases, renewable for 10 years; their recent extension to two 20-year terms and doubling of the maximum size of the land allotments will probably not be enough to provide positive prospects to the new leaseholders.

These farmers — like the 589,000 (as of 2018) urban “*cuenta propistas*” (people who work for themselves, but also hire others) — cannot obtain the inputs they need at wholesale prices and bank loans for an amount sufficient to operate and keep their usually small enterprises afloat.⁴² Moreover, the new agricultural lessees must sell most of their produce to Acopio, the state enterprise that also determines the purchasing prices. It is only what remains after Acopio has taken its share that the lessees can sell on their own at market prices, thus discouraging production.

As in the days of Fidel Castro’s rule, Cuban agriculture continues to suffer from organizational and bureaucratic ineptness. In 2016, for example, the official Cuban press acknowledged the serious problem of insufficient and inad-

equate packaging of processed agricultural products for the retail market. Thus the available 3.2 kilogram cans of tomato paste are too large and, at the cost of 130 pesos, too expensive for the retail trade.⁴³

Another article reported that in Eastern Cuba near Guantánamo⁴⁴ the tomato crop was lost because of the lack of industrial facilities to process it. Mundubat, a Basque NGO, recently estimated that Cuba loses 57% of the food it produces.⁴⁵

Partly because of the slowdown of the rise in tourism that had taken place during Obama's second period — due, in part, to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in December of 2014 — Cuba achieved negative GDP growth of -0.9% in 2016, a low 1.6% in 2017 and an even lower 1.2% growth in 2018. The government projects a growth of 1.5 percent for 2019, all of which is well below the 5-7% growth that economists estimate it would take for Cuba to embark on a course of economic growth.

More worrisome is that the rate of new investment, necessary to replenish the capital stock has become among the lowest in Latin America, dropping below 12% of GDP. With government forecasts indicating lower investments in the near future, the rate of gross capital formation may descend to slightly over 10%, barely half the rate of investment considered necessary for economic development.⁴⁶

Productivity is sliding too. Agricultural yields — with the exception of potatoes — are well below the rest of Latin America. In industry, biotechnology is the only sector that enjoys high productivity relative to the region.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, inequality — to a significant degree contained during Fidel's rule — has grown. This is due to a number of factors that include the differential access to remittances from abroad (Black Cubans are much less likely to obtain them), and higher incomes in the growing private sector.

It is also the result of racial discrimination, for which the government bears a heavy responsibility with its racially blind policies, although "affirmative action" exceptions have been made in specific instances such as in the racial composition of the Central Committee of the CCP. Experts put some 25% of the population below the poverty line, although that is just an estimate since the government has for over 20 years refused to release any data on poverty and inequality.

But the stark reality is that were it not for the remittances — more than three billion dollars — from Cuban-Americans in the United States and to a lesser extent from Spain and elsewhere, most Cubans would not be able to satisfy their most basic needs with their own earnings.

In 2017, Cubans earned on average 786 Cuban pesos a month.⁴⁸ Those pesos are used to acquire a diminishing number of goods, mostly through the shrinking rationing system, which the government plans to abolish. An increasing number of basic goods have to be acquired with CUCs (the Cuban equivalent of American dollars, each CUC costing approximately 25 Cuban pesos), making them unaffordable.

The purchasing power of average Cubans has been further eroded by inflation: the average state salary in 2016 represented 39% of its value in 1989 and 50% in the case of pensions.⁴⁹

Free education and health services have offset part of those losses. However, that is changing as the deterioration

of schools, which began after the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s, has led to an exponential growth of private tutoring, often provided by the schoolteachers themselves, as a source of income. A parallel development has been taking place in the health sector, with the growing practice of providing gratuities to doctors and other medical personnel in order to insure proper attention.

This deterioration has continued the reversal of many of the positive gains achieved by the revolutionary government in its early decades. Thus, for example, 390 Cuban schools were closed in the country for structural safety reasons before the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year.⁵⁰

According to Minister of Education Ena Elsa Velázquez Cobiella, Cuba's education system was still short of 16,000 teachers in 2016,⁵¹ even after 17,800 retirees, part-timers, university students and others were enticed to return to the classroom in recent years. Even so, the number of classroom teachers declined from 218,570 in the academic year 2008-2009 to 194,811 in the year 2016-2017. This is hardly surprising, since the average monthly compensation in the educational sector in 2016 was 533 pesos (\$21), well below the then-average state salary of 740 pesos.⁵²

The widespread physical deterioration of public buildings and facilities has affected not only schools but also hospital and other medical centers except for those set aside for the hard-currency medical tourism. To cap it all, the massive export of medical personnel to Venezuela (in exchange for oil), and to other foreign countries (in exchange for hard currency) has taken a heavy toll on the medical services provided to the Cuban people in the island.⁵³

Thus the number of family doctors in Cuba shrunk by 40%. At the same time, while the total number of doctors rose 21% (including those sent abroad,) the total health personnel decreased 22% in 2008-2016 and the number of hospitals declined 32% in 2007-2016.⁵⁴

Fidel's system endures, but it is foundering, primarily for internal reasons. Cuba has a new president, Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, born after the 1959 revolution, although Raúl Castro continues to be the First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party and head of the Armed Forces.

It remains to be seen whether, as the historic generation of revolutionary leaders passes away within the next several years, the new Communist leaders will proceed to fully establish the Sino-Vietnamese model or attempt to hold on to Raúl Castro's status quo. ■

Notes

1. In 1989, General Arnaldo Ochoa and three other high army officers were accused of engaging in the international drug traffic and executed. In light of Fidel Castro's concerns with every aspect of Cuban life and his micro-managing tendencies, it is hard to believe that he was not aware and that at least he did not "look the other way" before the trafficking group's activities, mostly on behalf of the Cuban state's treasury, threatened to become an international scandal. However, the drugs involved were not destined for domestic consumption in Cuba.

2. Starting in the late '70s, Cuba has been facing a growing demographic crisis with a declining birth rate, substantial emigration and an aging of its population.

3. The agrarian reform policy was not even developed by the revolutionary government's cabinet but by a group secretly meeting at Che Guevara's home with the substantial participation of PSP (the old pro-Moscow Communists) members but excluding the cabinet's liberals, social democrats and revolutionary anti-imperialists alike. This was a clear demonstration of the growing power of the PSP-Raúl Castro-Che Guevara tendency within the revolutionary camp. John Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara. A Revolutionary Life*, New York: Grove Press, 1997, 404-6.

4. Cited by César Escalante in "Los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución," *Cuba Socialista*, 1, septiembre 1961, 70.

5. Armando Chaguaceda and Lennier López, "Cuban Civil Society, Its Present Panorama," *New Politics*, Winter 2018, 40.

6. Samuel Farber, "Cuba in 1968," *Jacobin*, April 29, 2018.
7. Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 274.
8. bdigital.bnjn.cu/secciones/publicaciones/libros/walterio_carbonell/1A_%20cultura%20_nacional.pdf Unfortunately, Cuba's growing but still expensive Internet coverage will still prevent many Cubans, and especially Black Cubans who are even less likely to have Internet access, to have the opportunity to become acquainted with Carbonell's views. In any case, as of the publishing of this article, the site cannot be accessed.
9. Ignacio Ramonet, *Fidel Castro: Biografía a dos voces* (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, 2006), 486, and Fidel Castro interview with Lee Lockwood, *Playboy*, January 1967, 74.
10. Amnesty International, *Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Cuba*, London: Amnesty International, June 30, 2010, 9-10.
11. See Amnesty International report for Cuba 2016/2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/es/countries/americas/cuba/report-cuba/>
12. Roy Walmsley, Institute for Criminal Policy Research, *World Prison Brief, World Prison Population List*, 11th edition, May 2017.
13. Ian Lumdsen, *Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1996), 65-70.
14. The late distinguished Cuban architect Mario Coyula Cowley persuasively argued that the Gray Period actually lasted a bitter 15 years ("Trinquenio Amargo") and began much earlier in the 1960s. Mario Coyula, "El Trinquenio Amargo y la ciudad distópica: autopsia de una utopía," *Criterios*, www.criterios.es/PDF/coyulatrinquenio.pdf.
15. Cited from excerpts from *Granma Weekly Review*, May 9, 1971, 5 in Allen Young, *Gays Under the Cuban Revolution* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981), 32-33.
16. *Departamento de Versiones Taquigráficas del Gobierno Revolucionario*, "Discurso pronunciado por el Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz, primer ministro del gobierno revolucionario de Cuba, en la clausura del acto para conmemorar el VI aniversario del asalto al palacio presidencial celebrado en la escalinata de la Universidad de la Habana, 13 de marzo de 1963," [cuba.cu, www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/fl130363e.html](http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1963/esp/fl130363e.html)
17. Lillian Guerra, "Gender Policing, Homosexuality and the New Patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965-1970," *Social History*, 35, 3, August 2010, 274.
18. For example, the compulsory isolation of HIV-positive Cubans came to an end in 1993.
19. William M. LeoGrande, "Cuban-Soviet relations and Cuban policy in Africa," in Carmelo Mesa-Lago and June S. Belkin (eds.) *Cuba in Africa* (Pittsburgh: Center for Latin American Studies, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 1982), 41.
20. Wayne S. Smith, *The Closest of Enemies: A Personal Account of U.S.-Cuban Diplomatic Relations Since 1957* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 40.
21. Nelson P. Valdés, "Cuba's involvement in the Horn of Africa: The Ethiopian-Somali War and the Eritrean Conflict," Mesa-Lago and Belkin, ed. *Cuba in Africa*, 80, 84.
22. Initially, Cuba did not explicitly support the invasion, but refused to support and voted against (rather than abstain) a UN resolution condemning it, with Cuban foreign minister Raúl Roa claiming that "we shall not vote against socialism." Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 351.
23. United States Department of Commerce, *Investment in Cuba*, 24.
24. Juan Triana Cordoví, "La dulce francesa," *Rebelión*, October 22, 2018. <http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=248056>
25. *Ibid.*
26. Frank W. Thompson, "Reconsidering Cuban Economic Performance in Retrospect," paper delivered at the conference "The Measure of a Revolution: Cuba, 1959-2009," May 7-9, 2009, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 3-4, 6, 7. This is one of several revisions of Thompson's article "Cuban Economic Performance in Retrospect," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 37, no. 3 (Summer 2005). The important Cuban economist Pavel Vidal estimated that at best Cuba's GDP grew just over one percent in the period 1960-2017. Joaquín P. Pujol, "Cuban Economy Today and Perspectives for the Future, *Summary of Findings of 28th Annual ASCE* [Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy], November 13, 2018.
27. Frank W. Thompson, *Ibid.*
28. Human Development Indices and Indicators. *2018 Statistical Update*. [United Nations Development Program. Human Development Reports] hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2018_human_development_statistical_update.pdf. The historical record of HDI figures has been seriously questioned by the Cuban economists Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Jorge F. Pérez-López who argue that the lack of basic statistics to estimate the economic component of the HDI, and of reliable statistics for all three components in the years 1997-2000, have often made it technically impossible to determine the HDI for Cuba. Even the United Nations excluded Cuba from various tables in 2001 and entirely from the major HDI computation for lack of reliable information in 2010. It is also very puzzling as to how Cuba maintained its high standing in spite of the major economic crisis that started in the 1990s at least in terms of the economic dimension of the HDI. See chapter 4, "Cuba and the Human Development Index," in Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Cuba's Aborted Reform: Socio-Economic Effects, International Comparison, and Transition Policies* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2005), 111-130.
29. Shortages of toilet paper even when television stations report how well production is going are common in Cuba. See Irina Pino, "Looking After Your Behind," *Havana Times*, October 28, 2017. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=128080>
30. The official Cuban press has occasionally reported on water shortages. See Lianet Arias Sosa y Lourdes Pérez Navarro, "Salideros: ¿con el agua al cuello?," *Granma*, 9 de enero 2010, 4; Livia Rodríguez Delis, "Asignar y controlar el agua en el Plan de Economía," *Diario Granma* 14, no. 356 (21 diciembre de 2010), <http://granma.co.cu/2010/12/21/nacional/artic06.html>; and see elsewhere "Déficit de agua afecta a capital cubana," *Cuba a la Mano*, 21 enero 2011, <http://cubaalamano.net/sitio/client/brief.php?id=8723>; Erasmo Calzadilla, "Water and the Old Vets," *Havana Times*, November 14, 2011. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=55578>; *Redacción IPS Cuba*, "La Habana sigue con sed, pese a las lluvias," *Wednesday*, June 20, 2012, http://www.ips.cuba.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4545;
- la-habana-sigue-con-sed-pese-a-las-lluvias, Patricia Grogg, "La escasez de agua adquiere rostro de mujer en Cuba," *Interpress Service en Cuba*, November 24, 2015. <http://www.ips.cuba.net/sociedad/la-escasez-de-agua-adquiere-rostro-de-mujer-en-cuba/#more-23579>
31. Samuel Farber, "Trump's Cuba Rollback," *Jacobin*, June 20, 2017 and Peter Kornbluh, "What the US Government is not telling you about those 'sonic attacks' in Cuba," *The Nation*, March 7, 2018.
32. A recent investigation by Adam Entous and Jon Lee Anderson reaches no conclusion as to whom may have been responsible for the sonic attacks, but hints about the possible responsibility of Alejandro Castro Espín, a colonel in Cuba's Interior Ministry, who disappeared from public view and seems to have been dismissed from his post by his father Raúl Castro. Adam Entous and Jon Lee Anderson, "Letter from Cuba," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2018.
33. Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 191-92.
34. Daniel Munevar, Cuba: What lies beneath the agreements on the debt with the Paris Club and other creditors? *CADTM*, January 7, 2016, <http://www.cadtm.org/Cuba-What-lies-beneath-the/>.
35. Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Market, Socialist and Mixed Economies: Comparative Policy and Performance: Chile, Cuba and Costa Rica* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 609.
36. Fernando Ravsberg, "La Resistencia Pasiva," *BBC Mundo, Cartas desde Cuba*, December 24, 2009. http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/mundo/cartas_desde_cuba/2009/12/la_resistencia_pasiva.html.
37. Roberto Campbell Tross, a professor of political economy in the city of Ciego de Avila, as told to Yalín Orta Rivera et al. in "Crisis económica mundial también afecta economía cubana," *Juventud Rebelde*, 14 de junio 2009, www.juventudrebelde.cu
38. Fernando Ravsberg, "El Embudo Agrícola," *BBC Mundo, Cartas desde Cuba*, May 6, 2010, www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/mundo/cartas_desde_cuba/2010/05/el_mundo_agricola.html.
39. Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro*, New York: Norton, 1993, 623-29.
40. Manuel Paz Ortega, "'The Battle of Ideas' and the Capitalist Transformation of the Cuban State," *International Viewpoint*, February 8, 2007. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1207>
41. See, for example, Leticia Martínez, "Adecuan normas jurídicas para el trabajo por cuenta propia," *Granma*, 5 de diciembre de 2018, <http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2018-12-05/adeccuan-normas-juridicas-para-el-trabajo-por-cuenta-propia-05-12-2018-21-12-22>
42. For some of the problems confronting the approximately 30% of Cuba's labor force that does not work for the government see Carmelo Mesa-Lago, coordinator, Roberto Veiga González, Lenier González Mederos, Sofía Vera Rojas, Anibal Pérez-Liñán, *Voces de Cambio en el Sector No Estatal Cubano. Cuentapropistas, usufructuarios, socios de cooperativas y compraventas de viviendas* (Madrid, Spain: Iberoamericana, Vervuert), 2016.
43. Mariana Martín González, *Odalís Riquenes Cutiño y Lisandra Gómez Guerra, "Incongruencias ¿enlatadas?" Juventud Rebelde*, domingo, 25 de Diciembre de 2016, 04.
44. Lilibeth Alfonso, "Tomatoes are Rotting in Guantanamo," *Havana Times*, March 15, 2017. <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=124178>
45. "Cuba Pierde 57 Por Ciento de los Alimentos que Produce," *Redacción de On Cuba Magazine*, 23 de mayo de 2017. <http://oncubamagazine.com/economia-negocios/rendimiento-de-agricultura-cubana-entre-los-mas-bajos-del-continente/>
46. Pedro Monreal González, "El plan de desarrollo hasta 2030: ¿cuadrar los plazos y las cuentas?" *Cuba Posible. Un Laboratorio de Ideas*, julio 20 del 2016, <https://cubaposible.com/el-plan-de-desarrollo-hasta-2030-cuadrar-los-plazos-y-las-cuentas>
47. Personal communication of the Cuban economist Omar Everlery Pérez-Villanueva, July 19, 2016.
48. *El Economista Inquieto*, "Salario Medio en Cuba...cifras y estadísticas," *Granma*, 29 de junio de 2017, <http://www.granma.cu/economia-con-tinta/2017-06-29/salario-medio-en-cuba-cifras-y-estadisticas-29-06-2017-23-06-02>
49. Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "Aging, Employment, Wages and Social Welfare in Cuba: Would they Change Under Diaz-Canel?" Presentation at the Bildner Center of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York on June 4, 2018.
50. Daniel Benítez, "Cuba tiene más de 11 mil maestros inactivos que se niegan a retornar a las aulas," *Café Fuerte*, September 2, 2016. <http://cafeuerte.com/cuba29708-cubamas-11-mil-maestros-inactivos/>
51. Caridad Carrobello and Lilian Knight, "Educación: Brújulas para hoy y mañana," *Bohemia*, August 23, 2017. <http://bohemia.cu/en-cuba/2017/08/educacion-brujulas-para-hoy-y-manana/> At the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, the minister of education Ena Elsa Velázquez estimated that Cuban schools were still short of 10,000 teachers. "Cuba inicia nuevo curso escolar, pero persiste el déficit de docentes." *Inter Press Service en Cuba*, 3 de septiembre de 2018. <http://www.ips.cuba.net/sociedad/cuba-inicia-curso-escolar-pero-persiste-el-deficit-de-docentes/#more-40316>
52. *Inter Press Service en Cuba*, "Déficit de docentes y epidemias matizan inicio del curso escolar en Cuba," September 4, 2017. <http://www.ips.cuba.net/sociedad/deficit-de-docentes-y-epidemias-matizan-inicio-del-curso-escolar-en-cuba/>.
53. Cuban medical personnel sent abroad are paid only a small fraction (it was approximately 25% in the case of Brazil) of the salaries that the Cuban government collects from foreign countries, and they have no independent trade union rights to bargain with their government employer about salaries and working conditions. While it is true that Cuban medical education is free, this is also the case for other Latin American countries such as Mexico, but while Cuban doctors have to serve the government for the rest of their lives, Mexican doctors have to do the "social service" (*servicio social*) for only one year. See Ernesto Londoño, "Cuban Doctors Revolt: 'You Get Tired of Being a Slave'" *New York Times*, September 29, 2017. For a detailed account of the unjust rules governing the life of Cuban doctors abroad see José Alberto Gutierrez, "Cuba endurece reglas y recorta beneficios a médicos en Brasil," *Café Fuerte*, October 26, 2017, <http://cafe.fuerte.com/cuba/31389-cuba-endurece-reglas-recorta-beneficios-medicos-brasil/> As we know, since this article was published, Bolsonaro's extreme right-wing government suspended the Cuban medical program in Brazil.
54. Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "Aging, Employment, Wages and Social Welfare in Cuba: Would they Change under Diaz-Canel?" *Op. cit.*

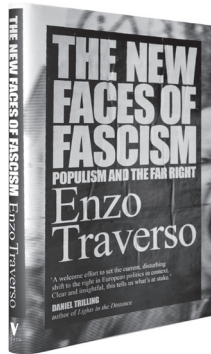
Our Dangerous World: A Historian's View of Post-Fascism

By Alan Wald

The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right

By Enzo Traverso

London: Verso, 2019, 200 pages, \$24.95, hardback.



THE TITLE OF a recent exchange of opinions in the *New York Review of Books*, “How to Write About the Right,” accentuates the imperative to theorize the global phenomenon of the rise of a new populist, xenophobic, and racist Right that Enzo Traverso tackles in his new short volume from Verso. Yet the interchange bizarrely climaxes with liberal iconoclast Mark Lilla channeling the voice of a wise wizard (possibly J. R. R. Tolkien’s Gandalf):

Whatever we are facing [in world politics], it is not twentieth-century fascism. Hell keeps on disgorging new demons to beset us. And as seasoned exorcists know, each must be called by its proper name before it can be cast out.¹

This is a startling oracular pronouncement, not to mention a confection of dodgy history, from a noted specialist in the extremism of “philyrannical intellectuals.”² Is such credulity about the elephant in everyone’s room just a cringe-worthy overstatement?

To be sure, it is irresponsible to label just anyone we find repulsive a “fascist,” and it would be a serious mistake to make an epistemic transfer, projecting one bygone experience onto another. Yet to decree with such magisterial certainty an unqualified *absence* of 1920s-40s type fascism in the new millennium leaves those of us tracking the rise of reactionary parties and social movements around the world wondering: Can this dismissal pass muster as a careful appraisal of such events as the dramatic escalation of the Far Right in almost all countries of the European Union?

Yes, there is temporal dissonance between objective historical conditions then and now, but most of the up-to-date analysis is clear-eyed that we are actually living in a moment that overlaps past and present expressions of racism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism. If Lilla’s readers accept his assurances that the racist populism of the moment is exempt from entanglement in some arc of fascist resurrection, the ensuing heedlessness could lead to a state of affairs like that depicted by the holocaust novel *Badenheim 1939* (1972).

In this celebrated allegory written by Aharon Appelfeld (1932-2018), Nazis — without jackboots, in the guise of concerned “sanitation workers” — arrive at a Jewish artists’ resort of Badenheim in Austria, near Vienna. They put up post-

Alan Wald is a member of Solidarity and an editor of ATC.

ers that praise the fresh air in Poland and lure the puzzled inhabitants to travel East on a fancy vacation by train.

The victims, led by the Panglossian Dr. Pappenheim, are somewhat wary of this unexpected proposal, which is presented in increasingly authoritarian terms. Yet they allow themselves to be dissuaded by various apologists from imagining that it could all be a fiendish deception. Clutching at the alternative, milder explanations tendered, the artists and intellectuals refuse to acknowledge that they are, in fact, facing deportation and death until it is too late.

The following exchange between two musicians, about what could happen to them in Poland, smacks of Lilla’s asking us to deny what we see:

“Kill me, I don’t understand it. Ordinary common sense can’t comprehend it.”

“In that case, kill your ordinary common sense and maybe you’ll begin to understand.” (72)

So let’s strip this debate down to its skivvies, for the obvious reason that we must thwart this creeping global sickness of our time by telling the right story and acting accordingly. We are not looking to the past to understand the present as an intellectual exercise in order to appreciate speculative fiction like Appelfeld’s.

Look around at capitalist elites bonding with mobs, bigots appointed to institutions of the state, and atomized masses scampering toward shoddy nationalist myths. What we see may be the crystallizing forces of an ideology that never died, marked by a blend of both chronological distinctness and historical sequence.

This movement is presently evolving under new socio-economic circumstances. Now is the time to emulate political theorist Hannah Arendt — increasingly the go-to person for insight into the genealogy of colonialist imperialism, anti-Semitism, and totalitarianism — and “think without a bannister.”³

We must acknowledge that, in the specter currently haunting Europe (and beyond), what we find to be most hideous may be what actually exists. Enzo Traverso suggests a conceptual lens to identify it: “post-fascism,” a phenomenon in transition.



Awakening of the Ghosts

While the most frightening ghosts of history seem to be awakening, and interwar episodes of Blackshirts and Brownshirts instinctively come back to our thoughts, we can’t let ourselves be hurtled by memory into a simplistic

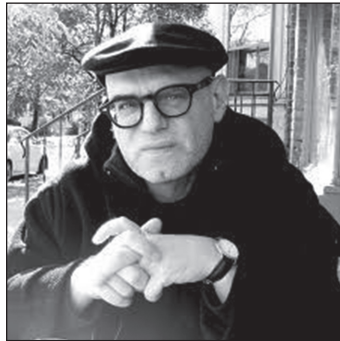
recreation of the past. For example, there is no evidence of a fascist-like demand for a “New Man,” nor has there been a real threat of working-class revolution provoking fascism as “a revolution against revolution.”

Yet it is equally reckless to play down the conspicuous fact that noteworthy fractions of the Far Right movements are publicly *declaring* themselves in the fascist tradition: Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary, and the National Party in Slovakia. The National Front in France, while not fascist at present, was the progeny of French fascism five decades ago.

Many more Rightists are cheek-to-cheek with fascist thinking and behavior even as they refuse the term for what are likely tactical reasons. On our side of the Atlantic, Donald Trump could be said to have the temperament of a fascist but not the political program.⁴

Moreover, there exist tacit alliances among numerous of these movements, and more than a few “not-yet-fascist” parties have the potential of moving toward fascism in the future. The danger is that a dogmatic blind spot, obfuscating authentic fascist antecedents and potential evolutions of these movements under changing material conditions of the twenty-first century, would disarm the Left from developing an appropriate, militant perspective and strategy to turn the tide and rebuild an emancipatory alternative.

Luckily, we live at a time when what began as a trickle of books and essays about the New Right and historic fascism is becoming a tsunami. Answers beyond the superficial are emerging and this year the volume by Dr. Enzo Traverso, a Marxist-



Enzo Traverso

internationalist professor at Cornell University, does more than just help provide a compass.⁵

In *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, Traverso has written a standout book in a crowded field that has the capacity to guide us through a mass of difficult material, with an enviable clarity essential to acquiring an assessment about our politically indeterminate moment.

Achingly Timely Questions

Traverso is scrupulous in the delineation of his hypothesis: “The main feature of today’s postfascism is precisely the contradictory co-existence of classical fascism with new elements that do not belong to its tradition. Wider developments have encouraged the change” (32).

Postfascism crosses borders, existing in the past as well as the present. A useful artistic correlative for his definition might be the 2018 German film *Transit*. In director Christian Petzold’s rendering of the 1942 Marxist novel by Anna Seghers (a pseudonym for Anna Relling, 1900-83, a German-Jewish Communist), the Nazi juggernaut is recreated as a cinematic super-imposition linking two eras. It is not merely some hideousness that lingers in our imaginations, but rather re-emerges before our eyes in all its violence.

To create the film’s hybrid atmosphere in Paris and Marseille, in which a Nazi occupation transcends its original period and setting, Petzold’s cinematic world is neither fully of

the late 1930s or today. Technology and buildings are blended from both eras, as well as the composition of the hiding and fleeing populations (anti-fascists, Jews, North African immigrants, targets of ethnic cleansing).

This eerily smooth fusion produces a heightened reality of the present; a second coming of the vileness through which humanity has already lived is what haunts the heart of the narrative pounding out the harrowing events in *Transit*.

Traverso’s book is devoted to helping us disentangle and decipher this postfascism, a phenomenon not totally new yet not a simple reproduction. In a two-part structure, “The Present as History” and “History in the Present,” he presents six chapters with many subtle, penetrating and frequently surprising points, and explains why all this is important.

As always, Traverso provides crisp and focused writing that includes a masterful synthesis of contemporary scholarship. Undergirding all is a firm grasp of classical Marxism, a historian’s range of depth and vision, and even a biographer’s feel for the personalities that bring ideas to life.

Traverso’s itinerary of topics tells us at once that his volume is less a monograph than a reference book of methodological reflections on critical elements such as “Populism,” “Identity Politics,” “Anti-Semitism,” “Islamophobia,” “Anti-Antifascism,” “Totalitarian Violence,” “ISIS and Totalitarianism,” and much more.

In each intervention, nuance and flexibility are combined with precision, as indicated in his observations about “Interpreting Fascism”: “The very definition of fascism is a controversial topic. The most restrictive approach refers exclusively to the political regime under the leadership of Benito Mussolini which ruled Italy between 1922 and 1943. A wider depiction includes a whole set of movements and regimes that appeared in Europe between the two world wars, among which the most important were German National Socialism (1933-45) and Spanish Francoism (1939-75).” (97)

To this he appends other candidates including Vichy France, Salazarism in Portugal, and nationalist and military powers in central Europe, Asia and Latin America. Each chapter is short and tightly focused, providing an admirably clear account. The often superb footnote citations, and astute comments, remind us how deeply researched *The New Faces of Fascism* is, and the thoughtfulness behind its strategy of continually raising achingly timely questions.

Readers’ eyes won’t glaze over as Traverso’s prose recurrently crackles with energy and vivacity: “Postfascism belongs to a particular regime of historicity — the beginning of the 21st century — which explains its erratic, unstable, and often contradictory ideological content, in which antinomic political philosophies mix together.” (7)

Slippery Definitions

The book’s first hundred pages home in on certain terms customarily used to label aspects of the new features of our current political scene. The problem is that many of these have slippery definitions and semantic ambiguities. Traverso’s aim, however, is to establish a lexicon that allows for historical comparisons with the goal of generating analyses and pursuing difference — not simply seeing repetitions.

“Populism,” for example, although appearing in the 19th century as the *Nardodniks* in Russia and the People’s Party in the United States, cannot be indulged today “as a fully fledged

political phenomenon, with its own profile and ideology.” Rather, “populism is above all a style of politics rather than an ideology. It is a rhetorical procedure that consists of exalting the people’s ‘natural’ virtues and opposing them to the elite — and society itself to the political establishment — in order to mobilize the masses against ‘the system.’” (15, 16)

He then points to the wide range of international figures to whom “populism” has been applied — Nicholas Sarkozy, Bernie Sanders, Eva Morales, Nestor Kirchner — and concludes that the word “has become an empty shell, which can be filled by the most disparate political contents.” (16)

On the other hand, when we turn to Traverso’s discussion of “Identity Politics,” he offers some positive guidelines for an activist perspective on both Right and Left varieties of “identitarianism” — those that aim at exclusion (the French National Front’s defense of “the French” against foreigners) and inclusion (the claims of oppressed minorities).

Among the many informative sub-topics addressed in his two-dozen pages on the matter is the writing of Houria Bouteldja, the French-Algerian spokeswoman of the Party of the Indigenous of the Republic who wrote the controversial *Whites, Jews, and Us* (2017). Traverso observes that Bouteldja’s work, which eschews any biological determinism, is falsely accused of anti-Semitism and anti-white racism but is flawed by its use of categories such as whites, Blacks, and Jews as “homogeneous entities, erasing the differences and contradictions that characterize these terms.” (53)

Traverso also displays an almost preternatural understanding of debates in the United States around “intersectionality,” in which “the social question and the racial question are deeply interwoven.”

This perspective comes into play in his justification of Left-wing identity politics against the Right’s embrace of white nationalism on behalf of its racism and xenophobia: “Left-wing identity politics are something quite different: they are not a matter of exclusion but a demand for recognition....an extension of existing rights and not a call for the restriction or denial of other peoples rights.” (55, 57)

At the same time, however, Traverso offers an important caveat: “an exclusive identity politics — politics reduced to identity claims — is as short-sighted as it is dangerous, for the role of politics is precisely to overcome and transcend particular subjectivities.” (59) In other words, identity politics weakens the Left when it forsakes any prospect of unity, the only foundation on which we can fight for mutual causes.

In his third chapter, “Spectres of Islam,” Traverso takes up “Anti-Semitism” and “Judeophobia,” “Islamophobia” and “Islamic Fascism (?)” His insights are surprising, refreshing and provocative. Islamophobia, he asserts, has now replaced the anti-Semitism that was the scapegoat of European nationalism for two centuries: “Like the former Jewish Bolshevik, the Islamic terrorist is often depicted with physical traits stressing his otherness.” (67)

At the same time, “Islamophobia is not simply an ersatz version of the old anti-Semitism. It has its own ancient roots and it possesses its own tradition, that is, colonialism” (75).

Nonetheless, Jews have certainly become the innocent prey of a new “Judeophobia,” especially in France. This Jew-hate — brutal terrorist killings such as the one in the kosher supermarket in Vincennes — is not of the same origin as that

once emanating from Christian Europe, although the earlier version has not entirely vanished and some anti-Jewish stereotypes are shared.

In the past, however, European states persecuted Jews while today they defend Jews. To a large degree, the deplorable recent Judeophobia stems from minorities who feel excluded from the European nations and attack Jews as representatives of the West — in some instances educated by the fraudulent text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and inflamed by policies of the Israeli State against its subjugated Arab population.

When it comes to “Islamic Fascism,” a expression used by both Left and Right, Traverso believes it is “more a term wielded for reasons of political struggle than a fruitful analytical category.” (83) Italian Fascism and German Nazism after all were not outright religions as is the Salafi doctrine within Sunni Islam; both were more accurately substitutes for political religions, setting out to replace traditional religions, although they eventually made compromises.

Conversely, the (trans)nationalism of ISIS is devoid of the fascist cult of blood and soil, and boasts a universal dimension based on a principle that ostensibly unites all religious believers regardless of territorial limits — somewhat analogous in that respect to Zionism.

Legacies of Fascism

The book’s second part surveys in more detail the legacies of fascism, antifascism and totalitarianism as they discomfit current intellectual debates.

To explore the first, Traverso primarily takes up the scholarly writing of three giants in the field: George L. Mosse (1918-99), a refugee from a German-Jewish family to England and the United States, who taught at the University of Wisconsin for many years; Zeev Sternhell (b. 1935), a Polish-born Israeli historian who taught at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and today writes as a Zionist supporter of the Peace Camp for *Haaretz* newspaper; and Emilio Gentile (b. 1946), an Italian historian who teaches at the University of Rome.

What Traverso admires in all three is that they “set their investigations in comparative perspective, which finds its shared horizon in the concept of fascism.” (98)

Mosse, who was also gay, “took his inspiration from his own recollections and experiences as he wrote on bourgeois respectability, the complex relationship between nationalism and sexuality, norm and otherness, conservatism and the artistic avant-garde, as well as the image of the body in fascist aesthetics.” Sternhell, in contrast, “belongs to the classical history of political ideas.” (99)

Gentile commenced as a biographer of Mussolini but reoriented his work toward cultural history. Traverso proceeds to evaluate the scholarship of each of these, along with numerous related scholars in passing, under the rubrics of “Culture,” “Ideology,” and “Revolution,” noting strengths and



George Mosse

weaknesses.

Many of the vulnerabilities reveal themselves most problematically in what Traverso calls “the public use” of this history, “the interpretations of fascism from the perspective of their impact on historical consciousness and collective memory of the countries where they met with their largest reception...” (127)

One longstanding mystery about George Mosse that I wish Traverso had been able to address is the relation of his ideas to the life and Marxist activism of his younger sister, Dr. Hilde Mosse (1912-1982). The connection seems critical inasmuch as Traverso notes that Mosse’s thinking was “the result of a peculiar intellectual experience which he described in his memoirs” (98), one that started in the Weimar Republic, then Cambridge and Harvard university in the 1930s. (See “A Puzzle,” below.)

Fascinating Observations

Traverso’s concluding chapters five and six, on “Antifascism” and “The Uses of Totalitarianism,” are reprints from earlier journals and conference proceedings, and some of the material may seem familiar from earlier books. Nonetheless there are so many fascinating observations that it is all worth a second look.

Most disconcerting is his description of the success of what he calls the “anti-fascist” paradigm in Italy and elsewhere. According to historian Francois Furet (a former French Communist), “anti-fascism [w]as the humanistic and democratic mask with which, at the time of the Popular Fronts, the Soviet Union extended its pernicious, totalitarian influence on the French intelligentsia” (137).

So far as I can judge, this wide-ranging volume is mostly

A Puzzle: George and Hilde Mosse

HILDE L. MOSSE fled Germany along with her brother, completed her medical degree in Switzerland, and came to the United States around the same time as George, doing a residency in Schenectady. In 1946 she became a founder of the Lafargue Mental Health Clinic in Harlem, named for French Marxist Paul Lafargue, Karl Marx’s son-in-law (of mixed ancestry, including African, Native American, and Jewish).

The famous clinic, which lasted about 10 years and also played a role in early civil rights legislation, focused on the needs of Black patients and was financially and otherwise backed by former Communist writers Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

Hilde Mosse, who resided on 19th Street in Manhattan, and had an African-American romantic partner, was one of the two lead doctors at the institution. The other was Fredric Wertham (1885-1981), a polarizing figure who had various connections with the Left but is best remembered for his crusade against violence in comic books.¹

As a Jewish woman with a career mostly devoted to addressing the effects of anti-Black racism, Hilde Mosse surely must have engaged in dialogue with her brother, who in his own writing took up matters of racism in regard to Blacks and Jews.

What may also be germane to George Mosse’s treatment of fascism is that Hilde Mosse is explicitly described in an interview with her brother as politically active and “close to the Trotskyites.”² Yet he offered no ready details, and no one with the requisite interest and political understanding, or access to material on the German Left, has followed up with a careful investigation.



It seems hardly possible that, with their common background in the trauma of the Nazi takeover (Hilde Mosse broke with her father bitterly over his lack of militant anti-fascism) and then Hilde’s connections with Trotskyism in Europe and perhaps continuing privately in the United States, nothing of substance was discussed between them on the character of Nazism.³

After all, the German Trotskyists to which his sister was close, members of the IKD (International Communists of Germany), were noted for distinctive ideas as to whether German fascism actually had a mass base or was controlled by constant supervision, as well as a view of the positive role that the church might play in resistance. Surely George Mosse was thinking about these, too.

There is also the fact that a number of German Trotskyists associated with the group IKD arrived in New York around the same time as Hilde Mosse, publishing a paper, *Unser Wort*, and connected with the U.S. Trotskyists (Socialist Workers Party). At the center was Josef Weber (1901-1959), a highly cultivated Marxist and after 1944 a mentor to social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1921-2006).⁴

As soon as he arrived in 1940 via Martinique, Weber began emphasizing the priority of democratic demands and national liberation over socialist perspectives. Then after 1946, he forecast a “retrogression thesis” predicting that humanity would be increasingly subject to “spydom” and “stool-pigeonry” under police and military surveillance.⁵

After his expulsion from the Trotskyists that year, Weber was active in a semi-un-

derground manner for another decade with individuals who had once had some IKD connections.

During the same Cold War era, Ruth Fischer (born Elfriede Eisler, 1895-1961), a former leading Austrian and German Communist who had allied with the Trotskyists for a time in the 1930s, relocated to the United States in 1941. In 1946 Fischer began giving the House Committee on Un-American Activity Committee testimony to expose individuals from Germany and others who had Far Left connections.

This was certainly a good reason for Hilde, and her brother, to go silent or claim lack of any knowledge of individuals and activities connected with Trotskyism. Since Traverso is a scholar who has, among other things, incorporated into his thinking the very best of what the Trotskyist historical and theoretical legacy has to offer, he would surely be the one to sort much of this out. ■

Notes

1. Wertham is the subject of several books, but little is said about Hilde Mosse beyond her medical activities, suggesting that she may have been secretive about politics. See Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (2005); Jay Garcia, *Psychology Comes to Harlem* (2012); and Gabriel Mendes, *Under the Strain of Color: Harlem’s Lafargue Clinic and the Promise of Antiracist Psychiatry* (2015).

2. See https://histmosse.wiscweb.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/188/2017/05/george_mosse_interview.pdf.

3. It doesn’t seem as if they were estranged since George Mosse addressed her memorial meeting and became head of a medical foundation in her honor. The silence on politics could reflect fear of McCarthyism or some other disagreement. The best source I have seen for understanding the views of German Trotskyism is in *Revolutionary History*: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol2/no3/gertrots.html>. An article on the German Jewish Trotskyist Martin Monath appeared last year in *Left Voice*: <https://www.leftvoice.org/Martin-Monath-A-Jewish-Trotskyist-Among-Nazi-Soldiers>.

4. The authority on Weber is Marcel Van Der Linden: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/images/weber.pdf>.

5. <https://platypus1917.org/2012/12/01/bookchins-trotskyist-decade-1939-1948/>.

error-free. One minor exception is his statement that Trump called “for Muslims to be expelled from the United States.” (77) He must mean the January 2017 *travel ban* on foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries (preceded by candidate Trump’s call for “a complete and total ban on Muslims” entering the country).

No doubt some readers will find that certain complicated arguments or references might need more elaboration or balance, and there are several that have stayed with me that I plan to further explore: How do we fully understand Judeophobia and anti-Semitism, when the Israeli state itself cavorts with European despots and holocaust deniers as it further implements its racist policies?

How and why has the myth of an identity between capitalism and democracy persisted when the more obvious association would be between antifascism and democracy? How can we switch the public understanding of communism as reduced to a violent ideology when history itself shows that it was a contradictory force combining social movements fighting for genuine liberation and top-down governments repressing human rights?

Is the 20th century defined more by a misguided utopianism of the Left, or a racial panic of racists, fascists, anti-semites and Islamophobes that produced even more graves than Stalinism?



Golden Dawn rally.

Traverso’s Challenge

The New Faces of Fascism ends fittingly with fire alarms ringing in the face of the Right’s volatile cocktail of xenophobia, racism, white identitarianism, and anti-globalism: “We know that things are coming to a boil, and the lid is about to come off. Big changes are going to take place, and we need to be prepared for them. When they do, the right words will surely come.” (187)

Traverso’s scholarship is an active agent in creating a usable collective narrative of mass anti-fascist resistance to address the precariousness of insecurity we feel. Yet this book’s most salient aspect is Traverso’s historicizing of consciousness about the legacy of what revolutionaries once fought and how we contested it — the internal contradictions and ambiguities of fascism and antifascism that he exquisitely excavates.

As we work each day to invent a new political model for a global Left, constructing our vision of socialist hope right at this instant, we must not abandon memory or the relentless pursuit of a critical understanding of what happened. There are many ways to destroy what democracy we have, and we can’t simply be commanded by impulse, one moment leading to another; any more than we can succumb to illusory teleologies about historical fates and class destinies.

We can never forget that the admirable militants of the 2010 Arab Spring discovered that huge mass mobilizations might nonviolently overthrow an existing dictatorship, but not prevent a new one from trampling the rebels underfoot. And it is unlikely that heroic revolutionary fighters are going to just appear, straight out of central casting, with magical answers.

Unlike Mark Lilla, who seems to want to evade an earlier period that in certain respects is very much alive, Traverso is an activist-scholar who can see that what went before is hardly restricted to an oldies act and that a fascist-like ambience is partially back. Still, the point of this book is that postfascism is a mutation that has not been completed.

Fascism may not be an immediate threat of coming to power, but it can also escalate rapidly; or the racist Right could go in a different direction, perhaps toward an authoritarian populist democracy. Activists must keep their eyes wide open.

As a creative Marxist thinker, Traverso shares one eminent characteristic with Kurt Vonnegut’s Tralfamadoreans in *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969); he can see all times at once. We simply cannot allow anyone to close the books on the antifascist past and remove it from memory.

While much of our popular culture makes it seem as if political insanity reigns everywhere — see the popular CBS television show *The Good Fight* with Christine Baranski — this means that Traverso enlightens the dark political landscape of 2019 by connecting the present with historical precursors such as Mussolini, Hitler and friends. This may help us confront the ultimate question: Does a comeback story await these guys?

If so, no single Marxist or revolutionary current can solve the puzzle of how we must organize ourselves and what to do next. We have long known that “party ideology” with its own dogmas and secular theologies is a dead end. Moreover, in the recent organizational crises of some of the most highly regarded groups on the Left, the British Socialist Workers Party and the U.S. International Socialist Organization, we have been reminded that bad personal behavior also infects the Left.

Individuals full of deluded self-importance, and sometimes sexist entitlement, have developed the ability to evade all the therapeutic critiques of vanguardism and substitutionism with which critics have been filling journals and discussion bulletins for decades.

Our dangerous world is here and at present, not in some fearful beyond. Traverso’s challenge to make preparations and find “the right words” is one that must be faced by revolutionary activists from differing backgrounds and generations.

This is surely a tough assignment, but needs to be undertaken by those who have the humility to admit our limitations, will partake of open dialogue, and are willing to come forward to join in common practical efforts, and ultimately unite to build our future in the present. ■

Notes

1. See <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/01/17/how-to-write-about-the-right-an-exchange/>.
2. See Lilla’s books, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals and Politics* (2016) and *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (2016).
3. Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. M.A. Hill (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1979), 376.
4. A strong case against designating Trump as a fascist is made in Dylan Riley, “What Is Trump?” *New Left Review* 114 (November-December 2018): 5-31.
5. See the earlier reviews in *Against the Current* of Traverso’s work: <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/194/>, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/183/p4699/> and <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/112/p367/>. Among the many new impressive volumes on the Right-wing present and fascist past are David Neiwet, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (Verso, 2017) and Michael Joseph Roberto, *The Coming of the American Behemoth: The Origins of Fascism in the United States, 1920-1940* (Monthly Review, 2018). For a helpful article on the European Right, providing a careful analysis of current trends, see the two-part *Against the Current* essay by Peter Drucker: <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/197/europes-political-turmoil/> and <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/198/europes-political-turmoil-part-2/>.

REVIEW

The Truth About the VA By Ronald Citkowski

Wounds of War:

How the VA Delivers Health, Healing and Hope to the Nation's Veterans

By Suzanne Gordon

Cornell University Press 2018, 464 pages, \$29.95 hardcover.

SUZANNE GORDON IS an author, journalist, speaker and patient advocate with a long and distinguished career in the field of health care systems. In 2014, a number of highly publicized media attacks on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Health Administration system (VHA), characterizing it as inept, corrupt and incapable of delivering adequate health care to veterans, caught her attention.

Gordon decided to find out how well the VHA system, which operates as a European-type centrally administered, single payer system, actually compares to the U.S. market-driven, private-sector system. Gordon presents a thorough and very readable answer to the question in her latest book, *Wounds of War: How the VA Delivers Health, Healing and Hope to the Nation's Veterans*.

I've heard a lot of blistering criticism of the VHA, going back to at least the George W. Bush years. Since I am a U.S. Army veteran who has had more than his fill of what we called "The Army Way," I must admit, now with a bit of embarrassment, that I tended to believe at least the less lurid accounts of the shortcomings of the VHA.

I found I was not alone in falling for these stories. In an interview following the publication of her book, Gordon noted: "Many liberals and progressives who don't buy the propaganda about climate, or about education, buy the propaganda about the VA."

How the VHA System Operates

During the five years she spent investigating the VHA system, Gordon visited hospitals and clinics and sat in on patient visits. She also carried out interviews with patients, their families and health care providers, and found that the VHA does a better job of caring for patients than does the

Ronald Citkowski is a veteran of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement. He is retired and splits his time between the Arizona Borderlands and Northern Michigan.



homelessness, are all considered and treated together. As such, it is very similar to the integrated health care systems of many European countries.

The VHA uses a Patient-Aligned Care Team (PACT) approach in which the doctors, nurses, practitioners and office clerks have morning meetings each day to plan for the needs of the patients they will be seeing. Inclusion of the clerks into the planning process may seem to be unnecessary, but as Gordon found out, clerks are the portal to the system who can often provide very good insights to a particular patient's issue — such as transportation and living conditions — which can influence their compliance with a treatment protocol.

If a patient needs to be referred for further care by a doctor, social worker, psychologist, dietician or other specialist, the primary care physician uses what is referred to as a "warm handoff" in which he or she introduces the patient to the specialist, in person if they are in the same complex, or by teleconference if not, and discusses the patient's needs.

VHA pharmacists are also integrated into the care team. Patients have an office session where their pharmacist will go over the prescribed medications as well as over-the-counter medications a patient may be using and discuss possible side effects and interactions.

The VHA system is actually very successful in providing mental health care. Veterans suffering from PTSD and or chronic brain damage often have problems of depression, anger management and substance abuse, reflected in a high suicide rate.

Survey data show that suicide rates for Veterans not using the VHA system actually rose by 40% over the period of 2000-2010.

private-sector health care system.

The VHA operates as a single-payer, integrated care system in which the patients' medical needs, which can include primary care, geriatric medicine, chronic pain treatment, mental health and rehabilitation, as well as their social issues such as drug abuse and

Meanwhile the suicide rate for those using the VHA system declined by 20% over that same period. Further studies have confirmed that veterans with severe mental illnesses who receive VHA care live much longer on the average than their non-veteran counterparts.

Women veterans, in addition to issues of PTSD and combat-related injuries, often have to deal with problems resulting from sexual harassment. Since the number of women in the military is growing steadily, these problems are of increasing importance. Furthermore, many women veterans are reluctant to deal with the same military hierarchy that gave rise to their harassment.

The VHA has come to appreciate the significance of this problem and has established separate women's primary care and mental health clinics in each of its centers, and gives women the choice of using these dedicated facilities or the general clinics.

In the VHA system, the average patient load for full-time primary-care physicians is 1200, while a private sector primary-care physician has a patient load in the range of 2100 to 3400. As a result, primary care physicians in the VHA system typically spend 30 minutes per visit with each patient.

Gordon includes a number of detailed personal accounts of patients in which they discuss their own experiences in and out of the VHA system. As she finds, patient satisfaction with the VHA integrated team-approach is very high, and a number of patients made a point of telling her that they turned to the VHA after disappointing experiences in the private sector.

Why the Criticism?

One criticism the VHA system we repeatedly hear is that patients experience long delays in obtaining services. Gordon addresses this point in detail and acknowledges that there were some real issues, particularly with regard to the Phoenix facility in 2014, primarily due to the inadequacy of that facility to accommodate a high winter-season influx of snowbird retirees.

She notes, however, that this problem has been addressed and goes on to cite a 2015 study by the Rand Corporation and a 2017 report done for the American Legion. Even though 16% of VHA facilities are operating at over 100% capacity, the average wait to see a primary care physician is five days; the average wait to see a mental health specialist

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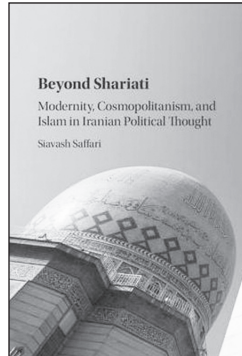
REVIEW

Towards Decolonial Global Solidarity By Catherine Z. Sameh

Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought

By Siavash Saffari

Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2017, 213 pages, \$32.99 paper.



IN THE WAKE of the 40th anniversary of the 1979 Iranian revolution, it is worth reflecting not so much on what has changed or stayed the same in Iran, but on the particular rhetoric and policies of the United States that have endlessly fanned the flames of war against Iran for the last four decades.

While president Trump's national security advisor John Bolton is the most recent and especially bombastic practitioner of such an approach, the assumptions that undergird his drive to war with Iran are continuous with the preceding administrations.

The Islamic Republic, so the argument goes, is exceptionally brutal, barbaric, and irrational. Its leaders are singularly deceptive and murderous. Iran cannot be engaged through standard diplomatic procedures. It only understands the language of violence and suffering.

Such an argument emerges from the logics that have long ensnared Iran inside the colonial matrix of power, or the project of Western modernity and its dark colonial underside.*

When Iranians overthrew the Shah, their Western-backed dictator, in the effervescent moment of 1979, they sought among other things to rupture the U.S. colonial stranglehold on Iran. Among those who took part in the revolution, many were followers of the ideas of the Iranian sociologist and revolutionary, Ali Shariati (1933-1977).

Considered one of the ideologues of the revolution, along with Ruhollah Khomeini, Shariati formulated a left Islamic liberation politics in critical conversation with worldwide anti-colonial thought.

In *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought*,

Catherine Z. Sameh is assistant professor of Gender & Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Rights Activism across Borders, forthcoming from University of Washington Press.

Siavash Saffari, Assistant Professor of West Asian Studies at Seoul National University, engages the work of Shariati and "neo-Shariatism" to "reread the intellectual foundations of the 1979 revolution" and shed light on the more recent "grass-roots democratic movement in Iran" and the "gradual exhaustion of Islamist politics and the Islam/modernity binary that has helped to

sustain and legitimize it." (14)

While numerous (Iranian and non-Iranian) scholars have explored Shariati's body of work, Saffari is the first to consider Shariati together with his later followers, and the ways in which they are extending his work in Iran today.

Activism and Consciousness

In the introduction Saffari reviews the biographical literature on Shariati, including a book by Shariati's wife, Pouran Shariat-Razavi. Shariati was born in 1933, the son of a "politically active and reform-minded Islamic preacher" who would have a deep and lasting influence on Shariati. (6)

Shariati and his father were founding members of the Mashad branch of the National Resistance Movement, an underground organization supporting the nationalist leader Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was ousted in the 1953 British-American coup after nationalizing the Iranian oil industry.

Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from the University of Mashad, Shariati went to Paris in 1959 and earned his Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in 1963. At the Sorbonne he was influenced by the work of sociologists and Islamic scholars who were part of the faculty there, as well as the writings of Martinique-born psychiatrist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon and French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre.

Politically involved in revolutionary and anti-colonial activism while in Paris, Shariati was moved by Fanon's writing on colonialism and the Algerian revolution, and began translating Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism* and *The Wretched of the Earth* into Farsi.

Saffari writes that while Shariati was initially attracted to guerrilla warfare, he eventually concentrated his revolutionary thinking and writing on "raising the consciousness of the masses over waging armed struggle," arguing for revolutionaries to ground notions of resistance in culturally-specific discourses. (7) Shariati returned to Iran in 1964, where he was arrested and briefly jailed for his anti-Shah activism in Europe.

Returning to Mashad after his release, Shariati was eventually hired as a professor of history at the University of Mashad. A beloved teacher and dynamic speaker, Shariati received numerous invitations over the next several years to lecture on campuses across Iran, including the newly established Hosseinieh Ershad, a "modern religious institution aimed at engaging young educated urban classes in debates about Islamic thought, culture, and history."

It was there that Shariati further developed a "revolutionary Islamic ideology that called for popular awareness, action, and movement in the face of oppression and injustice," critiquing the Pahlavi regime, as well as at "traditional religious doctrines and the pro status-quo position of the clergy." (8)

A site of anti-Shah activity, Hosseinieh Ershad was closed in 1972 and Shariati went underground. In 1973 he was arrested and jailed for 18 months, and after his release lived in Mashad under virtual house arrest. Unable to teach or speak, Shariati exiled himself, despite a travel ban against him, in 1977 to Belgium then England. Three weeks later, he died of a heart attack.

Shariati's New Relevance

Shariati's death was mourned worldwide by revolutionary activists and leaders, and he became a potent symbol in the revolutionary activism of late 1970s Iran, a fact often leveraged to critique his ideological limits and consign his thought to the dustbin labeled "mistakes of the past."

Debated as a contributor to the rise of the Islamic state or a dreamy utopian irrelevant to the present, the full intellectual contributions of Shariati are often missed. One of the important interventions of Saffari's book is to illuminate the current relevance

*The term colonial *matrix of power* comes from the Argentinian scholar Walter D. Mignolo and other Latin American scholars associated with the collective on modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. Drawing on the decolonial ideas of Anibal Quijano, Frantz Fanon, and others, the collective theorized Western civilization/modernity as a 500-plus year history of economic, political, epistemic, aesthetic, and environmental destruction of other civilizations and worldviews.

of Shariati through his contemporary interlocutors, what he calls the “neo-Shariatis,” Iranian activists, intellectuals and scholars.

As Saffari notes, Shariati’s work enjoys wide readership in Iran today, including among youth. New doctoral students are engaging his work and prominent neo-Shariatis like Reza Allijani, Taghi Rhamani, Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, Ehsan Shariati, and Hashem Aghajari have been part of Iran’s vibrant reform movement, often resulting in their imprisonment and exile, or dismissal and prohibition from university teaching jobs.



Ali Shariati <http://en.wikipedia.org>

The popularity of Shariati’s work speaks to his enduring significance for those interested in thinking about intellectual and political thought outside a Eurocentric framework, and about the relevance of local knowledges to the world at large.

Additionally, while Shariati drew “on concepts from the Shi’i tradition, by citing various Sunni scholars and by distinguishing between the oppressive and emancipatory aspects of Shi’ism, he effectively highlights the commonalities between progressive currents in the Shi’i and Sunni traditions.” (12)

Saffari’s methodological approach to Shariati’s and neo-Shariatis work is that of dialogical comparison. Drawing on this framework as developed by comparative

political theorist Fred Dallmayr, Saffari seeks out the border-crossing and binary-shattering implications of Shariati and his followers who, in conversation with other critics

of Western hegemony and Eurocentrism, offer responses to modernity that challenge rather than reproduce global relations of power.

In Chapter 1, Saffari considers the ways in which religious and secular critics of Shariati have focused on how his ideologization of religion and discourses of Iranian and Muslim authenticity have enabled the Islamic Republic to reinscribe the Islam/West binary.

Neo-Shariati thought offers an alternative reading, centering the ways that Shariati challenges both “authoritarian modernism and conservative traditionalism” and offers Iranians a path for crafting an indigenous modernity on their own terms. (38) Such terms, argue neo-Shariatis, are being articulated in the various struggles for religious reform and grassroots democratic activism inside Iran.

In subsequent chapters, Saffari explores the ways in which Shariati’s work opens up the possibility for thinking of individual autonomy inside an ethical-religious order that turns “the modern subject toward its others.” (127) Deeply critical both of capitalism’s consumer-driven and sexually exploit-

ative modes of individualism, and of Islamist collectivism that compromise individual freedoms, Shariati and the neo-Shariatis offer an account of Iranian modernity that constructs rights-bearing subjectivity and public religiosity as compatible, rather than antagonistic.

No to an “Islamic state”

As Saffari argues, implied in Shariati’s thought and elaborated by the work of neo-Shariatis, is the rejection of an Islamic state, the formation of which Shariati did not live to see. But also articulated in this work is an account of modern Iranian subjectivity and robust civic participation very much informed by Islam.

While the revolutionary government claimed Shariati as their own immediately after the revolution, during the past three-plus decades his “Islamic discourse has fallen increasingly out of favor with the official guardians of the post-revolutionary regime.” (10)

Shariati and neo-Shariatis, argues Saffari, propose a kind of revolutionary Islamic epistemology that gestures implicitly away from a stale ideology held hostage by the state, and towards a progressive and ethical self-subject in relation to the world. In this sense, neo-Shariatis engage in dialogue with other scholars and activists who challenge the secular/religious, modern/traditional binary in thought and politics alike.

In my work, I consider the ways in which Iranian women’s rights activists also contest these binaries and civilizational discourses, reconfiguring the legacy of Iranian anti-colonial thought from an explicitly feminist perspective.

In his conclusion, Saffari rightly states that while Shariati did address gender, he failed to offer a comprehensive analysis of women’s oppression. I would extend this critique to say that Shariati’s call to Iranian women to look to Islam for an indigenous, anti-colonial and liberatory account of the self was articulated primarily in gender-differentiated terms, enabling the post-revolutionary state to proclaim “women’s equality” while juridically enforcing their inequality.

Nonetheless, Shariati’s thought remains critically relevant for those living under post-colonial authoritarian states and those in the heart of empire. Saffari’s generative project offers a fresh look at Shariati’s epistemological insights, and more importantly locates Shariati and the neo-Shariatis as indigenous thinkers contributing to a globally engaged and cosmopolitan politics from below.

This important book will prove highly valuable to anti-colonial activists and scholars, who can think with Ali Shariati and the Iranian experience to democratize their own locales and decolonize the world. ■

“Sandinismo Is in the Streets” — continued from page 22

prisoners were released, so far it has been left in the dark, with no list of who or when, whether they are subject to house arrest or whether their records are being expunged.

On May 16 Eddy Montes Praslin, a well-known activist from Matagalpa arrested last October on terrorism charges, was murdered by guards at the Modelo Prison. Only the presence of the Red Cross stopped the guards from beating the other prisoners.

This led to demonstrations in his home town. In response, the Civic Alliance called for a general strike on May 23. In Matagalpa the streets were filled; in other areas protesters stayed home. These are the first public actions since last spring.

The second round of negotiations, starting February 27, 2019 and continuing over the next two months, still found the regime unwilling to negotiate a plan to resign. It was also unwilling to sign any agreement that would be supervised by international guarantors such as IACHR or the UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights. Government negotiators insisted the only guarantor could be one of their own discredited institutions.

The impasse continues while the need for a negotiated settlement remains strong. Clearly the Civic Alliance needs the backing of international human rights organizations as observers and documentarians. But that does not mean these institutions have any right to impose a solution. That remains the task of the Nicaraguan people.

After so much violence the majority of Nicaraguans do not believe change can come through sanctions or war. Determined to build a new Nicaragua, they desire peace.

Yet this is a particularly difficult moment as Washington has been orchestrating a destabilization campaign against Venezuela. Washington claims to use its sanctions against the Nicaraguan regime in the name of opposing corruption. The regime is corrupt but that in no way justifies U.S. interference.

Those of us who have been supporters of the Sandinista Revolution need to see that the Ortega-Murillo regime has stained that revolution. Our solidarity, therefore, has two tasks: *to stay the hand of Washington, and to build networks of solidarity with the civic movement.* ■

REVIEW

On Marx and Ecosocialism By Michael Löwy

Karl Marx's Ecosocialism Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy

By Kohei Saito
New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017,
308 pages, \$29 paperback.

MAINSTREAM ECOLOGISTS OFTEN dismiss Karl Marx as “productivist” and blind to ecological problems. A growing body of eco-Marxist writings that sharply contradicts this conventional wisdom has been recently developed in the United States.

The pioneers of this new research were John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, followed by Ian Angus, Fred Magdoff and others. They contributed to transforming *Monthly Review* into an eco-marxist journal. Their main argument is that Marx was highly aware of the destructive consequences for the environment of capitalist accumulation, a process which he described by the concept of metabolic rift.

One may disagree with some of their interpretations of Marx's writings, but their research was decisive for a new understanding of his contribution to the ecological critique of capitalism.

Kohei Saito is a young Japanese Marxist scholar who belongs to this important eco-marxist school. His book, published by Monthly Review Press, is a very valuable contribution to the reassessment of the Marxian heritage, from an ecosocialist perspective.

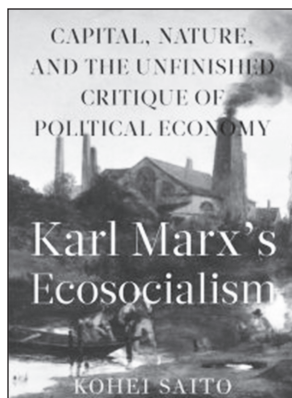
Restoring Unity

One of the great qualities of Saito's work is that — unlike many other scholars — he does not treat Marx writings as a systematic body of writing, defined from beginning to end by a strong ecological commitment (according to some), or a strong un-ecological tendency (according to others).

As Saito very persuasively argues, there are elements of continuity in Marx's reflection on nature, but also some very significant changes and re-orientations. Moreover, as the book's subtitle suggests, his critical reflections on the relation between political economy and natural environment are “unfinished.”

Among the continuities, one of the most

Michael Löwy is the author of many books and essays, including Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe (Haymarket Books, 2015).



important is the issue of the capitalist “separation” of humans from earth, i.e. from nature. Marx believed that in pre-capitalist societies there had existed a form of unity between of the producers and the land. He saw restoring the original unity between humans and nature, destroyed by capitalism, but on a higher level (negation of the negation) as one of the key tasks of socialism.

This explains Marx interest in pre-capitalist communities, both in his ecological discussion (for instance of Carl Fraas) or in his anthropological research (Franz Maurer): both authors were perceived as “unconscious socialists.”

In his last important document, the letter to Vera Zassoulitsch (1881), Marx claims that thanks to the suppression of capitalism, modern societies could return to a higher form of an “archaic” type of collective ownership and production.

I would argue that this belongs to the “romantic anti-capitalist” moment in Marx's reflections. In any case, this interesting insight of Saito is most relevant today when indigenous communities in the Americas, from Canada to Patagonia, are in the front line of the resistance to capitalist destruction of the environment.

An Evolution in Thought

Saito's main contribution, however, is to show the movement, the evolution of Marx's reflections on nature, in a process of learning, rethinking and reshaping his thoughts. Before *Capital* (1867) one can find in Marx's writings a rather uncritical assessment of capitalist “progress,” an attitude often described by the vague mythological term “Prometheanism.”

This is obvious in *The Communist Manifesto's* celebration of capital's “subjection of nature's forces to man” and the “clearing of whole continents for cultivation;” but it also applies to the *London Notebooks* (1851), the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*, and other

writings from those years.

Curiously in my own view, Saito seems to exempt the *Grundrisse* (1857-58) from his criticism. This exception is not justified, considering how much Marx in this manuscript admires “the great civilising mission of capitalism” in relation to nature and to the pre-capitalist communities, prisoners of their localism and their “idolatry of nature”(!)

The change comes in 1865-66, when Marx discovers, by reading the writings of the agricultural chemist Justus Von Liebig, the problems of soil exhaustion, and the metabolic rift between human societies and the natural environment.

This will lead, in *Capital* volume I (1867), but also in the two other unfinished volumes, to a much more critical assessment of the destructive nature of capitalist “progress,” particularly in agriculture. After 1868, through reading another German scientist, Carl Fraas, Marx will discover also other important ecological issues, such as deforestation and local climate change.

According to Saito, if Marx had been able to complete volumes II and III of *Capital*, he would have more strongly emphasized the ecological crisis. This also at least implies that in the unfinished state in which Marx left these volumes, there wasn't a strong enough emphasis on those issues.

This leads to my main disagreement with Saito. In several passages of the book he asserts that for Marx “the environmental unsustainability of capitalism is the contradiction of the system” (142, emphasis by Saito); or that in his late years he came to see the metabolic rift as “the most serious problem of capitalism;” or that the conflict with natural limits is, for Marx, “the main contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.”

I wonder where Saito found in Marx's writings, published books, manuscripts or notebooks, any such statements. They are not to be found, and for a good reason.

The unsustainability of the capitalist system was not the decisive issue in the 19th century that it has become today, or more accurately since 1945. Ian Angus most cogently argues that this is when human activity began to constitute the dominant shaper of the planetary environment. He sees this as when the planet entered a new geological era, the “Anthropocene.”

continued on page 42

REVIEW

That Oldtime Queer Utopia By Peter Drucker

Towards a Gay Communism:

Elements of a Homosexual Critique

By Mario Mieli, translated by David Fernbach and Evan Calder Williams

London: Pluto Press, 2018, 260 pages plus index, \$30 paperback from University of Chicago Press.

THE PAST DECADE'S mini-boomlet in queer Marxist publishing has sent some people in search of queer Marxist ancestors. This may be what prompted Pluto Press to put out a new edition of Mario Mieli's book *Towards a Gay Communism*, first published in Italian in 1977 and in English (as *Homosexuality and Liberation*) in 1980.

Rereading this classic confirms that recent queer Marxists indeed did not have to entirely reinvent the wheel — and at the same time that our queer Marxist forebears lived in many ways in an almost unrecognizably different world.

Mieli's work includes some striking echoes, not only of today's Marxism, but of today's queer theory and activism more broadly. Above all, he was in your face about sex, about being different, about being "abnormal."

Today he might be called, not "homosexual" or "gay" (his words back then), but "trans" or "genderqueer." Either way, it's easy to imagine him out there zapping bigots and conformists with the best of them.

Mieli today would be in a minority among queer theorists in relying so heavily on psychoanalysis for much of his analysis — but not a tiny minority (at least, not as tiny a minority as queer Marxists). There are still a fair number of queer scholars out there giving their own perverse take on Freud, and queer Marxists in particular who borrow from Herbert Marcuse's 1955 classic *Eros and Civilization*.¹

Mieli's outlook dovetails with Marcuse's in many ways. Like Marcuse, he insists on human beings' universal bisexuality (which he calls "transsexuality"), calls for a return to infants' non-genitally-fixed "polymorphous perversity," decries sexual repression as well as "repressive tolerance," and gives sexual "perversions" a major role in a project of full human liberation.

Contemporary in feeling too is Mieli's declaration that queer sex (especially anal sex and sex between gay men and women)

Peter Drucker is the author of Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism and a longtime advisory editor of ATC.



Mario Mieli, an in-your-face queer activist and writer.

and what liberationists then called "genderfuck" — "a stylistic means of disrupting the categories of gender normativity to unsettling and often humorous effect," as Tim Dean puts it in his insightful foreword to the new edition (xii) — can in themselves be radical acts.

Long before Judith Butler, Mieli cited an Italian feminist as declaring, "Femininity is a drag show." (15) His celebration of a trans woman's participation in English feminist gatherings (208-09) is a startlingly early anticipation of today's calls for trans inclusion.

Sadly, the gender nonconformity that liberationists championed in Mieli's time has been increasingly marginalized among gay men as they've become more prone to present themselves as "real men." Today, radical trans non-binary people and other genderqueers have largely taken over the challenge to gender norms, while many trans men and women insist that they are simply "trapped in the wrong body" and can conform reasonably well to the norms of their "true" gender.

Mieli's condemnation of the commercial gay ghetto is also as timely as ever. As Colin

Wilson's review of the new edition rightly observes, Mieli lived among radicals who had "a broader sense of the political" and wanted "to begin living now in a new way."²

Liberation — and Communism

What would really make Mieli an oddball among contemporary queer theorists is his call for "liberation," not to mention "communism." As Tim Dean points out (x), Mieli's book was published within months of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, Volume I (1976) — a work that would have far more influence on later queer thought and head in dramatically different directions.³

Notably, Foucault rejected accounts of sexuality that made repression central, insisting that the powers that be spend at least as much effort inciting and constructing sexuality as they do repressing it. And he dismissed "liberation" (particularly Marxist and feminist versions of it) as not only utopian but drearily utopian.

Foucault advocated, not so much a liberated sexuality, as a multiplication of forms of pleasure and ways of playing with power in sex. For those of us who oppose the reign of capital, cis straight male supremacy and other oppressive structures, Mieli makes a refreshing contrast to the dominant Foucauldianism of the past 40 years.

In other ways, however, Mieli could have learned a lot from Foucault — as Marxists over the last several decades have. Above all, Foucault stressed that sexuality in general is a product of history and that "homosexuality" as defined today in particular is a product of recent history, dating back a couple of centuries at most.

Historians of sexuality over the last few decades have proved Foucault's point exhaustively, exploring a myriad of extremely different patterns of same-sex sexual behavior and varying constructions of

"TRANSGENDER AMERICANS ARE facing an epidemic of violence," reports Trudy Ring in *The Advocate*. "Twenty-four of them were known to be homicide victims in 2018, although the actual number is likely higher... The majority of victims in any year tracked by *The Advocate* have been women of color."

As of early June 2019, there are nine reported murders of trans people this year in the United States — again, undoubtedly an underreport. All are African American. The first, Dana Martin, 31, lived in Hope Hull, Alabama, outside Montgomery. The others listed in *The Advocate*, with brief descriptions of their lives and circumstances of death: Jazzaline Ware of Memphis, TN; Ashanti Carmon, 27, of Fairmount Heights, MD; Claire Legato, 21, of Cleveland, OH; Muhlaysia Booker, 23 and Chynal Lindsay, 26, of Dallas, TX; Michelle "Tamika" Washington, 40, of Philadelphia, PA; Paris Cameron, 25, of Detroit, MI; and Chanel Scurlock, 23, of Lumberton, NC. ■

gender across time and space. Marxists in particular have drawn on this research, with John D'Emilio's seminal essay, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in particular laying bare the intimate connection between what Marx called "free" labor and the emergence of "homosexual" identity.⁴

D'Emilio's essay was another work that Mieli (who died in 1983, at age 30) just missed — and might have dismissed. *Towards a Gay Communism* succumbs to the worst potential pitfall of a Freudian-Marxist synthesis: it virtually jettisons Marx's sense of history, trading it in for a timeless Freudian schema. As Wilson notes, Mieli sees sexuality "as a natural, pre-given thing on a basically biological model."

For example, Mieli dismisses men who fuck queers without themselves identifying as gay as repressed closet cases. My own work among others suggests instead that Mieli was living in a time of transition between an older, originally 19th century model of "sexual inversion," in which "inverts" were expected to have sex with "real men" rather than each other, and a later, post-Second World War model of a more inclusive gay community.⁵

Missing Perspective

Lacking much sense of historical change, Mieli seems puzzled by the contrast between ancient Greek and Roman sexual-

Ecosocialism — cont. from page 40

Moreover, I believe that the metabolic rift, or the conflict with natural limits is not adequately described as a "problem of capitalism" or "contradiction of the system."

It is much more! It's a contradiction between the system and "the eternal natural conditions" (Marx), and therefore a conflict with the natural conditions of human life in the planet.

In fact, as Paul Burkett (quoted by Saito) argues, capital can continue to accumulate under any natural conditions, however degraded, so long as there is not a complete extinction of human life. *Indeed, human civilization can disappear before capital accumulation becomes impossible.*

Saito concludes his book with a sober assessment that seems to me a very apt summary of the issue: *Capital* (the book) remains an unfinished project.

Marx did not answer all questions nor predict today's world. But his critique of capitalism provides an extremely helpful theoretical foundation for the understanding of the current ecological crisis.

Therefore, I would add, ecosocialism can build on Marx's insights, but must fully develop a new, eco-marxist, confrontation with the challenges of the Anthropocene in the 21st century. ■

ity and the rigid heterosexuality of his own time and place. Understandably enraged at the Catholic Church, he suggests that the taboo on homosexuality "would appear to be of Hebrew origin." (61) But he admits to having no idea why the taboo originated.

He makes no link between gay oppression and capitalism, or class society in general — an odd stance for a self-proclaimed Marxist. And despite his expressions of solidarity with women and his attacks on the family, he says nothing about the role of women's labor in the family in reproducing capitalism.

In fact, for a self-proclaimed Marxist, Mieli has extraordinarily little use for other Marxists. In this respect he exemplifies some of the worst sectarianism of his otherwise exciting time. Someone who knew him from the London Gay Liberation Front in 1971-72 remembers that Mieli always had to be the most revolutionary, and that anyone who disagreed with him risked being written off as "so bourgeois."

Contempt for the Italian far left in particular disfigures the pages of Mieli's book. Translator Evan Calder Williams points out that Mieli identified particularly with the tiny ultraleft current descended from Italian Communist Party founder Amadeo Bordiga (a major adversary of Gramsci). (xxx) This may help account for the venom with which Mieli attacks larger far left currents like *Il Manifesto*, the soft Maoist *Lotta Continua* and the Trotskyists — all worthy of more attention and respect than his polemics against them suggest.

His attachment to Bordiga does not fully

explain, however, why by 1977 he concluded that "homosexuals are revolutionary today in as much as we have overcome politics." (175)

Mieli's conception of Marxism didn't leave much room for labor organizing: he called on gays to come out at work only to "reject a labour that no longer has any reason to exist." (249) Today's queer radical campaigns in solidarity with Black and Palestinian struggles would not fit in his vision either. By 1979, in fact, he would declare that he was "no longer part of the gay movement." (xxii)

This recital of Mieli's sectarian excesses may make people wonder why they should bother reading the book at all. But they should. His justified fury at bigots, his merciless exposure of "normality," his celebration of freedom and what Williams calls his "bracing gust of laughter" (xxvii) are all delights. If today's queer Marxists can combine Mieli's joyous sexual and gender deviance with more careful attention to history, economics and politics, then the writing of *Towards a Gay Communism* will not have been in vain. ■

Notes

1. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
2. Colin Wilson, "Review: Towards a Gay Communism," 15 December 2018, <https://www.rs21.org.uk/2018/12/15/review-towards-a-gay-communism/>.
3. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Volume I: An Introduction, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
4. John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in Ann Snitow et al. eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983.
5. See Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2015.

The Truth About the VA — continued from page 38

ist is four days; and the average wait to see a specialist is nine days.

Overall, the wait times in the VHA system were found to be at least as good as those in private sector systems.

So, if the VHA has established a good track record of providing veterans with high-quality health and social services on a timely and cost-effective basis. Why does the general public perceive it to be a failing organization?

To answer this question, we need to ask: Who would like to see the VHA fail?

As Suzanne Gordon documents, wealth-backed conservative groups have been making a strong push to delegitimize, defund, and ultimately privatize the VHA. Sixteen conservative lobbying groups, most of which were funded by the Koch brothers, appealed to Senators and Congressional representatives in October of 2017 for the immediate privatization of the VHA.

The Koch brothers have also created and funded an AstroTurf group, "Concerned Veterans for America," which is actively

lobbying the Trump Administration to implement steps to weaken the VA. Hedge fund billionaire and major Trump donor Steven A. Cohen has established The Cohen Veterans' Network as a private sector competitor of the VHA poised to take on outsourced mental health treatment.

The VHA represents a very good model of a single-payer health care system, and its success is a threat to the private-sector health care industry. The push against the VHA is just a part of the right wing's opposition to all forms of nationalized health care.

Furthermore, the VHA has a patient base of nine million veterans, a budget of \$200 billion, and currently sees 250,000 patients a day. That makes for a large chunk of income that the private sector would like to see directed its way.

Wounds of War is a valuable resource for veterans' rights advocates as well as everyone concerned with the struggle for Medicare for all. ■

Activist, Organizer, Educator: Dan Clawson (1948-2019) By Karin Baker

WHEN DAN CLAWSON's sudden death became known, the result was an outpouring of grief, and statements of appreciation. Of course, this is typical when someone dies, but what I read and heard from people are not the usual. A sampling:

- Dan is in my head like no other professor. Because of what he did, not because of anything he directly told me I should be doing.
- Rarely out in front, but always leading from behind, Dan was a mentor and advisor to union members and activists across the country.
- Dan had an ability to understand the context even of things that he wasn't a part of. It's hard to find people to talk about Indian politics with, but after a few sharp questions, within 15 minutes, he would have a great grasp of things. I will miss our talks.
- When I think about two colleagues whose jobs were just saved, that's a testament to Dan. Because he brought me in to organizing, and I taught his way of doing things to my local.
- His voice will always be what political analysis of an organization should be for me. If I can hear Dan say it, then I know it's right.
- A giant.
- No ego, just eyes on the prize.
- I have been trying to live up to his example from the day that I met him. I have not yet succeeded, but I will continue trying.

Political Activism Came Slowly

Dan Clawson was born in 1948 in Alexandria, Virginia, and grew up in Chevy Chase, Maryland. His father worked for the government and so by obligation was politically unaffiliated, but more or less a conservative Democrat; his mother was more of a liberal Democrat.

Dan's political activity developed slowly. As Mary Ann Clawson, his wife of 50 years stated, "he was always a man of strong integrity who was willing to speak truth to power, but he was not always an organizer."

Nonetheless, when the Marines came to Carleton College in the late 1960s to

Karin Baker is a special education history teacher. She knew Dan Clawson through Solidarity, and through Educators for a Democratic Union. She is among many who have trouble imagining a world without Dan.

recruit, Dan and Mary Ann decided to join the sit-in. Later, when they transferred to Washington University in St. Louis, they attended the local SDS chapter, found it sectarian and drifted away. Mary Ann vividly recalled the macho leftism that permeated student politics then.

More significantly, they got to know George Rawick, a professor who became Dan's mentor. Rawick had belonged to a series of socialist groups and had been close to C.L.R. James and Martin Glaberman. He was also influenced by his experiences teaching Black autoworkers in Detroit.

As Rawick was writing *From Sundown to Sunup: the Making of the Black Community*, they read his drafts. The book was based on a treasury of oral interviews collected in the 1930s with formerly enslaved people. As such it was among the first books to present enslaved people as agents in their own history.

During that period, at Rawick's suggestion, they read *Capital* together.

Studying Power

Dan's dissertation was titled "Bureaucracy and the Labor Process: the Transformation of U.S. Industry, 1860 to 1920" and ultimately published as a book by Monthly Review Press.

Kevin Young, a history professor who as a young scholar followed Dan's work, sees *Bureaucracy and the Labor Process* as a path-breaking historical study that shows how work became more hierarchical, bureaucratized, deskilled and degraded — not because bureaucracy and hierarchy were more efficient than prior systems of labor organization, but because those changes enhanced capitalist profits and control.

"While the adoption of new technologies or new systems of labor control such as Taylorism is often attributed to their superior productive efficiency, the book shows that class warfare by capitalists was the real motivation."

Dan went on to analyze campaign finance records of corporate political action committees and interview their lobbyists, producing two books: *Dollars and Votes: How Business Campaign Contributions Subvert Democracy* and *Money Talks: Corporate PACs and Political Influence*.

But Dan's scholarly focus shifted from how elites manage power to how working people can challenge this dynamic.

The Next Upsurge; Labor and the New Social Movements came out in 2003. One of the organizing efforts he analyzed was directed by Jane McAlevey. They stayed in touch over the years and he served on her dissertation committee.

Dan co-wrote *Unequal Time: Gender, Class, and Family in Employment Schedules* with Naomi Gerstel. Based on extensive observation and interviews, they highlighted the differing degrees of control over work hours experienced in the medical profession, focusing on implications of class and gender.

His latest labor-related scholarship, *Labor in the Time of Trump*, is an anthology of articles. The essays examine vulnerabilities in right-wing strategy and draw lessons from recent organizing efforts.

Activist and Organizer

By 1978, when Dan began teaching at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, there were more possibilities for action.

Dan didn't waste any time. When the graduate student union picketed, although an untenured professor, he picketed with them. He also worked closely with a group of undergraduates to challenge the right-wing character of student government.

While he taught in Amherst, Mary Ann got a job as a sociologist at Wesleyan University. Her focus was mostly on gender and popular culture. (She retired just last year.) They raised a daughter, Laura, who today writes for *Daily Kos*.

By the 2000s Dan found himself among a critical mass of like-minded professors including Stephanie Luce, Mark Brenner, Eve Weinbaum and Max Page. With the university cutting both faculty positions and their pay, the group got involved in the Massachusetts Society of Professors. Over the years he and Max were elected to office in the MSP, and later, in the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

As faculty and students marched and lobbied the legislature, the group began to see a need for a state-wide group. In 2007, the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts was born. As PHENOM's web page notes: "It was Dan Clawson ...

who first pushed the idea of an independent organization that would advocate for public higher education When few were willing to talk openly, much less build an organization around the idea of free higher education, Dan was happy to do so It has become a mainstream political idea, widely discussed in presidential campaigns, and here in Massachusetts.”

Democracy or Backroom Deals?

Along with creating PHENOM, Dan and Max Page developed an interest in a state-wide focus.

That had led them to join the MTA Board of Directors. Through this work Dan started to learn of the struggles K-12 teachers were having, especially around high stakes testing and charter schools. As Mary Ann puts it, “this was the beginning of a new chapter in his life as an activist.”

In MTA Dan and Max met others who were chafing at the politics of the current leadership. For example, even after the MTA convention passed a motion opposing the linking of students’ standardized test scores to teacher evaluations, the MTA Board went along with the policy.

Educators for a Democratic Union, begun in 2012, was the result of these frustrations, and it gained steam quickly when a new outrage came to light.

It turned out that there had been actual secret backroom dealings between MTA leadership and the billionaire-funded “ed reform” group, Stand for Children. It was floating a ballot measure that would tie teacher evaluations to students’ test scores and eliminate seniority rights.

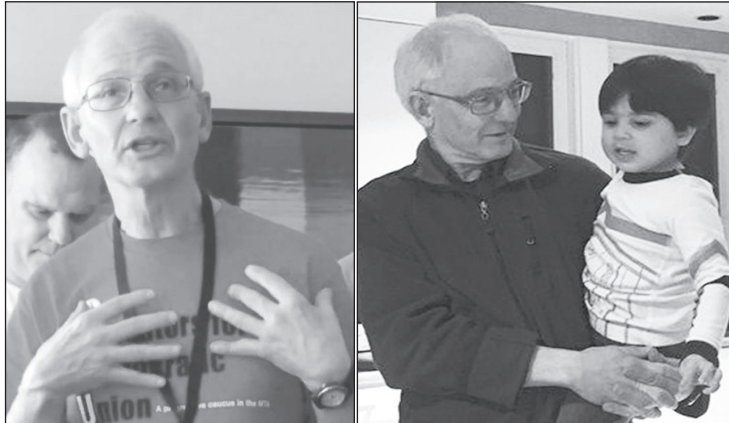
Polling data suggested the ballot measure would pass, so MTA leaders responded by giving in to much of what Stand for Children wanted and then announcing victory. They claimed this secret deal had been a necessary compromise to prevent something worse. Fighting back wasn’t an option they considered.

Contrast this to the period later on, when Barbara Madeloni won her 2014 campaign for MTA president — recruited by Dan, who became her campaign manager — and EDU began to take seats on the board and committees as well.

A new ballot measure, again funded by “ed reform” billionaires, would dramatically raise the cap on the number of charter

schools allowed in Massachusetts if it passed, and polls suggested it would.

No back room deals this time; Madeloni and the new guard in MTA led a fight, teachers went out into their communities and



Two aspects of Dan Clawson: As an organizer and teacher, and as the grandfather of Danny. Left photo: Paul Mange Johansen; right: Laura Clawson

educated, and the measure was defeated by a landslide. Dan’s efforts in MTA changed the landscape of the statewide union, perhaps preventing the destruction of the school system in that state.

Madeloni was to win another term, to the shock of the old guard. Then in 2018 Merrie Najimy, an early EDU member, was voted in. All of this happened through the organizing efforts of EDU, with Dan each time devoting untold hours to counting delegates on spreadsheets, meetings, and strategizing. Max Page became vice president.

Mary Ann saw Dan entering a new phase as he went from being such an effective organizer on the outside that he ultimately found himself inside. Yet he didn’t stop organizing on the outside. As Mary Ann said, “he managed to reconcile these two ways of operating so they became one.”

Future Plans

Within the months before he died, Dan was a key figure in several efforts. UMass Amherst made headlines when a panel was organized in support of Palestinians, including big name speakers: Linda Sarsour, Roger Waters, Marc Lamont Hill, and Dave Zirin.

Under Zionist pressure, the university considered canceling. Some credit Dan’s efforts to organize the sociology department to back the event as instrumental in convincing the university to go ahead. Others also credit Dan with jump-starting the effort among Hampshire College faculty and students to come together to save this institution, whose alternative model of higher education is under threat.

Although he wasn’t part of the UMass Labor Center’s faculty, he played a supportive role, serving on its committees, working with its students and fighting for its survival.

He was talented at stepping up when

that was needed, and stepping back when he’d recruited others to take over. As he retired from the faculty, he had many plans, including to devote even more of his time to organizing.

The week he died began with a faculty celebration of his retirement. It was to conclude with a gathering of friends to recognize the occasion. These friends eventually gathered for a very different purpose.

Because of a meeting, he’d put off having an angioplasty, a medical procedure to restore the blood flow through his artery, and suddenly died from a heart attack.

His heart troubles came as a shock to everyone. “He had great cholesterol,” said Mary Ann. He biked to work most days, went to the gym when he couldn’t, and “walked nine flights up to his office every day.” He worked hard, but it was work he loved to do!

A Talented Organizer with a Vision

Dan was a strong supporter of *Labor Notes* because it reflected his vision of social transformation, and it was his interest in *Labor Notes* that prompted him to then join Solidarity.

Barbara Madeloni put it well when she wrote: “What made him such a great organizer? Well, he talked to people. When he had a list he called up every person. He asked them questions. He listened. He made an ask: come to a meeting, sign a petition, run for office. And if he wasn’t successful at first, he didn’t give up hope. He came back, invited you into the movement, and gave you something to do.

So, yes, he did the work. But more, Dan’s organizing was sincere. He believed in our collective capacity to build a better world. He acted on that faith with each individual. His was a generous and determined heart. His manner communicated, ‘If we have a vision for a better world, we had damn well better be ready to do the work to get there. And, by the way, I have a plan.’”

He was also a loyal friend who used his strategizing ability in support of those around him, so that many came to him for help and advice when facing challenges. And more than one of us admired his ability to work collectively in the kitchen as well as in the realm of political action.

As a friend noted, “We marveled at the ability of Dan and Mary Ann to seamlessly work together to prepare a complex dinner for friends, achieving the benefits of division of labor without property ownership in the product. There should be a lesson for our society from that.”

Mary Ann likes to point out that Dan wasn’t always an organizer — in a sense, the first person he organized was himself. Then he organized us. Now we must carry on his legacy of organizing without him. ■

Bolton certainly does — and so do Israeli prime minister Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman, even if they're not planning to put their own forces into the battlefield.

The anti-Iran campaign has to be viewed with other regional initiatives to restore the domination that the United States lost in the wake of the Iraqi and Syrian wars. Shortly, the repulsive Kushner is supposed to reveal the plan he's developed, along with his buddy bin Salman, which anticipates dividing the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) into isolated bantustans. Promises of investments will be made (to be broken later in classic Trump fashion) in these miserable remnants of Palestine, enabling Israeli annexation of whatever land and resources it wants.

The announcement of this "solution" may be held up by the impasse between Israel's ultra-nationalist and ultra-religious reactionary factions. In any case, the resulting prospect is for a bitter struggle against Israeli apartheid under more difficult conditions than in South Africa, quite likely lasting for decades to come. All kinds of liberal Zionists, including leading Democrats of course, will say it's the Palestinians' fault for "rejecting the two-state solution" that Israel never actually offered.

Will the administration's provocations lead to a shooting war with Iran? It's one of those low-probability events, but carrying almost unimaginable possible consequences unless the brakes are applied somewhere along the line:

- The escalation of Saudi Arabia's U.S.-backed genocidal war in Yemen.
- The violent destabilization of Iraq, exposing U.S. forces to attack and also creating exactly the conditions for the reincarnation of the "Islamic State."
- Israel attacking pro-Iranian Hezbollah forces in Lebanon — or, if the Iranian regime feels itself under terminal threat — its rulers authorizing Hezbollah military strikes on Israeli targets.
- In that scenario, Israeli extreme nationalist and religious right forces — which are only partly controlled by the Netanyahu government and the military — might unleash longstanding plans for large-scale ethnic cleansing and expulsion in the OPTs. Whether brought about by accident or design, these are extreme scenarios but hardly something that the world should be prepared to risk.

China: Looming Confrontation

If the Trump regime's gambits in Latin America are mainly driven by sadistic cruelty and opportunistic calculation, and in the Middle East by the kind of strategic arrogant overreach that we've seen before with ruinous results, there is a political-economic and potentially military conflict that actually *does* pose a threat to U.S. hegemony: the rapidly growing confrontation with China.

The multi-dimensional complexity of this conflict is beyond our scope here. Its most highly publicized aspect, the trade war that Trump himself has pushed for decades, isn't the most important part. Tariffs grab the headlines, but in many respects this is the 21st century version of a classic rivalry between a rising power and the established imperial one.

In the 20th century, over the course of two world wars, the United States supplanted Britain, France and other European states to become the superpower of capitalist

imperialism. Today, it is challenged for global domination by a Chinese power with a hybrid economy — combining a private capitalist system with a single-party regime — which, however, faces its own internal weaknesses and contradictions.

The first approximation to understanding the U.S.-China conflict is that it has nothing to do with right and wrong or a "rules-based global order." Rather, both sides tell much of the truth about the other's misdeeds and lie about their own.

Yes, in the context of China's political system where the Communist Party regime makes and enforces the rules, its corporations' ascendancy in high-tech and especially 5G technology constitutes a security threat to every country that signs up for it. Yes, it's true that its "Belt and Road" project includes extending huge development loans to countries and seizing their strategic ports and assets when the projects fail and the loans can't be repaid.

It's also true that the United States has used its technological and military supremacy to dominate the Asian Pacific area for generations, seeking to control China's borders with potential hostile neighbors (notably India). Capitalist powers for centuries have looted not only the raw materials but the technical know-how of subjugated peoples and nations. One might say that the West invented intellectual property theft, and the Chinese "stole" it.

There's not just commercial and technological rivalry, but potentially military as well, and not only in the South China Sea. U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo, in his jaw-dropping speech to the Arctic Council, proclaimed that the rapid melting of Arctic ice opens up great shipping and resource extraction opportunities that the United States is determined to exploit and protect by military as well as commercial means.

While both China and Russia of course have their eyes on the same prize, Pompeo's speech, in its own right, stands out as a suicide note for humanity. This administration celebrates the very climate change that's destroying the agricultural base of Central American countries, accelerating their populations' flight northward toward Trump's immigration detention centers.

The idea that a border wall or punitive tariffs against Mexico will stop desperate refugees makes as much sense as the notion that sea walls and censoring climate science will prevent our coastal cities from being inundated by rising oceans and supercharged hurricanes.

Yet while the urgent need for a grassroots antiwar and ecological upsurge has never been greater, it is not presently clear what forces are capable of mobilizing it. The growth of Green parties' strength in Europe, student strike actions against government and corporate climate change inaction, and the new socialist activism in the United States are at least hopeful signs.

"How many more wars?" depends, in any case, not only on the savagery of the Trump gang but also on more profound issues that will persist well after the big twit has departed the scene. The fights to stop crippling starvation sanctions on Iran, Venezuela and Cuba; to block the drive toward insane wars; to force real, not symbolic action against the destruction of civilization by climate change; and to create a socialist future without imperialist rivalries and war are all inextricably connected. ■

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