

AGAINST THE CURRENT

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



DETROIT BEYOND BANKRUPTCY

— PETER BLACKMER

— JOSIAH RECTOR

Islamophobia Grows in Europe

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Egypt's Uprising and Its Fate

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A Letter from the Editors:

Biden: “Empire Is Back”...

NOT THAT IT ever left, of course: The United States’ vocation to rule the world is a constant fact of global life and its multiple crises. What then is the meaning of President Joe Biden’s proclamation that “America is back,” warmly greeted in many capitals and among elite opinion-makers?

Biden’s mantra is taken to mean a return from Trump’s transactional chaos and corruption to what’s called the “rule-based international order.” As to what that order means in the lives of the global majority, Nicole Aschoff has it right (“The Biden Doctrine,” *Jacobin*, Winter 2021):

“In promising to reconstruct a close approximation of the Obama-era global order, Biden is promising to restore a violent, rapacious system that had increasingly lost its legitimacy.

“Trump is such an obnoxious, dishonorable figure that it is easy to lose sight of the deep continuities between his administration, previous administrations, and the likely proclivities of the Biden team: continued interference in Latin American governments, indifference to crippling Third World debt, blithe disregard for the massive corporate theft of collective wealth through offshore tax havens, and a ready willingness to go to the ends of the earth to protect Wall Street while throwing ordinary people under the bus.”

On domestic issues, the enormous U.S. economic and public health crisis, as well as Republican obstruction, has pushed the Democratic administration in certain “progressive” directions. The same is *not* true of Washington’s foreign policy. What stands out here on first look is its sickening moral depravity.

Inherited from Trump’s gang, brutal sanctions on the people of Iran and Venezuela continue, while there’s no sign yet of lifting the criminal U.S. economic blockade of Cuba. As Kevin Young writes on Venezuela: “U.S. support for the far-right forces of (Juan) Gaudó and (Leopoldo) Lopez is intended to prevent a deal between (president) Maduro and the more pragmatic elements of the opposition [which] might alleviate Venezuela’s economic crisis, but it could leave Maduro in power and thus derail the U.S.’s regime change agenda.” (“Smarter Empire,” <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts>, March 8, 2021)

Meanwhile no sanctions have been placed on the murderous Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, on the pretext that Washington is “recalibrating the relationship” with Saudi Arabia, while preserving its essentials — and maintaining arms sales to the United Arab Emirates, as the country of Yemen dies. There are too many other dirty examples of “geopolitics” to list here.

Without reference to ethical considerations, we must also look at the real conflicts and contradictions facing the leading imperialist power. These are particularly important given the rising power of China as well as economic and cybersecurity challenges. Some of these carry longterm threats of war and mutual destruction.

This requires digging beneath daily rhetoric and news cycle noise. Strategically, “deep continuities” between Trump and Biden outweigh the differences. For example, while the big twit liked playing tough on TV when he threatened “Little Rocket Man” or bombed an empty airfield in Syria, Biden in his first 30 days already launched an air strike in Iraq that killed reportedly 22 Iraqi Shia militia fighters.

Biden’s intent was a warning signal to Iran, not starting a real war. Neither Biden nor Trump are serious warmakers by intention — even though such actions could trigger an apocalypse by accident or miscalculation. That is also certainly true of other smoldering conflicts, e.g. between U.S. and Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea, or the half-hidden Israeli and Iranian cyber conflict and sabotage of

each other’s shipping.

It does appear, if carried through, that Biden will end the U.S. war in Afghanistan by the 9/11 anniversary — a 20-year defeat for U.S. power, a war that could never have been “won” — and the longer it lasted, the more it inflicted devastation on Afghanistan and its population.

Conflicts and Contradictions

Notoriously, Trump was contemptuous of the U.S. strategic partners in Europe for their blatant failure to sufficiently impoverish their own populations for the sake of ramped-up military spending. Trump’s trashing of NATO and peremptory withdrawal from the Paris climate accord horrified the strategic partners of the United States, while appealing to his nativist and climate-change-denying domestic base.

Sabotaging the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Program of Action, JCPOA) made the world, and particularly the Middle East, a more dangerous place. This angered the European powers — while exposing their incapacity to do much about it — as well as drawing China and Iran closer together as Tehran turns to Chinese investment and assistance in return for Iranian oil at a discounted price.

Trump’s strategic game of course was consummating the long-gestating anti-Iran axis of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A Hillary Clinton administration would have worked more discreetly to develop that same alliance, although without the bombastic open provocation of Trump’s “deal of the century” that *publicly* throws Palestine under the tank treads.

In the Middle East arena of permanent crisis and shifting alliances, U.S. policy remains, as always, cynically indifferent to Israel’s destruction of Palestine. We can expect Biden’s team to return to more conventional postures of imperial diplomacy (from which the Palestinian people, for example, can expect exactly nothing). But on restoring the Iran deal, Biden is caught in the trick bag that Trump created.

Israel is doing everything, both secretly and openly in the sabotage of the Natanz facility, to destroy the negotiations. Iran for its part has now accelerated its nuclear enrichment. A new deal requires lifting Trump’s crippling additional sanctions on Iran, a rupture which Biden is unwilling to make as it would look like “weakness” — and the suffering

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May / June 2021 — Volume XXXVI, Number 2



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Front Cover: Detroiters marching to stop evictions, April 10, 2021 <https://jimwestphoto.com>
 Above: Picket in support of Bessemer Amazon workers; Detroit march against evictions. <https://jimwestphoto.com>
 Back Cover: Amazon organizing drive, Bessemer, Alabama

AGAINST THE CURRENT is published in order to promote dialogue among the activists, organizers and serious scholars of the left. We promote the vision of socialism from below, of a revolutionary, working-class, multinational and multiracial, feminist and antibureaucratic socialist movement. ATC is sponsored by Solidarity, a socialist organization founded in 1986, together with a group of advisory editors who believe that this magazine can contribute to building an effective U.S. socialist left.

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Truth versus Copaganda

Conviction in Chauvin Trial

By Malik Miah

"I CALLED THE police on the police," one eyewitness told the jury.

The prosecution opened the trial of Derek Chauvin with a 9-minute and 29-second ("929") video of the cop's knee murdering George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis. The Medical Examiner and other medical doctors said he was not moving minutes after the knee was placed on his neck.

The evidence by eyewitnesses and testimony by police officers, including the chief, declared that Chauvin was not following police policy and should be convicted. The Blue Wall of silence was cracked.

The top police officials' argument is that Chauvin is an exception to "good policing." African Americans and many others, on the other hand, see Chauvin as the *norm* of modern policing especially as it applies to Black and Brown people.

\$27 Million Civil Settlement

A few days before the trial began the Minneapolis City Council agreed, March 12, to a historic civil settlement paying the Floyd family \$27 million — the largest pre-trial settlement ever. Chauvin's lawyers unsuccessfully tried to use the settlement as a reason to move the criminal trial out of Minneapolis.

The three charges against Chauvin are second-degree unintentional felony murder, third-degree "depraved mind" murder, and second-degree manslaughter.

The defense repeated its false claim that Floyd died of his heart condition and drug use. A former medical examiner from Maryland — who's being sued there because of his outrageously false reports in previous police killings — even said death could have been caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from car fumes, although Floyd's blood oxygen level was normal.

The aim of the defense is to get a single juror to believe Chauvin followed police procedures. They seek a hung jury, and no conviction. The defense does not have to prove innocence. Then the state's attorney general would have to decide to drop the



case or have a retrial.

Not Safe to be Black

The context of the trial and the "929" video is numerous shootings by cops of unarmed Black men around the country.

During the 20-day Chauvin trial, 64 people in the United States have been killed by police — half of them Black or Brown. (*New York Times*, April 18)

In Chicago, just hours before the trial began on March 29, a 13-year-old Latino youth, Adam Toledo, was shot in the chest and killed by a cop. The bodycam (released after more than two weeks) shows that he was running away, was told to stop and turn around and raise his hands.

Toledo did so and was shot anyway. The cop, who has four use-of-force complaints since 2017, was put on administrative desk duty with full pay.

As the Chauvin trial was wrapping up, a killing occurred in the inner suburb Brooklyn Center of Minneapolis, 10 minutes from the courthouse.

Hundreds of demonstrators poured into the streets on multiple nights after the fatal police shooting of Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old Black man, during a traffic stop.

The officer, 26-year veteran Kimberly Potter, shot and killed Wright after a minor car violation. Her police chief claimed it was an "accident," that she intended to pull her high-powered Taser gun but instead grabbed her heavier gun.

The Taser is yellow, while the standard police gun is Black. The Taser is positioned opposite the normal shooting hand.

The next day Potter resigned — with a

full pension. She was charged with second-degree manslaughter, arrested, booked and released on \$100,000 bail.

As George Floyd's family says, there is *no justice* for Floyd since he can't be brought back to life. *Accountability* is the goal. A

murder conviction of Chauvin can send a strong message to the police and those who back criminal actions by cops.

A bigger victory of much greater significance would be an end to modern policing and its replacement.

Abolish Qualified Immunity

A starting point is to end "qualified immunity" for police.

Policing has never been fair or equal for Black and Brown people. It is why young Blacks are given "the talk" by their parents on how to act around police.

Youth as young as 7 years old are told to fear the cops. But as the Chicago shooting of Adam Toledo shows, complying with cop orders does not mean you are safe.

The U.S. Supreme Court first introduced the qualified immunity doctrine in *Pierson v. Ray* (1967), a case litigated during the height of the civil rights movement. It gives cops immunity from civil suits — unless the victim or the family is able to demonstrate that the cop "violated clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known."

Who defines "reasonable"? The police and the government do.

That means a killer cop in most cases is never charged. Even when a Derek Chauvin is charged, it is not for first-degree murder.

Even when the Floyd family won its civil lawsuit for \$27 million, the cop pays nothing out of his pocket. Nor does the police budget. It is the city's taxpayers who pay.

Worst yet, the police budgets continue to grow, with more military armaments, tear

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Malik Miah is an ATC advisory editor.

RWDSU Campaign at BAmazon: Bravery, Not Blowout

By John Logan

ON FRIDAY, APRIL 9 the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) announced that the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) had lost its organizing campaign at Amazon in Bessemer, Alabama, one of the most closely watched union drives in decades, by a vote of 1798 to 738.

The NLRB received 3215 ballots, and prior to the public count conducted by zoom, Amazon's lawyers had challenged most of the almost 600 disputed ballots (which are put aside to be counted in case they might determine the outcome).

The proverbial ink was barely dry on the result when organizing gurus published critiques, no doubt written weeks ago, full of heated rhetoric and organizing pearls of wisdom but light on facts — and lighter on an informed understanding of how the campaign had unfolded.

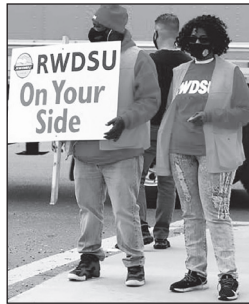
One article published in *The Nation*, "Blowout at Bessemer," provides one such example. Some critics had never visited Bessemer, and never spoke to RWDSU organizers to learn about the empirical reality. When you know why the union lost, why it was always going to lose, and what it needed to do to win, why complicate your argument with the actual facts of the campaign?

I would much sooner focus on the campaign's remarkable accomplishments — which I address briefly towards the end — but it's important to address wrongheaded criticism in some detail.

Was Bessemer a "blowout"? There's no question that union organizers had hoped the result would be much closer, but it almost certainly was closer: of the almost 600 objections, the overwhelming majority came from Amazon's lawyers, and they objected to ballots that the union believes were mostly from its supporters.

That's not nearly enough to change the

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outcome of the vote, but more than enough to push the union's vote tally to well over 1000 votes from workers who for two months had endured one of the most relentless and vicious anti-union campaigns in recent decades. Not such a blowout.

Second, there's good reason to believe that the NLRB will uphold at least some of the union's ULP charges and might order a rerun election if it finds that Amazon's unlawful anti-union conduct — such as its onsite mailbox, which the NLRB said it could not install — may have altered the result of the election.

Thus, Amazon may have won only because it cheated and could face another election. Again, not such a "blowout."

Assessing Reality

Was the RWDSU campaign at fault? Of course no campaign is above criticism, and one can certainly question the choice to go the NLRB election route against a corporation as powerful as Amazon. But criticism should be based on a grasp of the empirical reality. Ironically, even after defeat the union campaign has received more favorable, more accurate, and fairer coverage in the mainstream press than it has from some left publications.

As one would have anticipated, some critics have attacked the RWDSU campaign being "top-down" and not worker- or committee-driven. The Bessemer campaign was anything but top-down: indeed, it was almost certainly not a fight the union leadership would have chosen, but one that Bessemer workers and local RWDSU organizers were determined to go ahead with.

One critic suggested that the "warning signs of defeat" were everywhere. In truth, it would be more comforting to believe that the RWDSU campaign had failed due to these obvious and basic errors, as this would suggest that even without enactment of the PRO Act (pending in Congress), with more thoughtful and thorough preparation and a better executed campaign, the next time the union could succeed.

But the answer is not so simple because these criticisms are factually inaccurate. So, what, exactly have the RWDSU's critics gotten so completely wrong?

The RWDSU wasn't blindsided by the size of the bargaining unit. The union had initially filed for a bargaining unit of 1500, but union organizers knew that there were at least 2300 workers in the facility. Over the next several weeks, Amazon launched what its lawyer Harry Johnson called at the NLRB hearing the greatest hiring spree in the shortest time-period in history.

The RWDSU did not anticipate that final numbers would reach almost 6000 workers, but neither did anyone else. The union was collecting 50-100 authorization cards per day throughout December, so it was faced with a choice: either go ahead with the election in the much larger unit — even though Amazon's lawyers doubted the union had sufficient cards to do so — or pull the petition, which it believed would send a terrible message to the Bessemer workers and the labor community.

The RWDSU decided to go ahead, even though it knew that Amazon's packing the bargaining unit meant that it has not had the opportunity to engage with most of the new workers. In addition, the RWDSU had to contend with enormously high turnover rates, which doesn't impact campaigns in the public or healthcare sectors in the same way.

Thus, while the RWDSU was surprised by the unprecedented scale and speed of Amazon's December hiring spree, it never believed the Bessemer warehouse had only 1500 employees, as "Blowout" states, and it understood approximate numbers at Bessemer all along.

Discussions Over Dues

Second, there's the union response to the *DoltWithoutDues.com* anti-union website — which was launched on December 31st, not in February as stated in "Blowout." *RWDSU organizers never once tried to argue that workers wouldn't have to pay dues if the union won.*

The union's campaign materials and organizer conversations stressed that workers would need to pay dues to build power at Bessemer to bargain effectively with Amazon.

Publicly the union did point out, and cor-

rectly so, the important point that Amazon's entire website was based on a lie — that in Alabama, a Right-to-Work state since 1953, employees could be forced to pay union dues against their will. But this factual correction was not part of the organizing strategy, which stated repeatedly that the workers were the union, and they must be prepared to pay dues to have influence at the workplace.

Organizing through car windows: Third, "Blowout" wrongly suggests that the union had engaged with workers primarily through car windows as they sat at the stop sign before entering or leaving the facility. Given the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the union engaged with workers in every way possible, not just at the controversial traffic stop, which Amazon management pressured city officials to alter in order to reduce the amount of time workers waited there.

Amazon had warned that union organizers would likely visit workers at home, even at the risk of spreading COVID-19, so the union decided not to conduct home visits as it would normally do. But it held hundreds of small group and one-on-one meetings with workers at the local hotel or the RWDSU office. Absent the pandemic, organizers would have held larger meetings — which would have helped build solidarity — but workers were uncomfortable with big meetings for safety reasons so they limited meetings to a maximum of 10 workers.

In addition the RWDSU operated an extensive phone-banking system, with over 100 RWDSU organizers and trained volunteers which made over 50,000 calls with a high completion rate, thereby enabling the union to set up meetings. Reaching workers at the stop sign was a convenient way to collect authorization cards from workers who had expressed their desire to sign and the union kept organizers there to ensure a visible presence outside the facility.

Overwhelmingly, these were worker organizers from local poultry plants — which union critics often champion — and not RWDSU staffers, as stated in "Blowout." Moreover, stop-light conversations were not the union's principal method of engaging with Bessemer workers.

Celebrity Endorsements

Fourth, critics have suggested that the campaign was supposedly more interested in lining up celebrity endorsements than engaging with local community leaders and clergy. These criticisms seem especially misplaced.

During the campaign RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum worked behind the scenes to secure "celebrity endorsements," such as President Biden's remarkable video calling out Amazon's anti-union tactics, and he helped bring leading Black politicians and others to Bessemer.

But these high-level endorsements had nothing to do with what happened with the ground campaign. RWDSU organizers and community allies were not involved, and the endorsement effort did not impact their day-to-day actions.

Fifth, "Blowout" alleges that the campaign failed to engage sufficiently with community organizations and did so too late. In actuality, the union engaged with outside multiple organizations.

The RWDSU had maintained a media blackout during the first few months of organizing, which served the campaign well. After the campaign became public, the union engaged extensively with community organizations, especially the Birmingham Black Lives Matter movement, with BLM also providing a central theme of the campaign.

Indeed, several commentators who spent time in Bessemer commended the RWDSU campaign for its inclusivity when compared with similar union campaigns, which have often displayed a suspicion of outsiders. Thus RWDSU opened its doors to community and political organizations — Birmingham BLM, Birmingham DSA, Socialist Alternative, Our Revolution, and rank-and-file union members from local unions — in a way reminiscent of "Occupy Wall Street."

Moreover, union allies conducting "community canvassing" knocked on the door of every household in Bessemer along with many thousands of doors in the neighboring cities, Tuscaloosa and Birmingham. By late March, one could not travel for more than a block in Bessemer without seeing a yard sign expressing support for the Amazon union.

RWDSU organizers engaged extensively with local clergy, who provided significant support. One can always find a community organization that might feel slighted — and maybe with good reason — but the campaign, as a whole, engaged extensively with outside allies in the area.

What Was Gained?

Would we have been better off if the election had never happened? Would we'd been better off without Biden's remarkable video calling out Amazon's anti-union practices, the most pro-union statement in presidential history, which certainly would not have happened were it not for the RWDSU campaign? If we hadn't had the wall-to-wall and overwhelming positive media coverage of a union story that went on for months, involving not just the usual suspects — *New York Times*, Bezos-owned *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, *Huffington Post*, *Vice*, *Vox*, *Business Insider*, but also *Teen Vogue* and *Elle*, as well as just about every major overseas media outlet on the planet?

Their exhaustive coverage of Amazon's vicious anti-union campaign in real time achieved two things: First, it exposed a much larger, more diverse and younger audience

to the brutal reality of no-holds-barred anti-union campaigns. This might not have been news to seasoned observers — though some of Amazon's anti-union tactics were new to everyone — but they are new to 95% of the U.S. public, who have never seen them covered in such detail.

Second, for the first time in generations, it has created the opportunity for a meaningful national debate on the need for stronger labor rights. Would we have been better off if we hadn't had a major union organizing drive that placed the BLM message at the center of its campaign, and produced several charismatic and inspirational grassroots Black leaders?

And finally, would we have been better off without the largest organizing drive ever at Amazon, one in which several thousand workers signed union cards, and over 1000 workers voted for the RWDSU, even after enduring a months-long, multi-million dollar vicious and potentially unlawful anti-union campaign conducted by one of the most powerful corporations on the planet?

"Blowout" suggests that warning signs of defeat were everywhere from the beginning, but its criticisms are based on scant knowledge of the campaign.

For sure, one major sign of potential union defeat was apparent from the get-go: workers had decided to take on one of the most powerful corporations on the planet. Amazon has used anti-union algorithms, Pinkerton detectives, former intelligence spies, unparalleled surveillance by unregulated technologies and ruthless and unlawful anti-union practices. Amazon's reputation for "crushing" all previous union organizing efforts is well deserved.

The RWDSU campaign at Bessemer will serve as a catalyst for future worker activism at Amazon and in Alabama — the campaign won more union votes than every organizing campaign in Alabama in 2020 put together, but that activism will take many forms.

Amazon wants this struggle to be defined as Amazon vs. the union in the context of the NLRB process because it knows it can dominate that process most of the time. But the real struggle is Amazon vs. its workers fighting for better conditions. So long as Amazon's business model depends on extreme forms of exploitation, workers will continue to organize against it.

The RWDSU campaign at Bessemer wasn't a blowout. Friday's result may not even be the final word on the election. Moreover, the unprecedented media coverage and President Biden's video, has gotten the country's attention and provided unions with an opportunity to push for a debate on labor rights that hasn't existed for generations. The brave pro-union workers and worker organizers at Bessemer deserve better than uninformed criticism. ■

Detroit's Tale of Two Water Crises: From the 1930s to the Great Recession

By Josiah Rector

LESS THAN EIGHT months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. cited water bills as an example of what was wrong with capitalism. In his "Where Do We Go From Here?" speech, delivered at the 11th Annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference convention in Atlanta, Georgia on August 16, 1967, King asked, "Why are there forty million poor people in America?"

He observed that "when you begin to ask that question, you are raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth. When you ask that question, you begin to question the capitalistic economy." He went on to ask: "Who owns the oil? [...] Who owns the iron ore? [...] Why is it that people have to pay water bills in a world that's two-thirds water?"¹

Taken literally, King's last question suggests that desalination technology, harnessed to human needs rather than profit, could make the world's oceans a viable drinking water source for the world's population. (This was not a totally impractical idea; by 1961, Kuwait was already desalinating over six million gallons of water per year.)

Whether taken as a rhetorical flourish or as a literal statement, King's deeper message was clear. Despite the growth of the postwar middle class, the wealth of a small elite and the poverty of 40 million Americans were still two sides of the same coin. So were the control of natural resources by private monopolies and the denial of access to necessities like water to poor people.

Even during the so-called "golden age" of American capitalism between 1945 and 1973, the system made the meeting of basic human needs a class privilege rather than a universal right. After over 40 years of neoliberal retrenchment, King's critique of capitalism resonates more powerfully than ever.

Today, three billionaires have more wealth than half the U.S. population combined, and 26 billionaires have more wealth than half of humanity as a whole. The Poor Peo-

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Are basic human needs a class privilege?

ple's Campaign estimates that 140 million Americans are poor or low-income, and the minimum wage is lower — in real terms — than when King was assassinated in 1968.

This article will discuss how Detroit avoided mass water shutoffs during the 1930s Great Depression and imposed them in the recent Great Recession.

Shutoffs, Poverty and COVID

In 2016 alone, over 15 million Americans had their water shut off; at least 1.4 million people lost water service due to non-payment of bills.

In addition to the stress and humiliation of being unable to flush toilets or to properly bathe and clean, water shutoffs make people more vulnerable to dehydration and infectious disease with lethal consequences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A recent working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research estimates that a national moratorium on utility disconnections between March and November 2020 could have reduced COVID-19 deaths by 14.8% (over 37,000 people). An eviction moratorium could have reduced deaths by 40.7% (over 100,000 people).

Needless to say, these numbers cannot begin to convey the unnecessary human tragedy each of these deaths represents. Depriving people of water, heat, light and

shelter on the grounds of inability to pay is not just cruel and inhumane. It is a crime against humanity.

Detroit, often called the "Blackest big city" in the United States, became notorious for mass water shutoffs in the decade before COVID-19 hit. Since 2014 the city has shut off water for over 141,000 residential accounts.

In a city with 2.51 persons per household, this means that shutoffs forced over 300,000 people — almost all of them Black and poor — to live without running water for days, weeks, and in some cases months or even years in the past decade. Not coincidentally, the shutoff numbers closely parallel the number of Detroiters officially living below the federal poverty line in 2019: 243,891.

However, Detroit's mass water shutoffs are not simply a result of poverty and the long history of racism that has concentrated it in Black communities. Those problems long predated the past decade but mass water shutoffs are a relatively recent development.

Rather, they're a product of 21st century austerity policies implemented by the federal government, the state of Michigan, and the City of Detroit that prioritize the interests of largely white capitalists over the health and safety of the Black urban poor. They are also entirely preventable, as the history of Detroit shows.

Water Crisis in the Depression-Era

To see why mass water shutoffs did not need to happen during the 2010s Great Recession, it is helpful to go back to the 1930s Great Depression, the last time a comparable water affordability crisis happened in Detroit.

In the four years after the stock market crash of 1929, as automobile sales nosedived by 75%, Detroit manufacturers laid off 45% of their workers. Payroll at the Ford Motor Company fell from 128,142 to 37,000 between 1929 and 1931.

As the newly unemployed fell into destitution, the city's welfare rolls exploded from 3,977 in 1928 to 229,000 by 1933. Detroit's unemployed were unable to pay bills, rent or mortgage payments, leading to a rapid increase in utility shutoffs, evictions and home foreclosures. Meanwhile, the administration

of Mayor Frank Murphy faced the prospect of municipal bankruptcy as Detroit's tax revenues collapsed, forcing the city to default on its debts to Wall Street banks in 1933 and to begin paying city workers in scrip.

At the Detroit Department of Water Supply, staffers watched as rate-payers stopped paying their bills. Hal Smith, the Head Water Consumer's Account Clerk for the City of Detroit, wrote in a 1933 article that unpaid water bills "had not been a serious problem" before 1929.

By 1932, however, "many, through no fault of their own, were unable to meet their bills, and further, we knew that we would have to handle about 20,000 delinquent accounts per month." Delinquent accounts reached 90,000 by April 1933, and over 100,000 by March 1934.

In response to the crisis of the Great Depression, the Communist Party (CP) began organizing mass demonstrations of the unemployed in January-March 1930, including in Detroit. CP-led Unemployed Councils used direct action tactics to fight evictions and utility shutoffs, including reconnecting gas and electric lines.

Black Detroiters in CP-affiliated groups like the Nat Turner Club — an offshoot of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights — played a prominent role in these struggles. As Joseph Billups recalled in a 1967 oral history interview, "the Nat Turner Club turned out to be an Unemployed Club, taking care of evictions, turning on the lights, and so on."

As historian Eric Rauchway has shown, by 1932 President Hoover and his White House staff "were sure that Communist agitators would take advantage of unemployment to foment revolution." Indeed, "Hoover was sure that the New Deal was bringing communism to America" and portrayed Roosevelt as a Bolshevik on the campaign trail.

The New Deal, of course, was a far cry from socialism — let alone communism. The 1932 Democratic Party platform did include a tepid endorsement of "unemployment and old-age insurance under state laws" and called for expanded federal relief aid and public works programs.

The 1932 CP and Socialist Party (SP) platforms also called for unemployment and old-age insurance, but called for them to be funded by employers as well as the state. Unlike the Democratic Party, they both called for civil rights protections for African



Ford Hunger March, 1932 as the Great Depression ravages Detroit.

Americans and labor rights protections for union organizers. The SP called for "social ownership and democratic control" of the "principal industries" of the country.

The New Deal was fundamentally a liberal project of saving capitalism. During this period, however, militant organizing by the unemployed and industrial workers (often led by communists and socialists) did succeed in unionizing auto, steel, and other mass production industries, and won significant concessions from capital and the New Deal state.

Following the failure of 11,000 banks under President Hoover, New Deal policies prevented the collapse of the banking system and brought crucial federal aid to cities. Under the Emergency Banking Act, signed by Roosevelt on March 9, 1933, emergency loans from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Federal Reserve enabled the banks to recapitalize and established a system of federal deposit insurance to protect depositors.

The Rescue of Detroit

It was only in June 1933, once these measures were in effect, that Detroit was able to refinance its municipal debt with Wall Street banks, converting all the city's bond debt into 30-year loans.

The New Deal also brought substantial federal aid into the city. Over the next decade, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) would create nearly 100,000 public works jobs in Detroit, putting the unemployed to work rebuilding the city's roads, water and sewer infrastructure, parks, and municipal and federal buildings.

These policies made it possible for

Detroit's Department of Water Supply to avoid a policy of mass water shutoffs. In the Hoover years, debt service had climbed to a staggering 89% of revenues at DDWS.

Detroit's debt refinancing sharply reduced its short-term debt service obligations at DDWS and other municipal departments while the WPA and the Public Works Administration (PWA) financed long-delayed infrastructure projects.

On the one hand, New Deal federal aid funneled resources to the Department of Public Welfare and other city departments, reducing unemployment and making it possible for more people to pay rent, mortgage payments, and utility bills. On the other hand, reduced debt service obligations enabled DDWS to extend more credit to ratepayers behind on their bills.

According to Hal F. Smith, DDWS made "an effort to assist the delinquent consumer toward working out some plan whereby his water supply will not be cut off, such as granting more time, accepting part payments, etc." In cases where "the lack of water service was causing a health menace [...] the Department of Public Welfare would pay out of Welfare Funds the amount required to have service resumed."

As a result of these policies, DDWS settled 100,165 water bills in 1933-1934, for a total of \$533,541. With the use of credit installment plans, DDWS was able to settle most unpaid bills by 1936. DDWS Office Manager Daniel C. Grobbel told the *Detroit Free Press*, "There have been about 1,000 shutoffs altogether, but in most instances the bills are paid and the service is resumed within 24 hours."

Of course there is much to criticize about the New Deal, as radicals and civil rights activists did at the time.

The Homeowners' Loan Act of 1933 and the National Housing Act of 1934, which established the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), helped end Detroit's home foreclosure crisis during the Great Depression. But in Detroit as in cities across the country, the HOLC created racist "residential security maps" that classified virtually all neighborhoods where African Americans lived (and many where foreign-born immigrants lived) as "hazardous" to mortgage lenders.

Although the HOLC and FHA insured loans for African Americans in Detroit at higher rates than in most cities, they also trapped African Americans in a few restricted areas of the city and suburbs like Inkster. They refused to insure mortgages for African Americans who sought to move into segregated white neighborhoods and required developers to use racist "restrictive covenants" that barred sales to Blacks, and often other people of color and Jews.

Similarly, New Deal labor laws — made politically possible by the strike waves of 1933-1937 — were at best a mixed blessing for Detroit workers in the long run. While they established a legal framework for collective bargaining between capital and labor, management succeeded in excluding fundamental production decisions from the realm of negotiable issues by the late 1940s. (This was reinforced by purges of Communists from the CIO unions.)

UAW contracts increased wages and fringe benefits for auto workers, especially between 1950 and 1973, but racism, sexism, seasonal layoffs and unsafe working conditions remained rampant in Detroit auto plants. The postwar collective bargaining regime also gave workers no say in the corporate investment decisions that reduced the number of manufacturing jobs in Detroit from 349,000 in 1950 to 62,000 by 1990.

From New Deal to Urban Crisis

By the time of the 1967 rebellion, the combination of deindustrialization and virulent racism against African Americans in housing, jobs and policing had produced an "urban crisis" in Detroit and other cities that would only deepen in the late 20th century.

In many ways, the urban crisis was a product of the fundamental class and racial contradictions of a "New Deal order" based on the Democratic Party's tenuous alliance among "corporate moderates," organized labor, white southern Democrats, and northern African Americans and white ethnics. Any serious grappling with those contradictions requires that we dispel romantic, liberal illusions about the New Deal.

That being said, the history of the Great Depression and the New Deal in Detroit does demonstrate that an unemployment and water affordability crisis does not need to translate into mass water shutoffs — or, for that matter, mass evictions and foreclosures. Those tragedies are entirely preventable through progressive public policies, of exactly the kind that SP and CP members called for at the time.

The contrast between the history of water shutoffs in Detroit during the Great Depression and the Great Recession is stark. While shutoffs occurred sporadically between the 1940s and the 1980s, they increased dramatically as a result of "welfare reform" in the 1990s and 2000s, which replaced another New Deal program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), with the punitive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

AFDC itself was a flawed program, yet welfare rights activists succeeded over the decades in expanding some benefits, including the Vendor Pay Program, which provided utility bill assistance to welfare recipients in Michigan. In 2002, Republican governor John Engler eliminated Vendor Pay as part of welfare reform, making nearly 30,000 TANF recipients in Wayne County alone immediately vulnerable to shutoffs.

Detroit's water shutoffs only took on truly crisis dimensions, however, after the 2008 financial crisis. In contrast to the New Deal, the Obama administration's Home Owner Loan Modification Program (HAMP) provided meager assistance to distressed homeowners and 10 million people lost their homes to foreclosure during the Great Recession.

Between 2005 and 2015, a third of homeowners in Detroit lost their homes to foreclosure, due to both predatory subprime mortgages and illegally high property tax assessments. While Washington bailed out banks that had marketed predatory loans, crashing the economy, and provided loans to two automakers (General Motors and Chrysler) that had driven Detroit's deindustrialization, there was little federal aid to Detroit after 2008.

The city's fiscal crisis — driven by collapsing tax revenues caused by the 2008 crash, population loss, and deindustrialization — gave Governor Rick Snyder a pretext to impose an Emergency Manager in Detroit and force the city into bankruptcy. In Flint, similar policies led to the poisoning of nearly 100,000 people in the same period.

Today's Avoidable Disaster

This is the context in which Detroit's mass water shutoffs have occurred. In 2014, when Detroit was under the appointed Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department imple-

mented its harshest policy on unpaid bills yet. DWSD hired private contractors to shut off any account behind by \$150 or 60 days, regardless of public health consequences.³³

Despite civil disobedience, protests, and lawsuits filed by water rights activists with the People's Water Board and other organizations — and even denunciation by the United Nations Human Rights Council — the mass water shutoffs continued after Emergency Manager Orr ceded authority to Mayor Mike Duggan and DWSD was regionalized under a Great Lakes Water Authority.

It was only in March 2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (and under pressure from Detroit activists), that Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued a water shutoff moratorium in the state of Michigan.

Whitmer's Executive Order 2020-28 required public water suppliers to "restore water service to any occupied residence where water service has been shut off due to non-payment," but only for the duration of the pandemic.

On December 8th, 2020, Mayor Duggan announced that the city would extend Governor Whitmer's shutoff moratorium through 2022. However, activists like Sylvia Orduño of the People's Water Board have pointed out that Duggan continues to oppose a water affordability plan, which would limit water and sewer bills to no more than 4.5% of household income. Currently, poor households in Detroit spend over 10% of their incomes on water.

As organizations in the No Utility Shutoffs Coalition have demanded, a national moratorium on utility shutoffs, and state and local water affordability policies that restructure water and sewer rates, are imperative. However, a long-term solution requires ending the poverty that makes water unaffordable for anyone in the first place.

Policies like a jobs guarantee, a homes guarantee, Medicare for All and direct income assistance — coupled with "blue" and "green" infrastructure projects as envisioned by many Green New Deal advocates — would do just that. Like CP and SP militants during the 1930s, socialists today should support such progressive policies, while recognizing the need for a deeper systemic transformation away from capitalism.

We must also ensure that the racist treatment of African Americans and other people of color by New Deal housing and welfare agencies is never repeated again.

Ultimately, we cannot end water or other utility shutoffs without working toward a world without evictions, foreclosures, homelessness and poverty wages. We must work toward a world where everyone has access to decent and affordable housing, living-wage jobs, healthcare, and clean air and water. That necessarily requires fighting for a socialist future. ■

Detroit: “Comeback” and Austerity The State of the City (Part 1) By Peter Blackmer

TALK TO PEOPLE from outside Detroit, and you’re bound to encounter the same line on repeat: “I hear Detroit’s coming back!” The implicit meaning behind this well-financed narrative, of course, rests on tired racist analyses of Black leaders failing the city and white saviors coming to its rescue.

Within the stories of long decline and recent “renaissance” in American cities like Detroit, heavy-handed state interventions — taking over school districts, imposing emergency managers, declaring municipal bankruptcy — are treated as unfortunate, yet necessary course corrections after decades of local mismanagement.

Similarly, the draconian and neoliberal measures that accompany these state takeovers, like closing schools, shutting off water, foreclosing on homes, cutting social services, slashing pensions and selling off city assets, are explained as unavoidable sacrifices to balance the budget and save the city.

These narratives serve as enduring reminders to many Detroiters of the devastation wrought by emergency management. “When I hear Detroit is coming back,” organizer Tawana Petty often says, “I hear ‘Make America Great Again.’”

Beginning with an analysis of the contradictions and legacies of emergency management, this two-part article will analyze how the devastation of austerity has shaped city politics and given birth to dynamic movements to create a radically different form of urban governance.

Autocracy and Resistance

At the end of February 2021, the Detroit Charter Commission delivered its highly anticipated proposed revisions for the City Charter after nearly three years of work.

The Charter, which effectively serves as the City’s constitution, has been up for revision for the first time since 2012 — a year before then-Governor Rick Snyder placed the City of Detroit under emergency

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Detroiters protested the heavy hand of the bankruptcy, the imposition of an emergency manager and massive water shutoffs.

management. The autocratic takeover of city government and suspension of democracy under emergency management ushered in an era of austerity politics that has devastated the city.

At the same time, Detroiters have drawn from the city’s deep well of political struggle to resist austerity measures and organize visionary movements for a more just and humane society. Over the past three years, Detroiters have built upon these struggles while working through the City Charter revisions as a vehicle to begin repairing some of the harms caused by austerity measures imposed by emergency managers and carried forth ever since by city officials.

Stories of Detroit’s “comeback” spread like wildfire following the city’s emergence from bankruptcy in 2014, as investors and speculators expanded their financial interests in a city eager to attract outside investment.

Following decades of systemic racism and disinvestment, or what renowned scholar-activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore has described as

organized abandonment, the city’s bankruptcy was filed without public input during the nearly two years Detroit spent under state-imposed emergency management.

City officials are well aware of this history. Indeed Mayor Mike Duggan (who was elected in 2013 after running a write-in primary campaign) took office just months after Governor Rick Snyder appointed former Jones-Day lawyer Kevyn Orr as emergency manager. Duggan eventually took the reins from Orr and has carried forth many of the same austerity measures.

Duggan’s administration has overseen the continuation of mass water shutoffs, mass foreclosures caused by illegal property tax assessments, sweetheart deals to benefit developers and corporations at the expense of neighborhoods, and a vast expansion of the surveillance infrastructure of the Detroit Police Department.

The sum of these parts, longtime activists Dr. Gloria Aneb House and Rev. Dr. JoAnn Watson have noted, has led “to the erasure of our communities, to a reconfiguring of city land and resources to accommodate corporate objectives.”*

Now Duggan is attempting to weaponize the traumatic memories of emergency management to head off calls for progressive change in the city through revisions to the City Charter. Before the ink could dry on the Charter Commission’s draft, Duggan raised the specter of emergency management to come out swinging against its proposals.

Commenting on the revisions, Duggan oscillated between belittling commissioners, stoking fears of a return to bankruptcy, and threatening the city’s pension fund. “I’m hoping the charter commission doesn’t just write down whatever idea they have but they actually go back and responsibly make sure that we are not sending the city back into financial crisis,” Duggan told reporters in late February.

For Detroiters who have lost their jobs, faced evictions and suffered profound hardships during the pandemic, such a financial crisis is already a reality.

This type of fiscal fearmongering has

*We the People of Detroit Community Research Collective, *Mapping the Water Crisis: The Dismantling of African-American Neighborhoods in Detroit*: Volume One, 2016.

been a favorite trump card of the Duggan administration and his unelected predecessor Kevyn Orr. Interestingly, it only seems to be played when long-time Detroiters are the ones seeking funding.

When local people and organizations have demanded that the city allocate financial resources to ensure access to affordable water, safe housing, proper education, decent employment and environmental protections — staples of a healthy and just society — the Duggan administration and their allies on city council consistently cry poverty. Yet when corporations demand tax incentives, access to land, and other favors to set up shop in Detroit, the city bends over backwards to find the money.

Plague of Water Shutoffs

One of the most gruesome examples of the city's fiscal priorities since emergency management was imposed relates to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. During his reign as emergency manager, Orr set the standard for austerity politics, one that Duggan has largely followed.

Shortly after proposing the privatization of DWSD in March 2014, Orr notoriously signed a two-year contract to pay demolition company Homrich, Inc. \$5.6 million to shutoff water service to customers as little as \$150 or 60 days overdue.

The declared intent of the shutoffs was to compel payment of overdue bills, but there were bigger plans in motion. Propped up by blatantly racist narratives about Black Detroiters spending their money on sneakers or televisions instead of paying their water bills, Orr was effectively using poor and working-class residents to help shore up DWSD's finances to make the system more profitable for private ownership.

The contract with Homrich facilitated a violent wave of shutoffs to 83,000 homes over the next three years (including 33,000 in 2014 alone), and thousands more in the years since. In 2019, the city shut off service to nearly 12,000 households and reportedly 9,500 of these were without water at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As emergency management ended and local control returned, the Duggan administration picked up where Orr left off. Duggan extended contracts with Homrich in the amounts of one million in May 2015, \$1.8 million in February 2016, and another \$4.3 million that August.

None of those contracts required City Council approval, as each fell under the \$5 million threshold that requires a vote. Over this three-year period from 2014-16, Orr and Duggan paid \$12.7 million to a private contractor to shut off water to tens of thousands of homes without any input from City Council or the general public.

Despite critiques of Duggan's underhanded methods of extending contracts for

water shutoffs during these years, the city council fell in line in the following years. In March 2018, the council approved another \$7.8 million contract with Homrich that extended through June 2021, bringing the total expenditures for water shutoffs to over \$20 million.

These transactions reveal two fundamental contradictions of the city's austerity measures. First, while the city laid the hammer on tens of thousands of poor and working-class Black Detroiters, major corporate accounts were treated with velvet gloves.

As families struggled to conserve, recycle and survive without access to running water, major corporate customers were allowed to rack up tens of thousands of dollars in back bills, including a whopping \$200,000 debt reportedly owed by the Palmer Park Golf Club. In 2015 alone, businesses owed DWSD \$41 million compared to \$26 million for homes, yet only 680 businesses were shut off compared to 23,000 homes. If the shutoffs were supposed to be a means of generating revenue, why not start with the biggest debts?

Second, the amount of money the city laid out for shutoffs and various payment assistance plans was astronomically higher than the cost of funding a program to address high water rates and unaffordable bills.

Detroit City Council had passed a resolution in support of a water affordability program in 2005 under the leadership of JoAnn Watson, with strong support from president Maryann Mahaffey, and secured \$5 million from DWSD to finance it.

Drafted by municipal utilities expert Roger Colton in consultation with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) and others, the plan would have set water rates based on a customer's income and offered protections against shutoffs. Despite Council support, the City and DWSD stalled its implementation for the next several years.

While Philadelphia implemented a version of the affordability plan in 2017, the Duggan administration has continuously resisted its implementation, citing widely debunked claims of the plan's illegality.

Even when the COVID-19 pandemic and consistent pressure from organizers compelled Duggan and Governor Gretchen Whitmer to restore water service in March 2020, the Mayor remained steadfast in his position against an affordability plan and moratorium on shutoffs. Instead, the Duggan administration and Great Lakes Water Authority officials have thrown good money after bad to establish "assistance" plans that inevitably fail with water rates on the rise and the economy on the decline.

If water and utility experts are correct that affordability plans are effective means of improving bill collections and revenues at a lower cost than shutoffs and assistance plans,

why has the Duggan administration fought tooth and nail against water affordability?

Corporate Welfare, Foreclosures, Repression

The inhumanity and contradictions of life under the austerity measures of emergency management and the Duggan administration are maddeningly abundant. Take for example the city's financial contributions to Fiat Chrysler Automotive (FCA) to cajole the auto giant to expand its plant on the city's East Side.

In a relatively short period of time, the city and state managed to amass \$107.6 million through land swaps and assets sales to transfer the land FCA demanded for its expansion. Between the land transfers and generous tax incentives, the city and state spent approximately \$400 million to lure FCA to expand its operations in the city, according to the Detroit People's Platform. Considering the amount of public assets transferred to a multi-billion dollar corporation, the deal came with a comparatively weak community benefits agreement and no guarantees that Detroiters will be the ones getting the 4,950 new jobs the plant promised to provide.

Meanwhile, experts estimate that the city of Detroit owes \$600 million to residents to compensate for years of overtaxing homeowners after failing to re-appraise property values, an illegal practice that disproportionately impacted poor and working-class Detroiters, following the Great Recession.

Based on these blatantly illegal assessments, the county foreclosed on one-third of properties between 2008-2020, contributing to mass displacement, a mass transfer of homes and land to speculators through the tax auction, and a transformation of the city from predominantly homeowners to majority renters.

While the city belatedly conducted a reappraisal in 2017 at the behest of the state, it has done little to make reparations to the tens of thousands of Detroiters who were overtaxed, displaced, or lost their homes.

Furthermore, while illegally foreclosing on tens of thousands of homes, the city has spent \$265 million in federal Hardest Hit Funds to demolish over 15,000 houses since 2014 — money that could have gone into keeping people in their homes and preventing much "blight" in the first place.

To facilitate this violent agenda of displacement through shutoffs and foreclosures, the city has expanded the powers and presence of the Detroit Police Department. After a sharp cutback from 2013-14, the city has ramped up spending on policing at the expense of public safety, including massive investments in surveillance infrastructure.

In fiscal year 2019, the city's general fund spending for police totaled nearly \$295 million, as compared to \$32 million for housing, \$26 million for recreation, and only

\$9 million for public health. Now, amidst nationwide calls to defund police departments, Duggan has proposed a 4% budget increase for DPD (including \$500,000 for the controversial Shot Spotter program), whose bloated budget already accounts for over 30% of the city's general fund.

This expansion has been spearheaded by DPD Chief James Craig, a disciple of former NYPD chief and "broken windows" evangelist William Bratton. Craig was appointed to the position in 2013 in one of Kevyn Orr's early moves as emergency manager to implement "broken windows" policing in Detroit, as he had in Los Angeles under Bratton's leadership.

According to scholar Scott Kurashige, this implementation was supported by \$600,000 in consulting fees paid to the Manhattan Institute and Bratton Group to help draft the plan while Detroit was under emergency management.

Under Craig's leadership, DPD has served as a handmaiden to the agenda set by Orr and advanced by Duggan through its prioritization of low-level "crime" to facilitate gentrification. For example, in 2014 Duggan created a Graffiti Task Force to criminalize and prosecute street artists in prime areas for investment, while non-Detroiters were being paid handsome commissions for downtown murals.

DPD has also been called upon to enforce water shutoffs when Detroiters like Antonio Cosme and Charity Hicks protested the violent practice dutifully carried out by Homrich workers. More recently, DPD helped a slumlord illegally evict a Black

mother and her four children just days before Christmas last year, a practice that continues despite the DPD's denial that officers help facilitate evictions, even in the middle of a pandemic.

Accompanied by the day-to-day harassment of Black Detroiters in areas undergoing gentrification, these actions are a critical part of a larger process to remake the city for wealthy white investors and residents.

The Surveillance City

DPD's role in carrying out this agenda of alienating and displacing long-time Detroiters has been supplemented by the expansion of its surveillance capacities through the establishment of the Real Time Crime Center (RTCC) and its most visible initiative, Project Green Light (PGL).

Since 2014, the city has invested tens of millions of dollars in its surveillance infrastructure, including the purchase of software platforms for facial recognition, data analytics, cloud-based surveillance, as well as license plate readers, hi-tech traffic cameras, audio devices to detect gunfire, and other surveillance hardware.

Furthermore, the RTCC was designed to interface with private surveillance cameras (like Dan Gilbert's massive system downtown), state databases and federal law enforcement agencies, further expanding DPD's reach and increasing the danger to political activists, religious minorities, immigrants and civil liberties.

A basic search of procurement contracts shows that during Duggan's administration, the city has awarded over \$35 million in contracts alone to Motorola Solutions, Inc., which outfitted the RTCC with much of its video surveillance and data analysis infrastructure.

Interestingly, publicly available tax return documents show that the Motorola Solutions Foundation donated at least \$80,000 to the Detroit Public Safety Foundation between 2014-2016 as it was receiving millions in city contracts to build the RTCC. This was part of a broader pattern for Motorola, which reportedly donated over \$25 million to "public safety-related foundations" since 2008 while cozying up with police and fire departments nationwide and vastly expanding their presence in the surveillance industry.

This massive investment in surveillance presents a clear and present danger to Detroiters on multiple levels. First, not only is there no real evidence that PGL and facial recognition technology are effective in reducing crime (no matter how many times Craig and Duggan say otherwise), it also disproportionately targets and misidentifies Black people, leading to more encounters with police and the criminal justice system.

Despite spending over a million dollars on software from DataWorks Plus, Craig himself has admitted the city's facial recognition technology misidentifies people "96% of the time."

Second, there is a demonstrated correlation between the number of PGL locations and number of civilian complaints in precincts with high densities of PGL participation.

Third, the tens of millions of dollars being spent on surveillance technology are predictably being weaponized against protesters in Detroit and other cities where mass movements against police violence have emerged over the past year.

This massive investment in policing is denying Detroiters badly needed funds for real sources of public safety like education, housing, healthcare, employment and social services.

Whose Future Detroit?

For many longtime Detroiters, these kinds of fiscal priorities are revealing of the Duggan administration's broader visions for the future of the city. "Regular people that grew up here and love the city — we may want a better Detroit, a more just Detroit, even a cleaner Detroit, a more shiny Detroit," organizer Sonja Bonnett told me in 2018.

"Duggan and his people want a richer Detroit, they want tall apartment buildings that cost 3,000 dollars a month to live in so they keep us out...just like they did when they fled to the suburbs and left us in Detroit...but now they want the city back, so they're doing the same thing."

The organized abandonment and displacement of longtime residents under emergency management and the current administration have effectively worked toward creating a blank slate in the city — a Detroit with many fewer Black Detroiters.

At the same time, intergenerational movements of activists and organizers have emerged from the violence of austerity carrying forth the power and promises of Detroit's Black Radical Tradition. Detroiters are building upon this tradition as they envision and fight for a radically different world than the one on offer from the current administration and political establishment in the city.

"Their failures to value our lives and stand up in defense of our rights is why we exist, why we march in spite of police brutality, political witch hunts, and the weight of our own city, state and federal governments attempting to destroy us," Detroit Will Breathe co-founder Nakia Wallace recently wrote. "We will not be silenced now or ever. We will not be bullied into turning our back on the fight for our freedom."

The second part of this article will explore the fight for freedom being waged by Wallace and many other organizers. ■



<https://jimwestphoto.com>

Detroit Will Breathe protesting police violence and the extensive and expensive surveillance system Detroit police have implemented.

Tahrir Ten Years On: Egypt's Uprising and Its Fate

By Joel Beinin

CALLING THE OCCUPATION of Tahrir and other urban squares in Egypt and the January-February 2011 ouster of former president Hosni Mubarak a “revolution” — as is common — is not a helpful characterization of the events. The terms Arab Spring and Arab Winter are even less helpful because they obscure the social struggles of the decade preceding Mubarak’s ouster, which continue today.

According to the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, in the last quarter of 2020 there were 73 labor (33) and social (40) protests, including 11 strikes.¹ This is considerably fewer than the pace of collective action from 2004 to 2016, and many protests suffered severe repression. But it’s a much higher level of social struggle than during the Nasser, Sadat or the first two decades of the Mubarak eras.

The popular uprising of January 25, 2011 was partly, although not necessarily consciously, directed against neoliberal Washington Consensus economic policies. In that sense it is comparable to and continuous with the “Bread Intifada” of January 1977, one of the earliest of the roughly 150 anti-IMF food riots from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

The clearest expression of this political economy-driven element in the uprising was the nearly 3500 collective actions, including 570 strikes involving some 2.5 million workers, from 1998 to 2010.

Nonetheless, as labor lawyer, former presidential candidate and former director of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, Khaled Ali perceptively observed, “The workers did not start the January 25 movement because they have no organizing structure.... [But] one of the important steps of this revolution was taken when they began to protest, giving the revolution an economic and social slant besides the political demands.”²

Most Western observers ignored or minimized this aspect of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, where it was particularly pronounced.

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Tahrir Square, 2011.

The January 25 uprising was also linked to the more overtly political protest movements of the 2000s, animated primarily by the young urban intelligentsia: solidarity with the Second Palestinian Intifada; opposition to the 2003 Iraq War; Kefaya — the Egyptian Movement for Change, whose peak of activity was 2004-06; support for the Judges Club’s criticism of the 2005 elections; Mohamed ElBaradei’s National Association for Change; the 2010 “We are all Khaled Sa’id campaign,” etc.

This genealogy of social protest encompasses demands for democracy and government respect for the dignity of citizens, especially curbing routine police brutality and torture, and an anti-imperialist foreign policy.

Why No “Revolution”?

The mass demonstrations that erupted on January 25 could not have become a revolution, because the great majority of the movement’s supporters had no common organizational framework or political program beyond the ouster of Mubarak.

Under the best of circumstances, Mubarak’s ouster alone could not have resulted in a regime change. Most participants in the uprising — both workers and the urban intelligentsia — did not understand

the character of “the regime” whose demise they sought. This was exemplified by the deeply misguided slogan: “The army and the people are one hand.” That slogan blocked people from understanding that Mubarak’s removal was as much a coup as due to popular pressure.

Another reason why the popular uprising of January 25 could not become a revolution is that the social movements of the urban intelligentsia and the workers were largely detached from each other.

In the 2000s there were brave, even heroic, efforts to support and spread the ongoing strike movement by poorly resourced NGOs like the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services, the Coordinating Committee for Trade Union and Workers Rights and Liberties, and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, a small number of individuals like Kamal Abbas, Kamal Abu Eita, Khaled Ali and Fatma Ramadan, and journalists aligned with the left like Hossam el-Hamalawy, Mostafa Bassiouny, Jano Charbel, Faiza Rady, and Adel Zakariyya, among others.

There was an increasing degree of coordination and collaboration between the workers’ movement and the left and democratic forces after the formation of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade

Unions (EFITU) on January 30 and the ouster of Mubarak on February 11. In addition to the organizations and individuals mentioned above, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights actively supported the workers movement.

Collaboration strengthened as the number of strikes and collective actions soared from February, 2011 until the July 2013 military coup that overthrew the elected president Mohamed Morsi. But this was insufficient to link the two streams of social protest in a way that resembled the coalition of workers and intellectuals in Poland's Solidarity movement that was forged over the course of a decade or more.

Failure of Leadership

Moreover, as had been the case since the legal left party *Tagammu's* decision to back Mubarak against the Islamists in the early 1990s, most liberal, left and feminist forces at first supported the July 2013 coup and aligned with autocracy against Islamism.

The inability of these forces to break out of the devil's choice between Islamism and nominally secular autocracy has weakened opposition to autocracy for over 30 years and continues to do so. The "officers' republic," as Yezid Sayigh dubbed it, is now more firmly entrenched and more tyrannical than in the Mubarak era.

The government installed by the July 2013 coup appointed Kamal Abu Eita, then president of EFITU, as Minister of Manpower and Migration. Most of the left mistakenly considered Abu Eita's appointment a victory. Only a minority — most vocally, Fatma Ramadan — were critical of Abu Eita because after becoming a minister, he spoke out against striking.

Abu Eita's dismissal in March 2014 made it clear that the coup leader and now president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was not interested in substantially accommodating the needs of working people. In fact, given the economic situation and the demands of the Saudis and Emiratis who had showered some \$12 billion on Egypt, that would have been very difficult even for a government inclined to do so.

The strikes of the 2000s — and the escalating workers' movement after Mubarak's ouster — could not play a leading role in the popular uprising or turn it in a more radical direction, as many on the left imagined they could.

This was in part because until the formation of EFITU on January 30, 2011 there was no organization that could credibly claim to represent a large number of anti-regime trade unionists. EFITU was too new, inexperienced, and largely unfamiliar to workers beyond greater metropolitan Cairo, and a few other working class centers like Sadat City and Mahalla al-Kubra, to fulfill this task.

Even more importantly, the demands of public sector workers (the main force in

the strike movement, though it was much broader than that) were backward looking. They wanted a restoration of the Nasserist social contract.

Rather than raise demands for democracy or other critiques of the Mubarak regime (with some exceptions), protesting workers often called for the government, and even specific ministers like Minister of Investment Mahmoud Mohieldin, to intervene.

Sometimes they achieved their demands in this way. So they did not learn anything about the character of "the regime."

Nonetheless, there were sharp upsurges in workers' collective action in the first quarter of 2014. Even though far fewer than in 2011 and 2012, strikes and other collective actions remained well above historic levels throughout 2015 and 2016. These actions were locally led with no national leadership or strategy.

Persistent Neoliberalism and Autocracy

Ten years on from the start of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) uprisings, both neoliberalism and autocracy remain in place throughout the region. Even in Tunisia, conventional wisdom notwithstanding, a weak procedural democracy provides a screen behind which many figures from the Ben Ali regime have restored their power.

Therefore, the issues that prompted the 2011 uprisings are still on the table. Since then, struggles have continued to erupt over

the prevailing failed mode of capital accumulation and governance.

The 2017 *hirak rif* mass protest movement of Imazighen (Berbers) in Morocco, the 2019-20 uprisings in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon — and in January 2021 the third (or perhaps fourth) wave of popular mobilization against neoliberal policies in Tunisia since 2011 — illustrate the unfinished character of the Arab uprisings.

It will take many years before their final outcome is determined.

France began its trajectory towards a republic in 1789, but that republic was not securely established until after 1870, and resistance to it persisted until the mid-20th century. There is no reason to expect the Arab region to transform itself more quickly, whatever the end result may be.

One thing that appears to have changed is that whereas in 2011 Egypt was a leading factor in the spread of the popular movement to other Arab countries, it is no longer playing that role. In part this is because the Sisi regime has repressed all forms of political debate, and in part because the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have consolidated their grip as the leading forces of reaction in the region, with the full backing of the United States. ■

Notes

1. Al-Darb, January 18, 2001 [in Arabic].

2. Quoted in Raphaël Kempf, "Racines ouvrières du soulèvement égyptien," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 2011.

Solidarity with the Peoples of Myanmar!

IN MYANMAR (BURMA) the escalation violence continues, as at least 714 people, including four dozen children, lost their lives by mid-April. Some 3,000 have been arrested according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.

"The ruling junta wants to break democratic resistance, whatever the human cost. To this end, it deploys a veritable policy of terror. A dictatorship generally tries to deny or relativize its crimes. The junta is following that rule internally, but in Burma itself, this is not the case... 'We are aiming for the head,' the soldiers proclaim on social networks." (Pierre Rousset, "Myanmar: Terror, Resistance & the Stakes — A New Political Situation," March 31, 2021, following the "Armed Forces Day" massacre. Posted at Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres and <https://againstthecurrent.org/>)

As *Against the Current* goes to press, the popular resistance against the Myanmar junta escalates by the day, as does the military's murderous repression of the population and its near-genocidal campaigns against the country's ethnic minorities. For the first time in the Burmese democratic movement's difficult history, it has begun

to make common cause with the struggles of the minority peoples.

Fighting has broken out between the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) and various ethnic armed groups at several locations in the country's north and northeast. This has resulted in heavy casualties to the military.

New methods of protest have developed: releasing red and black balloons with slogans, organizing a "flower strike" at dawn, smearing red paint at bus stops to symbolize the blood the military has shed.

We urge our readers to consult Pierre Rousset's important article for a full analysis of the upheaval in Myanmar. We also suggest visiting ESSF's website (<http://europe-solidaire.org>) for information on their financial appeal "to support this struggle, now and over the long term."

The appeal specifies: "Our solidarity is focused on the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which includes the health workers and high school youth who were the first to reject the coup," labor unionists, and "groups advocating for the progressive aspirations of national minorities" and associations building solidarity with them. ■



Islamophobia in Europe: A Continuous and Growing Racism

By Joseph Daher

WHILE ISLAMOPHOBIA, CONNECTED to forms of anti-Arab racism and colonial and imperial histories, certainly existed prior to 2000, it exploded in Western countries after the attacks of September 11, 2001 by the jihadist organization al-Qaida. A new enemy had been found and laws discriminating against Muslim populations blossomed in Europe, North America and Australia, but also elsewhere, such as in India, Russia and China.

Western states built up Muslims as a dangerous “other” in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The so-called “War on Terror” helped the USA and its allies to justify imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and the wider region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) under the guise of combating terrorism.

At home, in both Europe and the United States, new counterterrorism policies and measures very largely targeted Muslims, who have been treated as legitimate objects of suspicion, and other non-white populations. Building on this “otherness” and “dangerous-

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ness,” authorities have increased laws and means to monitor Muslims, to control their every move, and to constantly ensure their adherence to so called “Western Values” or in France “Republican Values.”

Islamophobia has continued to grow in the USA and European countries over the past decade, with governments exploiting the rise of a new jihadist organization, the “Islamic State” (IS), and the arrival of millions of refugees from the MENA region to deepen their racist and repressive policies. The refugees of course are fleeing the deadly repression of authoritarian and despotic regimes, such as in Syria, the rise of the IS in Syria and Iraq, along with foreign interventions.

European Union (EU) countries are home to 20 million Muslims. Increasing number of far right and fascistic political parties throughout the continent have scapegoated Muslims and other non-white populations. National Rally (formerly known as the National Front), the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the English Defense League, Spain's Vox Party and the Austrian Freedom Party are some of the political parties that share a common discourse and policy to rid Europe of its “Muslim issue.”

These far-right political movements, however, are not the ones that have implemented the racist and exclusionary policies against Muslim populations. It's the social

liberal and right-wing governments that have done so. Successive center-right political leaders have, for instance, repeatedly spoken against “Islamist terrorism” (German Chancellor Angela Merkel) and the incompatibility with European values of so-called “Islamist separatism” (French President Emmanuel Macron).

The article will discuss the growing Islamophobic political atmosphere and rising violence against Muslims in Europe, which also served to attack more generally the democratic rights of wider sectors of the society, especially leftist groups and activists.

Continuation of Racism

Islamophobia does not measure a person's religiosity. It's a form of racism against individuals and populations considered or perceived as Muslims, whether he or she is a practicing believer or an atheist, but bearing a Muslim name.

Racism is not an opinion located in a psychological and individual level, but a relationship of domination: racialized groups are not simply perceived and thought of as citizens entirely apart, but also treated in a particular way. This difference, which should rather be characterized as unequal treatment, translates very concretely into denial or at least inequality of rights and opportunities — for example when one is Muslim, Arab or Black to find a job or housing, or for

Muslim women the right to wear a headscarf in public school.

After World War II serious attempts to classify people according to race ended, but racism took on other forms. The conservative “revolution” of the 1980s reinforced the official rhetoric of governments with the promotion of “culturalist” explanations to promote discriminatory and racist policies. This was accompanied by the implementation of neoliberal policies. It was also connected to the ascendance of Samuel Huntington’s concept of the “clash of civilizations.”

Neoliberal policies in Western countries led to further precariousness and a massive impoverishment of working-class populations. As trade unions and resistance from below were being crushed, competition between workers rose. In working-class circles, those who pay the most for these neoliberal policies were women, young people and populations with immigrant and/or minority backgrounds.

Under these circumstances inequalities in society could no longer be denied — but their causes were located in “cultural factors” supposedly specific to a person or a minority group. Inequalities were therefore explained by a group’s culture which was regarded as homogeneous.

In France, for example, Arab/Muslim populations (or those considered as such) were accused of “insufficient integration.” Their cultures and/or religions were seen as “incompatible” with “French culture.”

In Great Britain, similar dynamics were at play. The “War on Terror” in the 2000s was built on an older idea that Muslims “self-segregate” and don’t accept “British values.” This actually became a cornerstone of the Prevent strategy (see below), which pushes public sector workers to spy on Muslims for signs of radicalization and “non-violent extremism.”¹

Inequalities in society are no longer understood or seen as produced by the state’s social, political and economic policies. The objective is to disqualify the legitimacy of the claims and demands denouncing the inequalities in a particular society.

The development of racist discrimination in all spheres of social life leads to a triple process of precariousness, ghettoization and ethnicization of minority and/or migrant populations.

Attacking Democratic and Social Rights

The so called “War on Terror” led to justifying two massive wars, the occupations Afghanistan and Iraq, and other military interventions in Muslim majority countries, while criminalization and exclusionary policies against Muslim also increased.

Over the past two decades, the prohibi-

tions on forms of Muslim veiling in various public spaces has gone from the *hijab* ban in French schools and restrictions for teachers in some parts of Germany to an outright interdiction of the face-covering *niqab* in public spaces in Denmark, Belgium, France and more recently in Switzerland.

This has been accompanied by rising violence targeting Muslims, mosques and their symbols. This demonstrates how anti-Muslim feelings have penetrated far beyond certain limited sections of society, to reach wider sectors.

In a report published in 2012 titled “Choice and prejudice: discrimination against Muslims in Europe,” Amnesty International was alarmed by the Islamophobic climate. Many European countries (France, Switzerland, Austria, etc.) were singled out for their practices, while political parties quietly encourage them in their quest for electoral votes, the report adds.

The editor of the report describes, for example, how “Muslim women are denied jobs and young girls are prevented from going to school simply because they wear traditional clothes like headscarves...Men can be fired for wearing beards associated with Islam.” Muslims in Britain are generally paid 13-21% less than others with equal qualifications, while Muslim job seekers were three times less likely to be offered an interview.²

This has continued throughout the continent. In France, numerous laws in the past two decades directly or indirectly targeted Arab/Muslim populations, starting with the ban on the *hijab* in schools in 2004 and the *niqab* face veil in all public spaces in 2011. The *burkini* (swimwear for conservative Muslim women) clampdown followed in 2016.

The Collective Against Islamophobia in France on numerous occasions accused the French state and public authorities of participating, through their action, in the spread of Islamophobia. The implementation of the state of emergency and more broadly the anti-terrorism policy conducted since 2015 have led, according to the Collective to “the emergence of a security Islamophobia.”³

French President Macron announced a “separatism” law on October 12, 2020, and it was adopted on February 16, 2021, by the National Assembly. The discussion and adoption of the law were the pretext for all kinds of racist declarations by a majority of deputies of the right and far right. Unfortunately, some sections of the left joined in too.

[Now pending in the Senate and sharply criticized by Amnesty International, the sweeping “anti-separatism” law imposes regulations on religious organizations and allows the state to ban preachers for alleged extremism — ed.]

Meanwhile, the government-owned and mainstream media accused organizations and individuals opposing this law of “Islamophobic-

ism.” It sought to delegitimize any solidarity the left shows to the Muslim population.

In France’s new “anti-separatism” law, 51 articles provide more security tools. To receive grants from the state, associations will have to sign a “Republican engagement contract on respect for the principles and values of the republic.” This is accompanied by an extension of the grounds for dissolving associations which “threaten public order,” just as the government banned and dissolved certain Muslim associations in the past few months, such as the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, whose role is to provide assistance to victims of Islamophobia.⁴

At the same time, the so-called “religious neutrality” required of public service agents is extended to private sector agents entrusted with a public service mission, with all the obligations that go with it, in particular the headscarf ban. There will be increased control over mosques, an obligation to declare donations received from abroad, a change in the status of Islamic worship activities from the 1901 law to a more restrictive “separation” law of 1905, and increased control over all the activities of their cultural associations.

More generally, this new law is about silencing Muslims and their organizations, harassing them by making them responsible for the discrimination they denounce.

Similarly in the UK, the British government also stigmatized Muslims through various so-called “security” policies such as the “Prevent” security program, which began to be implemented in 2005. This program, redesigned by the Conservatives in 2011 but first launched by Tony Blair’s New Labor in 2007, aims to “fight terrorism” and “extremism.”

The program allows British authorities to put under surveillance anyone who disagrees with government policy and the actions of the British state, such as opposition to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the bombing of Libya or support to the Palestinian cause, and “British core values.”

Muslim students were particularly targeted in this campaign. The Prevent program also asked teachers to denounce the signs of “radicalization” of young Muslims...

According to a study published in 2017, the vast majority of teachers and school employees affirmed their concern about the stigmatization of Muslim students in the “Prevent” program strategy and on the contrary undermines inclusion efforts in schools, while being ineffective against religious extremism.⁵

As Narzanin Massoumi explained, “a Pakistani citizen is 150 times more likely to be stopped and searched under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act — a draconian piece of legislation that allows people to be stopped at ports without ‘reasonable suspicion’ — than if you are white.”

The law allows officers to detain people

without suspicion and hold them for up to nine hours at airports, ports and international rail stations. Yet only 100 people have been charged and 44 convicted since the law came into force in 2001.

In both, France and Britain the rise of Islamophobic policies also played an important role in a process of controlling and limiting the political rights of everyone — not only Muslims. In France, so called “anti-terrorist” and “security” laws targeted leftist and ecologist activists and group. On November 28, 2020, massive demonstrations occurred in France against “the global security law” uniting various democratic and progressive forces — from journalist organizations to the radical left — to fight the impunity of the police and the extension of surveillance power.

More generally this demonstration was to struggle for self-defense against the state apparatus and policies that deny liberties. These rank high among the instruments of the ruling class in the period of global crisis.

Similarly in England, the “Prevent” security program did not stop with attacks against Muslims, but later on targeted the left — ecologists, left groups, pro-Palestinian movements etc. For example, Marxist teaching texts are for marked as potentially radicalizing tools and therefore school teachers can no longer use anti-capitalist material.

Demonizing Muslims

The policies of governments and mainstream media have participated in the demonization of Muslims. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the display of negative portrayals of Muslims in the media make the population more likely to support government policies that are detrimental to Muslims and an erosion of their rights.

In 2007 a Greater London Authority report exposed that in a week’s coverage by the British media, 91% of the stories about Muslims were negative. A more recent study by the Muslim Council of Britain revealed last year that not much had changed.

An Arab News/YouGov poll in 2017 pointed out that the majority of British people supported racial profiling against Arabs. In 2019, YouGov found that 38% of British people believed that Islam was not compatible with Western values. A much higher proportion of respondents had an unfavorable view of Islam compared to any other religion.⁶

In addition, after Boris Johnson’s comments comparing women in *burqas* to “letterboxes” and “bank robbers,” Islamophobic incidents reportedly jumped by 375% in the following week. An internal inquiry by the Conservatives, however, characterized them as “respectful and tolerant.”

In 2019, research conducted for the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Religion Monitor

yet again confirmed large mistrust towards Muslims across Europe. In Germany and Switzerland, every second respondent declared they considered Islam as a threat.⁷ Forty-four percent of Germans, for example, saw “a fundamental contradiction between Islam and German culture and values.” The figure for the same in Finland was a remarkable 62%; in Italy, it’s 53%.

In Spain and France, about 60% thought Islam is incompatible with the “West.” In Austria, one in three didn’t want to have Muslim neighbors.⁸ In Hungary, which has seen growing anti-immigrant and racist policies since 2015, 72% had unfavorable views of Muslims in 2016 according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, while in a survey in 2017, 64% of respondents from Hungary agreed with the statement that “all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped.”⁹

More broadly, a new report by Amnesty published in the beginning of 2021 describes how discrimination in European counter-terrorism policies has promoted an environment where Muslims are more likely to be the subject of hate speech and attacks, while reinforcing the racist view that Islam is a “threat.” Muslims continue therefore to suffer ethnic profiling and are disproportionately subjected to surveillance, limitations on their movements, arrest and deportation.¹⁰

Explosion of Violence

The constant criminalization and racist policies against Muslims led to an explosion of Islamophobic acts in recent years, including killings and forms of terrorism by far-right movements and/or fascist individuals and organizations.

In 2018 alone, France saw a 52% increase of Islamophobic incidents while in Austria there was an increase of around 74%, with 540 cases. In Germany, the number of crimes classified as Islamophobic rose by 4.4% to 950 offenses in 2019, according to German police statistics.

Repeated or foiled attacks on refugee centers and mosques have multiplied, as with the killing of nine people in Hanau in February 2020 as the most blatant example.¹¹ The perpetrator of the attack in Hanau possessed what the German authorities have called “a deeply racist mind-set.”¹²

In Britain there were 143,920 anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic Tweets sent from the UK — an average of 393 per day between March 2016 and March 2017. The number of Islamophobic attacks also multiplied by five the day after the May 22, 2017 suicide bombing at the Manchester arena.

Islamophobic attacks are also part of an increasingly aggressive and hostile political atmosphere, while the fascist and far-right movements are mobilizing ever more on these issues. In England two fascist group,

Britain First and the English Defense League (EDL), have also increased Islamophobic attacks.

Leaders of Britain First have been banned from going to all mosques after a series of attempted intimidation of Muslims in their places of worship. On the other hand, EDL leader Tommy Robinson called for the formation of “militias” to “settle” the issue of Islam in Great Britain.

Muslims and mosques have also increasingly been targets of French far-right and fascist movements and groups. Far-right terrorists have justified their attacks as struggling against a “Muslim invasion.” The fascist Anders Breivik who assassinated 77 individuals in 2011 in Norway, claimed for instance to act to preserve Christianity against multiculturalism and to avert the “Eurabia” — a theory popularized by Bat Ye’or (the writer Gisele Littman — ed.) that Europe will be colonized by the “Arab world.”

The line from policy to act, from rhetoric to violence, is very hard to draw. And the process by which Islamophobia spreads across European society is complex, multi-causal, endlessly ramifying.

Feminism or Femo-Nationalism?

Similarly, there has been an instrumentalization (opportunistic manipulation — ed.) of women’s rights to attack the Muslim population, which is widely viewed as more patriarchal, essentializing Muslims as a threat to women’s rights. A form of femo-nationalism has been developing. As academic Sara Farris explained, this is an “instrumentalization” of migrant women in Europe by right-wing nationalists — and neoliberals.¹³

The far right and the right have taken over part of the feminist discourse, not to effectively defend women — they continue to maintain conservative and reactionary positions regarding women’s and LGBTIQ rights¹⁴ — but to erect a barrier between “Us,” the supposed egalitarian and emancipated Western society, and “Them,” an oppressive and threatening Islam.

For example, banning the *burqa* in several countries in Europe was implemented for the so-called purpose of struggling for women’s rights and equality. The main objective of these interdictions, however, were new campaigns of stigmatization against the Muslim populations.

Other voices claiming to be “left and feminist” also support the initiative in the name of equality, declaring that “the full veil is nothing but a mobile prison for women.” Their paternalistic argument — “we have never considered the fact that certain individuals accept or even adhere to the discrimination they suffer as a reason to stop combating this same discrimination” — denies the agency of women wearing the *burqa*, and ignores that this initiative will, on the

contrary, only reinforce the discrimination to which they are already subjected.

More generally some prominent feminists, although a minority, have supported laws such as the veil and *burkini* bans in France — for example, the well-known feminist intellectual Elizabeth Badinter — and this has strengthened anti-Islam positions in the name of women's rights.

It is indeed a real trap for the feminist movement. It breaks the solidarity among women by putting on one side Muslim women, with or without headscarves, portrayed as submissive victims and never as actors of their own emancipation unless they demonstrate their adherence to "Western values." On the other side Western society, even Western feminism, is considered capable of deciding the norms of gender equality and paths to liberation.

Such orientations are at odds with any idea of women's self-determined action, by anathematizing women wearing the *burqa* or headscarves, speaking on their behalf and declaring them automatically oppressed without giving them speech or even listening to them.

Moreover, use of the repressive state apparatus is never a vehicle for emancipation. Muslim women, already sufficiently discriminated against and subject to stereotypes having a considerable impact on the realization of their rights, do not need to have their rights and activity decided for them.

The issue of the veil and the *burqa* only concerns women; they must decide for themselves and in complete independence whether or not to wear it. Either imposing or removing the veil and *burqa* by force — by a state and/or an individual — is a reactionary act that goes against any support for women's autonomy.

Tackling the structural problems of sexism and racism cannot be done by choosing to stigmatize a group that is itself discriminated against. Only an anti-racist and anti-capitalist feminist movement can tackle these issues.

Conclusion

The continuously growing Islamophobia in Europe over the past two decades is not limited to a reaction to the terrorist Islamic State attacks or due solely to propaganda of far right groups, as claimed by mainstream media and governments, but are above all the result of the increasing authoritarian and racist policies of European governments.

The Islamophobic and racist policies of the ruling classes have the objective of consolidating a nationalist imagination by inviting the majority ethno-racial group to unite against invented threats posed by Muslims and more generally non-white populations.

Meanwhile various European govern-

ments are deepening their neoliberal and nationalist agendas, while most of the liberal and social-liberal parties have not opposed them, quite the opposite.

Moreover, it's important to understand how Islamophobia plays a larger social role by trying to normalize attacks by the ruling classes and the expansion of state control, directed not only at Muslim populations characterized as dangerous, but at everyone on the left who challenge the ruling system.

Marxists must challenge Islamophobia along with all forms of racism. Similarly, we must defend freedom of religion, and at the same time the right of oppressed groups to self-determination. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Karl Marx argued that we must reject state interference in matters of belief and worship.

Therefore, struggling against Islamophobia and all forms of racism is also a way to defend the rights of all engaged in challenging this unequal authoritarian system. In this perspective, let us not forget that jihadist organizations and others also feed in part on the racist, anti-social and imperialist policies of Western governments.

At the same time, there has been growing resistance from Muslim, Black and non-white populations and sections of the left against various governments' racist and security policies. The murder of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis in the spring of 2020 sparked a wave of anti-racist mobilization, historic in its scale and duration but above all by its global dimension.

Nearly all the Western countries were affected. In Paris, at the call of the Adama Committee, tens of thousands of people rushed to the court to demand "truth and justice." Demonstrations condemned state racism, socio-economic discrimination and police violence.

Marxists must challenge Islamophobia along with all forms of racism. Similarly, we must defend freedom of religion, and at the same time the right of oppressed groups to self-determination. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Karl Marx argued that we must reject state interference in matters of belief and worship.

Workers' struggles alone will not be suffi-

cient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands of rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups. Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society.

The left must indeed understand how beyond capitalist dynamics, gender issues, discrimination based on religion and/or "race" influence the structure and dynamics of our societies, our workplaces and the development of consciousness. It is not whether class issues come before gender/race/religion or vice versa, but how these elements come together in capitalist production and power relations, which result in a complex reality.

Discrimination based on race, gender, economic, cultural and ideological oppression should not be underestimated, at the risk of losing sight of the complexity of the task when building a progressive movement including workers of all backgrounds.

Failing to consider these interconnections will negatively impact the hard struggle to unite the working class and developing the political project for a radical transformation of society.

All forms of exploitation and oppression are opposed by Marxists. As Marx declared: "Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where black skin is branded." ■

Notes

1. This duty was made legally binding by the Tories' Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015. But it was first brought in by Tony Blair's Labour government in the wake of the July 7, 2005 bombings in London.
2. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/east-london-acid-attack-terrorism-islamophobia-a7817466.html>
3. https://issuu.com/ccif/docs/ccif_rapport_final_complet
4. See <https://againstthecurrent.org/state-racism-islamophobia-religious-fundamentalism/>
5. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/03/prevent-strategy-anti-radicalisation-stigmatising-muslim-pupils-teachers?CMP=share_btn_tw
6. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/29/islamophobia-united-kingdom-anti-racist-definitions/>
7. <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/topics/latest-news/2019/july/religious-tolerance-is-widespread-but-it-does-not-extend-to-islam>
8. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/28/europe-social-pandemic-hatred-muslims-blm>
9. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/anti-muslim-populism-in-hungary-from-the-margins-to-the-mainstream/>
10. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/europe-how-to-combat-counter-terrorism-discrimination/>
11. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/28/europe-social-pandemic-hatred-muslims-blm>
12. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html>
13. See Sara Faris, *In the Name of Women's Rights, The Rise of Femonationalism*, 2017, <https://www.dukeupress.edu/in-the-name-of-womens-rights>
14. We can see for example their defense of the traditional model of the family and against same sex marriage, their willingness to limit abortion rights, support for neoliberal policies, etc.

A Tale of Two Delmores: Marxism and the Modernist Poet

By Alan Wald

"[T]he revolution is a profession in itself,
which it is the writer's part to support as a human being,
but without ceasing to be a complete writer."
—Delmore Schwartz, 1939¹

I. Delmore Agonistes

HISTORY CAN BE a spoiler. What most students of literature are taught about the Jewish-American poet Delmore Schwartz (1913-66) is a cautionary tale of creative, reputational and psychological atrophy.

Delmore, who was almost always called by his first name, initially burst like a supernova on the Marxist literary landscape of the 1930s; a striking young eagle with a blazing movie-star charisma. As a Modernist (i.e. an author self-consciously departing from traditional ways of writing), he was dubbed "The American Auden," extolled by T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, and became a central presence in the pages of the Trotskyist-influenced journal *Partisan Review*.²

Three decades later he died at age 52; deranged, paranoid, and alone in a fleabag hotel off Times Square. A 1937 piece of surrealist fiction, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," made Delmore's name, but the circumstances of his demise — with his unclaimed body lying for days at the Manhattan morgue — cemented his legend.

Such a finale, retold *ad infinitum*, has by now turned Delmore into something of a vacuous cliché: the preternaturally gifted boy genius of otherworldly innocence unable to live in a profit-driven, sordidly corrupt society; a self-destructive *poète maudit* in the drug-and-alcohol-addled mold of 19th century French Symbolists Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire; or one of the English Romantic William Wordsworth's "poets in their youth" who began in "gladness" and ended in "madness."³

After the sensational behavior depicted in Saul Bellow's biographically based novel about Delmore, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), and James Atlas's biography *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (1977), his saga has the aura of a life subsumed by a tabloid afterlife. One wonders if there is anything new to be said.

Then again, trumpeter Miles Davis famously observed that the notes you don't play in jazz are more important than the ones you do.⁴ Much the same can be concluded about the relative weight of what is said and not said in conventional U.S. literary history. Life stories of writers have at times been

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judiciously curated so as to mute the presence of a Far Left that surged multifariously in assorted (and often unexpected) cultural regions in the Great Depression, only to be beaten underground during the 1950s.



Delmore Schwartz, portrait of an artist as a young man.

What's customarily chronicled about Delmore in biographical and critical studies is much like a sequence of snapshots in a photo album, carefully selected for specific emphasis; inconsistent images are omitted or misleadingly captioned so as not to contest the dominant point of view as to what a bad-boy Modernist poet ought to be about.

The result is that we have inherited a kind of "body double" of Delmore, an impersonation with the political core mostly hollowed out. His career, in fact, is worthy of scrutiny precisely because it embodies the staggering political and cultural incongruities of a still-misunderstood sequence of decades.

As Michael Denning demonstrated in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), the Depression, World War II and the postwar period was a 30-year block of time when an assortment of Marxist tendencies in art and the class struggle were in play in various guises and even disguises.

At this late date, traveling back to the old boneyard of the mid-century Literary Left to dig up and exhibit a revolutionary socialist "Comrade Delmore" feels almost ill-mannered, as if one were to brazenly dump an exhumed, rotting corpse on the table of a genteel wine and cheese reception sponsored by the Modernist Studies Association. How and why did this hasty burial of the original "political Delmore" and substitution of an anemic imitation happen, and what has been lost to cultural and radical history?

This essay is intended less as an "introduction" to Delmore Schwartz than a "reintroduction"— an effort to lay out a coherent story of Delmore's convictions and engagements. It's "A Tale of Two Delmores," but not because his politics and art comprise compartmentalized strands. On the contrary, it's for the reason that the mythic Delmore in scholarship and journalism bears little resemblance to the actually existing poet in whom these dueling constituents were distinctively if not always effectively blended together.

II. Delmore Among the Muses

Delmore was a writer and thinker who exhibited considerable range while also being irreducibly and inscrutably himself. From his teenage years he was a cultural omnivore whose eclectic interests began with French symbolism, Shakespeare, High Modernism, classical music and painting, and Greek Philosophy and Neo-Thomism; but it also extended to comics, abstract expressionism, B-movies, and baseball, as well as varieties of Bolshevism. Nevertheless, he felt at all times estranged, alienated, and apart from any national or ethnic culture.

Accordingly, the principal locus in his imaginative writing would customarily center on his own agonized psychological condition; from there he might move, usually by metaphor, to psychoanalytical, social, and historical consciousness, but most often to philosophical enigmas.

A signature poem is “The Heavy Bear Who Goes with Me” (1938), inspired by the “process philosophy” of Alfred North Whitehead, one of Delmore’s teachers at Harvard. Whitehead promoted an ontology — investigation into the nature of existence — accentuating interdependent progressions. When the stanzas open, we are presented with the human body as the foundation of experience:

*The heavy bear who goes with me,
A manifold honey to smear his face,
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,
The central ton of every place,
The Hungry beating brutish one
In love with candy, anger, and sleep,
Crazy factotum, disheveling all,
Climbs the building, kicks the football,
Boxes his brother in the hate-ridden city.*

As the poem evolves, we increasingly see episodes where the self-conscious writer futilely agonizes over his physical bulk and its drives that trap him in an ineluctable dilemma:

*That inescapable animal walks with me,
Has followed me since the black womb held,
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,
A caricature, a swollen shadow,
A stupid clown of the spirit’s motive....*

In a fashion typical of Delmore, then, the poem has turned into a dialogue of an observing mind with itself. Somewhat like his rough contemporary, the Romanian-Jewish poet Paul Celan (1920-1970), Delmore sought to render visible those aspects of reality too often elusively indiscernible; traits to be considered not as fixed and settled but as being at issue, to be questioned.

One governing characteristic above all links this poem to much of the rest of Delmore’s writing: its mode of compulsive self-observation. Among other things, Delmore was a pioneer in the poet’s removing of the mask from one’s face to expose candid personal experiences, many of them embarrassing and self-critical.⁵

This revelatory sensibility would become the hallmark of the school of “Confessional Poetry” that blossomed in the 1950s through the work of several of Delmore’s close friends, Robert Lowell (1917-77) and John Berryman (1914-72). Naturally, since Delmore’s upbringing was Jewish, he also has a place as a pioneer in the exploration of urban immigrant culture.⁶ Unlike almost all the other participants in the early



In 1938, when he was just 25, Delmore published a collection of poems and writings, In Dreams Begin Responsibilities. In 1959, he became the youngest- ever recipient of the Bollingen Prize, which was awarded for his collection, Summer Knowledge: New and Selected Poems.

Partisan Review circle, Delmore had no hesitation in aggressively coming out as Jewish. At the same time, he shared their adversity to “Jewish particularism” and offered candid, unidealized portraits of Jewish experience.

In the autobiographical verse play *Shenandoah* (1941), for example, Delmore agonizingly lampoons his parents’ absurd attempt to give him what they imagined to be a distinguished “Americanized” first name to balance a European (and often Jewish) last name.

In anecdotes told about his life, the poet alleged that his own unusual appellation came from “Delmore’s,” a delicatessen in his neighborhood, christened for a popular actor, Frank Delmore, who was admired by his mother; for this satire, the name “Delmore Schwartz” becomes parodied as “Shenandoah Fish.”⁷

In a passage in *Shenandoah* where Delmore observes himself as a child, *Shenandoah* looks back in wonder and pain at the forces producing his life-long sensation of estrangement from both the immigrant and prevailing mores and customs of his society:

*.... you hardly know
How many world-wide powers surround you now,
And what a vicious fate prepares itself
To make of you an alien and a freak!⁸*

Two years later, in what would be his major effort, the 208-page poem *Genesis: Book One* (1943), Delmore functioned as an anthropologist of his own Jewish immigrant family story and chronicler of the inheritance of psychological trauma that haunted him. If the final two books of *Genesis* had been completed, it might have been a production called, “Everything you wanted to know about Delmore’s childhood but were afraid to ask.”

In his much discussed “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities,” Delmore goes much farther by attempting a dramatic intrusion into his own past. While watching an imaginary moving picture of his parents’ engagement, he stages a disruption by standing up in the theater to protest the heartache and tragedy that will necessarily lie ahead: “Don’t do it. It’s not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous.”⁹

The Schwartz family history, which animated a number of other short stories, centers on the ill-fated marriage of his parents, Jewish-Romanian immigrants Harry and Rose Schwartz. As Harry rose to prosperity through his real estate business before World War I, the family moved to increasingly affluent neighborhoods in Brooklyn. But Harry's philandering resulted in marital separations during the early 1920s and divorce in 1927.

Delmore escaped his unhappy family life, as well as a sense of being poles apart from his schoolmates, by declaring himself a "poet." It was an identity that gave him a life-long sense of value, direction and dignity.

Although he was fixated on attending college and perhaps graduate school, the family's financial fortunes were devastated by the 1929 crash and then Harry's death the following year. Dependent on his unsympathetic mother for money, he spent 1930 at the University of Wisconsin immersed in literature and radical politics, then enrolled at New York University to study classical, analytical and contemporary philosophy with Sidney Hook, James Burnham and Philip Wheelwright.

After demonstrating brilliant potential in this field, Delmore enrolled in graduate school at Harvard where he charmed and wowed the intellectual elite, not only in philosophy but literature as well. Already he was translating Rimbaud and publishing his own poems and reviews. That's why, in March 1937, when his financial support from Rose Schwartz ran out, he left without completing a doctorate and returned to New York City to launch a career as a fulltime writer.

In 1938 he put out his first collection, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, with New Directions, a new independent Modernist publishing house open to Delmore and other poets on the Left. That year, age 25, he married Gertrude Buckman, a friend from high school who had also studied with Sidney Hook, who would write reviews (as well as translate exiled Bolshevik Victor Serge) for *Partisan Review*.

From the outset, Delmore proclaimed the Modern Masters of poetry to be his gods, but above all he aspired to be T. S. Eliot's stylistic disciple while ignoring Eliot's most reactionary ideas and political views. At the same time, he maintained a personal commitment to being *sui generis* in his themes at all costs; since he rejected the values he inherited from his family and social institutions, he believed that his poetry could provide a new vision of life and a sustenance unobtainable from any existing community.

III. Delmore's Zig-Zag Career

As a craftsman Delmore was capable of sparkling, gem-cut perfection, not only in poetry but in literary criticism that began with writing about the Irish radical poet Louis MacNeice and the Left-wing novelist John Dos Passos, as well as the reactionary Modernist Ezra Pound.

Often he praised the very qualities that he embraced for himself, as in the opening sentences of a commentary on Rimbaud: "Beginning as a bourgeois adolescent who finds his family intolerable, Rimbaud moved with the greatest speed to a recognition of his essential enemy, the whole bourgeois culture. The age in which one exists is the air which one breathes. Rimbaud was left breathless by his age."¹⁰

Yet his imaginative images could have the dreamlike intensity of surrealism and he favored the use of metaphors to give dramatic existence to ideas. In a rhymeless double sonnet

based on the Socratic dialogue *The Republic* (514a-520a), "In the Naked Bed, In Plato's Cave" (1938), he makes use of his own insomniac experiences to describe the delusional shadows of the night before the clarity of the day:

*Strangeness grew in the motionless air. The loose
Film grayed. Shaking wagons, hooves' waterfalls,
Sounded far off, increasing, louder and nearer.
A car coughed, starting. Morning, softly
Melting the air, lifted the half-covered chair
From underseas....¹¹*

Then again, for full appreciation, much of his work requires the cultivation of a specialty taste. Now and again there are verses so encrypted as to require an Enigma Code-breaking machine for comprehension. "Concerning the Synthetic Unity of Apperception," taking its theme from René Descartes, begins:

*"Trash, trash!" the king my uncle said,
"The spirit's smoke and weak as smoke ascends.
"Sit in the sun and not among the dead,
"Eat oranges! Pish tosh the car attends."¹²*

The linguistic play may be intriguing but trying to explicate too much of this can make one's eyes cross over.

Delmore also wrote many dialogues and blank verse dramas such as "Choosing Company" (1936), "Dr. Bergen's Belief" (1937), and "Paris and Helen" (1941). In "Coriolanus and His Mother" (1938), a Delmore-like narrator observes a dramatic performance of the story of the legendary Roman leader in the company of Marx, Freud, Aristotle and Beethoven; between the acts he jumps onto the stage to provide commentary. These are relatively straightforward entertainments but not exactly heart-pounding narratives; it is likely that most present-day readers will require time and study for maximum gratification.

In fact, except for a dozen or so of his best-known pieces of poetry, fiction and dialogue distinctive for their lucidity, reading Delmore in the absence of some degree of background knowledge in philosophy and the classics may seem at times like a recipe for masochism. That's why his career was never as a popular writer nor lucrative.

Fortunately, he had a talent for making a favorable impression on exceptional people who assisted him as protectors, in publishing and promoting his work. Since he didn't have a Ph. D. and was Jewish at a time when few Jews were accepted in English Departments, these allies worked to obtain temporary teaching positions for Delmore at leading institutions.

Nevertheless, the events of his personal life and the ups and downs of his career combined with deepening psychological problems and a dependency on drink and drugs to make the next 25 years a zig-zag affair. He would hold the high ground in Parnassus for a certain time, but then his fame and reputation would unhappen. Editorial positions didn't last, and teaching positions became more difficult to sustain as word of his erratic behavior circulated. His final chapters are a long and painful saga.

Delmore's first marriage ended after six years, and a second, to novelist Elizabeth Pollet in 1949, didn't survive much longer. In 1940 he received an appointment as a composition instructor at Harvard, followed by a Guggenheim Fellowship, but poor reviews of *Shenandoah* and *Genesis* were

personally devastating. As his life began to go off the rails he quit Harvard and moved to a number of universities but failed to secure a lasting position.

Even though he continued to produce fresh material in private, much remained in draft form and his new books often involved reordering, re-titling and reprinting earlier work. An award of the prestigious Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1959 brought Delmore some momentary new attention, but his diet of barbiturates and amphetamines were taking their toll. He inspired one of his students, the Velvet Underground guitarist Lou Reed, to write, but almost all his old friends became targets of demented conspiracy theories.¹³

Repeatedly committed to New York's Bellevue Hospital for psychiatric care, he resisted treatment and moved among dilapidated hotels in the city until dying of a heart attack on an elevator while taking out his trash in the middle of the night in July 1966.

IV. Political Delmore

To paraphrase Tennyson, in the spring of Revolution a young person's fancy turns to Bolshevism. That's certainly the way it was for Delmore, and many of the best and the brightest of his generation in the early 1930s. Capitalism was in crisis, memories of the international slaughter of World War I were only a decade in the past, and the Soviet Union was still the youthful experiment of idealists that deserved the benefit of the doubt.

There should be no haziness as to where Delmore's convictions lay in "The Red Decade," especially when he affiliated with *Partisan Review*. In spite of that, existing scholarship and journalism take a fast-food approach to his political ideology, often combined with a surfeit of misapprehensions about Marxism and the literary Left.¹⁴

Ceaselessly we are borne back to the era of Great Depression radicalism, but it changes every time a new generation looks at it. Nowadays, if Communism is mentioned in relation to Delmore, it is mainly in terms of describing the poet and *Partisan Review* as "anti-Communist"—barely suggesting what they were for.

Political labels should be used to open up and enlighten, not box in and evoke stereotypical bias. To clarify, one might employ a capital "C" Communism to indicate official pro-Soviet Communism, which by the 1930s was often called "Stalinism" by both supporters and radical opponents. In contrast, small "c" communism could indicate the heretical forms of Leninism, Bolshevism, council communism, and revolutionary Marxism to which Delmore and many others were attracted.

For the pre-World War II *Partisan Review*, which was launched by the Communist-led John Reed Club in 1934 but became organizationally independent in 1937, the more correct and illuminating political characterization should be "communist anti-Communist" or "communist anti-Stalinist." Of course, among the heretical Leninisms of the time, the politics of *Partisan Review* were certainly closest to Trotskyism, but the editors refrained from using the term because they did not want their journal to be linked to any specific political organization.

In any event, for a contemporary audience, especially after the distorting prism of the Cold War has done its work, describing Delmore and the journal as simply "anti-Communist" without context or qualification doesn't do it. A fact-based argument about this must begin with documentation, of which there is plenty.



When *Partisan Review* was relaunched in 1937, original editors Philip Rahv and William Phillips brought on others, including F.W. Dupee and Dwight Macdonald. Front row from left are Dupee and Phillips; behind are George L.K. Morris (artist and financial backer), Rahv and Macdonald.

One premier exhibit is the letter (now published) that journalist Dwight Macdonald sent in August 1937 to Leon Trotsky on behalf of the newly-formed *Partisan Review* editorial board: "all of us are ... committed to a Leninist program of action. We believe in the need for a new party to take the place of the corrupted Comintern."¹⁵

In February 1938, the editors publicly elaborated this stance: "Our program is the program of Marxism, which in general terms means being for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society, for a workers government, and for international socialism. In contemporary terms it implies the struggle against capitalism in all its modern guises and disguises, including bourgeois democracy, fascism, and reformism (social democracy, Stalinism)."¹⁶

Note that opposition to Stalinism was still far from the main political concern of the journal; affirming the abolition of capitalism was its central point. Stalinism is placed in a subsidiary position as a subset of reformism equivalent to social democracy. This was because the 1935 Popular Front had reoriented Communist parties to an alliance with "democratic" capitalist countries based on a preservation of their existing social order.

Delmore, whose writing appeared as the first item in the first issue of the revamped publication, personified *Partisan Review's* politico-cultural ethos. "If any writer could be singled out as the most extreme representative of the new intellectual grouping," recalled founding editor William Phillips, "it would be Delmore Schwartz" who embodied "most of the strains that came together in that period."¹⁷

None of this is to suggest that Delmore was your average Bolshevik-Leninist, at least as judged by what was required for

membership in most vanguard groups. His own relation to Marxism would be qualified by an insistence on eschewing all self-descriptions but that of poet, and he habitually preferred to evade any kind branding or labeling for himself, unless ironic.¹⁸

For the most part, Delmore-as-Marxist surely recalls German-Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) — steeped in philosophy and high culture, intensely interested in the materials of daily life, refusing to spurn notions of the need for God and the value of religious traditions, and with his back to the future. Delmore was also resistant to utopian notions of fundamental changes in the human character, despite Marxism's accuracy in analyzing social formations.

On the other hand, the idea that Delmore wasn't "political" is absurd. The most conspicuous purveyor of this myth was journalist and former Trotskyist Dwight Macdonald, who penned an obituary for Delmore announced on the front page of *The New York Review of Books*.¹⁹ If one had wanted to intentionally design a strategy to misrepresent Delmore's relation to politics, one could not do better than what Macdonald managed to accomplish.

When biographer James Atlas came along to write his acclaimed *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet*, Macdonald not only served as *eminence grise*, but read over and edited every page of the manuscript before bestowing his blessings on the final product.²⁰ What Macdonald claimed about Delmore's politics was brief: "Delmore's was a remarkably reasonable mind, immune to the passions and prejudices of our period [the 1930s-50s]. He was not a joiner....he seemed to feel no need for any political commitment as a writer, at least I can't recall his signing any of my manifestos or joining any of my committees."²¹

There are times when one feels the need to go up on the roof and shout in protest, and this is one of them.²² All Macdonald had to do was meander over to his bookshelf and pull out the early issues of *Partisan Review* that he edited. Delmore's name appears on every statement issued by the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism (LCFS),²³ the U.S. branch of the International Federation of Revolutionary Art announced by Trotsky, André Breton and the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.

The LCFS was the first and most significant of the committees Macdonald initiated, and where he served as secretary. Additionally, Delmore's name appears among the founding signatories of the 1946 "Europe-America Group," the second most important of Macdonald's committees, whose signers sought a post-war dialogue among radicals.²⁴ If there are additional initiatives that Macdonald formed and Delmore rejected, I am unaware of them.

Asking no questions, Atlas and all other writers about Delmore have omitted these references. Atlas also provided the grotesquely assured conclusion that Delmore was "Always apolitical."²⁵ This has served as a permission structure for numerous others to avoid serious consideration of Delmore's heartfelt convictions.

Macdonald is also way off in insisting that Delmore was "immune" to the political passions of his time. If one departs from what has been published directly on Delmore and reads around in the general history of the Cultural Left, one learns that pro-Communist composer Marc Blitzstein and Delmore

nearly exchanged blows over the Hitler Stalin Pact while at the Yaddo artists' colony in 1939.²⁶

One also discovers that Delmore intervened on political grounds to prevent New Directions Publishers from bringing out Kenneth Patchen's remarkable *The Journey of Albion Moonlight* (1941).²⁷ The pages of *Partisan* show that Delmore published a brutal denunciation of Muriel Rukeyser because her wartime poems had switched to a pro-Allies position.²⁸ And Delmore himself confessed that he became "violent and emphatic"²⁹ when addressing writers with whom he politically disagreed.

Macdonald's "not a joiner" line certainly gives a hyperbolic assessment of Delmore's undeniable detachment from political organizations that belies his frequent status as an ally. As a University of Wisconsin student, Delmore first read Marx under the tutelage of the leader of the Young Communist League, and efforts to recruit him continued when he returned to New York.³⁰

While at New York University he was part of a group of members and close sympathizers of the Trotskyist movement who met in James Burnham's apartment.³¹ In 1934 he co-edited a Marxist literary journal called *Mosaic*, and while at Harvard his close mentors included Communist fellow-travelers F.O. Matthiessen and D.H. Prall. In July 1936 he appeared with mostly pro-Communist poets in a special "Social Poets Number" of *Poetry* magazine edited by Horace Gregory, about to be appointed Contributing Editor of the *New Masses*.³²

In 1937 Delmore published in the *Marxist Quarterly*, which only gets mentioned as an item on his bibliography but almost certainly occurred as a consequence of his significant associations with the Trotskyist movement. In fact, in 1938 the poet John Wheelwright, a member of the Socialist Workers Party in Boston, wrote to James Burnham, now editor of its theoretical journal *New International*, that Delmore was a party sympathizer who ought to be asked to contribute.³³

In March 1939 Delmore taught at the Socialist Workers Party's "Marxist School" along with leading Trotskyist thinkers such as Max Shachtman and Burnham.³⁴ In May 1940 Delmore praised the new newspaper of the Workers Party (the break-away from the Socialist Workers Party led by Max Shachtman) and took out a subscription to *Labor Action*.³⁵

This list of associations, almost all of which are simply excluded from scholarship on Delmore, palpably doesn't match that of young revolutionary firebrands of the time, such as Nathan Gould and Myra Weiss; but neither is it the profile of cold aloofness from the Left suggested by Macdonald.

V. Delmore, the Complete Writer

In parallel fashion, explicit Marxist political statements by Delmore in his essays have been omitted from scholarship and mostly excluded from anthologies.

In 1938, when he published his *Southern Review* essay on Dos Passos, he included a favorable discussion of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács' writing, based on what had appeared in the Communist journal *International Literature*. This was among the very earliest considerations of Lukács in the United States, and along with Delmore's *Marxist Quarterly* contribution (elaborating on Columbia University art historian Meyer Schapiro's views), puts him in proximity to what is now called "Western Marxism."³⁶

In 1943 Sidney Hook published *The Hero in History*, and Delmore wrote a fine review rejecting outright Hook's claim that "Lenin's revolution is the chief cause of the world depression, the annihilation of the European labor movement, the coming to power of Hitler, and the Second World War."

His rebuttal relied on his study of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and Delmore kept his focus on capitalism as the source of war and fascism. "Surely the chief causes [of depression and World War II]," Delmore concludes, "are the conditions of international capitalism, the very causes which brought about the first war in 1914."³⁷

In 1955 in the *New Republic*, Delmore insisted in an article about the cartoon version of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* that the Bolshevik project in 1917 had been "the greatest and best social hope of human beings converted into a cynical despotism...its leaders and supporters were for the most part not gangsters and careerists, but dedicated martyred heroes and millions of men of good will."³⁸

This blunt statement was likely a case of Delmore thumbing his nose at the view predominant among Cold War liberal anticommunists, which was that a fascist-like totalitarianism had sprung directly from the ideas of Lenin.

Elsewhere, Dwight Macdonald provides a characterization of Delmore's view of World War II that makes me want to haul him before a Truth and Memory Commission. *Partisan Review* and the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism were founded on the belief that the U.S. entrance into an international war would not be to preserve democracy but continue the same struggle for the dominance of world markets that had produced World War I.

They believed that capitalism was the incubator of fascism and that fascism could not be militarily defeated without a socialist transformation. While some participants in the *Partisan Review* circle began to back away from this analysis with the start of the war, Delmore and Macdonald were among those who resisted.

Nevertheless, in a 1979 interview Macdonald was asked about Delmore's "position" on World War II and replied: "He had no position." The interviewer, perhaps sensing that this didn't seem quite right, asks again, "He had no position about things?" and Macdonald insists "No, none whatever."³⁹

In fact, Macdonald had sent correspondence to Delmore in 1942 demanding that he make public in the pages of *Partisan Review* the strong antiwar opinions he acknowledged in personal conversation, suggesting that Delmore emulate the anarchist Paul Goodman who had openly promoted draft resistance.⁴⁰

A few weeks later Delmore replied that he wasn't going to advocate doing anything about the war because it was a meaningless gesture under current conditions to directly propose any particular action to hinder it. The role of the intellectuals was simply to defend "culture and truth," which meant pursuing one's art but also detailed and constant criticism of the war.⁴¹

At this time, Delmore was in the process of officially joining

the editorial board of *Partisan Review*, which Macdonald had quit in protest of the journal's refusal to continue outright opposition to the war. So Delmore's letter, combined with his failure to publish any substantial disapproval of the war, has elements of opportunism.

This corresponds to the memory of Sidney Hook: "I got the impression at that time that he [Delmore] valued his association with *Partisan Review* more than he did his qualified agreement with Macdonald. Delmore was always more concerned with himself and his position on the firmament of poetry than with anything else."⁴² Hook also adds about Delmore: "He fancied himself as not only a poet but as a man of the world and a realistic political analyst..."⁴³

Correspondence at the same time from Delmore to playwright Robert H. Hivnor (1905-2005) elaborates his stance in light of maintaining one's creative writing: "you must keep yourself going and living as a writer, no matter what demands the new war and the *entelechy* [from Aristotle, vital function] of revolution make upon you. By an uneven analogy, the writer is like the doctor and the shoemaker, and only by being a doctor and a shoemaker can he do any good."

On the question of one's individual relation to the Marxist political movement, Delmore was precise: "the revolution is a profession in itself, which it is the writer's part to support as a human being, but without ceasing to be a complete writer."⁴⁴

VI. Et Tu, Delmore?

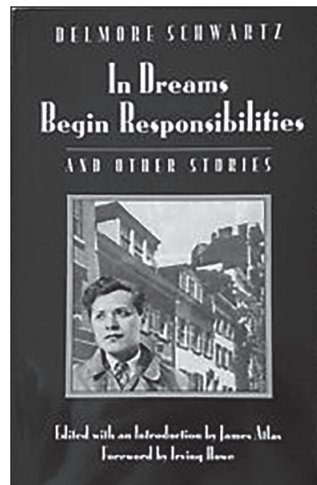
From the time of the *Partisan Review's* renovation in 1937, Delmore and the editors argued vigorously for the strategic autonomy of the publication; this was against the demand of the Socialist Workers Party for closer affiliation.⁴⁵ After all, if a journal is to focus on the creative arts, there is simply no benefit from a formal affiliation to a full political program or party, and plenty of risk.

Yet *Partisan Review* was political and *did* take positions. Ultimately its independence was surely compromised as it aligned with Cold War anticommunism. The editors may have continued to consider themselves Marxists, but the goalposts defining their radicalism had moved so far that one might as well call them SINO — Socialists in Name Only.

While warning signs were coming into view as World War II progressed, a turning point occurred with their publishing in the summer of 1946 an editorial called "The Liberal Fifth Column," demanding a more confrontational foreign policy toward the USSR.⁴⁶ Drafted by Delmore's close friend philosopher William Barrett but endorsed by all the editors, the text dangerously promoted outrage against liberals seeking to avoid a Cold War if not a hot one.

From that point on the *Partisan Review* editors were navigating dangerous waters, correctly recognizing a new world situation that demanded the abandonment of old dogmas but forsaking what was still worthwhile in the revolutionary socialist perspective. In effect, they were living the deed of apostasy before committing themselves to its performance.

In only a few more years they would become the recipient of cash from the CIA-funded American Committee for Cultural Freedom, showing a political convergence sometimes called "State Department Socialism." After that, their reputation on the Left was permanently besmirched; any memories



of the inspirational independent Marxists they had once been were now abandoned as mortified ghosts trapped in a world from which there was no salvation.

Delmore too was politically bound in a straitjacket of his own fashioning. For too long he had been contending with his own ambiguous motivations, struggling to align the contradictory pieces of his identity. Under the excruciating conditions of the Cold War, he simply couldn't survive their inevitable collision.

He may have sometimes claimed that his views hadn't changed but his name was now prominent on the letterhead of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, a grim voice of anti-communist liberalism (e.g. opposition to not just Communism but all varieties of communism — and wimpy about McCarthyism).

Still, there was little sign of any recorded activity. For the most part, when it comes to addressing anything other than literature, there is something blurry about Delmore in the 1950s, like the figure in the background of an old photograph. The political plot doesn't thicken so much as dissolve.

Perhaps he resisted what was known as "The Age of Conformity" through his insistence on his alienation and the inability of American culture to address the true needs of the artist. In a famous symposium on "Our Country and Our Culture," he was distinguished by a negative note: "the highest values of art, thought, and the spirit are not only not supported by the ways of modern society, but they are attacked, denied, or ignored by society as a mass."⁴⁷

Delmore's most notable political intervention in that decade seems to have been his 1953 *Partisan Review* essay about Columbia University English professor Lionel Trilling, "The Duchess' Red Shoes."⁴⁸ There is strong evidence that this was a critical foray designed to create some distance between the journal and the ideas of Trilling. In the eyes of several of the editors and writers, Trilling, part of the original *Partisan Review* milieu, was regarded as moving to the Right too precipitously, and Delmore thought that his repugnant politics would become more obvious if separated out from his mandarin literary views.⁴⁹

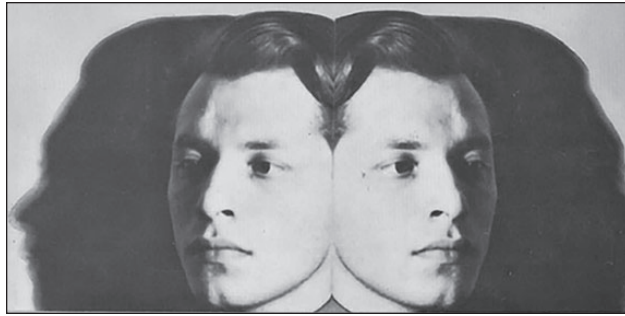
The exchange has now earned a minor place in literary history. That's because, whatever his new drift, Trilling was always a compelling, rich and complex thinker; and Delmore was a powerful intellectual match who went in for the kill, pointing to signs of intellectual snobbery with dialectical finesse. Nevertheless, so far as politics goes, revolutionary socialists had far more pressing matters on their minds at the height of McCarthyism and the Korean War than to parse just how much farther Trilling was to the Right than others among the New York Intellectuals.

VII. Delmore's Internationalism

The point is that the tectonic cultural shift after World War II changed everything in regard to short-term prospects for revolutionary transformation in the United States. And 75 years after that, so much more has happened in our culture and politics that one can have a hard time wrapping one's mind around Delmore's actual achievement even if we now

factor in his political life.

Most of all, clarity is needed about his blend of Marxism with High Modernism, which can easily scramble readers' expectations. For example, many socialists, myself included, customarily think of politics and poetry in terms of a scintillating agitational work, such as Claude McKay's response to the "Red Summer" of 1919 in "If We Must Die," or of eloquent commemorations of historical events, such as W. B. Yeats' eulogy of the Irish nationalist uprising against British rule in "Easter 1916." Delmore's work, in contrast, is often highly political without being written for a



Art design from *Selected Poems*

political purpose.

Among his paramount concerns as an artist was to root the personal in an international perspective. This did not begin with politics but with his view of poetry as an epistemological endeavor — an effort to acquire knowledge of who he was, which he might clarify by his own writing. Along with his search for new poetic forms and idioms appropriate to the modern world, the initial attraction was a perceived cosmopolitanism in James Joyce and T. S. Eliot.

When Delmore first began to read Trotsky, starting with *Literature and Revolution* (1922), while at the University of Wisconsin, he began to see the Russian Revolution as paramount among the world-shaping factors of his time. Such a perception became the basis of one of his most successful poems, "The Ballad of the Children of the Czar" (1937). In rapidly moving unrhymed couplets, he links his own situation as a two-year-old child in Brooklyn to the children of Czar Nicholas at the same time:

*The children of the Czar
Played with a bouncing ball
In the May morning, in the Czar's garden,
Tossing it back and forth...*

*While I ate a baked potato,
Six thousand miles apart,
In Brooklyn, in 1916,
Aged two, irrational.*

The standpoint he dramatizes on the fatal connections among the personal, historical, and social in 1914, are likely inflected by passages about Alexander II, father of Nicholas, from Chapter 6 of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (English translation, 1932).⁵⁰ The politicization of history comes in lines that show all of us variously as the casualties of history:

*The shattering sun fell down
Like swords upon their play,
Moving eastward among the stars
Toward February and October.⁵¹*

"The Ghosts of James and Pierce in Harvard Yard" (1938) is a more recondite, philosophically inspired sonnet, dedicated to the memory of his Harvard teacher D.H. Prall. Delmore depicts "a waking dream" in which the two "fathers of pragmatism" (William James and Charles Pierce) voice a cryptic warning about the state of the world as international war looms ahead:

We studied the radiant sun, the star's pure seed:
 Darkness is infinite! The blind can see
 Hatred's necessity and love's grave need
 Now the poor are murdered across the sea,
 And you are ignorant, who hear the bell;
 Ignorant, you walk between heaven and hell.⁵²

Often Delmore's more Kafkaesque stories seem to have political dimensions. These include his early prize-winning "The Statues" (1938) and late "The Track Meet" (1959). Both feature a vulnerable and decent individual caught up in a situation he barely understands, very much in the mode of Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926). In both cases the narrators are struggling to influence the world around them, each man marked by a kind of intelligence and hyperconsciousness that sets him apart from others. The configuration of the first story strongly suggests life before World War II and the second a postwar sensibility.⁵³

Politics is at its most straightforward in Delmore's fiction and poetry of the postwar moment itself. "A Bitter Farce" (1946) depicts a wartime writing instructor assigned to two classes. One consists of young soldiers, obviously pro-war and filled with racist sentiments especially produced by the recent (1943) Detroit race riot targeting African Americans. The title, "A Bitter Farce," is apt, to describe the embarrassing behavior of the instructor in his effort to balance survival with dignity.

The similar *leitmotif* of frustration is present in the second section of his collection *Vaudeville for a Princess and Other Poems* (1950), "The True, the Good, and the Beautiful." This phrase almost certainly stands for the traditional ideals of the poetic vocation, to which Delmore had a profound loyalty. Six of the poems are explicitly addressed to "Dear Citizens," indicating that he is talking to the society at large in an attempt to vindicate his recent behavior during the war.

In the body of the poems, the poet explains that he feels charged with the irresponsible behavior of being a mere bystander to the war of the past four years. His response remains that he has been dedicated to poetry, but he can't help wondering if his non-action might have been more like a prostitution.

VIII. Delmore in Our Time

Delmore Schwartz's legacy no doubt appears as a revolutionary commitment mired in ambiguity. Those trying to analyze his motives are invariably left with intractable questions. Only with great effort and research can his imaginative writings offer a window into his psyche, and even that is far from an unfiltered pipeline into true motives. In the meantime, the political and cultural achievement of *Partisan Review* — once the go-to place for Franz Kafka, Victor Serge, Karl Korsch and many more — has faded from public memory.

A restoration of Delmore in the socialist cultural tradition was never going to be an easy sell, especially for those who prefer biographies of revolutionary socialist ancestors to read

like chapters from a socialist version of *Lives of the Saints*.

Delmore's was a beyond-problematic life, a combination of extraordinary talent and self-destructive actions, which not only involved drugs but also cringeworthy stories about predatory sexual behavior. There were also emotional imperfections, including racial and gender myopia, as well as failures in empathy and understanding.

Finally, one must acknowledge that the world that formed Delmore's anti-capitalist and socialist consciousness has changed almost beyond recognition. Especially obsolete and hard to fathom are the Marxist predictions for short-term social transformation; in light of their failure to materialize, the politics advocated by Delmore may seem like self-delusory fantasy.

Few things look more dated than yesterday's idea of tomorrow. All this is made even less attractive by proclamations in the Trotskyist press and *Partisan Review* animated by an overkill of high passion and moral certainty, combined with much sneering at the supposed intellectual vacuity of political foes. Extreme conditions can push those who dream of socialist egalitarian-

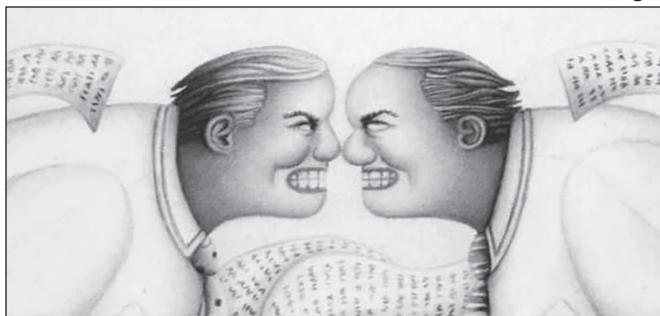
ism to intemperate extravagances.

Without dismissing such caveats, fundamental issues that riled Delmore still whisper to us across the decades: economic and racial discrimination, the dangerous intensification of a domestic and international Far Right, the failures and hypocrisy of liberalism, and the incapacity of a revolutionary left to cohere and win a majority of the working class.

Moreover, no matter what he wrote, Delmore was always conscious of the costs of capitalist society, even when his social vision in his last years seems elliptical and buried. All the same, we remember him because, as a sympathizer, he tried to inhabit the fraught political space of independent revolutionary socialism between the violent and aggressive power blocks of his era. As a thinker, in his own time he demanded and practiced a non-reductive Marxism. In the best of the early *Partisan Review* tradition, he aimed to infuse creative writing as well as criticism with social and historical dimensions without fetishizing any particular forms as progressive or reactionary.

History is always selective in how it tells deeply complicated narratives. Nonetheless, the arrhythmic heart of the matter is that we have two stories about the life and work of Delmore from which to choose. They contradict each other, and the first one lets you feel OK about skipping the knotty political debates that were central to the literary Left in the 1930s.

The other, however, stands hidden in plain sight in a brief early flashback to the young Von Humboldt Fleisher (largely a stand-in for Delmore) in Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*: "Then and there I realized that if I didn't read Trotsky at once I wouldn't be worth conversing with. Humboldt talked to me about Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, the Smolny Institute, the



Humboldt's Gift is Saul Bellow's roman à clef about his friendship with Delmore Schwartz. The poet Von Humboldt Fleisher seeks to lift American society through art, but dies a failure. In contrast, his friend becomes a wealthy playwright. With the two main characters significantly modeled on himself and Delmore, the emphasis on the latter's growing mental illness has added to the myth of the poet as apolitical.

Art design from Humboldt's Gift

Shakhty engineers, the Moscow Trials, Sidney Hook's *From Hegel to Marx, Lenin's State and Revolution*. In fact, he compared himself to Lenin."⁵⁴

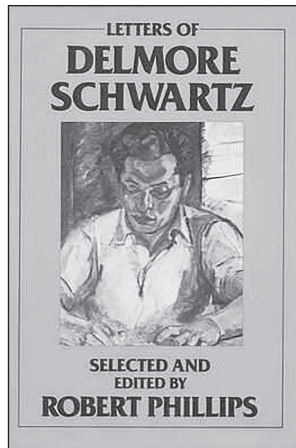
The way one understands the past inevitably explains how one understands the present, and this strange amnesia about the political Delmore is symptomatic of the challenges we face in reconstructing the still-buried history of aspects of the Far Left in order to grapple with our own possibilities and constraints.

The example of Delmore as socialist and poet once again illustrates that few intellectual problems are more fraughtful than confronting the intricate symbiosis between politics and art. Then, when it comes to projecting a future course of action, the many miscalculations of the 1930s show that there always needs to be space for the unsure, the tentative, the maybe.

Finally, in our work ahead to create a culture of solidarity, activists and scholars are going to have to come to terms with understanding that anyone's commitment at any time may not be easily understood through litmus tests and static categories. As with Delmore, it is rare that a writer can be consigned to a stationary spot along the political spectrum. ■

Notes

1. Delmore Schwartz to Robert Hivnor, Robert Phillips, ed., *Letters of Delmore Schwartz* (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1984), 75.
2. These accolades are cited in many places, including: <https://conchapman.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/homage-to-delmore-schwartz-2/>
3. From *The Prelude*, an autobiographical poem published posthumously in 1850.
4. The frequently cited statement is, "It's not the notes you play, it's the notes you don't play." See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/02/arts/music/silence-classical-music.html>
5. A brilliant study of this aspect can be found in the discussion of Delmore in Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation of Six American Poets* (2005).
6. In *The Nation*, June 22-29, 2015, Vivian Gornick makes the case for the revival of Delmore as a major Jewish poet: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/delmores-way/>. A fascinating statement of Delmore's attitude toward his Jewish identity appeared in the symposium "Under Forty" in *Contemporary Jewish Record* (February 1944): 12-14. It was recently reprinted for the first time in Ben Mazer, ed., *The Uncollected Delmore Schwartz* (2019).
7. The delicatessen story seems as bit off — as the only reference to "Frank Delmore" that I can find is a fictional character in a 1925 film played by actor Wheeler Oakman.
8. From "Shenandoah," reprinted in Craig Morgan Teicher, *Once and For All: The Best of Delmore Schwartz* (New York: New Directions, 2016), 202.
9. Delmore Schwartz, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, ed., with an Introduction by James Atlas (New York: New Directions, 1978), 8. Delmore had a younger brother, Kenneth.
10. Delmore Schwartz, "Rimbaud in Our Time," *Poetry* 55 (December 1939): 148-54.
11. Delmore Schwartz, "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave," *Selected Poems*, 25.
12. Delmore Schwartz, "Concerning the Synthetic Unity of Apperception," *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 40.
13. On Lou Reed and Delmore see: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69810/o-delmore-how-i-miss-you>
14. The only exception is a terrific pithy monograph by Alex Runchman, *Delmore Schwartz: A Critical Reassessment* (2014), which discusses his response to World War II, albeit from a different perspective than I offer. To my knowledge, there was only one review of this book.
15. Letter from Dwight Macdonald to Leon Trotsky, 23 August 1937, in Michael Wreszin, *The Letters of Dwight Macdonald* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 93-94.
16. "Politics and Partisan Review," *Partisan Review* 4, no. 3 (February 1938): 38.
17. William Phillips, *A Partisan View: Five Decades of the Literary Life* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983), 75.
18. A number of critics cite Delmore's one statement in a letter to Trotskyist Julian Symons that "I am not, by the way, a Marxist," ignoring that his objection to the alleged causality of the base-superstructure model is akin to that of Raymond Williams and other Western Marxists: "Marx seems to me to have discovered all the connections — what is wrong is the causal direction, first productive relation, then



- value...." See *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, op. cit., 65.
19. The text was subsequently reprinted as an introduction to the *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz* (1970) and over the years cited with frequency.
 20. This is documented at length in James Atlas, *The Shadow in the Garden: A Biographer's Tale* (New York: Pantheon, 2017), 135-44.
 21. Dwight Macdonald, "Delmore Schwartz (1913-1965)," *The New York Review of Books*, 8 September 1966, reprinted in Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker, eds., *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1970), xv-xxi.
 22. Why Macdonald so drastically misrepresented Delmore's politics is a complex matter. One part of the answer lies in the reluctance of once-revolutionary activists who later gained prominence to return to complicated older debates that would require considerable patience and knowledge to understand — such as the *raison d'être* of the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism, to which Macdonald never seems to have referred after the 1930s. Another is Macdonald's habit of declaring intellectuals who failed to agree with his aggressive stance as less political. See the discussion of Macdonald's break with *Partisan Review* in Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 123.
 23. See "War is the Issue," *Partisan Review* VI, 5 (Fall 1939): 128-30.
 24. "The Manifesto of the Europe-American Groups," from the Dwight Macdonald Papers at Yale University, is reproduced as a photocopy in Cavoulacos, Sophie, "A Quixote in the American Century: Dwight Macdonald and the Politics of Imagination," *2008-2010 Penn Humanities Forum on Connections*, 88.
 25. Moreover, if one looked through issues of the *Socialist Appeal*, one would see Delmore's name as a member of the group in an article starting on page 1 of the 6 June 1939 issue. This publication is now on-line: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/socialist-appeal-1939/v3n39-jun-06-1939.pdf>
 26. Eric Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 180.
 27. See discussion at: <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/journal-albion>
 28. See David Bergman, "Ajanta and the Rukeysler Imbroglia," *American Literary History*, 22, Issue 3 (Fall 2010): 553-583.
 29. Phillips, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, op. cit., 104.
 30. Maurice Zolotow "I Brake for Delmore: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Liar," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25, No. 1, available at: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mqrarchive/act2080.0025.001/8:2?rgn=main;view=image>. At the time I wrote *The New York Intellectuals* (1987) I was unaware of this information and assumed that Delmore had not been interested in politics during his year at the University of Wisconsin.
 31. E-mail from Eric Poulos to Alan Wald, 8 September 2020, in reference to his mother's memory of Delmore Schwartz. Ruth Ageloff Poulos (party name "Ruth Sawyer") was an early Trotskyist who was in an English class with Delmore as well as participant with him in a group of Trotskyist students and close sympathizers that met at Burnham's apartment. She assumed that Delmore was a member of the organization and described him as a "comrade."
 32. See "Social Poets Number," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* XLVII, No. II (July 1936).
 33. John Wheelwright to James Burnham, 12 July 1939, Brown University Collection.
 34. Advertisements for Delmore teaching a class at the Marxist School, which was a collaboration between the *Partisan Review* and Socialist Workers Party, appeared in February and March 1939 issues of *Socialist Appeal*. See, for example, "Marxist School will Open February 27," *Socialist Appeal* 3, no. 5 (4 February 1939), 3.
 35. Phillips, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, op. cit., 98.
 36. Delmore Schwartz, "John Dos Passos and the Whole Truth," *Southern Review* 4, 2 (1938): 351-67. It was reprinted in Donald H. Dike and David H. Zucker, eds., *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz* (1970). Delmore's Marxism was very close to that of Schapiro, who can certainly be identified with a U.S. counterpart to Western Marxism.
 37. Delmore Schwartz, "The Hero in Russia," *Kenyon Review* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1944): 126-129.
 38. "Films," *New Republic*, 17 January 1955, 22-23.
 39. Michael Wreszin, ed., *Interviews with Dwight Macdonald* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 126.
 40. Dwight Macdonald to Delmore Schwartz, op. cit., 109.
 41. Robert Phillips, ed., *Letters of Delmore Schwartz* (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1984), 133.
 42. Sidney Hook, *Out of Step: An Unquiet Life in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 512.
 43. *Ibid.*, 519.
 44. Phillips, *Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, 75.
 45. See discussion in Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 146-47.
 46. "The Liberal Fifth Column," *Partisan Review* XIII, No. 3 (Summer 1946): 279-293.
 47. Atlas, 282.
 48. Delmore Schwartz, "The Duchess' Red Shoes," *Partisan Review* 20 (January 1953): 55-73.
 49. Barrett, *The Truants*, 105.
 50. "We do not at all pretend to deny the significance of the personal in the mechanics of the historic process, nor the significance of the personal in the accidental. We only demand that a historic personality, with all its peculiarities, should not be taken as a bare list of psychological traits, but as a living reality grown out of definite social conditions and reacting upon them." Trotsky, Leon, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume I (London: Sphere Books Limited, 1967), 104.
 51. Delmore Schwartz, "Ballad of the Children of the Czar," *Selected Poems*, 21.
 52. Delmore Schwartz, "The Ghosts of James and Pierce in Harvard Yard," *Selected Poems*, 51.
 53. A fuller analysis of these stories will appear in the essay, "The Lost Partisan," in a collection of new essays edited by Ben Mazer, probably 2022.
 54. Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), 11.

“Organic Leadership” Method — Or Rank-and-File Organizing? By Marian Swerdlow

IN HER SECOND book, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, paperback), Jane McAlevey spells out a method for organizing a work place, most explicitly in the chapter called “The Power to Win is in the Community, Not the Boardroom.”

McAlevey has accrued remarkable prestige and influence, including among young labor activists and organizers, and is seen as a labor organizer with the answers to how to revive the labor movement. In *Jacobin* (“Workers of the World Can Still Unite,” 12/2019), Sam Gindin writes,

“Jane McAlevey is everywhere these days. Recently appointed a senior fellow at Berkeley’s Labor Center, she is now also a regular columnist for both The Nation and Jacobin. Her webinar (‘Organizing for Union Power’) has a global audience. She continues to be called on to address unions and run training sessions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Scotland and Germany . . .”

McAlevey’s method is distinctively reliant on the leadership of what she calls workplace “organic leaders.” These workers are already respected by and have influence over their co-workers before organizing begins. They not only lack enthusiasm for the union, they are initially indifferent or even hostile. They are often the favorites of their bosses and therefore the recipients of preferential treatment.

McAlevey claims this method was the one used by organizers in the 1930s to build the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), citing William Z. Foster’s pamphlet, *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry*, 1936, accessed at <https://digitallibrary.pitt.edu>. McAlevey’s centering her method on a specific form of leadership and her claim it accounts for the victories of the 1930s CIO invites us to revisit how successful organizers of that day actually viewed, developed and used leadership.

Marian Swerdlow is a retired New York City teacher, a former transit worker, and author of Underground Woman: My Four Years as a New York City Subway Conductor (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). She thanks Kit Wainer and Charles Post for their helpful comments.



Steel strikers, 1919. Although the strike was lost, William Z. Foster carried its lessons with him.

Therefore, this article will discuss the Foster text and then look at first-person accounts by other organizers of that era: James Matles’ *Them and Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), Wyndham Mortimer’s *Organize!* (Beacon, 1971), and Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2004).

Foster on Organizing Steel

Acknowledging that leftists drove the organizing upsurge of the mid-1930s, McAlevey examines Foster’s 24-page pamphlet to answer the question “What were the left’s winning tactics?” (33) She focuses on Foster’s “list” and “chain” systems, calling them “1930s terms for methods of building a network of the most respected workers inside and outside the workplace who could then mobilize their own networks.” (*Ibid.*)

Foster mentions the “chain” system, calling it “one of the best means of individual recruitment. By this method, workers undertake personally to organize their friends or to furnish their names so they can be approached by other organizers.” (Foster, 14). Note that Foster says nothing about influential or respected workers in particular: nearly all workers have friends.

Foster describes the “list” system as useful in “difficult organizing situations ... By this method, trusted workers, volunteer organizers, women, etc., get lists upon which to collect the signatures and fees of workers in various organizations, etc.” (*Ibid.*) Foster clearly is not talking about respected or influential workers here, either.

McAlevey’s claim that “the ‘list’ and ‘chain’ systems” are “1930s terms for methods for building a network of the most respected workers ... who can mobilize their own net-

works” (McAlevey, 33) is not supported by Foster’s actual text. He is not talking about what McAlevey claims he is.

For Foster, advanced political consciousness and leadership were inseparable. In his introduction, he states,

“The organization work must be done by a working combination of the progressive and Leftwing forces in the labor movement. It is only these elements that have the necessary vision, flexibility and courage to go forward with such an important project.” (Foster, 3)

Rather than rely upon a small number of respected workers, Foster writes,

“A central aim must always be to draw in the largest possible masses into direct participation in all the vital activities of the union: membership recruitment, formulation of demands, union elections, petitions, pledge votes, strike organization.” (6)

McAlevey (33) quotes Foster, “This work cannot be done by organizers alone,” but the entire quote better illuminates his views of organizing:

“Individual recruitment is the base of all immediate organizational work ...

An elementary aim in the campaign should be to activate [sic] the greatest number of workers to do this individual button-hole work. The campaign can succeed only if thousands of workers can be organized directly in the enrollment of members. This work cannot be done by organizers alone. Their main task is to organize the most active workers among the masses in great numbers to do the recruiting. (Foster 13-14)

So, according to Foster, organizers are chosen for their radical politics and their main task is the organization of “the most active workers.”

James Matles on Building the UE

James Matles' *Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank and File Union* is a first-person account of the building of the United Electrical Workers (UE), one of the largest, most militant and powerful of the new 1930s CIO unions.

Matles describes how in the earliest days of forming what would become the UE, he relied on workers who had been in The Metal Workers International Union, an affiliate of the short-lived (1929-35) Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which had been set up largely by the American Communist Party as part of a dual union strategy to form industrial unions.

When Matles began organizing, the former Metal Workers' members were the most politically advanced and dedicated industrial labor unionists in the shops where he started. He writes that the defunct union

"had established skeleton crews in dozens of shops in the machine, metal working and electrical industry. These active volunteer organizers were full of zeal and determination but very inexperienced organizers. They had to learn the hard way ..." (emphases added, Matles, 30-31)

The work of organizing an industrial union of electrical workers, according to Matles, began long before the explosive upsurge of the 1930s. Discussing Section 7R of the NRA, he comments,

"Now the possibilities of the quiet work done over a period of four years by the pioneer industrial unionists, who had pulled together a leadership corps ... in hundreds of shops became apparent. They were on the inside ... in automobile plants, machine shops, large foundries, rubber plants and others." (emphases added, 32)

In discussing struggles at Westinghouse in South Philadelphia, Matles comments,

"It is interesting to discover that the roots of Local 107 go deep in the soil of our history as a people ... nourished in its earliest beginnings, long before any real trade union organization appeared, by principles of democratic, aggressive struggle imparted by just a few workers with deep convictions." (180-81)

He goes on to describe the key men in the struggles of the late 1940s and early 1950s, who had been members of the Industrial Workers of the World in their early youth. He says they "were rank and file oriented ... incorruptible." For 10 years in the South Philadelphia plant:

"Wobblies numbered a couple of dozen at most ... they never became discouraged. They continued meeting, talking and reading ... They passed out literature, made their presence felt in the shop. Militant industrial trade unionism was their theme ... they were helping to plant seeds of UE Local 107 ... They and their allies — others with radical or strong trade union beliefs — laid the groundwork of the local ..."

(*Ibid.*)

Matles makes it clear the UE was built by the most militant, class conscious and aggressive fighters against the boss.

Mortimer on Auto Organizing

Wyndham Mortimer's autobiography, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man*, describes how a union local was formed at the White Motor Company in Cleveland, Ohio, which had a regime of paternalistic management, with better wages, and good working conditions. "An absence of tension," Mortimer describes it. (Mortimer, 41)

But there was also a dark side. "It was, of course, an open shop ... Some workers would keep the bosses' lawns mowed ... the snow shoveled [or] kick back \$5 on pay day." (*Ibid.*)

As part of the "benevolent" model of management, "the shop committee or company union met on the last Friday of each month. A company official would give a talk ... [and] ask for comments or questions. The real purpose," Mortimer discerned, "was to find out what was on the workers' minds. ... If there was dissatisfaction ... the company would learn of it before it became unmanageable." (42)

Based on that insight, Mortimer cannily concluded that there would be no punitive consequences if he used that opportunity to raise the beefs of his co-workers and he did. Mortimer reports, "This question, and short discussion between Mr. White and me went through the plant like a forest fire." He next wrote a letter to the company paper, disputing an editorial criticizing people "trying to get rich by their wits and not enough by hard work." This led to a summons to a personnel manager, but not to discipline. (45-47)

"The following day," Mortimer reports, "I had difficulty doing my work because so many workers wanted to know what had taken place in [the manager's] office. It was episodes of this kind that caused me to be well-known throughout the plant and contributed greatly to the confidence so many of the workers had in me later, in the days when the union finally came to White's." (47)

Next, Mortimer writes, he "gathered around me a group of men whom I could trust." (50) After he and another met with the American Federation of Labor officials and they proved unhelpful and hostile, Mortimer relates, "I called our group together. We met at my home. Dieter and I explained our experience ... we must find a way to organize ourselves. Out of this meeting there came the beginnings of the union at White Motor ..." (55)

Mortimer's criteria are people's trustworthiness and interest in a union. These were the people who successfully formed

the union.

Dobbs on Minneapolis Teamsters

In Farrell Dobbs' *Teamster Rebellion*, the methods used to organize the Teamster rank and file have many similarities to those used by Mortimer and Matles and advocated by Foster.

The escalating strikes that comprised the rebellion began with a work stoppage by the coal deliverers. Dobbs' involvement began when the man who was helping him load coal talked to him about joining the union. The man was Grant Dunne, a member of the Trotskyist Communist League. (Dobbs, 27)

Dunne's method was to "feel out" every potential union member, but not to find out which co-worker they respected.

"A careful method of procedure had to be developed ... individual workers had to be sounded out in a careful way. The process would be a slow one at the outset. As additional forces thus gathered, they in turn would give fresh impetus to the campaign." (emphasis added, 67)

Dobbs is very explicit about what makes union leaders — political consciousness and showing themselves to be the most astute and militant fighters against the boss:

"The key to [showing in the opening clash with the boss that the strike could be won] was the infusion of politically class conscious leadership into the union through cadres of the Communist League. Of course, they could not assume immediate leadership of the union. Their role as leaders would have to develop and be certified through the forthcoming struggles against the employers ..." (emphases added, 59)

Dobbs also explains the necessity and method of expanding leadership beyond committed revolutionary socialists:

"Ray [Dunne] and Carl [Skoglund] ... both ... knew how to teach younger leaders by precept and example. Under their guidance, a broadening leadership team was gradually forged ... added to the team were militant young workers who began to develop as leaders during the struggle." (emphases added, 60)

McAlevy's Leadership Method

McAlevy's method has three steps. First, identify the "organic leaders" in a workplace by asking the workers in each unit which co-worker they "most respected," was most "influential," and "whom they would most willingly follow." The person they name is their "organic leader." (McAlevy, 36)

McAlevy herself observes:

"Because these organic leaders are often considered good workers by management — for the same reasons that their fellow workers trust and rely on them — they are often favored in small ways, for example by being given desirable shifts." (*Ibid.*)

McAlevey is very explicit: an organic leader is definitely not an activist. In fact, any union activism or any interest in the union is a sign the person is NOT an organic leader. McAlevey quotes approvingly from Kristen Warner:

“Organic leaders are almost never the workers who want most to talk to us. More often than not they’re the workers who don’t want to talk to us. They have a sense of their value and won’t easily step forward.”(34)

How to get these workers to agree to join the union campaign and be trained? According to McAlevey, the organizer has a one-to-one “organizing” conversation with each, tries to find something that they are dissatisfied with, and then challenges whether they are willing to continue to accept this, or take a risk to change it. (36-37)

An implication that slips in here undiscussed: How does the organizer have the standing to convince someone popular, well-liked, and often favored by the boss, to risk it all? Only organizers on the staff of a local or an international union have positions, patronage, and resources to offer. This makes the method problematic for workers who are trying to build an opposition within a bureaucratized, undemocratic, and unresponsive union, or building an action among unorganized workers, or laying the groundwork for a union where no existing union has initiated the drive. (McAlevey explicitly dismisses the latter two dynamics, which she calls “hot shops,” in *A Collective Bargain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020, 158-159) as doomed to failure.)

In all three such cases, the organizer would be just a rank and filer who has no more, or even less, following. What would such a rank-and-file organizer have to offer these influential but unwilling co-workers to get them on board? So the “organic leadership” method implicitly depends upon union officialdom deciding to organize a new workplace, win a new contract, or launch a strike.

The second step is to train the organic leaders and them alone. In *No Short Cuts*, McAlevey says “developing [organic leaders’] skill set is far more fruitful than training random volunteers because organic leaders start with a base of followers.” (emphasis added, 13) (McAlevey is silent on the specifics of this training beyond saying “they are taught the organizers’ techniques.” (34)) But who are the “random volunteers,” “the workers who most want to talk to” organizers? They would be the most union conscious, even class conscious, workers.

Matles, in contrast, emphasizes the crucial role of already-radicalized workers such as the former TUUL members and the “Wobblies,” in organizing. Both Foster (3) and Dobbs (59) identify advanced political consciousness with leadership in labor



Through a series of strikes and open confrontations with police in 1934, the Minneapolis Teamsters made the city a union town.
Minneapolis Historical Society

organizing. Following McAlevey’s method, it is exactly the workers whom organizers depended upon during the 1930s upsurge who must be rejected as leaders. The two methods are polar opposites.

The third step is the now-trained organic leaders take charge of their “followers,” and “get a majority” of them to do whatever they tell them to do. “A worker identified as an organic leader can get a majority of her shift or unit to agree to a public and therefore a high risk action,” to wear a color shirt, sign a membership card, vote for a strike, walk out, etc. (35)

McAlevey is silent on who decides whether the action will be “signing a petition ... pose for individual or group photos for a public poster, or join a sticker day.” McAlevey is also silent as to how organic leaders accomplish this. She is only concerned if they cannot: then they aren’t organic leaders and the search for one resumes.

Escalating actions are, among other things “assessments of the strength of each organic leader.” (37) “Only true organic leaders can lead their coworkers in high risk actions.” McAlevey’s method has no space for the possibility that, when it comes to risky actions and union matters, workers think for themselves, discuss it among themselves, or come to their own conclusions, individually or collectively.

This entire method is based on a static concept of leadership: a worker either is intrinsically an “organic leader,” or cannot be one. Each worker is either immutably a

leader or a follower. Followers can’t become leaders.

This is antithetical to Mortimer’s account of how he established himself as a workplace leader by consciously choosing to stand up to the boss. (Mortimer, 45-47) It differs from both Foster’s (13-14) and Dobbs’ (67) emphasis on continually widening the number of workers who organize their workmates and Dobbs’ idea that struggle transforms a growing layer of workers into leaders. (Dobbs 59, 60)

An Inferior Method?

The fact that McAlevey’s method differs from the one used to build some of the most powerful unions through the struggles of the 1930s — despite her claim they are the same — suggests, but does not mean, it is inferior. Weaknesses in the method itself must be identified.

First, the organic leader that McAlevey tells organizers to rely upon is a weaker leader than the leaders Dobbs, Mortimer and Matles joined up with and, indeed, became themselves. McAlevey’s organic leader hangs back as others come forward to join the union.

McAlevey speculates why they “hang back”: they “know their own worth,” or “they are often favored in small ways; for example, by being given desirable shifts.” (34, 36) This is not the makeup of reliable and strong working-class leaders. They may be won temporarily to the union’s cause. There is no reason to think that they are the kind of people that will sacrifice their own

personal interests for those of the class, or even of the people they work with.

The second weakness of the organic leadership method is that it is top-down and keeps the vast majority of the rank and file as followers who do things based on their organic leader's personal influence. McAlevey doesn't even discuss a role for organic leaders, let alone the rank and file, in taking initiatives or discussing or planning strategy or tactics.

Instead, McAlevey is clear in *A Collective Bargain* from whom the organic leaders get their "marching orders": "These moments when the union staff have the experience in many rounds of employer warfare teach the workers." (emphases added, 188)

In the union where McAlevey received this version of "CIO organizing," 1199 NE, "organizers ... are understood to play a leadership role. They lead the organizing committee. The organizing committee leads the workers." (38) McAlevey makes it clear in *No Shortcuts* that using rank-and-file members as organizers at all is a necessary evil: "Because union staffers in a private sector union effort are banned [emphasis in original] from entering the workplace including its parking lots and cafeterias." (34)

This "chain of command" and the reliance on personal influence are conditions that minimize the opportunities for workers' consciousness to be raised to even a union consciousness level, let alone class consciousness or revolutionary consciousness. They simply follow the "organic leader," who him/herself almost certainly has a low

level of union or political consciousness or commitment.

The method explicitly rejects the organic leader training her "followers" to be leaders or activists as unfruitful (13) and McAlevey makes no mention of even educating them. The rank and filers are decision-makers only insofar as they choose to whether or not to obey their organic leader and take part in the action already formulated from above.

In reality, this method may succeed, but only temporarily. After an initial victory, the bosses inevitably begin a campaign to roll back the gains. Knowledgeable and selfless leaders and an educated rank and file are required to effectively resist. The workers organized through the organic leadership method are unlikely to have the level of motivation, conviction, and dedication to fight these assaults.

Indeed, in one of what McAlevey herself considers her most successful organizing effort, Catholic Health West, she herself describes how rank-and-file support for the union declined precipitously within two years. (*Raising Expectations and Raising Hell*, New York: Verso, 2014, 297-303).

As Executive Director, she eliminated workers' right to a grievance procedure. Instead, a committee of workers and bosses "resolved" grievances *ad hoc*, with no protections against favoritism, arbitrariness, or "horse trading." McAlevey admits part of the purpose was "weeding out workers who were performing poorly or were simply lazy." (299)

When a different union launched a raid, part of its appeal to the members was that they should have the right to a grievance process. McAlevey's union went from signing up 70% of the bargaining unit in 2006, to barely surviving two decertification elections in 2008. (301, 303)

The "organic leadership method" led to a leadership so out of touch with the rank and file it did not realize the unpopularity of this change, or the erosion of its support.

This method puts into the "driver's seat" the top officers of the union whose lives are completely different from the rank and file on the shop floor. More often than not, they consider management as their peer group rather than the ordinary union members. They have a greater stake in preserving the union as an institution, rather than in increasing workers' control in the workplace or improving their material conditions.

This perpetuates a conservative "business unionism" that is more likely to lead to concessions and suppression of rank-and-file militancy than to the kind of all-out struggles waged by Mortimer, Dobbs, Matles and other 1930s radicals.

McAlevey's method belies the title of her second book, *No Shortcuts*. The organic leadership method is a shortcut, as well as top-down and staff-driven. It may produce victories but they are built on sand. The fact that McAlevey enjoys such credibility among, and influence on, young people in the labor movement risks costly failures down the road. ■

Tulsa's Buried Massacre, 1921-2021

MAY 31 AND June 1, 2021 mark the 100-year anniversary of the destruction of "Black Wall Street," the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, in one of the most violent and sadistic white race riots of the bloody post-World War I period. Indeed it was pure ethnic cleansing in America.

The pretext for the assault was a trivial incident on the 31st, triggering the white *Tulsa Tribune* to run "an incendiary editorial under a headline residents remembered as 'To Lynch Negroes Tonight.'" Overnight, Black Tulsans mobilized what resources they had against the attacking mob. But after a 5am whistle, "By dawn, machine guns were sweeping the valley with their murderous fire," recalled a Greenwood resident named Dimple Bush. "Old women and men and children were running and screaming everywhere." ("Remembering Tulsa: 100 Years Ago," Tim Madigan, *Smithsonian*, April 2021)

In the end over 1100 homes were burned and more looted, 35 square blocks of a thriving Black community and all its infrastructure destroyed, most of its 10,000 residents left homeless, property damage

guessed at somewhere between tens of millions up to 200 million dollars. The estimated number of deaths is around 300, but no one knows as bodies were thrown on trucks to be dumped, uncounted.

You can read the horrific details today, but the most incredible part of the story is the more than seven-decade coverup that followed. If you want to understand how ethnic cleansing up to and including genocide can be successfully hidden and denied, Tulsa makes for a case study.

The white perpetrators and their media said nothing, while survivors who knew the story were mostly traumatized and too terrorized to speak out — and in the long decades of lynchings, legal segregation and overt white supremacy before the Civil Rights revolution, how much of the dominant society would have believed them?

Apparently the first tear in the curtain of silence occurred in the late 1950s when a history teacher at Booker T. Washington High School told the yearbook staff how his own prom never happened because of the white mob massacre. Greeted with incredulity,

the teacher began showing the photographic record, and when asked how such a thing could have remained secret, responded: "Because the killers are still in charge of this town, boy."

It was only in 1997 that the state legislature created the Oklahoma State Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot. Tulsa native, historian John Hope Franklin, was one of its advisors. (His father, B.C. Franklin, a Black Choctaw tribal member, had been a prominent Tulsa lawyer.) The 200-page report concluded city officials were to blame — they deputized those who committed atrocities. However no one was ever convicted.

A memorial to the massacre victims stands outside the Greenwood Cultural Center; the history of the massacre is now part of the state's curriculum and last year a team located the first group of unmarked mass graves; more have been uncovered.

Reparations for the descendants remain a critical demand in a still-segregated city where Black families are two-and-a-half times more likely to live in poverty. ■

REVIEW

Bringing Malcolm to Life By Malik Miah

The Dead Are Arising

The Life of Malcolm X

By Les Payne and Tamara Payne

Liveright, 2020, 640 pages, \$32.50.

THIS IS A powerful new biography of one the greatest African Americans of the 20th century, Malcolm X (Muslim name el Hajj Malik el-Shabazz). His voice still resonates across the world as his speeches are played to new generations of activists.

The Dead Are Arising provides a much fuller picture of the life and death of Malcolm X. It draws on interviews with his friends and family, including brothers who joined the Nation of Islam (NOI) before he did, to assess his contribution in the context of the times.

The book title refers to the NOI's belief that all Blacks are "dead" until their conversion to the Nation of Islam. "Negroes" did not know their true selves yet. They had to free themselves from the false sense of inferiority imposed by white society.

(Because the surname of most Blacks usually is that of white slave owners, it does not reflect African heritage. The letter "X" means unknown.)

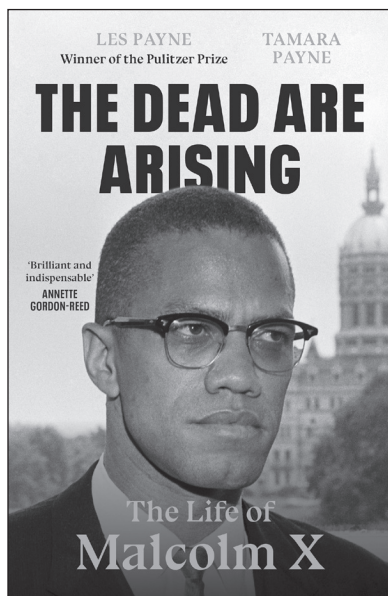
Malcolm quit the NOI in March, 1964. He then presented a more radical vision of achieving Black self-determination and liberation from racism and national oppression.

In an April 3, 1964 speech in Cleveland, Ohio, "The Ballot or the Bullet," Malcolm told his followers to join organizations, such as the NAACP, to spread Black Nationalism, and to bring awareness to the problems affecting African Americans.

He encouraged African Americans to fight the oppression of the "white man" by means of the "Ballot or the Bullet."

"It's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see that we have the same problem, a common problem — a problem that will make you catch hell whether you're a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist. Whether you're educated or illiterate, whether you live on the boulevard or in the alley, you're going to catch hell just like I am."

Malik Miah is an ATC advisory editor.



Introduction, her father first heard Malcolm X speak at the University of Connecticut in Hartford, Connecticut in 1963. Les Payne said he went into the speech as a "Negro" and came out for the first time as a "Black man."

Malcolm told the young people:

"Now I know you don't want to be called 'Black.' You want to be called 'Negro.' But what does Negro mean except Black in Spanish? So, what you are saying: 'It's OK to call me 'Black' in Spanish, but don't call me Black in English.'"

"Negroes" grew up in a racist society run by white supremacists where self-loathing and unconscious inferiority were taught by whites and accepted even by many educated Blacks. Belief in Black pride and equality was the fight that Malcolm X and Black nationalists stood for.

Today Black self-respect is taken for granted. That was not the case for most of U.S. history until the end of Jim Crow segregation.

Les Payne was a young, proud and educated African American when Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. He became a Pulitzer Prize winner and an editor of the Long Island, New York, newspaper *Newsday*.

He read and re-read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, co-authored with Alex Haley, after Malcolm's death. As Payne began his research in 1990, he found a lot had been left out and needed clarification. He interviewed family members and many others.

The book's strength is in telling Malcolm's

The book is based on decades of painstaking research by Les Payne, an acclaimed journalist who died before it was completed in 2018. His daughter Tamara, his primary researcher, transcriber and collaborator, completed the book.

Decades of Research

As she explains in the

life story and the history of Black America from the legal segregation era until the late 1960s.

What we see now in race relations has connection to the past. Understanding Malcolm's life and ideas is important to today's generations. The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) can only be fully appreciated by knowing this history.

In his final year of life Malcolm was more than a Black nationalist. He had become a firm believer in international solidarity and revolutionary activism. His newly found conversion to orthodox Sunni Islam, the basis of his newly created Muslim Mosque Inc. (MMI) and the secular OAAU showed that. Neither survived for long after his death.

The ideology of white supremacy was at the foundation of "American Democracy." Even whites who aren't racist have looked the other way after Blacks were lynched or murdered by cops. White liberals' unconscious bias slowed progress and urged protesters to self-limit their demands for equality.

That's the point Martin Luther King Jr made in his famous "Letter from Birmingham jail" in August 1963:

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was 'well timed' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'wait.' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never.'"

Legacy of Lynching

Payne begins by describing the 1919 lynching of William Brown, a Black man, by a "race riot" in Omaha, Nebraska. The vicious excitement of the white mob that did it, and faced no consequences, is what the Little family moved to in 1921.

The opening chapters also explore the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the climate of white terrorism that prevailed after the defeat of Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War.

The issue of lynching and white celebrations has been a vital trademark of American history. Whites get off free while the Black population suffers permanent terror.

A new film, "United States vs. Billie Holiday," shows how the greatest African-Amer-

ican jazz singer was targeted by the FBI and police for standing up and singing the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.”

Harassed and persecuted, subsequently she was incarcerated for drug possession. She ultimately in 1959, age 44, in a New York hospital room under police guard.

Malcolm Little was born in 1925, six after Brown’s lynching, at the University Hospital in Omaha. Malcolm’s parents Louise and Earl Little joined the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), founded by Marcus Garvey based in Harlem, one of the most important Black organizations of the 20th century.

Garvey was the Jamaican-born immigrant who preached Black self-reliance, Black nationalism, and pride in being African in the 1920s. He was targeted by the predecessor to the FBI and finally arrested and deported in 1927. The organization had branches in big urban communities and many countries.

As a child, Malcolm would listen to his father preaching the Garveyite tenets of Black pride, independence and repatriation to Africa. Payne make clear that his parents’ influence was at the core of Malcolm’s identity. As “Black Power” activist Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) once explained, Malcolm never really changed. He said his “basic philosophy was Garveyism” from childhood to the grave.

Earl Little was born in Jim Crow Georgia and knew the violence of that system well. He was also a Baptist minister.

Louise was born in the Caribbean Island of Grenada. She migrated to Canada and then to the United States. Like all immigrants, she was determined that she and her large family (eight children) succeeded. Louise was light-skin and could pass as “white.” It got her some work from which darker-skin Blacks would be excluded.

Father’s death in 1931

Malcolm’s determined proud father moved his family in white areas and bought six acres of land in a suburb of Lansing, Michigan. As in Omaha, the family faced threats from white supremacist groups. Neither Earl nor Louise ever bowed down.

One surprise of the book relates to the death of Earl Little. Malcolm always insisted his father was murdered by white racists (his children still say so). It turns out, according to Payne, that he was accidentally run over by a tram car, although Malcolm was never convinced because of the numerous threats made against his own family and his life.

His older brother Wilfried, whom Payne interviewed, was 11 years old at the time. Malcolm was only six. His mother accepted the accident explanation after an investigation.

Payne also reveals more about Malcolm’s infamous meeting, and the Nation of Islam’s

collaboration, with both the Ku Klux Klan and the U.S Nazi party.

Malcolm took the meeting with the KKK head as the NOI’s national spokesman as instructed by “The Messenger,” Elijah Muhammad. The white racists proposed collaboration with NOI to assassinate Dr. King, which Malcolm rejected.

Incarceration and Conversion

Malcolm was arrested, prosecuted and jailed in Massachusetts at age 20. Payne explains that incarceration was the pivot of Malcolm’s life. He accepted the teachings of the NOI while behind bars for seven years, thanks to evangelizing correspondence from his brothers Philbert and Reginald.

Malcolm dedicated himself to his new religion’s Black nationalist message and its leader, Elijah Muhammad. He quickly became the group’s most effective and recognizable spokesman, with fierce criticism of white America and a gospel of Black self-respect.

Malcolm’s split from the cult-like NOI, in Payne’s view, was inevitable. In the end it was Malcolm’s suspension from the NOI for calling the assassination of John F. Kennedy “chickens coming home to roost,” and the sex scandal surrounding the leader Elijah Muhammad — who fathered multiple children with his secretaries — that led to his exit.

But Payne make clear that Malcolm was always going to leave the NOI. The question was just when and how explosive his departure would be.

The split ultimately led to his death. The final two chapters are dedicated to an in-depth account of Malcolm’s assassination at the hands of the Nation of Islam with the help of both the FBI and the NYPD, which had informants with advance intelligence of the assassination and did not intervene.

Malcolm’s political celebrity and unapologetic approach ultimately turned the leadership of the NOI against him, and according to Payne, Muhammad gave the assassination order that led to Malcolm’s killing.

Payne discusses the role of the FBI’s COINTELPRO program that aimed to “neutralize” and prevent the rise of a “Black Messiah.” But he makes clear that Muhammad told his closest associates in the Fruit of Islam, the Nation’s security arm, to take Malcolm out.

Farrakhan’s Role

Payne notes the role of Louis Farrakhan, then Minister of the Boston Temple and the current longtime leader of the NOI. He had “been complicit” and acknowledged that he “created the atmosphere that ultimately led to Malcolm’s assassination.”

Farrakhan was at the Newark, New Jersey, Temple where the Fruit of Islam mem-

bers returned from the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm was killed.

Payne gives a detailed account of Malcolm’s assassination — who was present at the Ballroom, the lack of security and those who shot Malcolm. The details have never been totally clear, but Payne’s narrative highlights key figures and examines the possible involvement of the FBI and New York City police.

Malcolm knew he was in danger and did little to protect himself. He had trained bodyguards (who were arrested days before the assassination), but knew the Nation by itself could not take him out without complicity from the government agencies and police.

By the end, Payne implies, it is as clear as it should always have been that you cannot be pro-Malcolm X and in favor of Farrakhan and the NOI. This fact of Farrakhan’s role was admitted by Farrakhan himself, 22 years after Malcolm’s assassination.

On breaking from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had dedicated himself to Sunni Islam and begun experimenting with new tools for a global, human-rights-based movement for Black liberation. Both Elijah and the government wanted him removed.

Legacy and the BLM

The book’s Epilogue briefly discusses Malcolm’s legacy, including its impact on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, asking for nothing less than justice and equality in the criminal system.

Like Malcolm, the BLM demands everything that Black people deserve, by any means necessary. It does not advocate violence but will not abide the sick amoral logic that condemns destruction of property as “too extreme” a response to the police shooting Black men and women.

And thanks to the leadership of Black women and Black LGBTQ people who initiated the BLM, the imagination of the current movement is even more expansive than its predecessors in the mid-20th century. This is the promise they keep, and the idea that pushed Payne to write until his own death took his pen: “We will exceed even Malcolm’s wildest dreams.”

One shortcoming of *The Dead Are Arising* is not discussing the speeches of Malcolm X, such as the “Ballot or the Bullet.” It is relevant to discussions about tactics and strategies today.

The Paynes also do not discuss the significance of the formation of the OAAU and its radical democratic demands. This was more than a replication of older civil rights groups.

Malcolm had a vision to build an organization for all African Americans, religious and nonbelievers alike, similar to the Organiza-

continued on page 41

REVIEW

The Empire's New Forms By Keith Gilyard

Worldmaking after Empire:
The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination
By Adom Getachew
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, 288
pages, \$24.95 paperback.

"FROM OUR VANTAGE point, the transition from empire to nation in the twentieth century appears inevitable. And while the universalization of the nation-state marked an important triumph over European imperialism, it has also come to represent a political form incapable of realizing the ideals of a democratic, egalitarian, and anti-imperial future." (1)

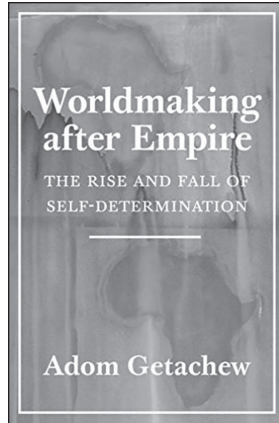
With this opening observation, Adom Getachew begins an admirable and convincing historical analysis in her recent book, *Worldmaking after Empire*. Understanding the current political moment as a phase in the centuries-long pillage of the global south by the global north, Getachew examines the practice and promise of several anticolonial efforts.

Specifically, she demonstrates that the goals of anticolonial activists in Africa and the Caribbean extended beyond establishing nation-states. Anticolonial nationalists, as Getachew terms them, considered national self-determination to be only a first step toward liberation and a new international order.

For Getachew, their stance was appropriate. Her book traces the emergence of anticolonial nationalism and highlights the thoughts and activities of Black Anglophone figures Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore and Eric Williams, though the author acknowledges many other significant postwar, anticolonial activists such as the Francophones Aimé Césaire and Paulette Nardal.

Over the course of three chapters, Getachew, a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago, theorizes colonization, explaining that it is more than simply the presence of alien rule. It is the maintenance of a global hierarchy based on racial and economic injustice.

Keith Gilyard is the Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of English and African American Studies at Penn State University. He is the author of True to the Language Game: African American Discourse, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy (Routledge).



rule collapsed under the weight of racialized imperial machinations.

Resisting Plunder and Domination

Decolonization was not progress as conveyed in normative narratives, that is, as the natural and ameliorative extension of Westernization. Anticolonial nationalists knew that the nation-state was a frail achievement.

It was a necessary staging ground for further struggle, but the structured and unavoidable dependence on an international order that had no plans to integrate them equally left all so-called postcolonial nation-states subject to neocolonial destabilization. The material resources and labor would remain available for plunder.

Serious nationalists had no choice but to adopt a far-ranging outlook, what Padmore would label the Black International, if they were to secure peace and prosperity in their homelands. The generative debate was not about nationalism vs. internationalism: The national project faced inevitable doom, as Nkrumah feared and would discover in Ghana.

The pressing need for anticolonial nationalists was to resist domination and challenge the global racial hierarchy, one that had become more rigid with the rise of whiteness as a consciously realized identity and a bond between Europeans and those of European descent who were settlers abroad.

The colonial-whiteness nexus was discernible in the League of Nations, of which segregationist President Woodrow Wilson was a primary architect along with the likes of Jan Smuts of South Africa, although Wilson could not persuade the United States to join. Not that the League did anybody much good. Firmly committed to the global racial

hierarchy, the members talked self-determination but practiced empire.

Getachew regards the League's early functioning as the "Wilsonian moment," one which unfolded coincidentally with the Communist International and the Du Bois-organized Second Pan-African Congress.

Eventually, as it continued to appropriate the idea of self-determination to preserve white supremacy worldwide, the League did nothing for the likes of Ireland, Egypt or India, and refused to intervene when Italy, one of its members, invaded Ethiopia, a second member. Perhaps the best aspect of the League before it became a casualty of World War II is that its failings clarified or deepened the radicalization of people like Du Bois, James and Padmore.

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Leverage for Decolonization

Anticolonial nationalists achieved more success with the League's successor, the United Nations. At first, the organization seemed eerily like the League. It espoused the rhetoric of human rights and equality but, Winston Churchill impressed on all around him that when he said "rights and equality" he was not referring to British colonies.

Nonetheless, unlike the case with the League of Nations, a politically decolonized Africa became a fact, and newly independent African nations were able to leverage the United Nations, in particular the General Assembly, as a medium for decolonization.

The signal achievement in that regard was the passage in December 1960 of Resolution 1514, Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. This, however, proved to be no panacea.

Self-determination would run aground on the shores of neocolonialism. Patrice Lumumba was executed in 1961; Nkrumah was ousted by a U.S.-backed coup in 1966; the Nigerian-Biafran war raged from 1967 to 1970. Nonetheless, the UN remained an important international forum within which postcolonial nation-states had a voice as they tried to resist external control and further their attempts at worldmaking.

In a fourth chapter, Getachew presents two case studies in regional federalism, the proposed Union of African States and the West Indian Federation.

Anticolonial nationalists, faced with the facts of formal independence and *de facto*

dependence, found themselves in what the author, following legal scholar Aziz Rana, calls the “postcolonial predicament.” Realizing the vulnerability of nation-states, they turned to federalism in attempts to strengthen their nations economically and militarily.

Ironically, the leaders of these initiatives, Nkrumah and Williams, looked to the United States as a model. Both read *The Federalist Papers* and were convinced that, in terms of power, federalism could do for African and Caribbean nations what it did for the 13 colonies. In their minds, the lack of federalism accounted for the weakness of countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Of course, they ignored for their purposes the reality of American slavery and American designs on conquest. In other words, as Getachew phrases it, “the United States was the only former colony to have triumphed over the postcolonial predicament not because it had federated but because it was an imperial federation.” (119)

This is not to say that federation was unworkable but it could not succeed in a liberating fashion by trying to follow the American example too closely.

In the end, Nkrumah failed to reckon sufficiently with intrastate issues. The geographical borders of colonialism were not the best alignment with respect to ethnic and religious groups, and subnational groups also asserted claims of self-determination.

Azikiwe, the governor-general and later first president of Nigeria, objected along those lines, and additional states were wary of the strong hand of a centralized political union. In 1963, with the formation of the Organization of African States, Africa opted for a treaty organization instead of Nkrumah’s dream.

Eric Williams faced a similar outcome with the West Indian Federation, which lasted from 1958 until 1962. Critics such as Jamaica’s Norman Manley favored a looser alliance than a federation, although he agreed that the existing organization was valuable and believed the Jamaican people would remain supportive. They did not, voting in 1961 in favor of ending the experiment.

From Anticolonial Wave to Neoliberalism

In chapter 5, Getachew explores second-wave anticolonial nationalism, particularly the work of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania and Michael Manley in Jamaica. After the coup in Ghana, those two became perhaps the most well-known symbols of postcolonial development.

Friends and interlocutors since their student days in the United Kingdom, each implemented a variety of socialism in his country. As part of their Marxist critique, they embraced the argument that postcolonial nations were analogous to European

workers of the 19th century, a construct tied to the moral claim that postcolonial nations had produced the wealth of developed nations and were owed redistributive justice in return.

Moreover, Nyerere and Manley knew that economic failure for postcolonial nation-states was hardwired into the international economic order. Their demise was hastened by the oil shock of 1973, falling prices for native goods, and dependence on dominant nations and institutions for aid, including bad deals with the International Monetary Fund, leading to debt crises. As proponents of federation understood, sovereignty alone cannot save a postcolonial nation-state.

Recognizing the concerns of anticolonial nationalists, the UN General Assembly in 1974 adopted the Declaration for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order. But its proposals that could have helped secure economic health for postcolonial nation-states such as Tanzania and Jamaica, like ensuring state control of natural resources and fair taxation of corporations, lacked force.

The NIEO was more of an ideological map than a concrete operation. It was undermined by powerful opponents who possessed no sympathy for the notion of nation-states as oppressed “workers.” In Getachew’s estimation, neoliberal economics ushered in a counterrevolution that displaced the NIEO and stifled hopes for global economic justice. If neoliberals cared

anything about justice, they directed that concern toward individuals, not nations.

Getachew ruminates in the epilogue about the collapse of a vibrant anticolonial nationalism with its internationalist gestures. She blames intellectuals and politicians, Daniel Patrick Moynihan prominent among them, for rejecting egalitarian claims on world resources. Moynihan, who was the United States Ambassador to the United Nations under President Gerald Ford, argued that the Third World was at fault for the economic problems of the Third World.

Moynihan, subsequently elected to the United States Senate, also never hesitated to point, with some justification, to shortcomings of postcolonial nation-states relative to undemocratic practices. This was from the same playbook used by those who opposed federations.

At any rate, neoliberalism became ascendant. Even Michael Manley climbed on board by the 1990s.

Ultimately, Getachew sees the need for a reimagining of global relations. She sees promise in Black Lives Matter, reparations movements, and the calls for social and economic decolonization in South Africa.

That is to say, she believes the task of worldmaking remains before us. Her scholarly contribution is immense. Readers predictably will have to fight through some abstraction but will be amply rewarded for doing so. Unfortunately this is a timely book, but fortunately it is right on time. ■

Solidarity with Kshama Sawant

FOLLOWING AN APRIL 1 ruling by the Washington State Supreme Court allowing a recall petition to proceed against socialist Seattle City Council representative Kshama Sawant, local activists along with her organization Socialist Alternative have formed a campaign, the Kshama Solidarity Campaign, to defend her.

The recall is heavily backed and funded by corporate forces including Amazon, which Sawant has fought to force it to pay fair taxes, and the *Seattle Times*, ostensibly because of her role in Black Lives Matter protests last year following the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd.

According to Kshama Solidarity Campaign spokesperson Bryan Koulouris: “Just two days after the court decision, we organized a socially distanced, fully masked rally with over 150 people attending in person and nearly 5000 watching online... We’ve raised over \$450,000 already and gained countless endorsements, including over 400 rank-and-file union members in the Seattle area.” (<https://truthout.org>, April 8, 2021)

The recall petition requires some 10,700 signatures to be collected within 180 days to get on the ballot for the next election. With its heavy funding and media backing, that’s probably within reach.

As it happens, the last elected socialist in Seattle, Anna Louise Strong, was removed by recall — in 1918! The ultimate fate of the recall petition against Sawant will be fought out in coming months. For updates and information on how to support her defense, visit <https://www.kshamasolidarity.org/>. ■



REVIEW

Healing Politics — A Doctor's Story By Susan Steigerwalt

Healing Politics:

A doctor's journey into the heart of our political epidemic

By Abdul El Sayed

New York: Abrams press, 2020, 338 pages, \$27 hardcover.

Medicare for all:

A Citizen's Guide

By Abdul El Sayed and Micah Johnson.

Oxford University press, 2021, 343 pages, \$19.95 (Barnes and Noble)

DOCTOR AND POLITICAL activist Abdul El Sayed has had a busy last few years: re-creating the Detroit health department, including expanding services such as eye-glasses for children so they can better engage in school and vaccinating residents during a hepatitis A outbreak in their neighborhood; running for governor in the 2018 primary (including visits to every single county in Michigan); and now, in addition to being a sometime commentator on CNN and producer of a daily political newsletter, *Incision*, involved writing two books.

One book shows us El Sayed's background and political philosophy. The other is a how-to guide for those of us involved in the struggle for Medicare for All.

Healing Politics is divided into three sections. The first tells the story of Abdul's childhood and young adulthood, the backdrop for his philosophy and political activity. His parents emigrated from Egypt, where his father was an agitator against the Hosni Mubarak dictatorship.

Growing up in a comfortable suburban environment and attending good public schools, Abdul experienced racism playing basketball at night or walking in his own subdivision. He was hassled by the police and told to go back to Mexico.

He enrolled at the University of Michigan. Not surprisingly, he experienced racism there too. He won a Rhodes scholarship, which he deferred to go to Columbia Medical School. He witnessed the humiliation of poor patients in the emergency room and was inspired to switch to public health to help change systems, not just to help individuals.

His personal account discloses his doubts and motivations, how much his parents' divorce hurt him, how his wife, a psychiatrist,

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helped him come to terms with that pain, and the overwhelming joy he felt at the birth of his daughter.

The book's second section details Abdul's belief that what he calls "politics of insecurity" fuels

much of the racism in society, and people's unwillingness to share resources and participate in the public commons.

(I recommend Heather McGee's excellent new book *The Sum of Us*, detailing how this attitude is much more prevalent among white than among Black working-class people.)

Following 40 years of disinvestment in public schools and universities, as well as the decline of labor unions and the security they provided, many people are poorer, and more fearful of what little they have being taken away. Why should I share when I have so little? is the attitude.

To illustrate the meaning of insecurity, Abdul shares two stories: When Director of the Detroit Health Department, he spent time with a Black janitor who had to take several buses to get to work because he couldn't afford a car. Likewise, a conversation with Lyft driver Chris, a white ex-union member from Macomb County who had attended the same public school as Abdul's wife, now underemployed and believing he'll never again have a fulltime job with benefits, shows the basis of his insecurity.

Section Three details Abdul's "healing politics" and his philosophy, which includes "the politics of empathy" and embracing our collective humanity. This includes reforming systems that have driven insecurity, inequity and pain.

Regarding minorities in this country, he identifies tokenism as a pervasive tool of today's ruling forces, and a device by which movements for equity and representation have been thwarted throughout history, using the example of British colonial rule in India to illustrate this. (245)

He also gives the example of people in the Muslim community connected with state government, who were stridently opposed to him when he ran for governor in the

Democratic primary. They had proximity to power, but no independent power of their own.

Abdul supports the Squad (outspoken progressive Congressional representatives) for what they believe in, not just their skin color or gender. What he calls "politics of empathy" means, as he puts it, "we can't tinker around the edges to deal with insecurity." We have to really change, part of which comes through effective governmental support for working people: a living wage, good public schools, easier unionization for example.

While he supported Bernie Sanders' program and primary campaign, Abdul also discusses the political pitfalls of using the word "socialist," with its long stigmatization, particularly for older voters. (243)

He strongly believes that the government exists to solve problems, but "we as a society acting through our government have failed to provide the basic goods and services that are so critical to living a dignified life to many in our society." (253)

The historical role of racism in the political behavior of the white working class and middle class is presented, but in my view underemphasized. While I agree that it is crucial for the government to provide material support to the working class, decrease inequality, provide meaningful work, good schools and communities — all positive aspects of what we call social democracy — I'm skeptical that white nationalists will be swayed by better government services. I hope I am mistaken.

This is a highly readable book by a brilliant and accomplished politician and epidemiologist, passionate and thoughtful in support of social democratic reforms. I hope to see his trajectory continue leftward.

The Health Care We Need

Medicare for All: A Citizen's Guide is co-authored with Micah Johnson. Johnson, a fellow Rhodes scholar and a resident at Massachusetts General Hospital. The book is forwarded by Bernie Sanders and Pramila Jayapal, giving context for the current battles.

The authors begin with human disaster stories within our current healthcare system. They illustrate the fundamental inability in an emergency to make an "informed choice of providers," the Kafkaesque insurance policies and the consequences for people who need to (try to) use them.

continued on page 36

REVIEW

Venezuela: Things Fall Apart

By Carlos G. Torrealba M.

Venezuelans Under Siege Venezuela frente las sanciones

Co-directors/producers: Atenea Jiménez Lemon and Kevin Young
42-minute film in English and Spanish, June 2019,
available on YouTube

IN *VENEZUELAN UNDER SIEGE*, Atenea Jiménez Lemon and Kevin Young show the impact of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and how Venezuelans have responded.

Atenea Jiménez Lemon is a sociologist, founder of the *Red Nacional de Comuner@s in Venezuela* and the Universidad Campesina de Venezuela Argimiro Gabaldón. She also edited *La Toparquía Comunera, concreción de la utopía* (2014). Kevin A. Young is a professor of Latin American History at the University of Massachusetts. He is author of *Blood of the Earth: Resource Nationalism, Revolution, and Empire in Bolivia* (2017) and editor of *Making the Revolution: Histories of the Latin American Left* (2019). They recently published a study on USA policies towards Latin America “Letting Latin America Live” in *NACLA* (Spring 2020).

Life Under Sanctions

The film draws on interviews with Venezuelans, both specialists and community activists. It portrays the devastating effect of sanctions both nationally and in everyday life — and how despite the hardship Venezuelans seek solutions and alternatives.

The allure of the documentary is that it involves a plurality of speakers: working-class people, women from the barrio, afrovenezuelans and members of the community. Also included are Professor Carlos Lazo and Manuel Sutherland from the Center for Research and Worker Training as well as a staff member from the nationalized power corporation (CORPOELEC).

The documentary begins with a summary of U.S. relations with Venezuela since the Chavista revolution. It reveals Washington’s hostile and bipartisan foreign policy, one

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which became even more aggressive under the Trump presidency. This overview is valuable because there is much confusion over the purpose and function of sanctions.

On August 24, 2017 Trump issued an executive order against the Venezuelan State. It prohibited negotiations on debts and bonds with the government and PDVSA, the national oil company. Trump also refused to allow Venezuelan companies based on North American soil, particularly CITGO, to transfer its dividend money home.

The second important sanction, issued in January 25, 2019, directly targeted PDVSA. This order prohibited American citizens and corporations from any international exchange with Venezuelan subsidiaries. For this reason, no one wants to acquire Venezuelan and PDVSA bonds; current bondholders refuse to negotiate restructuring. Trump also pressured other governments into blocking Venezuela’s access to its foreign assets, effectively freezing five billion dollars.

Jiménez Lemon and Young are right to emphasize that these sanctions are not isolated actions. They trace a pattern of opposing the Chavista government with U.S. support to the failed coup in 2002, the oil strike between 2002 and 2003 and by financing its opposition.

After Juan Guaidó annointed himself the country’s president, Trump immediately recognized him, essentially backing his attempt to overthrow the Maduro government. Sadly, President Biden has not ended these sanctions or withdrawn recognition of Guaidó.

Definitely, the documentary succeeds in reiterating that the United States has economic and political interests behind its banner of democracy. It also presents evidence that this imperialist repertoire has been tried before in other Latin American countries — from Cuba to Chile.

One of the documentary’s most important contributions is its attention to the collective responses to the crisis. The viewer sees the house-to-house distribution of priority foods carried out through CLAP, the government’s program, but the heart of the film is interviewing activists.

The documentary highlights the work of two cooperatives, showing members carrying out — and reflecting — on their experiences.

Cooperativa San Agustin States Convive, a grassroots organization led by women (as so much of civil society is), came together as the noose of the sanctions tightened. They reached out to a farmers’ cooperative and worked out a twice monthly market. Neighbors are welcome to join and receive the same goods at the same price.

While the CLAP bag is necessary, one activist comments, the cooperative is able to offer a variety of fruits and vegetables at a good price. Even more important, people are not just sitting around waiting for their allotment, but building something beyond capitalism or a state bureaucracy.

The documentary also highlights the work of the socialist cooperative, *Altos de Lidice*. Through its ties with international solidarity activists it provides medicines the government cannot obtain. Its drugstore posts prices and is open week days.

There is a tense relationship between the commune and the state. The popular organization avoids the Ministry of Health for fear of being drawn into corrupt networks.

The cooperative decided economic transparency is so important that they have instituted a monthly public accounting of expenditures. They encourage other cooperatives to adopt transparent accounting as well.

However, cooperative members realize they cannot reach beyond their community. They understand that government programs, however inadequate, can scale up in a way they cannot. One commune doctor points out that the clinics and their medical staff are part of the public health system. Although the system has deteriorated, it can be repaired.

The Role of the Sanctions

Washington's sanctions have cut off the government's ability to import the goods it needs. As Carlos Lazo explains, Venezuela is an oil rentier country that depends on imports for everything. *The sanctions function to deepen and prolong the crisis.*

However, *Venezuelans Under Siege* ALSO provides a critical perspective about statements that place all responsibility for the crisis on Washington. While the filmmakers highlight the imposition of U.S. sanctions, they point out that they were first imposed as the Venezuelan economy was already at the lowest point in its history.

In fact I would say that the large drop in medicine imports can be traced to the 2013-2016 period. Although Carlos Lazo explained that Venezuela is a vulnerable economy, he did not state the obvious point that this is the result of imperialism's domination of Latin America.

When the world price in oil dropped, the Venezuelan economy went into a tailspin. Many of the social programs that were instituted under the Hugo Chavez government were threatened. Of course Venezuela isn't the only oil-producing country that suffered, although it was clearly one of the most progressive.

The filmmakers compare Venezuela's economic decline to that of Colombia; Colombia recovered, although modestly. They then examine the error the Madero government made by maintaining a fixed exchange rate of *bolivares* for dollars.

This policy enabled business to buy goods — but was in fact a subsidy to them. Maintaining this practice for years opened a gap between the official rate and the black market rate, leading to runaway inflation and corruption in both business and government. Some figures suggest inflation eventually reached one million percent.

Here are other elements to consider: a) the gasoline subsidy was a key factor in PDVSA's downfall, b) liquidity fell 97.5% between 2011 and 2017, c) inflation was already critical before 2017, d) economic recession started in 2014, and e) by 2017, the country GDP had fallen by 30%.

What People Say

It is through interviews and examples of communities concretely dealing with their problems that the documentary provides the basis for discussing the complex situation facing the Venezuelan people. It combines data and technical background with reality on the ground.

Although the sanctions did not cause the crisis, many organizations — including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the IMF, Amnesty International — acknowledge the serious impact sanctions have. From this point of view, it is important

to characterize the sanctions as “*collective punishment*” — as Jiménez Lemon and Young do. Such a practice is banned under several international law agreements.

The documentary also reveals people's remarkable political awareness. Venezuelans know that the impact of sanctions falls mainly on people and not on government officials. One interviewee remarks, “They do not choke Maduro or Diosdado, they choke us.” It is crucial for those who see the film to understand that sanctions only suffocate those who have less.

When the filmmakers ask activists who/what is to blame for the state of the economy, answers vary. They reject U.S. intervention. Yet the rationale beyond imposing sanctions is that it will force change.

The filmmakers quote Assistant Secretary of State Lester Molloy, who in 1960 predicted an economic boycott of Cuba would bring the regime down. This immediately follows with a clip from an interview with Trump's Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, gloating about how much Venezuelans are suffering. His assumption is that regime change would naturally follow.

Taking this into account, I certainly

endorse the request of Venezuelans in the documentary to lift the sanctions. While sanctions are in place civil society organizations (which, like organized popular power, promote community solutions) have difficulties receiving and sending donations.

I also think the Left must also seriously analyze the methods through which the Maduro government is attempted to alleviate the impact of the sanctions. Gold exports have increased, which has led to: a) an aggressive dollarization process, which harms those who only earn national currency, b) an opening of exchange control, c) elimination of price controls, d) privatization of previously nationalized companies (Cadena Éxito, Arroz del Alba SA, Tiendas CLAP), e) more flexible conditions to transnational companies, f) land restitution to old and new landlords, and h) the establishment of a dual gasoline market (one paid in dollars, the other in *bolivares*). Understanding these and other actions represents a big challenge.

Finally, if those who identify with some sort of Left view convince ourselves that all the blame for the Venezuelan crisis falls on the sanctions, we will be deprived of learning from past mistakes and will be destined to commit them again. ■

Healing Politics — continued from page 34

The history of the attempts at universal healthcare in this country, which they review, reveals the underpinnings of the current opposition to healthcare reform. For example, the fundamental opposition to Universal Healthcare proposed by Harry Truman in 1948 was racism: *White Southerners did not want to open their white hospitals to Black patients.*

Opposition to the expansion of Medicare after Lyndon Johnson signed the original bill into law in 1965 was due to both organized medicine led by the American Medical Association and for-profit insurance companies.

The second part of this book discusses policies including our anti-prevention construct that keeps people in this country so ill (along with poverty, racism, environmental racism, corporate refined food, etc.). El Sayed and Johnson also detail the problems with high-deductible plans that are often the only thing that's affordable for working-class families in the “unaffordable care act.”

As I write, Joe Biden is allowing his corporate donors to control the agenda and block the possibility of moving away from for-profit healthcare. That's tragic.

Part three is about the political difficulties of passing Medicare for All. The for-profit healthcare systems have been honing their opposition to Medicare for All since Hillary and Bill Clinton's attempted “reform” in the early 1990s. This same group, in collaboration with big Pharma, engineered Medicare Part

D, in part to prevent the government from negotiating drug prices.

New to the mix are hedge fund managers who now own many Healthcare systems wringing whatever profits they can out of them, leaving no room for educational programs, nutrition services, etc.

The majority of people in this country and the majority of physicians favor Medicare for All. The authors summarize:

“*The future of Medicare for All may hinge on three big questions:*

1. *Whether the government should shoulder one of the largest and fastest growing expenditures burdening American families.*

2. *How best to provide the necessary good to all people equitably and*

3. *Whether we believe in collective action in an increasingly diverse America.” (296)*

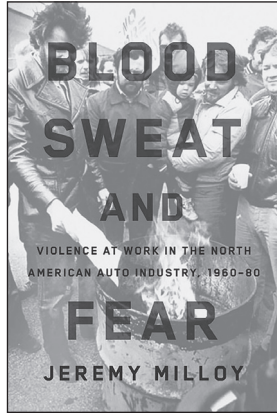
The progression is by no means guaranteed and will require a tremendous amount of work to help people understand what Medicare for All means and to counter the corporate and neoliberal opposition.

As a retired physician, and longtime single-payer activist (the old term for Medicare for All), I understand the critical need for high-quality government-funded healthcare for everyone. This clear, readable book lays out that challenge. Multiple YouTube videos also cover portions of this book. Both authors are excellent speakers; I recommend the videos. ■

REVIEW

Danger on the Shop Floor By Toni Gilpin

Blood, Sweat and Fear:
Violence at Work in the North
American Auto Industry, 1960-80
By Jeremy Milloy
University of Illinois Press, 2017,
228 pages, \$28 paperback.



“THIS JOB IS killing me.” That’s a phrase many workers have uttered, though what prompts such a dismal sentiment can vary: perhaps the numbness engendered by tedious, repetitive labor; or a grueling commute combined with an irregular schedule; or bigoted bosses who harass and belittle. Yet for some workers the danger is even more literal and immediate, as their jobs present a daily, imminent threat to life and limb.

At the outset of the pandemic in 2020, the particular hazards of COVID exposure faced by frontline workers received a brief flurry of public attention. But as that focus has receded, so has the recognition that for many workers, their jobs are literally life-threatening, and not only when there is a deadly virus afoot.

That’s why Jeremy Milloy’s historical study *Blood, Sweat and Fear: Violence at Work in the North American Auto Industry, 1960-80* has special resonance at this moment. “Confronting the history of workplace violence under capitalism,” Milloy, a postdoctoral research fellow at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, seeks to reframe our understanding of the dangers that workers are obliged to endure, and urges us to reconsider just who bears responsibility for them.

To do so he zeroes in on a period when the production of automobiles in Chrysler plants was an especially hazardous endeavor, and employees dreaded clocking in each day.

In part this was because already onerous working conditions imposed by management were deteriorating even further. But it was also that auto workers in the 1960s and ’70s often feared each other, as the incidence of physical confrontations between workers, or between workers and supervisors, ratcheted

Toni Gilpin is a labor historian, writer and activist. She is the author of The Long Deep Grudge: A Story of Big Capital, Radical Labor, and Class War in the American Heartland (Haymarket Books, 2020) and a co-author of On Strike for Respect: The Clerical and Technical Workers’ Strike at Yale University, 1984-85.

sharply upward.

Milloy argues that these were not coincidental developments, for increased exploitation was a root cause of heightened workforce volatility. For workers under capitalism, Milloy insists, violence, in a multitude of forms, simply comes with the job.

But just exactly what does Milloy mean

by “violence at work”? Violence, Milloy indicates, is “a culturally constructed phenomenon” which has changed over time and depends on who is defining the term. At the beginning of his book, Milloy delineates three forms of violence that might affect workers.

“Structural violence” refers to the many forms of hazardous on-the-job conditions workers must endure; workplace culture and power relations can be understood as “rhetorical violence;” while the fights, assaults and murders that constitute violence as it is most commonly understood are labeled “physical violence.”

Milloy insists that all three forms of violence are inherently intertwined, and to make his case he provides a comparative examination of Chrysler’s Dodge Main plant in Detroit (or more correctly, Hamtramck) and Chrysler’s manufacturing complex in Windsor, Ontario in the 1960s and ’70s.

Though these facilities were located in different countries, there were nonetheless obvious similarities: same employer, same union — the United Auto Workers — and same general territory, as the two facilities were separated by a mere 20 minute drive across the Detroit River. Nonetheless, Milloy argues, in Detroit and Windsor “there were significant differences in violence’s prevalence, uses, expressions and impacts.”

By all three measures in Milloy’s categories of violence — structural, rhetorical, and physical — Chrysler’s Windsor complex was a safer place.

Those factors traditionally offered up to account for such a variance — like the ways in which violence figures into popular culture or national mythologies, or the differing labor and political histories that characterize Canada and the United States — Milloy deems to be “relatively unimportant.”

Rather, the crucial distinctions, he argues, were “the greater in-plant impact of racial inequality” and “Chrysler’s greater power to dictate working conditions” in Detroit.

The Windsor Chrysler complex was not violence-free. In those plants, where the workforce was almost exclusively male into the latter 1970s, the “rough culture” that defined much industrial production was on full display. But while physical confrontations to resolve disputes between workers — or sometimes, to intimidate management — occurred in Windsor, they happened infrequently and were most often fist fights; weapons were rarely involved.

There were few Black employees in Windsor, so racism, either within the workforce or as might be manifested by management, was not a divisive force there. Moreover, Milloy indicates, working conditions in Windsor were far better for auto workers than was the case in “Detroit’s decrepit, dysfunctional Chrysler plants.”

In large part this was due to the Auto Pact, negotiated between the United States and Canada in 1965, which obliged Canadian plants to maintain production and workforce levels during the same period that the U.S. economy was heading toward widespread deindustrialization. Consequently UAW Local 444, which represented Chrysler workers in Windsor, was empowered to contend with management to enforce “a safer, saner work environment,” thus reducing the amount of structural violence Canadian auto workers experienced.

Violence at Dodge Main

Things were far different at teeming Dodge Main, which is the central focus of Milloy’s study. By the late 1960s, serious physical violence — of the sort often involving knives and guns, and might well result with workers sent to hospitals — had become so commonplace at the plant that it became the subject of national media attention.

Much of the reporting then presumed that the trouble within Dodge Main was largely reflective of the larger crime problem plaguing Detroit, but Milloy insists that the root cause was the plant itself.

Chrysler management responded to the increase in foreign competition that began in the 1960s by making its production employees work harder and faster, and thus an already unsafe factory became even more hazardous and stressful.

Milloy makes especially good use of grievance records to paint a grim picture of brutal conditions in the shop; “I guess you must work until you drop dead,” Milloy quotes one UAW steward in a grievance report. “It is like working in a concentration camp.”

But Milloy notes that Chrysler also instigated changes in its hiring processes that escalated tensions in the plant. More recently hired African American employees — who would make up nearly half the Dodge Main workforce by 1968 — were relegated to the second shift, and compensation for this newer group of workers was less than that enjoyed by first-shift workers, who were older and mostly white.

The resentment and division fostered by Chrysler’s employment practices turned an already edgy workplace into a tinderbox. UAW Local 3, the union at Dodge Main, as Milloy details, proved utterly incapable of responding either to the deterioration of working conditions or the rise in racial conflict.

The only response the bureaucratic UAW offered to punishing working conditions was a ponderous grievance procedure, and Blacks attempting to confront racism — within both the company and the white workforce — met with indifference, or worse, from most union officials.

UAW leaders viewed physical violence on an individual level, rather than as symptomatic of class and racial oppression, and searched vainly for ways to impose order on the membership. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was born as a result, and this radical Black workers’ organization provided the sort of structural analysis that the UAW did not.

To DRUM, as Milloy describes, the pervasive violence in the plant “was a product of the dangerous, degrading work environment at Dodge Main and the larger structures of capitalism and white supremacy.” Sharper analysis, however, didn’t prove enough to quiet the violence within Dodge Main; only the shutdown of the plant in 1979 did that.

Mechanisms of Exploitation

Milloy’s rich and detailed study properly reminds us that the workplace is the primary source of capitalist exploitation, and thus we need to pay close attention, as he has, to what workers actually experience on the job to understand the mechanisms that enable that exploitation.

There are some weaknesses in Milloy’s analysis: at times the distinctions between the categories of violence he utilizes becomes hazy or confusing, or “violence” comes to be such an all-inclusive term (lay-offs and poverty in general sometimes seem to fall under that umbrella as well) that the concept threatens to lose its meaning.

And while Milloy emphasizes racism as a principal explanation for the violence at Dodge Main, and is sensitive to the anger and frustration voiced by Black workers, he does not center women’s experiences and sexism in the same way. That there were almost no women at the Windsor complex, and only a small cohort confined to particular jobs at the Dodge Main plant, is of course a reflection of patriarchal hiring practices that also contributed to the “rough culture” of the shops and the violence within them.

Milloy does provide some examples of the harassment and sexual violence faced by women at Dodge Main, and indicates how the UAW, and even DRUM, not only failed to respond but often perpetuated the problem. But foregrounding sexism as much as racism might have enhanced Milloy’s study.

Of course through the 1960s and ’70s the most violent actor of all was the federal government, as was made increasingly manifest by the escalating carnage of the Vietnam War during those turbulent decades. Yet how this martial zeitgeist contributed to the overall atmosphere within Dodge Main (and how the different political situation in Canada, conversely, might have lessened tensions in Windsor) is not a subject Milloy touches on, nor does he consider if Vietnam veterans working at Dodge Main may have been especially prone to hostile behavior.

Milloy rightly wants to focus on the

structural underpinnings that contribute to individual acts of violence, but surely our blood-soaked foreign policy, and the aggression inculcated by the military within the (disproportionately minority) population of young men who served in Vietnam, is part of this larger picture.

But Jeremy Milloy has contributed something quite valuable with his book, refocusing attention on a subject — violence — that has become so commonplace that it may have seemed as if there was nothing new to be said about it. Those explosive moments when workers have “gone postal” and wreaked havoc at their workplaces, Milloy argues, should not be attributed to isolated moments of individual crisis, or written off as some inherent tendency of Americans to solve their problems with gunfire.

Milloy’s examination of auto manufacturing makes clear how the work process under capitalism — the jobs that people hold, and the ways they are obliged to do them — is in itself steeped in violence, leaving workers injured, exhausted and bitter. It should thus not come as a shock that some workers respond to the violence they are subject to on the job with more violence.

Maybe the only surprise is that more of them don’t react that way. “*My job is killing me.*” when workers say that — whether they’re in factories, or hospitals, or Amazon warehouses — they really mean it. ■

Conviction in Chauvin Trial — *continued from page 2*

gas and weapons of war. The police then deploy this force upon peaceful Black Lives and anti-police violence protesters.

Another needed immediate change is for all cops to live in the community they police. The community must have an independent board to hire and fire police.

The police “union” (a cartel) must also be dismantled so criminal cops can’t be protected. The “unions” don’t just bargain for wages and conditions, they “bargain” for cities giving almost all oversight of police conduct to the police themselves, usually meaning they have a green light to kill.

The police system as it is must be ended and replaced. These changes go beyond reimagining current police forces, or other democratic reforms. They represent the end of policing as it has been practiced since the time of slavery and the Jim Crow segregation era.

Police Defense: Copaganda

The Black Lives Movement that sparked the mass protests in 2020 in the United States and around the world is ready to act whenever a Black man or woman simply walking, driving or breathing is gunned down by cops.

The police counter-narrative, labeled by some as “copaganda,” says that police make split-second decisions and all their actions are justifiable. Black and Brown people are seen as less than human and criminalized for existing.

“There is no political or social cause in this courtroom,” the Chauvin defense lawyer told the jury. It is true that the jurors’ assigned task is neither to vindicate nor to denigrate the Black Lives Matter movement.

Fortunately, the jury include both white, Black and biracial members. They did their job. They found Chauvin guilty on all three counts. Bail has been revoked and sentencing will be in eight weeks.

As Jeannie Suk Gersen, professor of Law at Harvard University wrote:

“‘You can believe your eyes,’ the prosecution told the jury. ‘It’s murder.’ That appeal to jurors’ common sense comes up against the defense’s suggestion that ‘common sense tells you that there are always two sides to a story.’ But this is a case in which the political momentousness far exceeds its legal or factual difficulty.” (The New Yorker, April 10)

The whole world watched. Until Black lives matter, no lives matter. ■

REVIEW

Stirring the Dust of Archives By Noa Saunders

Left of Poetry:

Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetics

By Sarah Ehlers

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019, 308 pages, \$29.95 paperback.

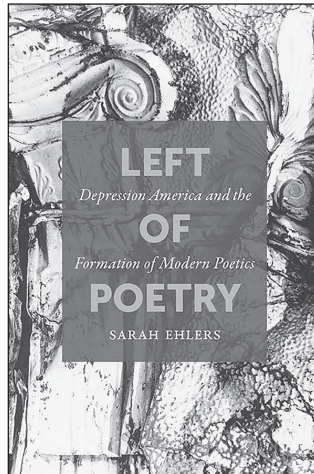
SARAH EHLERS, AN Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston, has published a highly original book reclaiming the lyrical and political work of several renowned as well as forgotten poets of the 1930s. Attracted to the Communist movement, they collectively cultivated an anti-capitalist poetics that the scholarly community has since neglected.

In a lucid three-part structure, Ehlers situates their work against the backdrop of decades of anti-communist propaganda, which accelerated especially after the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the rise of New Criticism (a formalist movement in literary theory) in the American academy.

Using the rubrics of “Documentary,” “Lyric” and “Rhythm,” Ehlers shows how a fresh exploration of Communist-affiliated poet-activists like Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Martha Millet, Edwin Rolfe, Genevieve Taggard and Jacques Roumain reveal biases in the cultural mechanism not only of canon formation but also of how we tend to read such authors. She depicts the social and poetic consequences of the institutionalization of high modernism (that is, exclusionary experimental literature before World War II) in New Critical discourses that, throughout the war and after, glorified stylists like Ezra Pound, whose pro-Fascist politics became conveniently irrelevant to an apolitical aesthetics that prioritizes formal innovation over all else.

In the hands of these Communist-affiliated poets, the lyric, traditionally understood to be the outward expression of an individual’s inner thoughts — which the reader, New Criticism teaches us, merely overhears — becomes more communal, more international, less inscrutable, and enjoys a farther public reach. Guided by a historical methodology

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devoted to archival retrieval, Ehlers salvages a Communist contribution to the lyrical form that recovers conceptions of community, meter, and accessibility. This achievement reveals that what scholars today recognize as conventional writing and reading practices are actually informed by a deeply anti-communist trajectory.

Ehlers’ source material includes travel logs, personal scrapbooks, photographs, medical documentation, unfinished manuscripts, children’s books, union songs as well as poetry and essays from small revolutionary magazines like *Dynamo* and *New Masses*. From these archival materials she garners an argument about poetry’s role in representing history that crosses media and generic boundaries. As much as the work of the high modernists, imagists or objectivists, communist poetry also develops an aesthetic that draws from other media, particularly, photography, folk music and radio.

Poetry’s proximity to the American public is, in part, the subject of Ehlers’ analysis. Documentary poetics opens up the book’s tensions of representation — a question of “how documentary and poetic forms mediate conceptions of history and political agency.” (68) Ehlers sees Hughes’ works like the poems “Wait” and “Open Letter to the South,” and the play *Scottsboro Limited*, as retaining important lessons from photography’s power “to concretize the abstractions of economic relations,” untainted by a tourist’s gaze. (49) Similarly, by refusing to capture her subject sentimentally, Rukeyser’s exploration of the 1930 tunnel disaster in Gauley, West Virginia in *Book of the Dead* brings her reader closer to the grounds of historic neglect.

Each of these poets stands at the intersection of “the visual and the verbal” to reveal “how the speaker of a poem exists in a gap between lived history and representation, and it enacts a mode of expression that is not authentic or private but mediated by technology and history.” (30)

For Ehlers, poetry occasions a new ac-

cess to social life that current conceptions of the lyric disregard; she illustrates that poetry therefore has the capacity to fill historic gaps in understanding capitalist crisis.

Politics of Poetic Style

At stake for the book is a fierce confrontation of the political implications intrinsic to the individualistic, detached, and atemporal lyrical speaker at the heart of 20th century American poetry. In poetry’s inheritance of Romanticism, a topic explored in chapter three, Ehlers sees a resistance to community where Romanticism bestows us with a lyrical “I” whose internal expressions are liberated from historical contingencies.

The New Critical classroom, with its formalist commitments to irony, subjectivity and autonomy, has taught us to read poetry as if we are overhearing the speaker’s private thoughts, rather than an urgent transmission from one global citizen to another. Communist writers, like Taggard and Rolfe, rebuke this individualistic inheritance as one distorted and appropriated by capitalist alienation.

For instance, in Taggard’s poem “Night Letter to Walt Whitman,” the lineation shows a decentering of the individual where the lyrical speaker is pushed to the end of each line, becoming simultaneously “an afterthought and a hinge from one thought to another”:

*They are brother and sister and sister
City and land They are sick
I think
They are going to die I swear I want
another pair
A swarthy sister with strawberry
mouth I say
Another smelling of new-mown hay and
the fur of cattle. (121)*

Ehlers’ discussion of pro-Communist poetics dissolves lyrical conceptions of subjectivity in order to position the speaker as a nexus through which readers connect with each other.

For Ehlers, the historical revelation of leftist poetry animates the lyric so that it transcends the personal or private. The speaker enunciates not merely an expression of individual experience but the reception or “lyrical effect” of historical contingency. Rejecting the isolation of the Romantic lyric, Taggard and Rolfe also recover poetic community by reinvigorating traditional folk genres, ballads, songs, and other forms with “rhythm” that serves the public’s need to

continued on page 44

REVIEW

A Chinese Migrant Story: **Shifting Identities in a Settler Land** By Listen Chen

The Diary of Dukesang Wong:
A voice from Gold Mountain.
By Dukesang Wong, edited by David McIlwraith
Translated by Wanda Joy Hoe
Talonbooks, 2020, 144 pages, \$18.95 paperback.

IN 1880, FIVE years before the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the federal government's imposition of a head tax on Chinese immigrants, Dukesang Wong (1845-1931) migrated from China to "Gold Mountain," the term Chinese migrants used to refer to the west coast of the United States and Canada. He landed in Portland and eventually found work building the railway in British Columbia. Later he became a tailor, brought his wife to Canada, and settled his family here.

The Diary of Dukesang Wong is a selective translation of seven notebooks, originally belonging to Wong, and are the only known primary account of a 19th century Chinese railway worker.

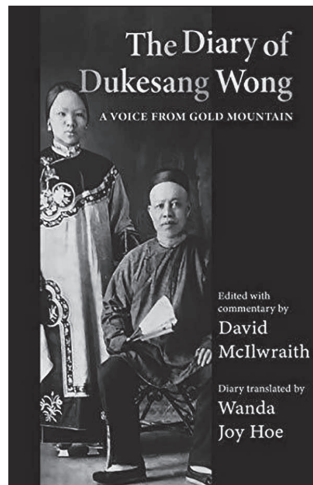
As editor David McIlwraith points out in his introductory commentary, the absence of primary accounts is a testament to the virulent forces of anti-Chinese racism, which ejected Chinese people from white-dominated spaces through physical violence that also functioned as historical erasure.

Unfortunately, Wong's original diaries were destroyed in a fire, so the book itself consists of excerpts translated by his granddaughter, Wanda Joy Hoe, while she was a university student in the 1960s. What remains covers two periods: Wong's life as a disenfranchised member of the imperial administrator class in China, from 1867-1880, and his subsequent migration, 1880-1918.

The diary entries themselves barely take up one-third of the slim book. Interspersed is commentary by McIlwraith, who is not a historian but rather a writer with a particular interest in the history of early Chinese migrants in Canada.

The primary text is the real star of the book, with McIlwraith's commentary providing additional context and interpretation. This is helpful but also politically limited by

Listen Chen lives in Vancouver, Canada on occupied Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, and Squamish territories. They are an editor of The Volcano and a member of Red Braid Alliance for Decolonial Socialism.



its inattentiveness to the gendered dynamics of Wong's identifications with and against Canada and Qing dynasty China.

The raw material of Wong's private thoughts, dreams, desires and frustrations,

as well as the fragmented nature of the diary, place a heavy hermeneutic burden on the reader. But if read with attention to Wong's shifting social positions throughout his journey, the text reveals rich insights to the gendered, racialized and class production of subjectivity, and in particular pushes back against ahistorical renderings that imagine anti-Chinese racism as autonomous from the economic imperatives of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism.

A Racial "We" Bigger than "I"

Wong's diary reads like a typical diary: his scope is that which intimately impacts him and what he reports are his own thoughts, observations and feelings. As a young man in China he struggles with the downfall of his family, which is triggered by the assassination of his father, an imperial magistrate. This is followed by the suicide of his mother and culminates in his abandonment of ambitions to complete his education and join the ranks of the Qing bureaucracy.

Mapping Wong's use of "I" and "we" pronouns points to how class relations mediated his sense of identification and group belonging. Wong's entries while in China gesture at collective family interests, but the deterioration of his family after the death of his father has an atomizing effect: we read only about his "I," moving through the world and struggling to find a new life path.

Outside of his "I" lie the peasants, whom he repeatedly writes about as a kind of unruly, dangerous and hot-headed externality — particularly during moments of

historical rupture, like the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. Only with Wong's arrival to the United States and his first diary entry written there does he express himself with a passionate "we": a plural product of the compressing, racist violence meted out to all Chinese people, irrespective of their class backgrounds.

Wong's "we" reaches its crescendo during his work on the railroad where he writes poignantly, "I am truly alone amid the dying. The leaders of the white people demand money — our poor savings — taken from we who have so little, given to those who are not so taxed." (60)

But in response to political upheavals in China, Wong's "we" splits to capture the interests of his class of origin. Writing about the Boxer Rebellion, an anti-imperialist insurrection led by Chinese peasants against Western foreigners that began in 1899, Wong seems unable to recognize the international character of the white supremacy that, in other contexts, he bemoans.

Instead, he writes fondly of the white people he encountered in China as educated men adjacent to the intelligentsia, who "mingle with us and share their books with us," contrasting them from the whites in Canada who "separate us as if we were dishonourable." Alongside his delineation of good and bad whites he separates himself from the "common people" he blames for throwing away honor and acting "against our long civilization and all our great teachings." (99)

Wong wrote these words in 1901, after the Eight Nation Alliance of Western imperial powers invaded China to put down the rebellion, executing rebels, looting Beijing and further entrenching imperial domination over China. Despite being deeply oppressed in Canada by whites, Wong gazed backward longing to find an unchanged China where white and Qing dynasty elites had their place above the peasant masses, a desire that aligned with the interests of western imperial powers.

The tension between Wong's "we," which unites Chinese migrant workers against white workers and bosses, and his imperial "I," lifting him above the peasant masses who are themselves trapped in feudal relations with the imperial administrator class, traces alignments with class power that fracture Chinese communities in white supremacist

nations.

Wong saw his disenfranchisement in China as inappropriate because of his class position. In Canada, upon experiencing the great equalization of white supremacy alongside other Chinese migrants who overwhelmingly came from the peasant class, he developed a sense of class solidarity while continuing to covet the Qing Dynasty order in China, an expression of his rightful class position above peasants.

Today, it is no longer Qing Dynasty China providing the petty-bourgeois and bourgeois Chinese diaspora with a sense of exception, but their identification with a different imperial power, Canada: Wong did not make the leap from identifying with China's imperial order to identifying with Canadian settler-colonial and imperial power. However, his nostalgia foreshadows the subsequent emergence of a privileged diaspora willing to align with Canada over the interests of poor workers globally.

Wong as Patriarch: Domestic “We” Wedded to Sovereign “I”

In the late 1880s, Wong's wife Lin arrived to join him in Canada, where he was no longer a railroad worker but the co-owner of a successful tailoring business, later to become the elected president of a Benevolent Association in New Westminster in 1903.

Upon Lin's arrival, Wong begins to turn away from the solidarity of his coolie-wide “we” to a domestically focused “we” and “I.” It's no longer his fellow, toiling peers with whom he primarily identifies, but the patriarchal purview of his domestic life, itself dependent on his business.

Not surprisingly, in the twists and turns of Wong's life and fortunes, the establishment of a business and a nuclear family restored to his life a sense of “natural” order scaffolded by gender and class.

Mcllwraith notes Wong's domestic turn but fails to explore Wong's family as a site of politics, instead focusing on Wong's reactions to ongoing white racism and turmoil in China. But Wong's deeply patriarchal aspirations to own a home and a wife are no less historical or political than the racism he suffered at the hands of white settlers. Indeed, throughout his diary the desire to become a patriarch mediates his relationship to women, peasants, class and Indigenous land.

Chinese men outnumbered Chinese women by a ratio of 28 to 1 in the early 20th century. While some merchants could bring their daughters and wives with them, working-class Chinese men could not, highlighting the classed character of access to Chinese women and the gendered character of Canada's racist immigration policy. While Mcllwraith notes the rarity of Wong's ability to reunite with his wife to be, his commentary does not explore its classed and gendered implications.

For Wong, the establishment of his own family allows him to retrieve a sense of imperial entitlement, hitherto buried beneath family ruin in China and white supremacist violence in Canada. Following his first son's birth, he writes that “the name of Wong will continue” and that “the order is oh, so good,” naturalizing patriarchal power as an expression of cyclical time. (86)

While Wong experienced ongoing racist exclusion from Canada despite settling down with a business and family, the way class and gender ordered his sense of natural hierarchies foreshadow the emergence of a Chinese diaspora class whose assimilation into Canada is contingent on occupying Indigenous land, participating in compulsory heterosexuality, and owning businesses.

Wong saw his disenfranchisement in China as inappropriate because of his class position. In Canada, upon experiencing the great equalization of white supremacy alongside other Chinese migrants who overwhelmingly came from the peasant class, he developed a sense of class solidarity while continuing to covet the Qing Dynasty order in China, an expression of his rightful class position above peasants.

What Wong's Diary Means Today

How should we read Wong's diary in the 21st century, in a moment marked by broad agreement that racism is “bad” and should be denounced — especially if it takes the form of a random hate crime that bourgeois politicians can denounce as a problem of immoral individuals, rather than a reflection of the West's imperialist aggressions?

In a context where it has become a liberal cliché to point to the exclusion of Chinese migrants and plight of Chinese railroad workers in order to denounce contemporary yellow peril, Wong's diary offers a critical intervention in hegemonic understandings of racism, which detach white supremacy from its base in colonialism, capitalism and imperialism, fixating on exceptional instances of hate rather than the mundane exercise of race power through class and gendered exploitation.

Today's reformists are eager to recuperate figures like Dukesang Wong as founding fathers of multicultural Canada, as if white supremacy can be eradicated by selectively assimilating racial aliens who pose no threat to the nation: historical ghosts like the Chinese railroad worker and bourgeois and petty-bourgeois Chinese people willing to embrace Western empire. Indeed, portions of Mcllwraith's commentary as well as the

book's introduction perform the ideological work of discovering in Wong proof that Chinese migrants are rightfully part of Canada.

But Wong's diary reveals, against the ideological upholstery of liberal anti-racism, that the bounds of settler-colonial nationhood are historically contingent, which means that for some to belong, others must be violently left out. The production of Canadian nationhood, which today relies on the “post-racist” discourse of multiculturalism, is no less reliant on exploitation, colonial occupation, imperial domination, or the gendered division of labor than it was for Wong. Yet where Wong was barred from integrating into Canada, his gendered and classed descendants are not.

For Wong, imperial patriarchy formed a continuity between feudal and imperial China and bourgeois and settler-colonial Canada that, while ordering his aspirations and relations to classed and gendered others, never materialized into a bridge that he could fully walk over. Yet his diary foreshadows a multiculturalist Canada where the possibilities of assimilation have been greatly expanded while always set within the limitations of class, gender, and colonial belonging.

His voice, with its shifting and inconsistent pluralities, insists that for national belonging to become more “inclusive,” there must be aliens willing to step across the narrow bridge that leads to the rotten heart of imperial civil society and in so doing, leave behind the gendered, racialized, classed and colonized others whose interests exceed imperial, colonial and bourgeois nationhood. ■

Malcolm — continued from page 41

tion of African Unity (OAU). His death came too soon; his followers couldn't keep it alive.

Malcolm remains a shining example for revolutionary nationalists, socialists and antiracists of all racial and ethnic groups worldwide.

“With his appreciation of the power of words,” Payne concludes, “Malcolm helped changed the names people called themselves, ‘Black’ from an insult among so-called American Negroes — fighting words in many cases — to a proud affirmation.

“Later, after his sojourn in Africa and his conversations with Black American expatriates there, he helped popularize the term ‘Afro-American’...embracing Africa had been seen only as an embarrassment by the Nation of Islam as well as by many Christian Negroes.

“‘You can't have the roots of a tree, and not the tree,’ he would say as he directed African American eyes toward Africa. ‘You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself.’ These words speak directly to today's youth across the United States as they challenge the media's beauty standards to be more inclusive.” (524) ■

REVIEW

Imagining “The Old Man” After 1940

A Fictional Effort to Comprehend Trotsky By Paul LeBlanc

Trotsky in Tijuana

By Dan La Botz

St. Petersburg, FL: Serge Press, BookLocker.com, Inc., 2020, 470 pages. \$20 paperback, Kindle \$4.99.

THIS IS A curious work coming from the author of a dozen left-wing volumes on history, politics and social struggles — where statements of fact reign supreme.

On the copyright page, the book announces itself as “a counterfactual historical novel,” with its premise that Leon Trotsky, in Mexican exile, was not killed by a Stalinist assassin in 1940. Instead he lives on for a dozen more years, moving from the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán to the far-western town of Tijuana.

By page 90, I felt an involuntary elation: “Thank God! He wasn’t killed after all!”

Of course a counter-factual novel is a work of fiction, just a story. And to say that someone is “telling stories” is sometimes a colloquialism meaning the person is telling lies. Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn say that Mr. Twain wrote “a true book with some stretchers” — and, here again, a “stretcher” is a lie.

Like any work of art, *Trotsky in Tijuana* is inflected with inventions — some plausible and others more dubious. Artists bend and shape realities in order to express their understanding of what most effectively communicates their vision. No one reading a novel should get bent out of shape when confronted with what seem to elements on the imagination or “stretchers.”

Even a book filled with reactionary distortions can get at vibrant elements of truth: for example, Dostoyevsky’s relentlessly anti-revolutionary novel *The Possessed* reveals, perhaps with some exaggeration, the malignant psychology that can overtake even idealists. The question is: To what extent can we find an informative and compelling vision in one or another work of fiction?

According to the disclaimer on the copyright page: “Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.” That, of course, is a “stretcher,” as the author himself confesses in his about-the-author composition at the

Paul Le Blanc is Professor of History at La Roche University and author of Leon Trotsky (Reaktion Books 2015).



Art design from Trotsky in Tijuana

end of the book: “This novel is an attempt to understand and come to grips with Leon Trotsky and his legacy.”

In the book’s preface another artistic fiction is told

— one of the characters in the novel, “Ralph Bucek,” claims that he (not Dan La Botz) wrote the book. This fictional author tells us:

“*Leon Trotsky was to me a father figure and, as the reader will discover, I felt the ambivalence toward him that most sons feel toward their fathers. As boys, we think of our fathers as strong and always right, and then later we discover that they can be weak and are sometimes wrong. When we mature, we still love them, but also see them as people like ourselves, as the fathers we have in turn become.*” (10)

This seems to me to capture a critical insight that unfolds in the novel. It remains here to consider several aspects of the novel’s attempt to use fiction and the imagination to express original and forceful insights — in regard to the actualities of history, as well as the quality of its artistry and its portrait of Trotsky.

As History

As history, *Trotsky in Tijuana* has some of its greatest strengths — although there are also some surprising weaknesses. The book is peppered with capably written mini-essays on the history of Tijuana, the Second World War, the Cold War, and various actual and interesting historical figures, including some associated with the revolutionary and socialist movements. There is an occasional error or an interpretive bias, but overall these aspects of the novel are nicely done.

On the other hand, given what the novel is about, a surprising weakness in its historical component involves what I find is missing: any serious sense of the U.S. Trotskyists and their movement (those close to Max

Shachtman as well as those close to James P. Cannon). They were central to Trotsky’s life and concerns in this period, but the book’s references to them are incredibly sketchy, fragmentary, disjointed, peripheral.

The only actual character in the book from this milieu is a guard at Trotsky’s compound, the fictional author Ralph Bucek. In addition to Ralph, who are the other guards in Trotsky’s compound? They have neither personalities nor even names. I see this is an artistic deficiency, although I realize that this is not every reader’s concern.*

Yet I would further argue that it is an analytical barrier. The community described by others who were there as guards and secretaries — Joseph Hansen, Rae Spiegel (Raya Dunayevskaya), in an earlier period Sara Weber, and others — is absent from the novel, a failure of verisimilitude. This relates to the novel’s literary qualities: too many people are abstractions or cyphers or not there at all.

The community and interplay of actual human beings, the human and political collectivity of the movement of which Trotsky was a part — embedded in and profoundly connected to the larger social realities and struggles of his time — doesn’t come through here. The vibrant collectivity is missing.

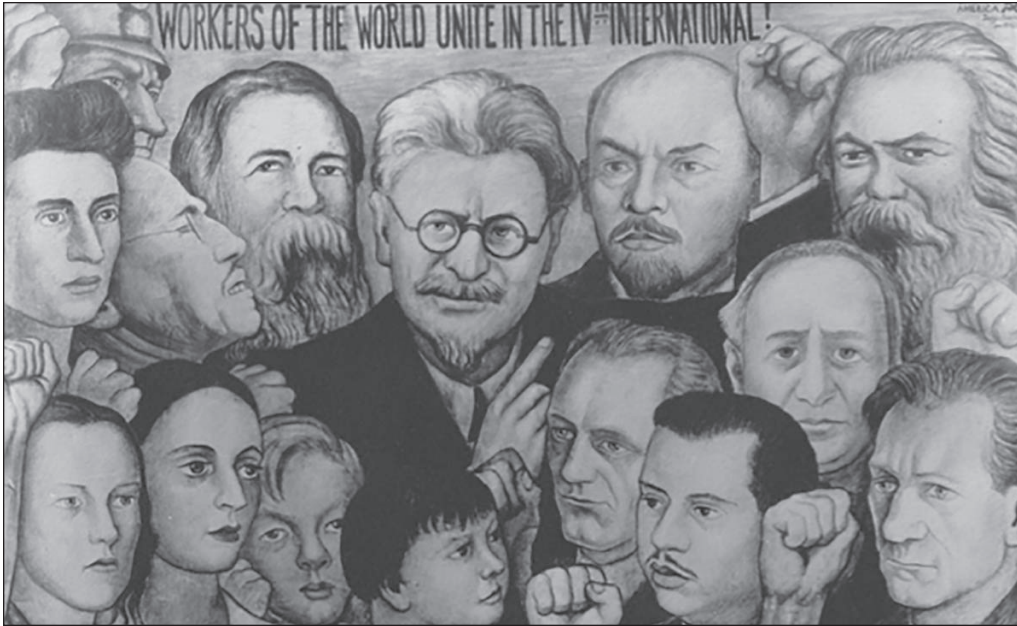
As Literature

Trotsky has been a focal point of a growing number of fiction portrayals and in some ways it feels unfair to compare what the author has done with creations from those professional novelists whose lives have been dedicated to the literary craft.

For example, when Meghan Delahunt’s *In the Casa Azul* came out in 2001, it was aptly praised by *Publisher’s Weekly* as “a mesmerizing first novel” resembling “nothing less than one of [Diego] Rivera’s famous murals — human activity everywhere, each figure burning for attention.”

One cannot say the same for *Trotsky in Tijuana*, nor does it compare favorably with Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna* (2009), not to mention Leonardo Padura’s wondrous contribution to world literature *El hombre que hamba a los perros* (2009), translated in English as *The Man Who Loved Dogs* (2014).

*For two very different assessments of the novel, see: <https://newpol.org/counter-historical-revolutionary-dan-la-botz-trotsky-in-tijuana/> and <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6874>



Diego Rivera's 1934 mural: Top row, left to right — striking coal miner, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Frederick Engels, Leon Trotsky, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Karl Marx; bottom row, left to right — children of U.S. Trotskyists, Arne Swabeck, Max Shachtman, Christian Rakovsky, James P. Cannon.

Yet La Botz arguably takes on a more difficult task than the novels by Kingsolver and Padura, since they are not focused on exploring Trotsky the human being. Rather, they engage with him as a symbol of revolutionary hope in relation to the realities of their own countries. Their primary characters are people other than Trotsky — which considerably lightens their load in portraying the great Russian revolutionary.

Bernard Wolfe comes closer to what Dan is reaching for. Wolfe's *The Great Prince Died* (1959) brings to mind the pretended author of *Trotsky in Tijuana*, who like Wolfe was a former Trotskyist and had been a guard at Trotsky's Mexico compound.

Wolfe has a better feel for the way Trotsky talked and carried himself, but both novels are intent on providing a somber judgment about the meaning of Trotsky's life. Yet Wolfe's skill at characterization and dialogue are missing here. *Trotsky in Tijuana* is full of interesting characters (or ideas for characters) that never quite come alive. They seem moved along by the author, not their own inner dynamics. This might work if the novel were a satire — but it is not.

Of course, the book is not entirely without humor. Colonel de la Fuente, fictional aide to Mexico's revolutionary-nationalist President Lázaro Cárdenas, shows Trotsky around Tijuana, and Dan has the Colonel delivering a lecture on the area's history, making reference to the theory of uneven and combined development. "It's a nice application of the theory," Trotsky tells him "once again admiring de la Fuente's mind." (One imagines the chuckling author's wink at us.)

There are also nice turns of phrase:

when Trotsky engages with a new lover, fictional stand-up comedienne Rachel Silberstein, "they came out of their clothes as easily as bananas out of their skins." Silberstein is one of the more interesting characters in the novel, but a lengthy account of her raunchy stand-up routine didn't strike me as all that funny — although we are told the audience "roared with laughter and applauded loudly!"

Another potentially interesting creation is Dr. David Bergman, an associate of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm before fleeing the Nazis to practice psychoanalysis in the United States. He is engaged by Trotsky's life partner Natalia Sedova, who is hopeful that Trotsky — having suffered so many great personal blows and agonizing stresses — might benefit from therapy.

Unfortunately, this hardly goes anywhere. Bergman seems more a plot device than a person. There are multiple missed opportunities in this book for one who might want to understand Trotsky.

There are other characters who might have been fleshed out to more effectively create the milieu of the Trotsky family and those with whom he associated in Mexican exile. The story of Trotsky's daughter Zinaida, whose mental breakdown and suicide in 1933 eventually resulted in her son Sieva becoming part of the Trotsky household, is minimized and set aside, as is the life of Sieva himself.

The great artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who had once been so important in Trotsky's life before the rupture of relations, are mostly absent — the significance of their journey from Trotskyism to Stalinism

neither explored nor even mentioned. Also missing, but quite relevant to issues with which Dan seems concerned, was Trotsky's friendship with Otto Rühle and Alice Rühle-Gerstel, left-communists and devotees of the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler, who both committed suicide in 1943.

In my view, the highpoint of the novel is the attention given to Trotsky's companion Natalia Sedova, whose life as a revolutionary is described with great respect. We are told that her intellectual engagement contributed significantly to Trotsky's own thinking. Her qualities certainly come through in Trotsky's 1935 diary, and particularly in her splendid book co-authored in 1946-47 with Victor Serge, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*.

Many see her as inseparable from Trotsky, a faded person consigned to the background.

In fact, Dan shows Natalia Sedova as very much a person in her own right. We know that she came close to leaving Trotsky over his 1938 affair with Frida Kahlo.

Natalia was central to his life and he worked hard to repair the terrible damage he had done to their relationship. Yet in the novel she finally leaves Trotsky in the late 1940s, over the fictional second love affair, in the process becoming his political opponent. Sedova might have been gratified by well-deserved recognition accorded her, though one can imagine indignation over the way Dan does it. Yet he sees it differently: "Natalia had awakened to her own life." (364)

A Portrait of Trotsky

The Trotsky who emerges in this novel is "the dominant figure who took command of a living room, a mass meeting, or an army with equal ease." He was, of course, "a great revolutionary and fighter for freedom and progress," who may inspire "a new movement for socialism coming from below." Yet there were terrible weaknesses entwined with the strengths.

Natalia considers the strengths and weaknesses: "His intellectual genius, and his arrogance. His ability to inspire, and his inability to form warm relations with others. His political insight, and at the same time his surprising blind spots. Now with age, the liabilities seemed to be greater than his assets." (362)

In fact, Trotsky's thinking is stuck in 1917 or 1923 or 1936 — with limited relevance to the here-and-now: "He is a hero lost in time." But he is "attached to old formulas,"

finding it “difficult to give them up.” By the late 1940s, we are told, his “old theory of permanent revolution explained none” of the new developments (including revolutions in China, Indochina, and Indonesia, not to mention the forced inclusion of Eastern Europe into Stalin’s Communist Bloc).

The mass of Trotsky’s old writings of the 1930s about the turbulent developments in France still had value — they could make “a good door-stop.” Natalia feels compelled to tell him: “You have clung to your old views and your followers in France and New York have made them into a dogma. They surround you and reinforce your views, and no one among them will challenge you.” (373)

In fact, the headquarters of the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, “was located in his head,” and he scoffed at the idea of the Fourth International going on without him. Not only had Trotsky come to represent “a Bolshevism characterized by authoritarianism and intolerance,” but he had become “a megalomaniac” who was “at war with everyone.” He was increasingly a man alone, and obsessed: “I am the only one today who can lead the movement and arm a new generation. ... Everything depends on me. The fate of the world ...”

Obviously, the novel suggests, in the interest of freedom and progress and socialism from below, that one must reject the weaknesses in Trotsky that increasingly overwhelmed the strengths.

There is no doubt in my mind that some weaknesses identified in *Trotsky in Tijuana* were part of Trotsky’s makeup — although I do not think, for example, that he was a megalomaniac.

It seems to me that the strengths — in the person he was, in his political practice, and in his theoretical contributions — were in a different and far more positive political balance than Dan’s counterfactual novel allows.

The balance that *Trotsky in Tijuana* presents corresponds, it seems to me, to limitations of this novel as fully-realized literature. There is a failure to connect both Trotsky and his ideas to an essential quality in the movement of which he was part — its collectivity, the multi-dimensional reality of human beings interacting and in motion.

If we place anyone — if we place ourselves — in the actual context of our interactions with all the other human beings (each with our own complex mix of strengths and weaknesses) there is a different chemical balance than would otherwise exist if the others become abstractions or cyphers.

To the extent that we abstract ourselves from the vibrant humanity of others, the living collectivity of which we are a part, it becomes more difficult to comprehend who and what we actually are. ■

Karen Lewis, 1953-2017 By Dianne Feeley

KAREN LEWIS, THE Chicago Teachers Union president who led the game-changing 2012 strike, died February 7. As a Black educator, she fought for “The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve,” which demanded smaller class size, an innovative curriculum and the resources of nurses and social workers.

The daughter of Chicago teachers who grew up on the South Side, she taught high school chemistry for more than twenty years before being elected president in 2010 on the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) slate that swept into office that year.

CORE began as a reading group for activists. The group decided to back parents who fought against school closings. CORE challenged the school board’s austerity plans when the official union had already given up. That meant they took on Mayor Rahm Emanuel by both organizing themselves and supporting the community in their desire to have good schools.

In order to prepare for their 2012 contract, the CTU had to win a strike vote by 75% of the whole membership (not just those who voted). Of course the legislators who had passed that law believed it could block that avenue. But the invigorated union won the strike vote by 90%

and carried out a week-long strike. At its height, a poll found that two-thirds of the public school parents supported the union, not the mayor and his corporate school board. Lewis, who always had a sharp way with words put it, “They tied our hands and we still kicked their asses.”

Of course CTU didn’t win what they wanted and needed, and their saddest moment was when the school board was able to close almost 50 schools and lay off teachers, but they struck again in 2016, continuing to press for more resources.

Karen Lewis was characterized by her union as “a brawler with sharp wit and an Ivy League education.” A renaissance woman who spoke three languages and loved many kinds of music, Lewis was considering running for mayor against Emanuel in 2015 when she was diagnosed with brain cancer. In 2018 she stepped down as president, but still closely following the union’s struggle — including CTU’s protracted negotiations in 2020-21 over how to safely return to school in the midst of the pandemic.

Karen Lewis was a team player who understood the need for allies. She is survived by her husband, fellow teacher, John Lewis, and by the teachers in Chicago and across the country that she inspired. ■

Stirring the Dust of Archives — continued from page 39

connect with each other.

Reclaiming “rhythm” from theorists who see only capitalist alienation in the synchronous and repetitious labor of the masses, Ehlers foregrounds the aptitude of simplistic song-like poetry to proliferate among a fast-growing collective. Like the reproducibility of film or the radio broadcast’s immediate accessibility, the poetics forwarded by activists like Millet function primarily as a vehicle of circulation; awareness, union, and collectivity come to define a poetics that runs counter to the lineage of modernism.

Repudiating the condescension of New Criticism, Ehlers exhibits the poetry during the 1930s as a form of social praxis that does indeed have its own formal and teleological depth. Millet’s incorporation of song and rhythm becomes a means of defying the emerging modernism that hales conservative politics under the guise of being apolitical.

When the Haitian revolutionary Jacques Roumain was asked to give a lecture on culture and literature in 1939 in New York, he instead chose to discuss the war, calling it “a more urgent task than to stir the dust of archives.” (163) While Roumain was right to attune American poetics to the immediate and tangible present, Ehlers demonstrates how stirring the dust of archives is a crucial

imperative for understanding what the American lyric looks like today, “when matters of financial crisis, working-class representation, the perils of individualism, and the possibilities for global connectedness outside the flows of capital are at the forefront of thinking in the humanities.” (17)

From the standpoint of both global citizenship and poetic scholarship, Ehlers’ book articulates how what we learn in school about the arts is deeply contoured by the ebbs and flows of political history.

Ehlers recovers an archive of material that hasn’t been taught partially because of its unavailability (Millet’s manuscript on Pound, for example, wasn’t available to researchers until recently), but mostly because of its erasure. She exposes not only the faults in the ways we have been taught history, but also how we’ve been taught to read and interpret works of literature.

The impact I hope Ehlers has for each reader is to reckon with what it might mean for a poetic speaker to speak to you directly, rather than be left isolated in the fog of “poetic universality.” For any poetic universality to exist, after all, the speaker needs to unite with the reader, and with all readers to come. ■

of Iran's population is of no concern. The permanent loss of the JCPOA is looming, with dangerous implications.

The serious conflicts confronting U.S. imperialism today would be challenging even if they weren't converging together, and even if Trump hadn't left the United States in a weakened and declining position on a number of fronts.

The central axis of global rivalry today is between the established U.S. power and the rising one of China. This struggle differs in a crucial respect from the old U.S.-Soviet conflict, which was political and military but not essentially economic, as the bureaucratic Soviet bloc economies were insulated and overwhelmingly weaker. Today's China is a rising *economic* as well as political-military power, even though the United States remains clearly dominant.

China's rapidly growing technological capacity and commercial reach create a host of competitive and strategic issues — some generally positive as in supplying COVID vaccines, others less so as when China buys up agricultural assets in the Global South or bullies its neighbors in fishing waters, repeating some classic techniques of Western raw-material extraction and settler colonialism. Not only in Asia but in Africa and Latin America, Chinese investment and development projects are successfully competing with U.S. and European competition — while creating their own social and environmental contradictions, too.

At the same time, Western dependence on China for crucial supply chains (from rare-earth elements to N95 masks and PPE for frontline medical workers!) are forcing the United States and Europe to figure out rebuilding their domestic capacities.

The U.S. and international left faces the complex and tricky task of speaking uncompromisingly against the Chinese regime's brutal policies in Xinjiang and Tibet, and its broken promises and repression in Hong Kong, without playing into Washington's exploitation of these issues for its own hegemonic purposes. (For an excellent resource, see the Hong Kong solidarity activist website <https://lausan.hk>.)

A secondary but important arena is the U.S.-Russia conflict. In contrast with China's Xi Jinping, Russia's president-for-life Putin rules over a society in deep social decline, utterly incapable of engaging in economic competition with U.S. capital. Its military capacities are significant regionally (in the Syrian holocaust and on the Ukrainian border for example), but globally weak in comparison with the United States. In asymmetrical rivalry, however, Russia has sophisticated capacity in terms of cyber espionage and malicious mischief, including the ability to disrupt other countries' political processes — as, of course, U.S. imperialism has been doing for at least 75 years.

Most pressing among the profound global challenges are the inextricably combined COVID-19 pandemic and climate crises, both of which will persist: COVID until, at the very least, the world is effectively vaccinated along with adequate preparation for new outbreaks, and the climate emergency for the remainder of this century, assuming we survive it.

Environmental degradation and runaway warming (with melting permafrost, destruction of forests, and northward migration of pathogens among other consequences) effectively guarantee new pandemics, as does corporate mono-crop agriculture. And if Biden's program projects a reasonable, although overdue, first step toward controlling

COVID, it doesn't remotely grasp the environmental emergency. ("Carbon neutral by 2050" will not cut it.)

Here again, a rupture with policy and practice entrenched in the post-World War II "Permanent War Economy," and doctrines of unlimited economic expansion at any global environmental and social cost, are essential — yet beyond the capabilities of capitalist governance.

Imperialism Comes Home

The reality of imperialism for the lives of the world's people is literally brought home at the southern U.S. border where thousands of asylum seekers and refugees every day are seeking entry. As the worst obscenities of the Trump administration are now gone — its sadistic pleasure in tearing families apart and imprisoning children in cages, its gleeful and undisguised racism — the essential realities come into clearer focus.

Alarmed by the flow of migrants and rightwing blowback, Biden and Vice-President Harris pledge to address "the underlying causes" that propel migration from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in particular. But *U.S. policies themselves are the critical factors* that have entrenched death-squad and drug-cartel regimes in those countries, and blocked the possible revolutionary changes that might have liberated them. As a result, the only decent course is to LET THE REFUGEES IN.

Kevin Young puts it well: "Admitting a few more refugees and taking some climate action will have positive impact on people's lives. Unruly popular movements may force bigger changes to policy. Yet given the magnitude of the destruction that U.S. governments have visited on Latin America and the Caribbean, what stands out is the vast gulf between what Biden is likely to do and what is owed to the people of the region, who deserve far more than just a smarter empire."

Unaccompanied children, and whole families, are fleeing from U.S. "bipartisanship" in action: The Honduran regime of Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) came to power following a 2009 coup that was warmly greeted by Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State under Obama. In 2017, when Hondurans were voting for an opposition reform candidate, the Trump administration nodded approvingly as the count was halted and the president declared "reelected."

Environmental and Indigenous activists in Honduras have been murdered by the hundreds. Both JOH and his brother Tony Hernandez are named as drug criminals in the United States, where a federal court has just imposed a life sentence for Tony following his conviction.

We hear repeatedly that the United States is, or must return to being, that mythical "shining city on the hill" celebrated by Ronald Reagan during the glorious 1980s. That golden age was when the United States supported *both* Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, while sponsoring the genocidal counterrevolutionary wars in Central America the results of which have brought those desperate migrants fleeing northward.

That's imperialism: the metaphorical "shining city" dumping its garbage, raw sewage and toxic waste, both literally and figuratively, on the peoples down the hill, including much of its own population. This system needs to be fought — regardless of which capitalist party rules at the moment — for our own and humanity's survival. ■

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