

Thaddeus Stevens, Bourgeois Revolutionary ♦ On Adrienne Rich

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A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

AGAINST THE CURRENT



CLIMATE EMERGENCY!

Daniel Tanuro on Code Red

Sally Moore Goldman on the "heat dome"

Voter Suppression, Then and Now

♦ MALIK MIAH

"Hindu Exceptionalism" and COVID-19

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A Letter from the Editors: Facing the Long J6 Riot

TRUMP'S JANUARY 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol didn't begin on that day, of course. It was prepared by the outgoing president's feverish "stolen election" lies and bumbling lawsuits and cultish rightwing and social media disinformation in which a sizable sector of the Republican voting base has ensconced itself in a reality-free parallel ideological universe. More important, the J6 pseudo-insurrection didn't end then either. The United States' slide toward a potential massive political and constitutional crisis makes a looming backdrop to the present terrible unfolding season of uncontrolled wildfires, floods and a coming catastrophe of housing evictions — by the hundreds of thousands — amidst the resurgent COVID-19 pandemic.

January 6 was a lavishly televised and videoed coming-out party for the likes of the Proud Boys, Bougaloo Movement, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and the rest of the far-right militia network, ranging from comic-opera types to seriously dangerous armed and organized groupings. Some of those who stormed the Capitol thought they were truly "insurrectionists" in a mythical patriotic cause. We know from the account of General Milley of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Trump was fantasizing about, if not operationally planning, a military coup and "emergency" to stay in office.

Information emerges by the week of Trump's criminal moves to manipulate and corrupt the Justice Department and Supreme Court, state election officials and his own vice-president to cancel his election loss. But as reactionary as many of those players are in their own right, most aren't unconditional Trump-cult loyalists, and no way were the institutions of state going down in his bunker. Yes, January 6 was a vicious, violent and potentially murderous white-nationalist riot that might have gotten even worse, but hardly a proper coup. Ask the people of Burma (Myanmar), or Chile (1973) or Haiti (1991, 2004) or Honduras (2009) to tell you what a real coup looks and feels like.

To what extent the plotters and/or patsies of January 6 will be seriously prosecuted — and their enablers in medium-and-high political places exposed — remain open questions. But we're seeing now that January 6 wasn't a one-day thing but a long riot, which has continued in gerrymandered, rightwing-controlled state legislatures by other, frankly more effective means.

These of course are the voter restriction, suppression and intimidation laws cascading through dozens of states not by conspiracy but essentially in the glare of daylight, even if some of them are passed and signed into law in the dead of night. Meanwhile the six-person rightwing Supreme Court majority, which we'll now call WSCOTUS for White Supremacy Court of the United States, has signaled in the Arizona case that it's prepared to uphold the destruction of the Voting Rights Act. (For some discussion see "America's Political Crisis: Dead Center Can't Hold" posted at <https://solidarity-us.org/>, June 29, 2021.)

The Threat within the System

What's actually at stake here? President Joe Biden laid it on a bit thick in his July 13 speech calling these laws "the biggest threat to our democracy since the Civil War." That conflagration was a contest between rival social systems, which ultimately couldn't be resolved by compromise (despite decades of attempts) because of the slave system's threat of westward expansion.

Nothing of that sort of conflict is happening in today's free-market capitalist America, obviously. But African-American legislators and civil rights activists are quite right in calling out the threat of "Jim Crow 2.0," recalling the era following the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction in an infamous post-election "compromise" in 1876 that destroyed most of freed people's social, political and economic gains in the South.

But Biden's overheated "Civil War" rhetoric contrasts with his complacent assurance that heroic voter registration and turnout activism will overcome state voter-suppression laws — so no urgency to remove the filibuster on federal voting rights legislation. Angry activists have accurately warned that it's not feasible to "out-organize" voter-suppression once it's entrenched in law.

In fact, voting rights in the United States were more or less assured only in the relatively brief historical period from the passage of the historic 1965 law until 2013, when Chief WSCOTUS Justice Roberts began dismantling it on the pretext that the election of Barack Obama meant that "America has moved on," and hence federal pre-clearance of voting rules changes in southern states was antiquated.

Now the emboldened WSCOTUS majority, through Justice Alito, decrees that Arizona's law making it harder for rural Indigenous voters is perfectly OK because it doesn't actually "prohibit" them. That's the whole point, of course: a more sophisticated Jim Crow 2.0 doesn't require making it impossible for African-American or Latinx or poor communities to vote, only harder, more inconvenient and potentially nastier (with rightwing "poll observers" in Texas menacing them, for example).

In a closely divided and polarized two-party setup both at state and national levels, with tiny majorities in both houses of Congress and with the anachronistic Electoral College's ability to install a president who's lost the national election by millions of votes, strategically placed vote suppression can turn the party of an electoral minority into semi-permanent ruling status — with potentially disastrous results for democracy, for basic rights, even for the stability of the system itself.

Here's why: the longtime traditional preferred political organ of U.S. big business, the Republican Party, has morphed into a peculiar amalgam of plutocracy, white supremacy and Christian nationalism. With amazing cynicism, its leadership has embraced, enabled or passively accepted the mythos of the Trump cult. In the process this party has become a virulent mutant somewhat along the lines of the militantly racist German AfD or French "Rally," which in those countries are considered too toxic to be allowed into national government.

On the legislative level, today's Republican Party has replaced traditional "bipartisan" negotiation with near-total obstructionism when it doesn't hold the levers of power and raging-bull-in-a-China-shop methods when it

continued on the inside back cover

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Front Cover: Detroit youth lead a march as part of the Global Climate Strike, September 20, 2019. They were part of a movement in 175 counties calling for breaking dependence on fossils.

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Above: Suncor Energy's oil refinery on the St. Clair River, Sarnia, Ontario.

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One Member, One Vote for UAW Members: Taking Back Our Union

By Dianne Feeley

UNITED AUTO WORKERS (UAW) members have been scandalized as a dozen top officers were convicted in federal court of taking at least \$3.5 million in illegal deals from FCA, kickbacks from vendors and/or stealing \$1.5 million in union funds. Included were past and current International UAW presidents, Dennis Williams and Gary Jones. Although the other International Executive Board (IEB) members claim that these were “bad” apples, few believe the dozen could have managed by themselves.

Rory Gamble was quickly and unanimously elected by the IEB to serve out the rest of Jones’ term, ending in 2022. Gamble, the first African-American UAW International President, previously served as Region 1A Director for 12 years and Vice President in charge of the Ford Department since 2018. Although he promised to clean house, he comes from the same Administrative Caucus (AC) as Williams and Jones, as does every other IEB member.

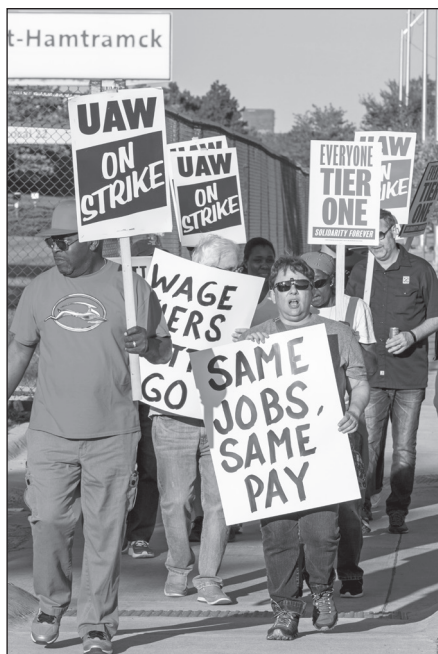
On January 29, 2021 the UAW leadership settled with the Justice Department, agreeing to a six-year oversight by a court-appointed federal monitor with extensive powers. New York attorney Neil Barofsky has been appointed to be that monitor. Barofsky previously served as assistant U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of New York.

Currently a partner at the Jenner & Block, Barofsky specializes in the law firm’s monitorship practice. He and his team are charged with monitoring elections, investigating corruption and requiring compliance with labor law. They will be paid by the UAW.

One element of the consent decree is holding a membership-wide referendum on the procedure for electing top UAW officials. Currently members elect delegates to a Constitutional Convention, held every four years, where the IEB is elected. For the past 70 years the caucus in power, the Administration Caucus, has controlled the convention.

Over the past 30 years only one person not nominated by the caucus — Jerry Tucker — was elected Regional Director. That happened only after the Labor Department ruled the initial election fraudulent and su-

Dianne Feeley is a retired autoworker active in Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD).



During the 2019 strike at General Motors, those on the picket line said they were out because they wanted everyone to earn the same wages and benefits.

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pervised the re-run. When another Regional Director, Warren Davis, disobeyed caucus rules and ran for re-election, the following day convention delegates voted to dissolve the Region.

Dissidents have long advocated for election of top officers through a one-member, one-vote system. It is viewed as the first step to end the AC stranglehold over the union.

Two years ago Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD—<https://1m1v.org>) formed to amend the UAW Constitution to provide for direct election. When the time period UAWD had allotted itself for gathering petitions ran out, 26 locals representing 60,000 members had voted their support. Short just a few more locals and 20,000 members to meet the requirement, the rank-and-file grouping planned to relaunch their petition — but federal indictments opened up another alternative.

How the Corruption Developed

Currently the Administration Caucus holds all IEB seats and runs all regional offices. In addition to being the union’s face in

its meetings with management, AC officers appoint and dismiss staff, authorize or deny local strike actions, push or bury grievances.

Through wielding this power they are able to pressure convention delegates and local officers. Particularly since the 1979 economic recession they have come to see from management’s perspective — or at least believe that management has all the cards. They have negotiated one concessionary contract after another, telling members they should feel lucky to have a union job.

Through this process of selling contracts that do not “save” jobs they have built a culture of collaboration with management. Apparently it’s not so far from hanging out with management figures to supplementing one’s salary and becoming like them.

As the Administration Caucus threaded its way through the unfolding scandals it has kept a low-key profile. In 2020, as the pandemic took hold, Gamble announced the union would work with management to make sure facilities were safe. At first they published the names of members who died from COVID along with their local. But as time went on it became harder and harder to obtain information about safety.

Meanwhile, as many organizations met over zoom, the IEB allowed locals to forgo membership meetings. Only with the end of this summer have they begun scheduling meetings.

Direct election of top officers makes sense to members — it’s the way we elect local officers. It’s also the method that the Teamsters, Machinists, Laborers, Steelworkers, American Postal Workers, United Mine Workers, UE and the Longshore and Warehouse unions use. In fact, Teamsters adopted that system in 1989 as part of a federal settlement to weed out corruption in their union.

Cleaning Up

Aware that the federal monitor can block candidates for office who do not meet an anti-corruption standard, the IEC is using the period before the referendum to reorganize. Gamble announced he was retiring this past June. He was replaced by Ray Curry, who had been elected secretary-treasurer in 2018. Previously he was Region 8 Director.

Frank Stuglin, Region 1 Director, replaced

Curry. With Vice President With Gerald Kariem's retirement, Chuck Browning moved up to Vice President in charge of the Ford Department. Between 2010-2018 he had served as an administrative assistant to the president, then became Region 1A Director.

Just as when Gamble replaced Gary Jones, these were all unanimous votes. (Vice Presidents Cindy Estrada and Terry Dittes remained in the positions for which they had been elected three years before.)

Several conclusions can be drawn from looking at these IEB actions: 1) the AC operates as a tight unit, 2) it prepares for renewal through staff appointments and developing cadre at the regional offices, and 3) this specific reorganization is to advantage IEB officers when they run as incumbents in the next election. The cards have been reshuffled but it's the same deck.

The reality is that the AC handpicks its candidates and imposes caucus discipline. Yet the corruption scandal reveals its failure to discipline its top leaders. Given the layers of the AC's control of the union, neutral referendum rules will be important in giving UAW members a chance to change direction.

The Referendum Process

The federal monitoring team is responsible for setting up and conducting the referendum and the leadership election that follows next year. For its part, the UAW leadership is responsible for providing the addresses and emails of every UAW member, including part-time and laid-off workers as well as retirees. More than a million members are eligible to vote.

As of mid-August, UAWD built a website to advocate for direct elections, printed and distributed thousands of leaflets and collected pledges of those who support one member, one vote. In contrast, there is silence from Solidarity House (where the IEB resides) and the regional offices.

Given the language of the consent decree, the Office of Labor-Management Standards ruled that no UAW resources can be used by advocates on either side. The IEB has challenged that ruling, asking to have the decree amended so that there can be at least a monitored use of union resources.

In order to meet the timetable laid out in the consent order, the federal monitoring team published the interim rules on its website (<https://www.uawmonitor.com>). Given the impasse in negotiating with the IEB, the monitor indicated that if the consent decree is amended the rules and schedule will need to be revised. For now, the summary states:

- No union or employer funds can be used for the referendum or for candidates in the subsequent election. For example, not only can there be no union funds, but no use of union resources such as computers. Union officials cannot campaign while on the

UAW clock.

- A web forum outlining the issues involved in the referendum will take place on September 29.

- Ballots will be mailed out on October 12, posing one question: continue using the delegate system or move to one member, one vote on electing the UAW's International Executive Board. Ballots will need to be mailed back within the month.

- A process of counting, verifying and announcing the results is outlined.

- If one member, one vote wins, the Constitution would be considered as amended; the next IEB election would be conducted accordingly.

So far UAWD representatives have met with the mediation team three times. The main concern is to ensure a level playing field so UAWD and other reformers can make our voices heard during the campaign.

We are opposed to the UAW IEB, a party to the consent decree, campaigning against direct elections. Given the difficulty of reaching UAW members solely by mail, we encourage the addition of electronic balloting. We strongly suggest that the monitoring team make itself accessible to members so that missing ballots or campaign violations can be immediately addressed.

What Are the Stakes?

After the history of concessionary contracts and the level of corruption that has been revealed, the membership is cynical. Yet most members aren't aware of the Administration Caucus as a political force; they just see that the leadership doesn't pay attention to their demands. But it isn't just self-centered individuals, but a political machine that stands in the way.

With direct elections, there is a chance to have meaningful discussions about what should be prioritized in bargaining, how to deal with growing inequality and how to enforce safe working conditions. Direct elections can hold top leaders accountable — but changing the culture of the union requires members to step up.

Ending two-tier wages is clearly the key membership demand, yet successive contracts include two or more tiers, increase the number of temporary workers and allow more outsourcing. A member-driven union doesn't leave the work to elected leaders, but comes together to think through its problems and possibilities, develops strategic campaigns that it carries out and then evaluates. Yet the challenge is even bigger when we consider that the companies we work for are global and the product we make is sold on a global market.

Instead of building strong relationships with autoworkers in other countries, particularly Mexico, UAW officials have encouraged a protectionist ideology. Where it has attempted to unionize U.S. plants owned by

foreign corporations, it failed to develop a reciprocal relationship with the unions in those countries, and therefore weakened its own organizing drive.

There is an interesting model about how to carry out cross-border work. The UE has sent their members to help Mexican unions on their campaigns. In turn, they brought workers from those unions to help the UE here in the United States, particularly in plants with a Latinx workforce.

It's clear that the unsuccessful union drives at Toyota and Volkswagen create a negative environment for challenging concessionary contracts. We strengthen ourselves and our demands when we are more unified. But even beyond these challenges, we face a serious issue as extreme weather teaches us that we cannot continue to use fossil fuels as our energy source.

Whatever Walter Reuther's contradictions as UAW President back in what is considered the heyday of U.S. unionism, he attempted to anticipate the future of the industry and develop a plan. In contrast, the Administration Caucus seems to close its eyes to the restructuring of the industry. More than a decade ago UAW officials supported the corporate bailout of Chrysler and General Motors, as if our interests were the same.

At that moment, a group of autoworkers came together and drove in a caravan to Washington, DC to call for the federal government, which would own the majority of the stock, to transition to producing for mass transit. Over the years Auto Worker Caravan (AWC) has continued to call for mass transit instead of individual car production, opposed tiered wages and benefits, and supported the democratization of the UAW.

Building an alternative to the expensive, individualized, hazardous and inefficient transportation system of today remains a bold but necessary vision. Even with the last GM contract and the closing of several plants, the IEB offered no alternative.

Immediate Questions

Given that the UAW calendar calls for a Constitutional Convention with the election of top officers in 2022, even if UAW members win direct elections, will there be enough of an emerging network to contest the Administration Caucus' hold on staff appointments and regional offices? For its part, the AC has built a deep bench of candidates through their institutional power.

How can the membership begin to develop a vision of the economy, and an idea about what workers might be able to contribute? That's difficult given the culture of passivity the AC promotes. Whether strategizing in locals of auto workers, state employees, nurses, graduate students or amalgamated locals, the UAW must depend on the energy of its membership. ■

The Scenario that the IPCC Does Not Model: On the Brink of the Abyss

By Daniel Tanuro

THE INTERGOVERNMENT PANEL on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group I has presented its Physical Basis Report as a contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report on climate change, due in early 2022.

The report and its summary are written in the precise style and vocabulary of scientific publications that make “objective” statements. However, never before has a report by global warming experts given such an impression of the anguish caused by the analysis of the facts in the light of the inescapable laws of physics.

Terrible Prospects...

The anguish stems first of all from the context: the terrible floods and fires that are spreading desolation, death and fear in the four corners of the planet are the very things that the IPCC has been warning against for more than 30 years, which governments have done little or nothing about.

Anguish also stems from the enormity of the fact that now — no matter what we do — humanity faces terrible prospects. Even if COP26 (the 26th UN Climate Change Summit in Glasgow this November) makes a decision to implement the *most radical* of the stabilization scenarios studied by climate scientists — the one that ensures the most rapid reduction in CO₂ emissions as well as other greenhouse gases — the fires, the floods, the droughts, the loss of fresh drinking water; these are all *here, now, and inexorably will only get worse*.

In summary:

- The Paris target will be exceeded. The global average surface temperature will probably increase by 1.6°C (+/-0.4) between 2041 and 2060 (compared to the pre-industrial era) and then decrease between 2081 and 2100 to 1.4°C (+/-0.4);

- Note that these are only *averages*: it is almost certain that the temperature on land will rise faster than on the ocean surface (probably 1.4 to 1.7 times faster). It is also virtually certain that the Arctic will continue to warm faster than the global average (most likely more than twice as fast);

- Some mid-latitude and semi-arid

regions, and the monsoon region in South America, will have the highest temperature increases on the hottest days (1.5 to 2 times the global average), while the Arctic will have the highest temperature increases on the coldest days (3 times the global average);

- On land, heat waves that used to occur once every 10 years will occur four times every 10 years, and those that used to occur only once every 50 years will occur nearly nine times over the same period;

- It is very likely that additional warming (compared to the current 1.1°C) will intensify extreme precipitation events and increase their frequency (globally, 7% more precipitation per 1°C of warming). The frequency and strength of intense tropical cyclones (categories 4-5) will also increase. Intense precipitation and associated flooding is expected to intensify and become more frequent in most parts of Africa and Asia, North America and Europe. Agricultural and ecological droughts will also be more severe and frequent in some areas, on all continents except Asia, compared to 1850-1900;

- This additional global heating (of 0.5°C +/-0.4 compared to today) will continue to amplify the melting of permafrost, and thus the release of methane. This positive feedback from global warming is not fully integrated into the models (which, despite their increasing sophistication, continue to underestimate reality).

- Ocean warming during the remainder of the 21st century is likely to be 2-4 times greater than between 1971 and 2018. Ocean stratification, acidification and deoxygenation will continue to increase. All three phenomena have negative consequences for marine life. *It will take millennia to reverse them.*

- It is almost certain that glaciers in the mountains and Greenland will continue to melt for decades, and it is likely that melting will also continue in the Antarctic;

- It is also almost certain that sea levels will rise by 0.28-0.55m in the 21st century, compared to 1995-2014. Over the next 2,000 years, it will probably continue to rise — by 2 to 3 meters — and then the movement will continue. As a result, at half the places where there are tidal gauges, exceptional tidal events that were observed once a century in the recent past will be observed

at least once a year, increasing the frequency of flooding in low-lying areas;

- Low likelihood but very high impact events could occur at the global and local level, even if warming remains within the likely range in the radical scenario (+1.6° +/-0.4°C). Even under this 1.5°C scenario, abrupt responses and tipping points — such as increased Antarctic melt and forest die-offs — cannot be ruled out.

One such unlikely but possible event is the collapse of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC). Its weakening has already been measured, but the magnitude of the phenomenon is a question mark.

A collapse would most likely cause abrupt shifts in regional weather patterns and the water cycle, such as a southward shift of the tropical rain belt, weakening of the monsoons in Africa and Asia, strengthening of the monsoons in the southern hemisphere, and drying in Europe.

... in the Best Case Scenario?

This report forces us to face reality: we are literally on the brink of the abyss. All the more so because, let us repeat and insist:

1. The projections for the sea level rise do not include the phenomena of the disintegration of the ice caps, which are non-linear and therefore cannot be modeled, and which have the potential to very quickly turn the catastrophe into a cataclysm;

2. All of the above is what the IPCC believes will happen if the world's governments decide to implement the most radical of the emission reduction scenarios studied by scientists, the scenario aimed at not going (too far) above 1.5°C.

To detail the impacts of the other scenarios would make this text unnecessarily long. Let's just give an indication, concerning sea levels: in the business-as-usual scenario, a rise of 2 meters in 2100 and 5 meters in 2150 is “not excluded.”

In the long term, over two thousand years, for a warming of 5°C, the seas would inevitably and irreversibly rise (on the human timescale) by... 19 to 22 metres!

Let's recap. Implementing the most radical scenario proposed to them is not what governments are doing. Their climate plans (the “nationally determined contributions”) are currently leading us towards a warming of

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3.5°C. With less than one hundred days to go until COP26, only a few countries have 'upped their ambitions' ... but not nearly to the necessary levels of emission reductions.

For example, the EU, the "climate champion," has set a target of 55% reduction by 2030, when 65% is needed.

Simple Math, and Political Conclusions

Greta Thunberg once said that "The climate and ecological crisis simply cannot be solved under the current political and economic systems. This is not an opinion, it is simply a matter of mathematics." She is absolutely right. You only have to look at the figures to see that:

- 1) The world emits about 40 gigatons (Gt) of CO₂ per year;
- 2) The 1.5°C carbon budget" (the total amount of CO₂ that can still be emitted globally without exceeding 1.5°C) is only 500Gt (for a 50% probability of success — for 83%, it is 300Gt);
- 3) According to the IPCC's 1.5°C special report, achieving zero net CO₂ emissions in 2050 requires reducing global emissions by 59% before 2030 (65% in developed capitalist countries, given their historical responsibility)
- 4) 80% of these emissions are due to the burning of fossil fuels which, despite the political and media hype about the breakthrough of renewables, in 2019 still accounted for... 84% (!) of humanity's energy needs;
- 5) Fossil infrastructures (mines, pipelines, refineries, gas terminals, power stations, etc.) — construction of which is not slowing down, or hardly at all — are major facilities in which capital is invested for some 40 years. Their ultra-centralized network cannot be adapted to renewables (they require another, decentralized energy system): it must be destroyed before capitalists can recoup their investments, and the reserves of coal, oil and natural gas must remain underground.

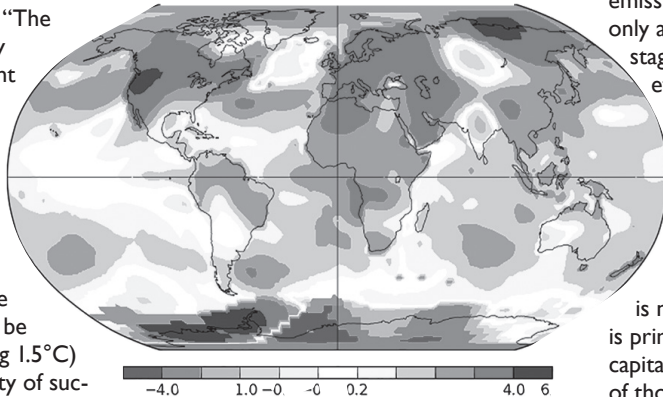
Therefore, knowing that three billion human beings lack the essentials and that the richest 10% of the population emit more than 50% of global CO₂, the conclusion is unavoidable: changing the energy system to stay below 1.5°C while devoting more energy to satisfying the legitimate rights of the poor is strictly incompatible with the continuation of capitalist accumulation that generates ecological destruction and growing social inequalities.

The catastrophe can only be stopped in a manner worthy of our humanity by a double movement, consisting of reducing global production and radically reorienting it to serve real human needs, those of the majority, democratically determined.

This double movement necessarily involves the suppression of useless or harmful production and the expropriation of capitalist monopolies — first and foremost

in energy, finance and agribusiness. It also requires a drastic reduction in the extravagant consumption of the rich.

In other words, the alternative is dramatically simple: *either humanity will liquidate capitalism, or capitalism will liquidate millions of innocent people to continue its barbaric course on a maimed, and perhaps unlivable, planet.*



Comparing rise in world temperatures from 1951-80 period with those of June 2021. NASA

Robbers Unite

It goes without saying that the masters of the world have no desire to liquidate capitalism... What will they do then? Let's leave aside the climate deniers like Trump, those followers of Malthus who are betting on a fossil fuel neo-fascism — a plunge into planetary barbarism on the backs of the poor.

Let's also leave aside the Musks and the Bezos, those obscene billionaires who dream of leaving the ship Earth made unlivable by their greedy capitalist parasites.

Let's focus on the other, more cunning ones — the Macrons, Biden, Von der Leyen, Johnson, Xi Jinping... — those who will fight like brigands for the Glasgow agreement to give them an advantage over their competitors, but will stick together in front of the media to try to persuade us that "everything is under control."

To escape the above alternative, what do these gentlemen propose? First of course, making consumers feel guilty and asking them to "change their behavior," on pain of sanctions. Then a set of tricks, some of which are downright crude (the failure to take into account emissions from international air and sea transport, for example), and others which are more subtle but no more effective (for example, the assertion that planting trees — in the global South — would make it possible to absorb enough carbon to sustainably compensate for the fossil CO₂ emissions of the North).

But beyond these tricks, all these political managers of capital now believe (or pretend to believe) in a silver bullet, increasing the share of "low-carbon technologies" (code name for nuclear power, especially "micro-power plants") and, above all, deploying so-called "negative-emission technologies"

(NETs — or CDRs, for Carbon Dioxide Removal), which are supposed to cool down the climate by removing huge quantities of CO₂ from the atmosphere to be stored underground. This is the so-called "temporary overshoot of the danger threshold" of 1.5°C.

There is no need to dwell on nuclear power after Fukushima. As for "negative emission technologies," most of them are only at the prototype or demonstration stage, and their social and ecological effects promise to be terrifying (more on this later).

Nevertheless, we are led to believe that they will save the productivist/consumerist system and that the free market will take care of deploying them.

In truth, this science fiction scenario is not primarily about saving the planet: it is primarily about saving the sacred cow of capitalist growth and protecting the profits of those most responsible for the mess: the oil, coal, gas and agribusiness multinationals.

Between Science and Ideology

And what does the IPCC think of this madness? Adaptation and mitigation strategies are not part of Working Group I's task. However, it does make scientific considerations that should be taken into account by the other Working Groups.

On NETs, it is careful not to rush to the brink. The Summary for Policy Makers states:

"Anthropogenic CO₂ removal (CDR) has the potential to remove CO₂ from the atmosphere and durably store it in reservoirs (high confidence)."

The Physical Basis Report goes on to say: *"CDR aims to compensate for residual emissions to reach net zero CO₂ or net zero GHG emissions or, if implemented at a scale where anthropogenic removals exceed anthropogenic emissions, to lower surface temperature."*

Clearly, the summary endorses the idea that negative emission technologies could not only be deployed to capture "residual emissions" from sectors where decarbonization is technically difficult (e.g. aviation).

They could also be implemented on a massive scale, to compensate for the fact that global capitalism, for reasons that are not "technical" but profit-driven, refuses to give up fossil fuels. The text goes on to extol the benefits of this massive deployment as a means of achieving net negative emissions in the second half of the century:

"Anthropogenic CO₂ removal (CDR) leading to global net negative emissions would lower the atmospheric CO₂ concentration and reverse surface ocean acidification (high confidence)." (both above quotations from D1.5 page 39)

The summary makes cryptic caveat:

"CDR methods can have potentially wide-ranging effects on biogeochemical cycles and climate, which can either weaken or strengthen the potential of these methods to

remove CO₂ and reduce warming, and can also influence water availability and quality, food production and biodiversity (high confidence)."

It is not clear that NETs are all that effective, as some "effects" could "weaken (their) potential to remove CO₂."

The last part of this sentence refers to social and ecological impacts: bioenergy with carbon capture and sequestration (BECCS), the most mature NETs today) could only significantly reduce atmospheric CO₂ concentration if an area equal to more than a quarter of today's permanently cultivated land was used to produce biomass — at the expense of water supplies, biodiversity, and/or feeding the world's population. (See my book, *Trop tard pour être pessimistes*, 2020).

On the one hand, the IPCC Working Group I bases itself on the physical laws of the climate system to tell us that we are on the brink of the abyss, on the verge of irreversibly tipping over into an unimaginable cataclysm. On the other, it objectifies and trivializes the political-technological headlong rush by which capitalism is once again trying to postpone the irreconcilable antagonism between its logic of unlimited profit accumulation and the limits of the planet.

"Never before has an IPCC report given off such a strong sense of the anguish caused by the scientific analysis of the facts in the light of the inescapable laws of physics," we wrote at the beginning of this article. Never before has such a report illustrated so

clearly that a scientific analysis that considers nature as a mechanism and the laws of profit as laws of physics is not really scientific but scientific, i.e. at least partly ideological.

The IPCC WG I report should therefore be read with the understanding that it is both the best and the worst of things. The best, because it provides a rigorous diagnosis from which to draw excellent arguments for indicting those in power and their political representatives.

The worst, because it spreads both fear and powerlessness... from which the powerful benefit even though the diagnosis accuses them! Its scientific ideology drowns the critical spirit in the flood of "data. It thus

continued on next page

Life Under the Heat Dome: Oregon's Bootleg Fire

By Sally Moore Goldman

AS PEOPLE AROUND the country have seen on the news, ferocious fires are coming out of the Pacific northwest, particularly Washington, Oregon and California. Typically the wildfire season develops in August. This is what Oregonians expect and prepare for. However this year has been different. Spring was abnormally dry with low snowpack levels, adding to the persistent drought over the past 20 years.

Fires this year started in May, the earliest ever recorded. By early July, temperatures were in the nineties or triple digits for several days in towns across the state.

The Bootleg Fire, classified by InciWeb as this year's largest national wildfire began on July 6th. Located near Bly, in south central Oregon, it bulldozed through 413,717 acres of forests, grazing and farm land.

The fire burned some 70 homes, mostly cabins. Over 2000 homes were ordered evacuated and an additional 5000 threatened. Sparked by lightning and pushed by strong winds and critically dry weather, the fire expanded up to four miles a day.

By July 18, the Medford National Weather Service Forecast Office reported that "extreme fire behavior, dry fuels and unstable atmosphere" formed a tornado in the Bootleg Fire, ripping trees from their roots. Smoke output that day generated pyrocumulus clouds rising as high as 30,000 or 40,000 feet, where commercial airplanes fly. "Prior to last year, there had been only two well-documented tornado strength vortices generated by fires," according to Neil Lareau, from the National Science Foundation.

Strong winds carried the smoke all the way to New York City. The Big Apple looked like a smog day in the 1970s where the sun was orange.

Sally Moore Goldman is a retired accountant, activist and a supporter of Solidarity.

Haze hung over New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Some areas recommended that people remain inside because of the air quality. The smoke covered a large portion of the U.S. east coast.



Fires blazing in the Oregon mountains.

Back in Oregon, as the inferno got closer to farms and grazing land, most ranchers released their livestock from pastures and pens with the hope that they could find safety. One rancher tracked down and recovered 95 of their animals, but an additional 45 cows and 81 calves were still missing.

Area ranchers and landowners have been euthanizing injured and dying animals. Around half of recovered animals have burned feet or eyes and one cow had died of smoke inhalation. To understand the toll the fire takes on people and animals, one rancher remarked "Apparently, if their (the cows) feet are burnt (where hooves are coming away) they don't heal. You can't bring them home to doctor them, so you have to put them out of their misery."

Another rancher commented "I have been here 20 years. And I've fought eight fires, maybe this one is the ninth...." he said. "But nothing to this magnitude has threat-

ened livestock before."

The Bootleg Fire is now 100% contained after 39 days of 2400 firefighters combating the blazes. Local crews including our small community of Lincoln County who sent 14 members and the National Guard had been deployed. Teams from Utah and California were also put into action. The fire commander confronting Oregon's third largest fire had to utilize a historic amount of resources, and deal with a coronavirus outbreak of at least nine firefighters who tested positive with mild symptoms.

Don't think that the coast line of the state is immune to fires. Last year the Echo Mountain Complex fire reached to Otis, Oregon, an area only five miles from the ocean. The fire covered 2500 square feet in the town and destroyed half of its structures — 298 houses and 339 other structures.

The flames from this fire also jumped over Highway 101 where smoke lingered from the previous night. As a result, we had to evacuate — and we only live two-and-a-half blocks from the ocean. Luckily we were able to return the next day.

But now, many Oregonians don't view summer as a consistently pleasant event. Instead we must be prepared to leave "as if we may never come back."

My husband and I have our suitcases filled with necessary clothes, items for daily living like toothpaste, soap, important papers like banking information and passports. I have a list on the refrigerator to remind me what to take — our medicine pills, purse, eyeglasses, lab tops and special photos. Our car is equipped for such an emergency with water, dry food, blankets and an extra gas can.

As of August 17, eleven fires have burned 206,440 more acres. ■

Alabama Strike Continues

By Zack Carter and Dianne Feeley

ELEVEN HUNDRED BROOKWOOD coal miners have been out on strike since April 1st. They took concessions in their last contract, negotiated in 2016 with Warrior Met Coal after the previous owner Jim Walter Resources, went bankrupt. Agreeing to a range of concessions in order to keep the mine from closing, members of UMWA Locals 2245, 2397, 2368 and 2427 received a promise from the mine's new owner that they would be rewarded in the next contract.

The miners, who dig or process metallurgical-grade coal used in steel, agreed to a \$6 an hour pay cut, reduced health care coverage and a seven-day work week with little overtime pay. While the industry standard is \$30 an hour, they make \$23 with only three paid holidays a year. The unending pace of work — compounded by a four-absences-for-any-reason-and-you're-fired policy — has added to the unsafe working conditions.

Over the five years of the contract, Warrior Met Coal — formed by a group of investors including Black Rock Fund Advisors, State Street Global Advisors and Renaissance — has become profitable. Last year alone its top five officers raked in more than nine million dollars in their total compensation packages.

Yet when it came time to negotiate the new contract, Warrior Met only offered a dollar an hour raise and added fifty cents more in the contract's third year. Management refused to budge on working conditions and health care coverage. For their part, miners viewed the proposed contract an insult and voted it down 1006 to 45.

Pickets are up at the dozen mine entrances. For its part, Warrior Met is employing scabs, has a court injunction limiting the number of pickets to a handful, calls state and local police to patrol as well as using its own security for surveillance and intimidation. Several trucks have driven into the picket lines and strikers ended up in the hospital.

On May 25, hundreds of miners and their

Zack Carter is a longtime trade union and community activist. Currently he serves on SOS Steering Committee.



Strikers and their families gather at Tannehill State Park.

families marched to Warrior Met Coal #7 Mine's North Portal to prevent scabs from entering or leaving. Eleven were arrested for trespassing and held overnight in the Tuscaloosa County Jail.

On Wednesdays, the UMWA organizes mass meetings at the historic Tannehill State Park, near Birmingham. Speakers have included local and regional UMWA officials as well as Sara Nelson, international president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO. With the help of the UMWA District 20, miners and their families traveled by bus to Wall Street in June and again in July to picket and rally, meeting up with New York City trade unionists. Miners led the chants:

On the Brink of the Abyss — *continued from page 6*

diverts attention from the systemic causes, with two consequences:

1) Attention is focused on "behavioral change" and other individual actions — full of good will but pathetically insufficient.

2) Instead of helping to bridge the gap between ecological and social awareness, scientism maintains it.

Ecologizing the social and socializing ecology is the only strategy that can stop the catastrophe and revive the hope of a better life. A life of caring for people and ecosystems, now

event on voting rights held in a park a few miles south of the Shelby County Courthouse.

The Women's Auxiliary has organized a pantry to provide groceries for families and raised funds so children would have new supplies when they went back to school. To send funds directly to the auxiliary, go to <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/UMWA-StrikePantry>.

To read strike updates, go to <https://umwa.org/>. You can send funds via <https://umwa.org/umwa2021strikefund> or mail the UMWA, 2021 Strike Aid Fund, P.O. Box 513, Dumfries, VA 22026. ■

"No Contract, No Coal! Warrior Met Has No Soul."

In their multiracial solidarity with the struggle to restore voting rights, several UMWA locals joined a broad coalition that includes the Alabama NAACP, Poor People's Campaign, Lift Our Vote and Saving OurSelves for Justice & Democracy (SOS).

On June 25, the eighth anniversary of the *Shelby County vs. Holder* Supreme Court decision that struck down a critical section of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, striking coal miners attended a panel and

and in the long term. A simple, joyful and meaningful life. A life that the IPCC scenarios never model, where the production of use values for the satisfaction of real needs, democratically determined in respect of nature, replaces the production of goods for the profit of a minority.

This ecosocialist alternative scenario will not be modeled by the IPCC. It is rational and feasible, but can only grow from the solidarity and the self-organized struggles of the exploited and oppressed. —August 9, 2021

Why Do Socialists Oppose Zionism? By David Finkel

[THE FOLLOWING NOTES are a very sketchy primer. It is not a detailed historical analysis nor a discussion of the Palestinian liberation struggle. The readings cited at the end provide some background and insight on these critical subjects.]

1) *Zionism is often called, by its proponents, “the national liberation movement of the Jewish people.”* That claim is not only false, but nonsense. Jews of the world constitute partially overlapping communities loosely connected by historical experience, culture and what used to be common religious practices — or memories of common practices. There is certainly such a thing as Jewish identity (or identities), but nothing like global nationality: the Jewish people of the world aren’t a nation or any kind of collective political entity.

Additionally, the Zionist movement didn’t aim to organize the Jewish population against its oppressors, but to transplant Jews to a different place (often in fact with the assistance of those same oppressors). Out of this plan came another absurd ideological claim that Palestine was “a land without a people for a people without land.”

Zionist leaders themselves knew perfectly well that Palestine was inhabited — but in the ethos of 19th and early 20th century colonialism, they considered its population to be so “backward” and without culture as to be of no importance. In the same spirit, the European Zionist leadership also looked down on the *Mizrahi* (Middle Eastern and North African) Jews, who from the early period of Zionist settlement through the establishment of the state were recruited as a source of labor, in preference to hiring Palestinian Arabs.

2) *Although Zionism isn’t and never was a “national liberation movement,” it WAS very much an outgrowth of 19th century European nationalism.* In eastern and central Europe, rising nationalist movements both set an example, and often made life increasingly difficult, for Jewish populations. In particular, there was a Jewish nationality in 19th century eastern Europe, oppressed and economically distressed and periodically subjected to violent attacks. (This disaster developed for complex historical reasons from the middle

of the 17th century, particularly following the disintegration of the medieval Polish kingdom where Jews had been protected and lived reasonably comfortably.)

Under the Russian Tsarist regime, Jewish life also deteriorated disastrously in the late 19th century. This crisis created a fertile ground for nationalist as well as socialist, anarchist and liberal ferment.

In this context, Zionism arose as a nationalism of a peculiar type, aiming to transplant a population rather than liberate it on its own soil. It was bitterly opposed by the progressive Jewish nationalist movement in eastern Europe, the Bund, which envisioned Jewish liberation as part of an overall social transformation; by Jews in the broader Russian revolutionary movement; and by Jewish liberal currents and by rabbinical authorities.

3) *Although a minority movement, political Zionism — the quest for an “independent Jewish state” in Palestine — from its inception was attached to the search for colonial sponsorship.* It was able to supersede other Zionist visions such as a Jewish spiritual homeland or binational state. (When we say “Zionism” today it means statist political Zionism unless otherwise specified.)

This dominant Zionist movement was also, inevitably, what we now call a colonial-settler enterprise. Its historic leaders — from Theodore Herzl to the “leftist” Ben-Gurion and militant rightwinger Vladimir Jabotinsky — were neither ashamed of this, nor shy about it. Zionist settlement and the incremental takeover of Palestinian land was enabled and protected by British colonialism under the post-WWI “mandate” period (the 1920s up to 1939) — always against Palestinian protest and resistance.

4) *Prior to WWII Zionism remained very much a minority movement among Jews in Europe and globally.* The Nazi genocide, and the post-WWII re-division of the world, changed everything — and not only in Palestine, of course. In the war’s aftermath, hundreds of thousands of stateless Jewish refugees from Europe ended up in Palestine, some by choice but many because all other options were closed to them. The chaotic end of the British Mandate, along with a hasty and ill-conceived United Nations “partition” plan, resulted in the unilateral declaration of the

State of Israel, war, and the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians between 1947-49. Large-scale immigration of Jews from Arab countries also followed in the 1950s in the context of nationalist upheavals there.

The victory of Israel in the 1948 war was not “a miracle against all odds” but rather a result of superior military and political organization, effective mobilization of the Yishuv (Jewish population), superior weaponry after an arms shipment from Czechoslovakia early in the fighting — and detailed advance planning for the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages and expulsion of their inhabitants.

5) *From 1948 to 1967 to the present, a series of wars, further ethnic cleansing, and after 1967, settlements in the West Bank (and until the early 2000s, Gaza) shaped the further evolution of the Israeli state.* Israel’s overwhelming military superiority, fully backed and guaranteed by the United States, has been an established fact for over half a century. Until 1977, its politics were dominated by the Labor Zionist establishment; since the mid-1980s, Israel has followed the model of unabashed neoliberal capitalism, leaving behind its early “socialist” pretensions and becoming a hugely unequal society.

Israel’s 1948 declaration of independence had promised a democratic society without communal or religious discrimination. Reality has made that promise increasingly a dead letter, culminating in the “nation-state of the Jewish people” law, passed as a “basic law” with the equivalent of constitutional status. (Israel has never adopted an actual Constitution, partly because it claims to represent Jews of the whole world, not only its own citizenry.)

There are hundreds of discriminatory laws and practices that make a mockery of the idea of the “Jewish and democratic state” that Israeli *hasbara* (propaganda) claims it to be. The present ethnic cleansing of East Jerusalem Palestinian Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighborhoods is among the latest examples.

In short, it’s impossible to hide the reality that Israel today is an overtly Jewish-supremacist state, with many features of apartheid although of course it’s not identical to the South African example. This is the product of what Professor Rashid Khalidi calls “the hundred years’ war on Palestine.” Whether the

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Zionist enterprise might have produced a different outcome is a matter of speculation, but that can't distract today's social justice and solidarity movements from facing the actually existing "facts on the ground."

That's why an increasing proportion of the U.S. population, particularly younger folks including Jewish Americans, have become critical of unquestioning U.S. military and political support of Israel, and why the BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) movement in support of Palestinian rights has grown dramatically in the United States and internationally. And it's why the Israeli government is trying to use U.S. courts and Congress to criminalize the movement.

6) *It's also a matter of speculation whether a "two-state solution" might once have provided at least a partial resolution of the tragedy.* Israel's *de facto* absorption of the post-1967 Occupied Palestinian Territories, aided and abetted by U.S. policies, has wiped out that possibility although it remains a staple of time-wasting diplomatic rhetoric. The real-life situation is a single colonial-apartheid state with two nationalities, an Israeli-Jewish oppressor nation and the oppressed Palestinian nation

It's absolutely necessary to support all struggles that point toward *equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians* within the Israeli state, including BDS, and all struggles against what Human Rights Watch accurately calls Israel's "crimes of apartheid and persecution." From a socialist perspective, however, there is no short-term "solution" especially within the borders of this small territory.

We believe that a *socialist transformation* will be needed in order to tear down the state structures of oppression and racism that political Zionism has created — which are now inextricably intertwined with Israeli and regional capitalism — and to open a future of national equality, democracy and freedom from oppression for Arab Palestinians, Jewish Israelis and minority communities in historic Palestine. We offer no "blueprint" for how those peoples will freely construct their own future.

We do believe that it will require a revolutionary democratic transformation of the Middle East region, no matter how permanent the forces of imperialism and reaction may appear today. ■

7) *Selected readings:*

Human Rights Watch, "A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution," www.hrw.org, April 24, 2021.

Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. One World Oxford, 2006.

Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine. A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Company, 2020.

Jeff Halper, *War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification*. Pluto Press, 2015, and *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine. Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and the Case for One Democratic State*. Pluto Press, 2021 (reviewed in ATC 213).

Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust. The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*. Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Company, 2010.

Essays by Moshé Machover, *Israelis and Palestinians. Conflict and Resolution*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.

Jenny Bourne, "Homelands of the Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics," *Race and Class* 29:1 (July 1987): 1-24.

Occupied East Jerusalem: An Ethnic Cleansing Rampage

EVEN BY THE degraded standards of Israeli jurisprudence, this Supreme Court "compromise offer" was particularly appalling as well as cowardly:

"Under the Israeli high court proposal, four Palestinian families and dozens of others threatened with forced expulsion from the [East Jerusalem] Sheikh Jarrah would remain in the neighborhood as 'protected tenants' who could not be evicted, as long as they acknowledged that Nahalat Shimon Company — a right-wing settler organization dating back to the early years of Zionist colonization of Palestine — as the rightful owner, and paid it NIS 1500 (\$465) in annual rent." (Brett Wilkins, Common Dreams online, August 3, 2021)

The settler company claims "Jewish ownership" of the Sheikh Jarrah homes on the basis that Jewish residents — who have no connection to the Nahalat Shimon outfit — had to flee when Jordan took over East Jerusalem in the 1948 fighting. Meanwhile under Israeli law, Palestinians forced out of their West Jerusalem homes, who were resettled in Sheikh Jarrah under Jordanian authority (1948-1967), are forbidden to reclaim their own family homes.

The pending Sheikh Jarrah evictions were the flashpoint for Palestinian youth protests and brutal Israeli repression leading up to the twelve-day Israel-Hamas confrontation earlier this year. Israel's Supreme Court at the time postponed the evictions and has



improvised this sickening "compromise" — based on no legal or logical foundation whatsoever — to defuse a still-explosive situation. Sheikh Jarrah residents, of course, immediately rejected it. "The minute we pay rent for our homes, it means we have given up ownership," said one.

In the nearby Silwan neighborhood, Palestinian families are facing eviction — some already forced to demolish their own homes — for the construction of a "City of David" theme park, a tourist monstrosity to

celebrate the myth-encrusted Biblical story of the ancient Judean king. It's one of the sickest examples one can find of the weaponization of religion and religious legend (similar in fact to what's happening in Modi's India, discussed by Mona Bhan and Purnima Bose in this issue of *Against the Current*).

While court battles remain to be fought, the ethnic cleansing rampage — and resistance — continues in occupied East Jerusalem and all over Palestine, with consequences that are difficult to contemplate. — D.F.

Allies and Direct Action Needed Now! Confronting Voter Suppression

By Malik Miah

VOTING RIGHTS ARE under siege.

The right to vote without restrictions is an existential citizenship issue for African Americans. Other ethnic national minorities believe likewise. Progressive-minded whites also see the issue that way.

However, the Biden Administration does not. President Biden in a July 13 speech in Philadelphia attacked the Republican effort to overturn the will of the voters but laid out no action plan to stop it.

He then began a national tour to promote an infrastructure deal with Republicans that does not include defense of voting rights.

To civil rights and Black Lives Matter (BLM) leaders and other on the ground activists, this was a slap in the face. Immediately Black women took the lead in organizing protests at the Capitol and Supreme Court to demand protections for the right to vote.

The actions included Black elected officials and leaders of major civil rights groups. More than 150 civil rights groups sent a letter to the White House and Congress to “do whatever means necessary” to defend voting rights.

Acts of civil disobedience have led to arrests; more are planned until federal laws are passed and enforced.

The arrest of these African American leaders stands in contrast to how Trump backers were treated after the January 6 insurrection, allowed to walk out of the Capitol building without handcuffs or even their names taken down by the National Guard and police.

Missing Allies

All-Black actions, however, are not enough to stop the coordinated voter suppression efforts of right-wing state legislatures. What’s missing so far at these direct-action protests are movement allies.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ended legal segregation in the South, did not only impact Blacks. The movements of Latinos, women, gay people and the disabled have all used that law to advance their rights.

These allies need to step up and participate at civil disobedience protests, as

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In addition to allowing more absentee voting because of the pandemic, some states had recently stipulated all who requested an absentee ballot receive one. But many legislatures refused to allow election staff to open the envelopes or conduct a count before Election Day. <https://jimwestphoto.com>

occurred last year during the anti-police violence marches after the police murder of George Floyd.

Not waiting for the Biden government, more marches and rallies are planned. These include rallies and marches on August 28, the anniversary of the March on Washington in 1963 led by Martin Luther King Jr. His son, Martin Luther King III, is one of the organizers.

Fleeing Texas

In a dramatic and well-planned action, 50 elected Democratic state legislators in Texas took the unusual step to leave their state and travel to Washington, D.C., to push Congress and the Biden government to act.

Texas Democrats argue that without federal laws, hard-right Republicans will win elections with a minority of voters. Republicans will use their unchecked political power on a range of issues that harm the vast majority of working people.

Many Texas Republican officials openly say their goal is to limit the number of Democratic Party voters, especially urban Black people. In the 2020 elections, 11 million people voted and the Republican Secretary

of State said only 44 voters had possibly voted in error. That person has since been removed from office.

The *Texas Tribune*, widely read across the state, described why the Democrats left the state:

“On July 12, Texas House Democrats packed their bags and headed for the nation’s capital in a high-profile effort to block passage of GOP-backed voting restrictions.

“Democrats hoped their exodus would break what’s called a quorum — the minimum number of lawmakers needed to conduct business — so Republicans couldn’t pass legislation that could ban drive-thru and 24-hour voting, among other sweeping restrictions” (July 14)

Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott said the legislators, when they return, will be apprehended and brought back to the legislative body to get a quorum. Texas does not have authority to do so in Washington, D.C. where they intend to stay for a month until the “special” state legislative session closes.

Meanwhile in Arizona an ongoing fake “audit” by a Trump-allied firm continues. Trump told a rally in Phoenix on July 24 that stopping ballot fraud is the top issue for his supporters.

An Associated Press review of the Arizona ballots of the 2020 election showed only 182 “possible” ballots with issues. That’s out of three million votes cast. Only four ballots were found with a problem — two from Republicans, two from Democrats.

Crisis of the System

There is a crisis of U.S. bourgeois democracy. Because of former President Donald Trump’s big lie that he won the 2020 presidential election, 47% of Republicans say President Biden is not legitimate. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans say voting is not a right but a privilege.

The United States tells the world it’s the essence of democratic rule, calling itself a 245-year experiment. Yet for most of that history, Black, Latino, Asian and especially Indigenous peoples were excluded from the “democracy” except as super-exploited labor.

Democrats and those who disagree with Trump are seen as enemies. That’s why the January 6 insurrection occurred even though it failed. Trump is behind the effort to restrict voting.

Without effective resistance, voting rights can be restricted. After the slaveholders lost the Civil War, the country was at a crossroads. It could become a new democracy based on ideals of equality and freedom, or one based on skin color and national oppression of nonwhites.

The decision chosen was not inevitable. It could have built a society based in the original words of the Declaration of Independence authors that “all men are created equal.”

That course was rejected, because most whites did not see Black people as their equals. Racism ran deep.

The rulers decided that the newly freed citizens would not be treated like white citizens. Effective power was restored to the defeated Confederacy.

A colorblind society was never a goal before or after the Civil War. Black super-exploited labor, yes; voting rights, no.

Under the principle of “state rights” the bankers and manufacturers of the North allowed white terrorism to flourish. It was a brutal process as racist “Black codes” and then Jim Crow laws were imposed that turned citizenship hollow for former slaves.

Martin Luther King Jr expressed the hopes of African Americans: “I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” (From the “I have a dream” speech)

Role of Supreme Court

The Supreme Court’s role has been central in the recent undermining of voting rights. The Court is an unelected body with

nine members, appointed by presidents, approved by the Senate, and holding lifetime seats.

Historically the court has lagged popular will and been used by the rulers to slow down or reverse changes supported by society. Typically it responds to big events before modifying positions.

The issue of voting rights has been no different. Before the Civil War, the Court ruled in 1857 in the infamous Dred Scott case that Black people could not be citizens. The Constitution’s rights only applied to whites.

“The Freedom Amendments” for example, which said Black people were citizens, were never fully implemented. The 13th Amendment, adopted in 1865, that ended slavery still allowed forced labor in prisons and thus a new form of slavery.

The 15th Amendment, adopted in 1868, said the right to vote applied to all. But, again, it allowed its implementation by state governments. The Supreme Court rejected federal oversight as a violation of “state rights” until the 1965 Voting Rights Act was enacted.

The Supreme Court in 2013 saw its role to return to the pre-1965 regulations. The Chief Justice John Roberts, a longtime opponent of the Voting Rights Act, wrote the decision that declared the law was outdated since Black people can vote in all states.

Roberts’ majority ruling gutted the key Section 5 that allowed the Justice Department to stop new state laws before they went into effect. Not anymore.

The 2021 court voted 6-3 in its Arizona case to overturn Section 2 that allowed the Justice Department and lower courts to overturn new laws that discriminate in practice. The decision effectively nullifies the 1965 law.

The key paragraphs in the Supreme Court’s Arizona decision written by Samuel Alito makes clear that ostensibly small-scale minor discrimination is legal:

“The size of any disparities in a rule’s impact on members of different racial or ethnic groups is a crucial factor to consider. Even neutral regulations may well result in disparities in rates of voting and noncompliance with voting rules. The mere fact that there is some disparity in impact does not necessarily mean that a system is not equally open or that it does not give everyone an equal opportunity to vote. And small disparities should not be artificially magnified.” (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/19-1257_g204.pdf)

During the period of American apartheid, called Jim Crow, the laws rarely if ever mentioned specific discrimination directed at Blacks. Yet few Black people could register and vote throughout the South.

What’s Needed

The movement against voting rights is serious. Liberals and the Biden government

have spoken loudly but have no effective strategy to stop the right wing.

Kamala Harris told Black women activists that they must get out the vote even though the restrictions can stop the results. She said the government will spend \$25 million. At least 20 times that is needed.

The historic legislation of 1965, which President Johnson signed into law, outlawed literacy tests and provided for the appointment of federal examiners (with the power to register qualified citizens to vote) in those jurisdictions that were “covered” according to a formula provided in the statute.

To give one example of the impact of the 1965 law for Black people, in the state of Mississippi only 6.7% of African Americans were registered in 1964. After the law was passed, registration jumped to 58%.

Segregationists and defenders of the Confederate legacy never supported the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Attempted state rollbacks began immediately. Waiting for the Senate to pass a new federal law would be to allow the right wing to win at the state level.

A new stage of the counter revolution is ongoing. Will it be Jim Crow 2.0?

Road Ahead

President Biden continues to defend a Jim Crow relic, the filibuster. It is an arcane Senate rule that requires a super majority, 60 out of 100 votes, to bring legislation to a vote.

He continues to call on his “Republican friends in the Senate” to support voting rights. Biden and Harris see the effort as getting people to vote around and through obstacles, even though Republicans can use the laws to overturn the voters’ will.

The White House continues to see the issue as secondary to other concerns such as foreign policy and domestic bipartisan support for infrastructure.

African Americans do not see it that way. But until all U.S. citizens and residents see the right to vote as essential to bring about change, little legislation for change is possible.

The end of 19th century slavery and 20th century Jim Crow legal segregation were not fueled by legislation or courts. The first took a revolutionary civil war and the second required mass civil disobedience led by the Black community.

What Texas Democrats have done by stopping for now a quorum and coming to the Capital is an important form of resistance. It is a call to action.

More must be done now. The people of all ethnic groups need to hit the streets, as the Black Lives Matter movement did in 2020. ■

Thaddeus Stevens: Bourgeois Revolutionary

By Bruce Levine

THE AMERICAN AND French Revolutions of the late 18th century opened an era marked by what Marxists call bourgeois-democratic revolutions.¹ These are struggles to overturn pre-capitalist social relations and institutions and to win “bourgeois-democratic rights” — rights, that is, that abet the development of capitalism or, at least, do not intrinsically challenge capitalism’s existence.

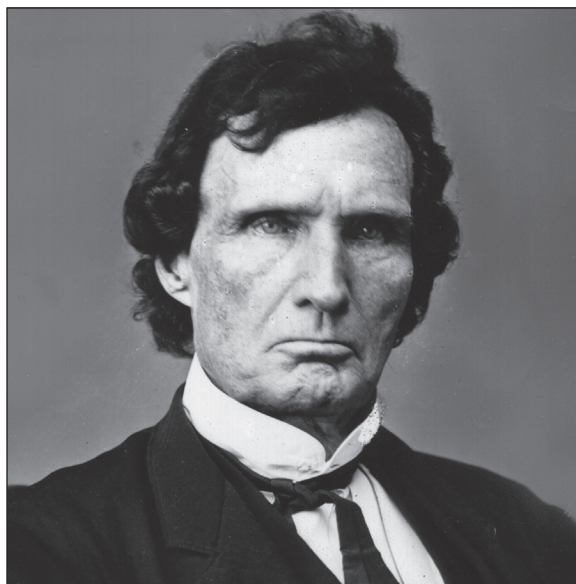
Such rights include national unification and independence; republican rather than monarchical or other authoritarian forms of government; personal civil, legal, and political equality; and land reform, including the removal of feudal or other oppressive pre-capitalist relations on the land.

The Civil War waged in the United States between 1861 and 1865 belonged to this family of revolutions. The Union forces in that war at first fought principally to resist the nation’s dismemberment at slaveowners’ hands. But eventually the Union’s war program expanded to include emancipation of the South’s slaves, who accounted for almost forty percent of the population of the insurrectionary states.

That, as Karl Marx recognized from afar, represented “a gigantic revolution” in U.S. society.² The Pennsylvanian congressman Thaddeus Stevens played a leading role in that revolution. Rather than summarize my recently published book about Stevens, this essay tries to elaborate further some themes that may be of particular interest to readers of this journal.³

The Role of Leadership

But neither Abraham Lincoln nor his party’s majority set out at first to impose such a radical social change upon the South. It was, instead, the intrinsic logic of the war-time conflict — the necessity of attacking-



Civil War era photo of Thaddeus Stevens by Matthew Brady.

slavery in order to defeat the slaveholders’ insurrection — that led the Union president and his party as a whole, step by step, into what Lincoln finally acknowledged to be “a revolution of labor.”

But of course, the intrinsic logic of a situation does not by itself ensure its translation into appropriate action, does not ensure that those involved will be guided by that logic in their conduct. For that to happen, someone must first of all recognize that objective logic, formulate a program informed by it, and win others over to that program. In other words, adequate leadership is required.

Carl Schurz, a prominent Midwest Republican, later claimed that “emancipation would have been declared in this war, even if there had not been a single abolitionist in America before the war. ... Nay, [even] if there had been a lifelong pro-slavery man in the Presidential chair,” so long as he was also “a Union man of a true heart and a clear head”⁴

But the fact is that in the Union in 1862-63, heads clear enough to see and hearts courageous enough to do what the Union’s survival required were not in excess supply.

Although many northern Democrats, thus, sincerely supported a war to preserve the Union, few of them recognized the necessity of emancipation. Those who did not

included both the head of the Union army, George McClellan, and Lincoln’s own Secretary of State, William Seward — the man who had nearly been the Republican party’s presidential candidate in 1860.

For the situation’s intrinsic logic to yield positive antislavery policy, someone needed to open the Union’s (and the Republican Party’s) eyes to that logic. Pennsylvania congressman Thaddeus Stevens played a key role in doing that.

Recognizing early on that the fight against the secessionists had created a revolutionary situation, Stevens began deliberately to formulate a revolutionary response to it and to demand its implementation. At each stage in the war’s evolution, Stevens pressed the populace and politicians (including Lincoln) for greater antislavery radicalism.

Then when the war eventually ended, Stevens persevered, insisting upon civil and then political equality for African Americans during the Reconstruction era. In doing that, he continued to march ahead of his party’s majority.

While hesitant Republican moderates viewed Reconstruction as a legally and politically vexing problem, Stevens regarded it as an opportunity — an opportunity to complete (or, in his words, “perfect”) the revolutionary transformation of the nation that began during the war itself.

Pro-Capitalism and Anti-Slavery

Historians and biographers have not neglected Stevens. About a dozen book-length studies about him have appeared, all of which contain valuable information. But none of them clearly identify the specific nature of Stevens’ core beliefs, leaving his particular politics and the historical context in which they took shape inadequately explained.

One able historian thought it enough to label him rather vaguely a “nineteenth-century egalitarian.” Another, gazing balefully upon Stevens’ devotion to capitalist development, refused on that account to regard Stevens as any kind of egalitarian at all.⁵

Both those authors missed their mark. The first failed to specify the kind of equality for which Stevens stood, thereby ignoring

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the fact that self-styled “egalitarians” came in many shapes and sizes in the 1800s (as, of course, they still do). The second author erred by flatly counterposing pro-capitalism and anti-slavery to one another, seeing the two causes as necessarily distinct and even in contradiction with one another.

But in Thaddeus Stevens’ eyes, they were inseparably intertwined. Slavery — and white supremacy more generally — profoundly repelled him morally; his words and actions make that abundantly clear. But that revulsion did not conflict with Stevens’ general bourgeois views on political economy and philosophy; the two went hand in hand.

From his youth, like many intellectual and political figures of his day, Thaddeus Stevens regarded the development of capitalism (then often referred to in the U.S. North simply as “free-labor society”) and the spread of its values as the salvation of society as a whole, as key to humanity’s liberation from oppressive, anachronistic social relations and backward beliefs.

Thus, while one of his college texts praised Christianity as the source of moral progress, the young Stevens held instead that it was economic development “that has banished barbarism, despotism, and superstition from a great portion of the globe.”

In appraising and depicting capitalism in this way, Stevens conformed to a general pattern that Marx and Engels discerned. A rising class that aspires to reshape society in accord with its own needs and values, they saw, “is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society,” is compelled to “give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”

Such a rising class can do that more convincingly to the degree that “its interest really is more connected with the common interest of all other non-ruling classes,” and if the internal contradictions of the kind of society that it champions are as yet less sharp, less obvious.⁶

In 1860, the average manufacturing enterprise employed fewer than ten people and upward mobility in the North in that era was drastically greater than it would be when capitalism developed further. At that early stage of industrial capitalism’s development in the United States, people like Stevens considered its manifold superiority over chattel slavery self-evident and had little trouble convincing most of the North’s population of the same thing.

Some of Stevens’ biographers have suggested that his radicalism owed something to his being born lame, with a club foot, therefore beginning early to empathize with disadvantaged people generally. Maybe so, just as it’s conceivable that their physical infirmities inclined the young Rosa Luxem-

burg and Antonio Gramsci to the left many decades later.

But we have better reason to credit other factors in Stevens’ early years with influencing his ideological development. He was born and grew up in a state, Vermont, with an exceptionally radical-democratic recent past, political heritage, and political culture.

His family was poor, a fact to which he later attributed his identification with and wish to better the condition of the impoverished and downtrodden generally. His own successful effort to escape the poverty of his youth no doubt reinforced his devotion to the capitalist economy that had made that escape possible.

Meanwhile, his family’s Baptist faith, which traced its ancestry back to the 17th-century revolution in England that overthrew the monarchy, encouraged individual conscience, personal choice, and community solidarity. College education exposed him to books infused with the spirit of the bourgeois Enlightenment.⁷

All these external influences — and key aspects of his personality, including a strong will, a combative nature and personal courage — would determine the manner in which he would subsequently evaluate and respond to political developments.

To be sure, not all of these factors tended to push him in the same direction ideologically. He would have to work out inconsistencies as he made his way through life. But all the influences noted above did combine to foster in Stevens an early hostility to chattel slavery.

Vermont’s unusually democratic state constitution was the first in North America to explicitly condemn the enslavement of human beings. New England Baptists proved receptive to abolitionism.

His formal education confirmed and reinforced his antislavery views. Stevens later recalled reading Greek and Roman classics in his youth that “denounced slavery as a thing which took away half the man and degraded human beings, and sang paeans in the noblest strains to the goddess of liberty.”

One of the most important books assigned to him in college scorned slavery as an abomination, in accord with the liberal bourgeois principle that while wealth inequality born of market forces were legitimate, oppression and exploitation imposed by physical force, legal or otherwise, was not.

Evolution of a Revolutionary

So Stevens’ repugnance toward slavery was pronounced by the time he graduated college and moved to Pennsylvania in search of work, first as a teacher and then as a lawyer, and still later as a politician. But he was not at first ready to make that sentiment central to his professional or political life.

It would require the passage of additional years and the cumulative impact of one slavery-spawned national political crisis after another, from the 1830s through the mid-1850s, to show him that this was indeed the central question of the age and to forge him into the steely, aggressive, bourgeois revolutionary that he eventually became.

One milestone along that route of political evolution came in the mid-1830s, as slaveholders and their allies escalated their attacks on all forms of antislavery speech and action and demanded that the free states aid them in those attacks. Those developments helped deepen and make more consistent Stevens’ dedication to the antislavery cause.

Another turning point came when the United States, prodded especially by slaveholders, declared war on Mexico in 1846 and proceeded to steal half of that nation’s land mass. Stevens opposed the war and denounced Congress’s 1850 decision to permit slavery’s expansion into the newly acquired land.

Four years later, Congress bowed yet again before the South, this time opening the door to slavery in federal territories previously closed to it. That decision provoked a huge northern outcry that birthed the antislavery Republican Party. Stevens soon helped to found it in his state and in 1858 gained election to the House of Representatives on the young party’s ticket.

When that same party’s presidential candidate won the election two years later, slaveholder leaders, concluding that slavery was now doomed in the United States, launched the insurrection that became civil war.

The Second American Revolution

Under certain circumstances, a rising capitalist class and its allies can overturn slavery, feudalism, or other pre-capitalist relations and institutions without violent conflict. That is most likely where an old and declining ruling class has lost confidence in itself and especially in its ability to resist demise.

But that was not the case in the United States in 1860. Slavery there remained immensely profitable and seemed likely to remain so indefinitely. Other factors also bolstered the strength and audacity of the slaveholding elite.

Slave-based agriculture, on the one hand, and a still young industrial capitalist economy, on the other, dominated geographically distinct parts of the country. In the South, and especially in the cotton kingdom of the lower South, the planter class continued to enjoy not only economic but also social and political hegemony; most slave-less whites there remained under its influence.

When the slaveholding elite did see its political power declining at the national level

in the late 1850s, its own long-accustomed regional power left it confident in its own strength and future. That confidence encouraged it to protect its interests aggressively, forcibly tearing its geographical stronghold out of the Union and creating a new country safe for slavery.

For both economic and political reasons, the bourgeoisie and the rest of the northern population could not allow that to happen. The consequence was war.

For Stevens, the Civil War fused necessity and opportunity. He had wished throughout his adult life for slavery's speedy disappearance; here, finally, was the chance to accomplish that.

But he also believed that Union victory in the war would require supplementing a purely military struggle with a frontal attack upon slavery because it was the mainstay of both southern society and the South's war effort.

Stevens was therefore among the first in Congress to call for confiscating the slaves of Confederate rebels; to demand full legal freedom for slaves who were so confiscated; to demand bringing African Americans into the Union's until-then lily-white armies; to call for widening the scope of emancipation to include *all* slaves within the rebellious states.

He was also among the first to press for outlawing slavery throughout the United States as a whole — to press for a constitutional amendment that would outlaw the enslavement of any human being anywhere in the country. He did that a full year before Abraham Lincoln endorsed the idea.

Stevens clearly understood that these steps would mean a radical transformation — a social and political revolution — in southern society. He fully embraced that transformation.

He repeatedly argued that “We must treat this war as a radical revolution” and “revolutionize Southern institutions, habits, and manners. . . . The foundations of their institutions. . . must be broken up and relaid, or all our blood and treasure have been spent in vain.”

Land Reform

For Stevens, the democratic transformation of the South would be incomplete without something else common to other bourgeois democratic revolutions — land reform, which in this case called for breaking

up the slave plantations into small farms for the freedpeople.

Stevens did not originate that idea. All over the South, emancipated slaves sought both during and after the war to take the land of their ex-masters and cultivate it for themselves. It seemed obvious to them that centuries of unpaid Black labor had more than paid for those acres.

President Lincoln did briefly consider making it easier for Black southerners at least to buy federally-controlled land. But his administration soon abandoned even that idea and Lincoln ultimately decided that property-less and impoverished former slaves would have to depend on their own efforts alone if they were to survive economically. (“Root, hog, or die,” was the advice Lincoln thought appropriate, using a then-familiar phrase that meant “find your own sustenance or starve.”)

On this subject too, Stevens strongly disagreed with Lincoln. Always a believer in active government, he had never relied solely upon the market's “invisible hand” to create or guide the equitable kind of capitalist society that he hoped for. So now the Pennsylvanian repeatedly urged Congress to confiscate the estates of the South's major planters and divide them among their former slaves.

“It is impossible that any practical equality of rights can exist,” Stevens insisted in the fall of 1865, “where a few thousand

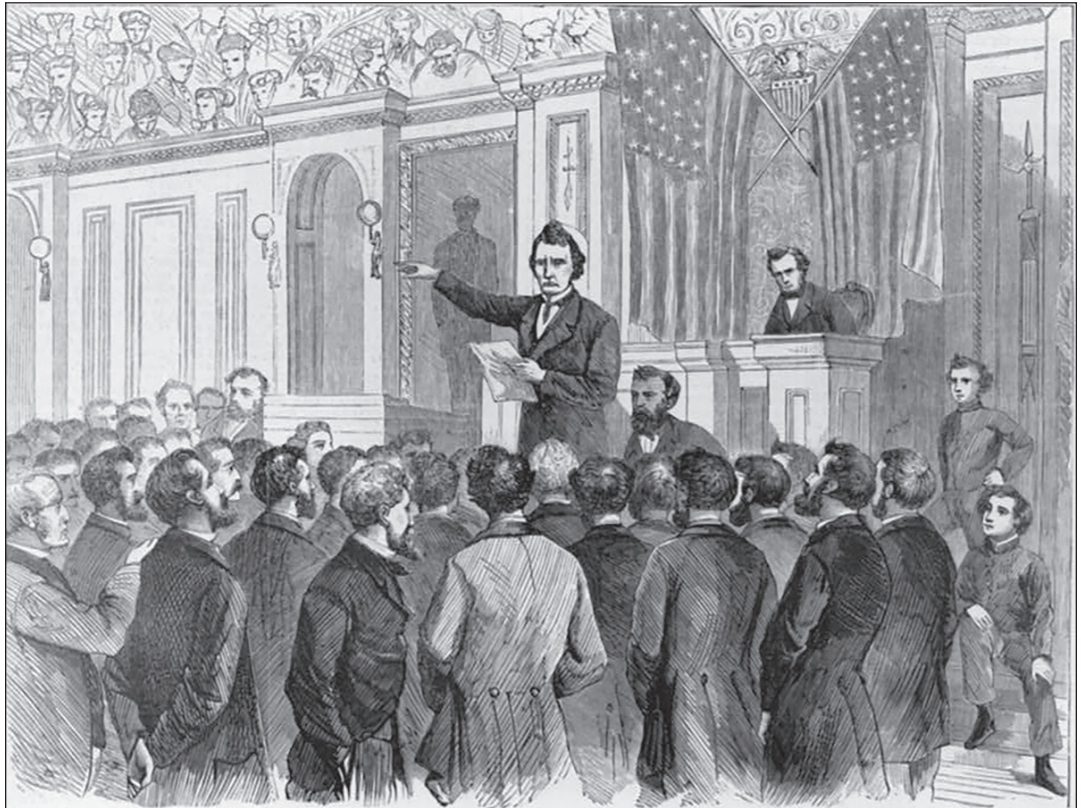
men monopolize the whole landed property.” For “how can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse exist” in a society composed of “nabobs and serfs”?

There was nothing intrinsically anti-capitalist, much less socialistic, in calls to confiscate and divide the slaveowners' estates. Marx argued, indeed, that landlordism economically constrained the development of capitalism. Lenin likewise contended (regarding the 1905 Russian Revolution) that “the ‘ideally’ pure development of capitalism in agriculture” required the nationalization (meaning state ownership, not collective cultivation) of all land.

But as Marx understood, “in practice” the capitalist “lacks the courage” to nationalize the land, “since an attack on one form of property . . . might cast considerable doubts on the other form” — that is, private property in industry.⁸

Marx's observation held true in the United States. Stevens' proposal to confiscate and break up plantations into small, freedpeople-owned farms fell far short of nationalization. But the U.S. capitalist class and its spokesmen (including even some Republican radicals) nevertheless rejected the notion.

As a couple of major northern newspapers bluntly explained, they could not tolerate the large-scale confiscation of landed property in peacetime, lest doing so



The Last speech on impeachment — Thaddeus Stevens closing the debate in the House, March 2, 1868. sketched by Theodore R. Davis, artist. 1868. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/92520334/>.

encourage wage workers in the North to follow suit by trying to confiscate workshops, factories, etc. there.

Thaddeus Stevens, although a lifelong champion of capitalism and himself a long-time owner of an iron works, was one of very few members of his class to display no such fears. Here as on many other occasions and in many other places, an ardent bourgeois revolutionary found himself opposed by hidebound members of the very class whose presumed interests and principles he sought to advance.

The Reaction

Beginning in the 1870s, white supremacists in the South overturned most of the gains of the Reconstruction era. By the 1890s, as Frederick Douglass recorded, "In most of the Southern States the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments are virtually nullified. The rights which they were intended to guarantee are denied and held in contempt. The citizenship granted in the fourteenth amendment is practically a mockery, and the right to vote, provided for in the fifteenth amendment, is literally stamped out in face of government."

The same was true, he added, of the economic situation of the Black American, having been, upon emancipation, "sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends and without a foot of land upon which to stand." Therefore, "though no longer a slave, he is in a thralldom grievous and intolerable, compelled to work for whatever his employer is pleased to pay him."⁹

Thaddeus Stevens had died in the summer of 1868 at the age of 76. But if he had lived longer, could he have prevented Reconstruction's eventual overturn? For that matter, could Abraham Lincoln have?

No. The fate of any kind of radical social or political change depends upon the presence of at least two conditions: not only able radical leaders but also, and still more fundamentally, the kind of objective circumstances that enable those able radicals to lead, circumstances that make their proposals compelling to many others and thereby empower them politically.

For antislavery radicals, those objective circumstances did not fully exist until the end of the 1850s. By the later 1870s, they existed no longer.

At that point, white supremacists far outnumbered freedpeople in the South and had infinitely greater resources at hand. The freedpeople's southern white allies were too few and too unreliable. In the North, the bourgeois conservatism that doomed land reform in 1866-67 only deepened in the decades that followed.

With the obstacle of slavery removed and the South's once formidable anti-industrial influence in Washington weakened,

industrial capitalism grew mightily. But so, therefore, did the size of the country's wage-earning working class. And the postwar militancy of that class angered and frightened northern businessmen, whose interest in the rights and welfare of any laborers, least of all Black ones, cooled apace.

In 1873 a major economic depression hit the country as a whole, a depression that many capitalists attributed to continuing social and political turmoil in the South. That depression therefore further soured them on federal action there.

A major Republican businessman in New York spoke for many others when he declared that "what the South now needs is capital to develop her resources, but this she cannot obtain till confidence in her state governments can be restored, and this will never be done by federal bayonets. We have tried this long enough. Now let the South alone."¹⁰

"... as on many other occasions and in many other places, an ardent bourgeois revolutionary found himself opposed by hidebound members of the very class whose presumed interests and principles he sought to advance."

When depression-spawned severe wage cuts sparked a nationwide labor uprising in 1877, the editor of the once semi-radical magazine *The Nation* blamed "some of the talk about the laborer and his rights that we have listened to ... during the last fifteen years, and of the supposed capacity of even the most ignorant, such as the South Carolina fieldhand, to reason upon and even manage the interests of a great community."¹¹

Betrayed by their onetime allies in the northern elite, therefore, and receiving scant attention and no active solidarity from the North's growing but short-sighted and racism-plagued labor movement, African Americans in the South now faced white supremacist forces alone.

As the capitalists disowned and turned their back on that revolution, academics and producers of popular culture followed their lead. Scholarly volumes, popular history books, and Hollywood films about that era long demonized the radical Republicans, especially Thaddeus Stevens.¹²

It would take the mass mobilizations of the modern civil rights movement and the changes that it brought about in cultural norms to induce academia, publishers and film-makers to rethink at least some of their inherited prejudices about slavery and emancipation, Thaddeus Stevens and the Second American Revolution.

Completing that revolution's tasks and building on those foundations a genuinely multi-racial and egalitarian society will be the

work of the Third American Revolution. ■

Notes

1. Events like the 17th-century revolution in England in some ways anticipated the eruptions of the late 18th. Probably the best take on that subject is Christopher Hill, "A Bourgeois Revolution?" in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill*, 3 vols. (Amherst, MA, 1985), vol. 3, 94-124. But it was after the American and French revolutions that bourgeois-democratic revolutions began to multiply dramatically.
2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols. (Progress Publishers, 1975-2005), vol. 42: 48.
3. Thaddeus Stevens: *Civil War Revolutionary, Fighter for Racial Justice* (New York, 2021).
4. Carl Schurz, *Speeches, Correspondence, & Political Papers* (New York, 1913), vol. 1, 232. Emphasis added.
5. Hans L. Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Richard N. Current, *Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition* (Madison, WI, 1942). In an essay widely cited by left-leaning scholars, Margaret Shortreed did try to depict Stevens as a bourgeois revolutionary. But she too ascribed to him and his cohort a narrow, economics-preoccupied understanding of bourgeois class interest that eclipsed any kind of ethical revulsion toward slavery. See Shortreed, "The Antislavery Radicals," *Past and Present*, vol. 16 (Nov. 1959), 65-87. Missing from all such attempts to counterpose morality to economics is recognition that a specifically bourgeois, but no less real and compelling, ethical hostility to chattel slavery clearly did play an important role in bringing on the Second American Revolution.
6. From *The German Ideology* (1846), in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 60-61.
7. Later, observers would often liken Stevens to Maximilien Robespierre, the Jacobin leader during the most radical phase of the French revolution. And there were indeed some striking parallels there. Each man (as one biographer notes of Robespierre) "brought to his participation in the Revolution values and beliefs that had developed across ... decades of family life, schooling, and work." Both spent their youths in provincial parts of their countries and experienced personal hardship there. Both chafed at those difficulties, hungered for an education and advancement, and managed to reach those goals. In school, each devoured ancient republican classics as well as works of the European Enlightenment that extolled ideals of bourgeois liberalism. Both went on to become skilled, witty lawyers, ardent foes of aristocratic privileges and caste, and champions of bourgeois equality. The quoted words are those of Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven, 2012), xix, 1-61. But see also Albert Soboul, "Robespierre and the Popular Movement of 1793-4," *Past and Present*, vol. 5 (May 1954), 54-70.
8. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value, Part II* (Moscow, 1968), 42-45; Lenin, "The Agrarian Programme of the Social-Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905-1907" (1907), in his *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1962), vol. 13, 314-21.
9. *Life & Times of Frederick Douglass* (originally published in 1892; reprint, London, 1962), 501-504.
10. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York, 1965), 207.
11. Leon Litwack, ed., *The American Labor Movement* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1962), 53-56. On northern capital's reaction to the demands of wage earners in these years, see David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York, 1967), and Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).
12. In this respect, they marched in lock step with the French bourgeoisie and both conservative and liberal intellectuals, who used the bicentennial of the Great French Revolution to disown, vilify, and slander that magnificent popular upheaval.

Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky

By Michael Löwy

"Of all the personalities of European socialism, nobody was in origin, temperament and political and literary gifts more akin to Trotsky than Rosa Luxemburg..."
—Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, 183

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY ASSASSINATED

Rosa Luxemburg in 1919. Stalinism, from 1925 on, wanted to purge the Comintern of this dangerous "syphilis" (in the words of Ruth Fischer, chief of German Communist Party), i.e. Rosa's ideas. Leon Trotsky on the other hand in 1935 joined her, with Lenin and Karl Liebknecht, as the three revolutionaries claimed by the Fourth International under construction.

Despite their differences, the profound communion between Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg stems from revolutionary Marxism and internationalist communism, of which they were both authentic and lucid representatives.

It is also, however, a communion marked by tragic combat against the pathological excrescence of the workers' movement as signified by its reformist bureaucracy, a combat which cost them both their lives (murders ordered by Noske 1919, Stalin 1940) and witnessed the temporary triumph of the "gravediggers" of the revolution. (Gustav Noske, a rightwing Social Democrat, was Minister of Defense in the German Weimar Republic — ed.)

We know that Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg met only rarely. In *My Life*, Trotsky describes his impression of Rosa's character at one of these meetings, the conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in 1907: "Short of stature, frail, even sickly, she had noble traits, eyes that gleamed with spirit, and could subjugate with the virility of her character and mind. Her style, strained, precise, implacable, will forever reflect her heroic spirit."

Then he adds, revealing a certain regret, "I admired her from afar. And yet it may be that I never properly appreciated her..."

Michael Löwy is the author of many books and articles on Marxism and revolutionary history. This article appears in a collection of his essays, in French, Rosa Luxemburg, L'entaille Incendiare (2018). Thanks to Paul Le Blanc for bringing it to our attention, and to Lynne Sunderman for translation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article, if I remember well, was published around 1979 in the *French Journal Quatrième Internationale*. If I would rewrite it today, I would probably give greater emphasis on the positive side of Rosa Luxemburg's and young Leon Trotsky's views on political organization. But I still agree with the essential argument of the paper, bringing together both thinkers, as the guiding inspirations of the Fourth International.

Since I discovered Rosa Luxemburg in Brazil, aged 15, and joined a small "luxemburgist" organization called the Independent Socialist League, myself and my comrades had the habit of referring to her as "Rosa." Was it a form of sexism? Or a way to express admiration, tenderness, proximity? I leave it to the readers to decide...

Realistically speaking, despite their limited personal interaction, there is a remarkable similarity in young Trotsky's and Rosa's vision of the world, their methods, their strategic aims and political theories.

They are united by their weaknesses, their errors, and their insights. Among their errors, the most significant is undoubtedly their rejection of the Leninist theory of organization.¹ Here we can see Rosa's influence on the young Trotsky, who even mentions her explicitly in his pamphlet *Our Political Tasks* as an orthodox Marxist leader who had come out publicly against Lenin's centralism.

It is also around this time (1904) that Trotsky first met Rosa Luxemburg. In a discussion with Marceau Pivert in 1939, Trotsky freely admitted that in that pamphlet, he defended his "very similar views to those of Rosa Luxemburg" but stressed that his subsequent experience proved that "on this question, Lenin was correct, and Rosa Luxemburg and I were not."

Rosa and Trotsky's error was in not distinguishing between certain one-sided formulas found in *What Is To Be Done?* and the essence of the Leninist theory of the party: the strict, rigorous, centralized organization of the revolutionary vanguard, and political orientation of the proletariat.

After the 1905 revolution, in a new

1907 preface to *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin admitted that the pamphlet contained a few "rather maladroit or imprecise" ideas.² Nevertheless, he worked tirelessly for fourteen years on this solid, tempered organization, this clandestine splinter group implanted in the factories which for the first time in history had paved the way for the proletarian revolution — the Bolshevik party.

The roots of Rosa's and Trotsky's misunderstanding of the Leninist theory of the party (revealed on a political level by their confused and conciliatory position between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks) can be found in what could be termed their "revolutionary catastrophism." Like Kautsky and most of the "orthodox" Marxists of the Second International, before 1914, Rosa and Trotsky believed that the fall of capitalism was inevitable and that the victory of the proletariat would be irresistible.

This "optimistic fatalism," this naive faith in the "iron laws of history," is the theoretical foundation of their semi-spontaneous organizational ideas, a foundation which was obviously quite shaken by the collapse of the Second International (over member parties' support of their own imperialist governments on the outbreak of world war — ed.) in August 1914. It was no accident that precisely at the outset of World War I, Trotsky began to reconnect with the Bolsheviks.

Nevertheless, Rosa's and the young Trotsky's organizational error did contain a rational basis: much earlier than Lenin, they recognized the threat of the rising power of the party apparatus, the conservative tendency towards the self-preservation of the organization (which ultimately became an end in itself) — in a word, the danger of bureaucratization.³

Rosa Luxemburg had understood earlier than Lenin the profoundly reformist bureaucratic character of the German Social-Democratic Party instrument and its official "orthodox Marxist" ideologue, Karl Kautsky, whereas the young Trotsky had already demonstrated by 1906 in his *Results and Prospects* a sense that the conservatism of the Social-Democratic parties of Europe (and of Germany in particular) could ultimately become "an obstacle in the proletariat's straightforward struggle for power."⁴



The Petrograd Soviet Assembly meeting in 1917

What Kind of Revolution?

Rosa's and the young Trotsky's profound intuition also revealed itself — well before Lenin's theses in April 1917 — in the formulation of a strategy for the proletarian revolution in Russia. It appears that around 1905-1906 the two arrived at similar conclusions albeit by different routes on the character of the 1905 revolution, which was for them "not so much ... the last successor of the old bourgeois revolutions as the forerunner of the new series of proletarian revolutions of the West."⁵

At the 1907 Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party convention in London, Trotsky's speech on the Russian Revolution received Rosa's and Leo Jogisches' wholehearted approval. According to Trotsky, that speech also led to a reconciliation between them and to their collaboration in Rosa's Polish journal *Przeglad Socialdemokratyczny*.⁶

What's more, at the 1909 conference of the RSDLP, it was Rosa who gave the speech and led the majority to take up the maxim "the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry," which was incidentally introduced by Trotsky in 1905.

It is for this reason that in 1931 Stalin included Rosa among the "inventors" of the "utopian project" of permanent revolution and in his papal bull entitled "Some Questions Concerning the History of Bolshevism" decided to "excommunicate" her posthumously for the sin of perpetuating Trotskyism.

One might well ask how Rosa and the

young Trotsky were able to rationalize the coexistence of their organizational misunderstanding with their grasp of strategic truth. However, there may in fact be a paradoxical link between the two. Let us simply sketch out a possible hypothesis that only more in-depth research can confirm.

Before 1917, for both Rosa and Trotsky, the strategy of the Russian Revolution was articulated around two tightly-linked axes: the hegemonic role of the proletariat and the extension of the revolution in western Europe, particularly in Germany. These theories were founded on the following premises:

- 1) A remarkable analysis of the social forces in Russia and of the internal dynamic of the revolutionary process based on the 1905 model (with a certain under-estimation of the peasantry, especially by Rosa);
- 2) Europe's economic and political unity (the premise of their mistaken conception of the national question);
- 3) The revolutionary spontaneity of the European proletariat, which, spurred by the Russian Revolution, would rise up despite and against the social democratic parties (the premise of their organizational conception).

The two latter premises were the foundation of their hopes for, or even their certainty of a rapid extension of the Russian Revolution in Europe, which they felt was actually key to proletarian victory in Russia itself. Thus their strategy for the Russian Revolution was based both on correct assumptions (their analysis of Russian

socioeconomic development, for example in Trotsky's *Results and Prospects*) as well as on false premises, which were incidentally the exact source of their political errors about the party and the national question.

In reality, as Trotsky subsequently recognized, the Russian proletariat, supported by the peasantry, was able to triumph and take power without outside help from a revolution in Western Europe (although naturally, it was not able to construct an isolated socialist society in Russia). The two other premises were thus totally unnecessary.

One can thus see how, with regard to each problem, 'error' and 'truth' were jumbled together in a complex and contradictory combination.

Russian Revolution and After

In 1917, Lenin became 'Trotskyist' (as Kamenev complained in 1917) and Trotsky, Leninist. Armed with the April Theses, the Bolshevik Party led the Russian proletariat to power in October.

A few months later, even as she criticized various aspects of Bolsheviks' politics (to which we shall return presently) from her hiding place in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg sketched out a pamphlet in which she offered her enthusiastic support to Lenin and Trotsky, two names that were for her as for any other revolutionary of the era, completely inseparable.

Upon her release from prison thanks to the 1918 revolution, Rosa decided to not publish her account, having changed her

mind on certain points. She had intended to rework the text, but her plans were tragically interrupted by reactionary executioners in service to the social-democrat Noske.

Three months after this ignoble crime, Trotsky wrote in the first manifesto of the Communist International (March 1919) that “We communists, united in the Third International, recognize the direct continuation of the efforts and heroic martyrdom in the long series of revolutionary generations, from Babeuf to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg.”

It was not until 1932 that Trotsky “rediscovered” Rosa. The occasion was offered, so to speak, by Stalin, who, in the above-mentioned article (“Certain Problems with the History of Bolshevism”), accused Rosa of capitulating to opportunism because unlike Lenin, she had not broken with Kautsky before 1914.

Trotsky easily destroyed this dishonest falsification with the aid of the famous letter from Lenin to Shlyapnikov from 27 Oct 1914: “I now hate and detest Kautsky most of all... R. Luxemburg was right; she understood long ago that Kautsky was only the lackey of the party majority, of opportunism.”

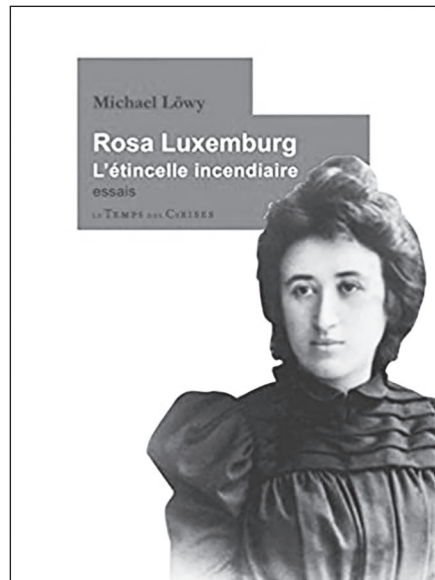
He returned to this problem in 1935 in his article “Rosa Luxemburg and the Fourth International” to underscore that “Rosa Luxemburg understood and began much earlier than Lenin to combat how the ossified party machinery and the unions had served to put the brakes on the movement.”

In reality, Trotsky “rediscovered” Rosa as he struggled against Stalinism, which had particularly sensitized him to the antibureaucratic dimension in Rosa’s work, directed less against Lenin (with all due respect to certain anti-Leninists who claim to be Luxemburgists) than against that which then constituted the principal bureaucratic machine of the international workers movement: the leading apparatus of the German Social-Democratic Party, a bureaucracy against which she had struggled all her life and was responsible for her death in 1919.

Trotsky thus “rediscovered” Rosa Luxemburg as the bureaucracy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the USSR deteriorated. In 1932, as he struggled against Stalin’s centralization via his polemic against Stalin’s slanderous article, Trotsky “rehabilitated” Rosa and brought to light her critique of Kautsky’s opportunistic centrism.

In 1935, he emphasized Rosa’s opposition to the “Philistines of opportunistic bureaucracy,” and to the “crusty reformist apparatus” of the Second International. There was a striking resemblance between the Communist Parties of 1935 — a parliamentary opposition, verbally revolutionary, but in reality reformist and “moderate” — and German Social-Democracy before 1914.

It was this resemblance (which is not to



say identity), this problematic commonality, that explains Trotsky’s renewed interest in Rosa, not to mention the growing understanding of his own struggles as the continuation of Rosa Luxemburg’s — except that by 1917, Trotsky had definitively absorbed the essentials of the Leninist conception of the party into his own theoretical system, with the result that his defense of Rosa Luxemburg was not without reservation.

The moral of the story was that for Trotsky, “if we disregard the incidentals or that which has already been resolved by evolution, then we may fully expect to orient our work for the Fourth International under the sign of the ‘3 Ls,’” not only of Lenin but also of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

With this solemn proclamation, beyond the falsifications and Stalinesque lies, Trotsky reconnected with the tradition of the Third International, during which it had been decided since the death of Lenin in 1924 to commemorate the “3Ls” in January. But for Trotsky, it was not a question of a formal rehabilitation but rather of restoring the revolutionary vanguard to the precious heritage of Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas, which for the most part belonged to the arsenal of revolutionary international communism.

The Debate Continues

In later times we have witnessed diverse attempts to oppose Rosa Luxemburg to both Trotsky and Lenin. See for example Gilbert Badia, historian of the French Communist Party, in his otherwise interesting and well-documented work as he gives way to the old demons of Stalinism: “We have found no identity, not even of convergence, in their respective theories... Trotsky himself affirmed a kinship that does not exist between Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas and his own.”⁷

How then can we interpret, if not as a kind of convergence, the adoption by the 1908 conference of the Social Democratic

Party of Poland (SDKPIL), headed by Rosa Luxemburg, of the slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat and supported by the peasantry, put forward by Trotsky at the very same moment? We must send G. Badia back to read works by Isaac Deutscher (an author who has now been “rehabilitated” and cited by [French Communist journal] *France Nouvelle...*), who shows with precision the similarities in the approach of these two revolutionary Marxists.

On an altogether different and less serious topic, the “New Philosopher” André Glucksmann (one-time Maoist who became a rightwing ideologue — ed.) has been trying to put Rosa Luxemburg in the same camp with Alexander Solzhenitsyn for the benefit of his crusade against the “Bolshevik terror.”⁸

In his polemic against Glucksmann, Daniel Singer humorously describes an imaginary meeting between R. Luxemburg and Solzhenitsyn: “She could not be in the same room as Solzhenitsyn without pinching her nostrils because he symbolized everything — the nationalism, the obscurantism of the Orthodox Church, the idealization of the peasantry, and the glorification of the past — all the vile stench of Holy Mother Russia, the knout, and the pogroms that she so detested... And, based on Solzhenitsyn’s criteria, what old goat is mangier than Rosa the Red, the revolutionary, the internationalist?”⁹

Yes, Rosa Luxemburg criticized Lenin and Trotsky in her renowned pamphlet on the Russian Revolution, drafted in prison in 1918 and published after her death by Paul Lévi. But her critique had nothing in common with that of the Social-Democrat reformists (Kautsky and company) or of the liberal bourgeois, to say nothing of a partisan of the Tsar-like Solzhenitsyn, to the extent that she is clearly situated in the same camp as the Bolsheviks, the October Revolution, and the revolutionary Marxists:

“All the revolutionary honor and capacity for action [for action] which Western Social Democracy lacked were represented by the Bolsheviks. Their October uprising was not only the actual salvation of the Russian Revolution; it was also the salvation of the honor of international socialism.”

At the conclusion of her text, she insists on the distinction between the essential and the non-essential in Bolshevik politics: what is essential is revolutionary coherence, and proceeding from that, “the future everywhere belongs to Bolshevism.” (“The Russian Revolution” in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, Pathfinder Press, 1970, *op. cit.*, 375, 395). What is secondary are tactical errors that she decries passionately but fraternally.

Rosa Luxemburg’s polemical remarks partially correspond to a very questionable conception of the tactic of alliances, which today sparks mainly historical interest: for example, her rejection of the slogan about

the right of self-determination, or her opposition to the Bolsheviks' agrarian policies ("The Land to the Peasants").

Her position on the Constituent Assembly (whose dissolution by the Bolsheviks in 1918 she criticized) had by all appearances changed after the revolution in November 1918 in Germany and the emergence of the Workers' Councils. In her last articles from 1918-19, she seems to have considered the power of the Workers' Councils as contradictory to a Constituent Assembly.

The key question of democratic socialism remains unanswered: Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms of the Bolsheviks have lost none of their urgency. On the contrary, they appear in fact prophetic in that they attracted attention to the dangers of policies that severely restricted democratic liberties as instituted by revolutionary powers in Russia:

"Without a free and untrammelled press, without the unlimited right of association and assemblage, the rule of the broad masses of the people is entirely unthinkable.... Freedom only for supporters of the government, only for the members of one party — however numerous they may be — is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." (Ibid., 389)

Contrary to latter-day Euro-Communists,

Rosa Luxemburg supported the dictatorship of the proletariat, but she stressed that it was "a dictatorship of the class, not of a party or clique — a dictatorship of the class, that means in the broadest public form, on the basis of the most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy...."

That is the historic mission of the proletariat: "by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy — not to destroy democracy altogether." (Ibid., 393)

Nevertheless, in the dramatic and almost untenable situation in which the Bolsheviks found themselves in 1917-18, surrounded by imperialists, threatened by white troops and foreign interventionists, how could they have done otherwise? Rosa Luxemburg responds to this pertinent objection in one of the most important passages of her entire pamphlet:

"It would be demanding something superhuman from Lenin and his comrades if we should expect of them that under such circumstances they should conjure forth the finest democracy, the most exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat and a flourishing socialist economy. By their determined revolutionary stand, their exemplary strength in action, and their unbreakable loyalty

to international socialism, they have contributed whatever could possibly be contributed under such devilishly hard conditions. The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics." (Ibid., 394)

How can we fail to recognize Rosa Luxemburg's clairvoyance and the justice of her critique? How, after sixty years of bureaucratic degeneration in the USSR, can we reject the vital necessity of an unlimited democracy to safeguard the power of the proletariat? It seems that the moment has come for Marxist revolutionaries to say clearly and out loud: On the chapter on socialist democracy, it was Rosa Luxemburg who got it right.

That was in fact the point of the document on "The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Socialist Democracy" approved by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International in 1977.¹⁰ Was that then not adopting Rosa's conception of freedom in a workers' state? ■

Notes

1. Cf. Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/>
2. Trotsky, in his last publication *Stalin* (1940), declared that Lenin himself recognized the "one-sided, and therefore erroneous" theory exposed in *What Is to Be Done?* on the introduction of revolutionary consciousness "from outside" of the working class. Cf. Trotsky, *Stalin*, ed. by Charles Malamuth (New York: Stein and Day, 1967), 58.
3. Cf. E. Mandel, "The Leninist Theory of Organization," *International Socialist Review*, December 1970; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/196x/leninism/index.htm>
4. Judging his own book *Our Political Tasks*, Trotsky in 1940 emphasized that it was "immature and erroneous" in its critique of Lenin, but that it nevertheless contained "a fairly accurate characterization of the cast of thought of the 'committeemen' of those days, who have foregone the need to rely upon the workers after they had found support in the 'principles' of centralism..." — the same committeemen who were the first embryo of the bureaucracy at the heart of the Bolshevik party and whom Lenin found himself in constant struggle. Cf., Trotsky, *Stalin*, 62.
5. R. Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. by Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 203.
6. Cf., Trotsky, *The Permanent Revolution*, chapter IV. Cf., also, Trotsky, *My Life* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 203: "At the London congress... on the question of the so-called permanent revolution, Rosa took the same stand that I did." In reality, however, on one crucial point, Rosa Luxemburg did not agree with Trotsky: for her, the Russian Revolution could never move beyond the democratic-bourgeois framework. For excellent coverage of this topic, see Norman Geras, *The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Verso, 1983).
7. G. Badia, *Rosa Luxemburg journaliste, polémiste, révolutionnaire*, Editions sociales, 1975, 337, 813.
8. A. Glucksmann, *La Cuinière et le mangeur d'hommes*, le Seuil, 1975, 106.
9. D. Singer, "C'est la faute à Karl Platon," *Lire*, 1976, 10/18, 103-104.
10. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/1985/dictprole/1985.htm>

Guatemala: Strike and Crisis

A NATIONAL STRIKE led by Indigenous Guatemalans, as well as an institutional crisis over the preemptory firing of anti-corruption prosecutor Juan Francisco Sandoval, are shaking that Central American country.

Sandoval, forced to flee the country after his firing, has been investigating corruption linked to Guatemalan president Alejandro Giammattei.

Sandoval has been replaced by Rafael Curruchiche, who previously served as an Electoral Crimes prosecutor. In that capacity Curruchiche refused to issue an arrest warrant against former president Jimmy Morales, and more recently moved to arrest anti-corruption figures Juan Solorzano and Anibal Arguello.

Successive U.S. administrations have been pretty indifferent to rampant corruption and atrocities in Guatemala, particularly during the genocidal counter-insurgency war of the 1970s and '80s, but the Biden administration appears to be concerned at least with appearances.

"Guatemalan Attorney General Consuelo Porras' July 23rd decision to remove Special Prosecutor Against Impunity, or FECI, Chief Juan Francisco Sandoval fits a pattern of behavior that indicates a lack of commitment to the rule of law and independent judicial and prosecutorial

processes," said a U.S. State Department spokesperson. "As a result, we have lost confidence in the attorney general" and her intention to combat corruption.

Some U.S. visa restrictions have been placed on Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran officials whom the State Department "believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining democracy or the rule of law."

There was no indication that Porras has been affected by widespread international criticism, or that much of anything will change while U.S.-Guatemalan military ties remain intact.

Responding to Sandoval's firing and other abuses including corruption in the provision of COVID vaccines, Indigenous leaders called a national strike on July 29 over the government's corruption and the rule of economic elites, the military, and drug traffickers at the expense of the population's lives and dignity.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of August a new law went into effect sharply limiting the work of NGOs, potentially criminalizing human rights defenders.

See: "Tensions Escalate as Guatemalan Attorney General Remains Defiant and National Strike Continues," *Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA*, August 6, 2021. ■

Modi's Hubris:

Hindu Exceptionalism & COVID-19

By Mona Bhan & Purnima Bose

A YEAR AGO our article on “Authoritarianism and Lockdown Time: Coronavirus, Occupied Kashmir, and India” (ATC 207) analyzed the temporal dimensions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's [BJP] responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. We reflected on the juxtaposition of the “compression of time,” enacted through Modi's four-hour notice that India would be placed under lockdown, and the “elongation of time” experienced by Kashmiris, who endure numerous military lockdowns.

Modi's lockdown order was an expression of authoritarian power: he upended the lives of countless people (particularly the most vulnerable, the poor and migrants) simply because he could. In contrast to the compression of time between edict and implementation, we emphasized that time under military occupation is lived as static time in which one day resembles the previous one and prefigures the day after, extending into a futureless, hopeless tomorrow.

In the present article, we turn to Modi and his rightwing Hindu allies' diligent promotion of Hindu exceptionalism as a framework for everyday governance. Drawing on earlier iterations of Indian exceptionalism, Modi's government has built on and strengthened pre-existing narratives about Indian (read Hinduism's) distinctiveness that were already in circulation even before the BJP came to power in 2014.

Indian nationalists for decades have invoked India's ancient civilization, its status as the world's largest democracy, its diversity and, in the last few decades, rapid economic growth to fuel their claims of Indian exceptionalism. The global pandemic has provided new opportunities for Hinduism to function as a type of soft power, as a benevolent force that would beat back COVID-19.

The belief that Hinduism could inform and cultivate a unique political creed — at once spiritual and scientific, divine and democratic, hierarchical and humanitarian — enabled Modi and his followers to cast him as a “god-like leader, the 11th incarnation of Lord Vishnu,” and simultaneously exaggerate his purported support for science as a tool of “national transformation.”¹

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Faces of India's crisis: Farmers continue their long protest strikes against the Modi government's “free market” laws which eliminate guaranteed pricing, threatening their security and livelihoods to benefit large-scale agribusiness. Their protests persist even amidst the devastating toll from COVID and in defiance of Modi's increasingly repressive rule.

While Modi did not invent Hindu exceptionalism, he successfully mobilized a toxic mix of Hindu pride and vulnerability in an attempt to restore what many Indian rightwing nationalists consider India's lost civilizational supremacy — its rightful status as a *vishwaguru*, a teacher to the world.

In other words, Modi transformed earlier articulations of *Indian* exceptionalism into a distinctive brand of *Hindu* exceptionalism, which has been marketed to the world as a form of “Hindu humanitarianism.” The result, we argue, has been a jumble of performative spiritualism and quack science with deadly consequences for health policy and pandemic relief in India and, more generally, the world.

Secularizing Hinduism & Swaraj (Self-Rule)

Modi's brand of Hindu exceptionalism does not emerge from a vacuum but draws on Indian nationalist discourse from the anti-colonial struggle against the British and the foreign policy of the nascent state following independence in 1947.

Nationalist discourse in British India consisted of multiple ideological strands, which continue to inform contemporary understandings of Indian exceptionalism. As Kate Sullivan notes, in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s many of those charged with implementing Indian foreign policy had a world-view that rested on “a conviction of India's moral pre-eminence and a concomitant drive to play a moral leadership role in world politics.”²

According to Sullivan, three particular constructions of

India circulated in the early 20th centuries: Mahatma Gandhi's moralism, Jawaharlal Nehru's secular liberalism, and V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar's Hindu majoritarianism.³ Yet narratives that pit Savarkar's highly exclusionary Hindu nationalist visions for India against Nehru's secular liberal credentials undermine how the two visions intersected.

While these three versions of nationalism differed in significant ways, all derived their moral legitimacy from Hinduism.⁴ Nehru and Savarkar, Hindol Sengupta asserts, conceptualized India's topography as foundationally Hindu. Despite their professed "disinterest in religion," they invoked "theological tropes" to imagine and construct a civilizational entity in which geography served as a key cultural and civilizational artifact.⁵

For instance, they believed that India's ancient rivers and mountains were cultural and civilizational entities that were "primordially Hindu."⁶ Indeed, Nehru thought that "*Arya Dharma*"⁷ and not Hinduism was a more befitting and inclusive term for religion in India; the former, he claimed, included all Vedic and non Vedic religions (Buddhism, Jainism etc.) that had originated in India.⁸

In secularizing Dharma by defining it as an "ethical concept" and constitutive of the legal social order that defines the internal essence of all things, Nehru reinforced and emphasized conceptions of India as organically "Aryan."⁹ This casteist and racist conception of Indian history has been mobilized by Hindu rightwing forces to maintain that Aryans and the ancient Vedic Hindu cultures are indigenous to India while Muslims and Christians are invaders.

Nehru's glorification of ancient Indian civilization had political implications for Muslim-majority Kashmir, which at the time of India's partition was a princely state, a nominally sovereign entity of British India ruled by a local Hindu Maharaja who did not enjoy popular sovereignty. He was despised for his repressive policies, particularly toward Kashmir's Muslim populations.

After the partition when Kashmir's accession to India or Pakistan became hotly contested, many in Nehru's Congress Party including Sardar Patel endorsed "Kashmir's accession to India based on its Hindu past."¹⁰ Himself a Kashmiri Brahmin, Nehru remained silent when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the militant wing of the Sangh Parivar or the family of Hindu rightwing organizations, initiated a large-scale pogrom against Muslims in Jammu, killing at least 500,000 people and disappearing 200,000 more.¹¹

Indeed, Indian leadership, including Nehru, at the time demonized Muslim tribal invaders from Pakistan as instigators and perpetrators of violence, thereby ignoring the violence unleashed by the Hindu rightwing on the Muslim population.¹²

Hinduism also informed Gandhi's ethos and was an important aspect of his identity. Tariq Ali explains that Gandhi's "entire political style was that of a Hindu leader. His speeches were full of mystical symbolism deriving from the past of Hinduism and designed to convince his followers that only a social-pacifist solution was possible in India."¹³

Suraj Yengde argues that Gandhi's principle of *Swaraj* (self-rule) endorsed the caste system and its multiple oppressions.¹⁴ *Swaraj* was to be attained through *satyagraha*, a term that has become shorthand for nonviolent civil disobedience. Gandhi's *satyagraha* ignored caste and caste-based inequalities;

hence, his insistence on *satyagraha* as a "moral purifier" was deeply compromised.¹⁵

Deploying Hindu principles of caste hierarchy, Gandhi suppressed the political rights of "untouchables" (Dalits) in India. But still as Yengde contends "India has been exporting Gandhi since Independence."¹⁶ Gandhian ideology was "exported" and "masked" under the guise of "moral spiritualism," allowing subsequent Indian governments to peddle their brand of Indian/Hindu exceptionalism as a force for nonviolence, unity and inclusion.

Rebranding Hindutva, Recycling Swadeshi

Swadeshi was an important component of Gandhi's movement. Calling for the boycott of foreign goods and their replacement by native ones, *swadeshi* has its contemporary incarnation in Prime Minister Modi's slogans "Make in India" and "*AtmaNirbharBharat*."¹⁷

In 2014, Modi launched his "Make in India" campaign aimed at boosting the manufacturing sector by creating an infrastructure of "industrial corridors" and "smart cities" "based on state-of-the-art technology with modern high-speed communication and integrated logistic arrangements."¹⁸

This conducive business environment was to be nurtured through de-regulation and de-licensing. Belying the self-sufficiency embedded in its slogan, "Make in India" ironically was to be dependent on foreign capital: the Modi Administration announced plans to open Foreign Direct Investment in Defense Production, Construction and Railway infrastructure. This brazen initiative was to be undertaken by a country that has yet to provide sanitation and clean water to the majority of its citizens.

In May 2020, Modi launched the *AtmaNirbhar Bharat* Abhiyaan mission to deal with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The phrase translates as "self-reliant India," which he argued was the combination of "age old 'Sanskriti' or culture and 'samskara,' or character derived from Hindu religious scriptures such as the Vedas and the shastras."¹⁹

It is difficult to get a sense of what this Rs. 20 lakh crore economic package (roughly \$307.6 billion) entails and to gauge its efficacy. The Government of India website for this initiative features a banner with "Economy, Infrastructure, System, Demography, Demand" at the top of the page, along with a pious declaration from Modi, explaining that Indian self-reliance is grounded in a "concern for the whole world's happiness, cooperation and peace."²⁰

The rest of the page features photographs apparently uploaded by organizations about specific projects such as "cake biscuit training" and "awareness on covid19 vaccination." Each picture links to a site that features additional photographs from these organizations without any explanatory copy.

Clicking on the "Get Involved" tab on the homepage takes one to a page for the "*AaatmanirbharBharat* (ABC) Pledge" in support of the Prime Minister's "vision." That page visually evokes the anti-colonial *swadeshi* movement through background images of women and men weaving cloth and sewing. Reinforcing these visual nationalist references, the page superimposes an image of the *Ashoka chakra*, a 24-spoke wheel from the Indian flag, on the laboring textile workers.

We want to underscore the point that the

AatmanirbharBharat website consists of images rather than substantive explanations of its program. As of June 2021 only 31,466 people had taken the pledge to support Modi's program, in a population of approximately 1.3 billion.²¹

What is clear, however, is that the Indian economy and public health infrastructure have suffered during Modi's seven-year tenure as prime minister. When he took office in 2014, India's GDP annual growth was 7-8%. By the fourth quarter of 2019-2020, it had fallen to 3.1%.²² Inflation is trending upward (a whopping 6.3% in May 2021).²³

Manufacturing and exports have remained stagnant while unemployment is climbing up, going from 8% in April 2021 to 11.9% in May 2021.²⁴ Agricultural growth is disappointing, and the government continues to spend shockingly little on healthcare, one of "the lowest levels of public spending on healthcare in the world."²⁵

Modi's dismal economic record, according to economists, can be attributed to his demonetisation program in 2016, which removed about 86% of cash from circulation; his dramatic overhauling of the Goods and Services Tax, which was rolled out swiftly with little planning; and his periodic COVID-19 shutdowns.²⁶

Even though the economy under Modi has had its worst performance since Independence, his credibility has benefited from the discourse of Indian exceptionalism, which has been part of the image that Indian politicians have projected abroad since 1947. Nehru popularized the idea of India as exceptional for charting a "third way" between capitalism and socialism through its participation in the Non-Aligned Movement and for its status as the world's largest secular democracy.

Following the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, economic growth, investment and trade surged and buttressed the idea that India had a unique contribution to make to the world stage. That version of Indian exceptionalism is now eclipsed by a hardened form of Hindu exceptionalism, which distances itself from its precursor by decrying secularism and non violence as emasculating forces.

Yet unlike the liberal outcry against Hindu nationalism that perceives it as a rupture from India's "exceptional" virtues, we see enduring continuities between **Indian** exceptionalism and **Hindu** exceptionalism.

Masculinization of Hindu Exceptionalism

Prime Minister Modi's version of Hindu exceptionalism rests on an inflated and masculinized sense of Hinduness (Hindutva) cultivated by the Hindu Right and embodied at the individual level.²⁷ Since 2014, as then Chief Minister of Gujarat, he has bragged about having a 56" chest as a prerequisite for a leader to achieve the economic success of that state. (Some critics have ridiculed Modi by suggesting that 56" describes the girth of his belly rather than the width of his chest.)²⁸

In his mind and those of his devotees, the large chest measurement is a physical instantiation of Hindu growth and expansion. Modi's subsequent ascent to power is an affirmation of Hindu prowess, one that, according to Hindu ideologues, had been subdued by many years of colonization and Muslim rule. For his followers, India can only be restored by a "*loh purush*," iron man, such as Modi who had the mettle to steer India on its destined path to becoming a spiritual leader to the world.

More recently, Modi's performative masculinity has started

to conform to age-appropriate Hindu gender norms. Take for instance the transformation of Modi's appearance in the past year. A long beard and flowing locks have supplanted his neatly-manicured beard and carefully-coiffed hair.

Modi's sartorial choices are straight out of a Hindu casting book, meant to raise him "from a mere political leader who serves at the whim of the electorate to a philosopher-king whose duty is to guide the nation along the path of righteousness."²⁹

The religious iconography of Modi's appearance and its appeal to Hindu nationalists are explicit. Such sectarian symbolism diverts attention from Modi's economic and political failures, among which we count his responses to the pandemic. As Mamta Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal quipped, the growth of his beard is inversely proportional to India's economic growth: "The Indian economy has gone for a toss. There is no industrial growth. There is no growth, except for the beard of Narendra Modi."³⁰

Modi's obsession with individual bodies informs his understanding of the body politic and his trumpeting of Hindu exceptionalism in response to the pandemic. By early 2021, as Gautam I. Menon points out, "the idea that India's Covid-19 experience was exceptional" had become rooted among Indian policy makers, who were riveted by the fact that a "smaller fraction of people were dying of the disease when compared with Brazil, the UK, or the US."³¹

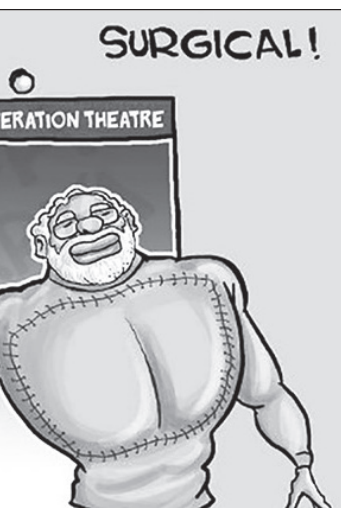
At the beginning of January 2021, the Indian government maintained that its number of COVID-19 deaths per million was 110 whereas Brazil's was 987 and the United States' was 1200. Several theories were floated to explain India's lower mortality rates: immunity gained from childhood vaccines against tuberculosis; the relatively younger age demographic of the country; the "hygiene hypothesis" correlating lower sanitation to greater exposure and potential immunity to illnesses; dietary theories of microbiomes; and the suggestion that Indians are genetically predisposed to handle COVID-19 infections.

India's deceptively lower death rate inspired Modi to declare in January 2021 that "this country by effectively controlling the coronavirus has saved the entire world and mankind from tragedy."³² Subsequently, in March and April the ruling BJP encouraged devout Hindus to attend the Kumbh Mela festival in Uttarakhand, which typically draws millions of worshippers.

In declaring the festival "open for all," Uttarakhand's Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat reassured the public that "Nobody will be stopped in the name of Covid-19 as we are sure the faith of God will overcome the fear of the virus."³³ Alluding to the status of the River Ganges as sacred, he added: "Most importantly, Kumbh is at the banks of the River Ganga. Maa Ganga's [Mother Ganges] blessings are there in the flow. So, there should be no corona."³⁴

Modi, after an outcry of criticism for promoting atten-





dance at the Kumbh Mela, reluctantly advised worshippers to observe the festival symbolically at a distance. Yet this reversal occurred well into April after many people had departed for the month-long festivities.

Like Rawat, Modi has been touting quack science and Hindu practices as preventive and curative measures for COVID-19. On June 21, 2021, a day that the United Nations had dubbed “International Yoga Day,” popularized in the last few years by Modi, he asserted that Yoga boosts immunity to COVID-19: “Covid-19 specifically attacks our respiratory system, which gets strengthened by pranayama,” a

breathing exercise.³⁵ He even instructed his Ministry of Science and Technology to explore research into the efficacy for COVID-19 treatment of breathing exercises and yoga.³⁶

Earlier in the year when the number of COVID-19 infections were small, he applauded Ayurveda’s role in boosting immunity among Indians, singling it out as a key factor responsible for India’s exceptionally low COVID-19 related mortalities.³⁷ India, he boasted, had generously shared its Vedic wisdom and taught the world the benefits of India’s “traditional medicine, Ayurveda, in improving immunity.”³⁸ Other BJP politicians such as Legislative Assembly member Surendra Singh and member of Parliament Pragya Singh Thakur swear by the preventive powers of a daily swig of cow urine.³⁹

In addition to recklessly encouraging Kumbh Mela devotees to expose themselves to the virus, Modi and BJP officials have participated in enormous election rallies with tens of thousands of attendees packed into close quarters with the majority brazenly unmasked. At one such rally, he gloated: “Everywhere I look, as far as I can see, there are crowds. You have done an extraordinary thing.”⁴⁰

In the meantime, India’s reported low-mortality rate in fall of 2020 has been largely attributed to demographic factors and the fact that a significant proportion of the population consists of young people. Moreover, epidemiologists have questioned the accuracy of the government’s infection rates and death-by-covid statistics. *The Economist*, for instance, estimates (on the conservative side) that the mortality rate is six times the official number.⁴¹

Hindu Humanitarianism, Vaccine Diplomacy

By April 2021, India’s second wave of COVID-19 had arrived, heralded by super-spreader election rallies and Kumbh Mela. Oxygen tanks were in short supply, hospitals overrun, and crematoriums overwhelmed. Pictures of corpses exposed by the retreating waters of the Ganges became ubiquitous.

Earlier in January, Modi and his allies in a display of masculine bravado had proclaimed that “India has saved humanity” by controlling the virus in India and exporting vaccines to several countries.⁴² This humanitarian outreach was at the expense of ensuring the just and efficient vaccine production and distribution within India itself. (By June 2021, only 3.5% of India’s population had been vaccinated.)⁴³

In the initial months of 2021, India supplied vaccines to a number of South Asian countries and promised to ship

doses to Brazil, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and other African countries. For Modi, vaccine diplomacy became a way to counter the global influence of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁴

India’s vaccine initiative played up Hindu humanitarian themes, emphasizing India’s status as “Pharmacy of the World,” referring to Bharat Biotech’s and the Serum Institute of India’s [SII] role producing Covaxin and Covishield (the Indian name given to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine) respectively.⁴⁵

Critics have charged that the government rushed approval for both vaccines in an effort to project itself as a leader on the global stage.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Modi Administration’s claim to humanitarianism is belied by the huge profit margins raked in by SII and Bharat Biotech, which are 2,000% and 4,000% respectively compared with Pfizer and Moderna whose respective margins are 650% and 500%.⁴⁷

By late spring, India’s vaccine diplomacy came crashing down as it had to halt its vaccine exports to other countries amidst an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases, a move that dimmed India’s image as the pharmacy of the world and laid bare Modi’s global hubris. India’s reneging of its pledge to supply vaccines to countries in the Global South has imperiled millions of lives.

Expanding Hindu Rashtra, Eliminating Dissent

Even as India’s public health infrastructure visibly crumbled in 2021, its decline had started decades before as public financing of health was never the Indian government’s top priority.⁴⁸ Under Modi, the public health crisis deepened even more.

While Modi’s government reduced the budget for India’s National Health Mission responsible for public health concerns by almost 20% in 2017, the budgetary allocations for defense in 2020-21 amounted to \$49.6 billion dollars, the highest ever increase in the last 15 years.⁴⁹ The government spent \$18.48 billion dollars for weapons procurement alone.

In what was reported in the media as a “major policy shift,” India accepted foreign aid for the first time in the last sixteen years because it did not even have an adequate supply of oxygen cylinders and medicines to tackle the surge of COVID-19 cases.⁵⁰ It was clear that AtmNirbhar Bharat had failed at the most basic level.

Despite the multiple economic and public health crises in India, the outcome of his arrogance, Modi’s zeal to ensure the realization of a Hindu Rashtra (nation-state) never abated. Modi’s decision to implement the National Register of Citizens and Citizen Amendment Act in 2019 were important steps to make the vision of a Hindu Rashtra a reality by providing non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh a pathway to citizenship, while criminalizing minority Muslim populations in India as illegal and illegitimate, and incarcerating them in detention camps.

The expansion of Hindu territoriality was also what lay at the heart of the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A, key constitutional provisions that had guaranteed the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in India. Kashmiris in the post-Partition period were promised the right to determine their political future through a free and impartial plebiscite in accordance with UN resolutions.

While these resolutions were never honored, Modi’s

unilateral abrogation of the autonomy provisions was meant to expand the territorial borders of a Hindu homeland over forcibly annexed land, initiating a settler colonial project to ultimately change the demographics of the region and make Hindus the majority population.

A series of uninterrupted lockdowns beginning in August 2019 with the abrogation of 370 and 35A, during which time Kashmiris had no access to media, phone services or the internet, imposed a militarized siege, a phenomenon that a key Kashmiri rights group called “digital apartheid.”⁵¹

Apart from intensifying their tactics to curb dissent through a media blackout, the Indian state also arrested hundreds of Kashmiri boys (as young as nine years old) and political leaders under preventive detention laws which allowed detention for up to two years without trial.⁵² Kashmiris extensively reported how India’s military and surveillance apparatus made it extremely hard for them to cope with the effects of COVID-19. According to civil society and media reports, by May 2021, 119 inmates across 13 jails had tested positive for COVID-19, while hundreds out of an estimated 4,573 political prisoners were suspected to have the virus.⁵³

Without access to medical care, and despite the J&K government’s assurances of vaccinating all “eligible people,” which included political prisoners, vaccination rates remained abysmally low. Many insisted that the Indian state was purposefully using inadequate health care as a way to exterminate key political leaders.

Among these was the prominent 77-year old Tehreeq-e-Huriyat leader Ashraf Sehrai. For many, his COVID-19 related death in prison was a “cold-blooded murder.” It exemplified the Indian state’s complete disregard for Kashmiri prisoners’ right to life and the fundamental statutes of International Human Rights Law.⁵⁴

There were also concerns that India was deliberately preventing access to vaccines for Kashmiri Muslims. On May 16, amidst a surge of COVID-19 cases in the state, a newspaper article “Children of a Lesser God,” revealed that while 9,000 residents of Jammu were vaccinated on a single day, no one in Kashmir received a vaccine that day.⁵⁵ As per reports that week, only 818 Kashmiris compared to 40,000 predominantly Hindu residents of Jammu had received the vaccine.

When vaccines were made available, health workers who were part of outreach and vaccination interventions took videos of people receiving their vaccine shots, and uploaded these on social media. Locals wary of Indian designs considered these videos to be part of a public relations exercise, conducted by the Indian state to erase its brutal history of killing and exterminating Kashmiris, and to present the world with the benevolent side of Indian rule in the region.⁵⁶

People’s perceptions and experiences around supply and distribution of vaccines in Kashmir, as well as reports of vaccine hesitancy, particularly among women who worried about vaccines causing lifelong infertility, cannot be separated from the existential anxieties Kashmiris suffer under a militarized occupation.⁵⁷

Under Modi’s rule the number of political prisoners, including poets, academics, activists and students, has increased at an alarming rate even *within* India.⁵⁸ People have been detained and arrested under fake and trumped up charges that have had a chilling impact on free speech.⁵⁹

In its report entitled *Democracy under Siege* released by Freedom House, India was declared to be “partly free,” indicating a dramatic downward slide on matters of political freedoms and liberties.⁶⁰ Modi’s government refused to release political prisoners and stop arresting new dissenters even as the pandemic ravaged through India, putting the lives of countless activists in India’s overcrowded prisons at extreme risk.

Recently Fr. Stan Swamy, the 84-year-old Tribal rights activist who was arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case along with 31 more people for allegedly conspiring with Maoist groups to destabilize India, died inside jail due to COVID-19. Critics rightly termed it “a blatant murder” by Modi and the Indian judiciary.⁶¹

Conclusion

The question remains whether Modi will emerge unscathed despite perpetuating what Arundhati Roy correctly called — referring to the colossal number of COVID-19 deaths in India in 2021 — “Modi’s crime against humanity.”⁶²

Our Human Rights collaborator from Kashmir shared with us his assessment of the unfolding political situation in India within the context of the pandemic: “Even if half of Indians die, the other half will still vote for Modi.” Although stark and perhaps premature, our friend’s comment painfully captures the truth that many in India and elsewhere are loath to confront. Despite “India’s descent into Covid hell”⁶³ under Modi, and his plummeting approval ratings in the past few months as corona cases surged in the country, many tenaciously held to their faith that Modi “was still the man for India.”⁶⁴

Even as many hoped that the virus outbreak would curb the full blown outbreak of Hindu fascism, others feared, and for good reason, that Modi’s brand would remain untarnished — regardless of the climbing death count in India, and proclamations about India’s descent from the status of an aspirational superpower into a “failed state.”⁶⁵

Modi’s message of Hindu pride transcends quotidian concerns about India’s debilitated economy and rotten public health infrastructure. His expansionist interventions in Kashmir continue to win him public accolades, even as thousands of farmers are on the streets protesting the new farm laws and social media critics are increasingly expressing palpable anger and outrage against Modi’s utter failure to contain the pandemic.

Yet the brandishing of Hindu exceptionalism is Modi’s elixir and might allow him to continue to exert his authoritarian hold over India’s polity. ■

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- supposed to perform certain roles, duties, and rituals that are considered to be their "special dharma." In this schema of dharmic roles, the Śūdras, "who are, as it were, half-citizens (Beisassen) of the religious and social system of the Āryas, may not become familiar with the Veda; they have only to serve the three upper castes." The word Ārya, he explains, describes "a cultural community, the elite classes of which called themselves Ārya" (479). See Paul Hacker and Donald R. Davis, "Dharma in Hinduism," *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 34: 5 (2006): 479-496.
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Adrienne Rich, Trailblazer By Peter Drucker

The Power of Adrienne Rich:

A Biography

By Hilary Holladay

Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2020, 480 pages, \$32.50 hardback.

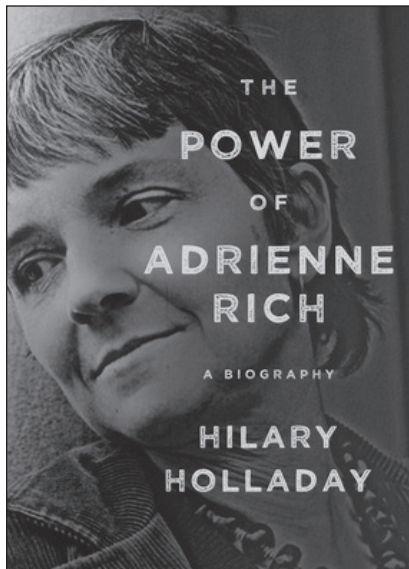
ADRIENNE RICH WAS many things to many people. She was one of the United States' leading poets, the recipient of countless honors, beginning while she was still in college and continuing until her death in 2012. In her forties, Rich became a lesbian feminist icon, idolized by crowds who flocked to her readings and talks, renowned for her book on motherhood *Of Woman Born* and her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

She was also a public intellectual on the radical left, without interruption from the 1960s through the rest of her life. The red threads of her thought can be traced from before her emergence as a feminist celebrity. She wove them into an even more impressive intellectual edifice in the three decades starting in the mid-1980s, when she branched out in new revolutionary directions.

Hilary Holladay's beautifully and incisively written biography provides a wealth of material to track Rich's political and intellectual development as well as her poetry and her life. My assessment, however, is that the book could easily have been twice as long. It left me hungry for more on several levels.

While *The Power of Adrienne Rich* comments on each of Rich's dozens of books of poetry, it still leaves room for more in-depth literary analysis.

It illuminates her life with details of her family of origin, her sexual relationships and her many intense friendships. It is particu-



larly strong on the influence of her domineering father, Arnold Rich, and of her partner from 1976 on, Michelle Cliff.

But there must be other important things to say about (for example) her difficult ties with her sister Cynthia Rich, and her devoted but complex love for her three sons. As for Rich's close friendships and recurrent breaks, there were too

many of them, extending over far too many years, to do justice to them all in a few hundred pages. While this article is in part a review of Holladay's excellent book, therefore, it also explores some issues in greater depth than Holladay does. In particular, it tries to illuminate Rich's deep engagement with Marxism during the last thirty years of her life.

Holladay's main focus is on Adrienne Rich the lesbian feminist. This makes sense, given how crucial Rich was to so many women, her pathbreaking exploration in her poetry of love and eroticism between women, and the enduring strength of her thought in this field.

My own interest, though, is at least as great in Rich's evolution in her last three decades — when her lesbian feminism, though still important, was by her own account less central for her. Lesbian feminists still celebrate Rich's writings of the 1970s — rightly — but the Marxist left has paid too little attention to her work.

No doubt there are several explanations for this. Rich came to Marxism just as it began a long decline in the United States, in terms of both its political and intellectual influence. Though she taught at many universities, she was never well integrated into academic Marxist circles. And despite her high regard for Raya Dunayevskaya's attempt to fuse Hegelian Marxism with fem-

inism, Rich was never active in any particular Marxist current.

Still, nothing justifies Marxists' neglect of Rich's thought. Fortunately, her essays provide an ample basis for reconstructing it. It is high time to pay it more attention.

A Life on the Left

Rich's political life can be divided into four major periods:

- In the 1950s, she was in retrospect a startlingly conventional and conservative young woman, as a wife (to the economist Alfred Conrad) and mother. She wrote for example in her journal in 1950 that any woman who claimed to want "sovereign 'equality' simply doesn't speak truth." (53)

- In the 1960s, at first somewhat in her husband's shadow, she became active on the New Left, particularly in solidarity with anti-war and anti-racist students at City College of New York.

- In 1970 she joined the women's movement, throwing herself into a close-knit women's community, transforming her thinking, playing a major part in the creation of second-wave radical feminist theory, and within a few years coming out as a lesbian.

- Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and a trip to Sandinista Nicaragua in 1983 catalyzed Rich's striking out in new directions, proclaimed publicly in her seminal 1984 essay "Toward a Politics of Location."

Several major themes bind together Rich's political writing of the 1960s, the 1970s, and her last, Marxist decades. Anti-racism in particular was always key for her. This was inevitable at City College, where solidarity with Black students was urgent and inescapable for a radical.

In those years June Jordan and Audre Lorde became her intimate friends and co-thinkers, which they remained as long as they lived.

Rich often welcomed fierce debates with people she loved, only sometimes to break with them when the struggle became too much for her. Neither "a saint nor a superwoman," Holladay comments, "when someone angered or disappointed her or just wore her out, she cut ties, often with little warning." (324)

But Rich never wavered in her commitment to Jordan and Lorde, or shrank from

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the challenges they posed to her as a white anti-racist. The same was true with Rich's Black Jamaican life partner Michelle Cliff.

Even in the 1970s when Rich believed that identification with women transcended every other identity, she also had a constant preoccupation with many women's victimization by class and poverty.

As early as 1971, she was thinking of the women whom Virginia Woolf "left out of the picture altogether — women who are washing other people's dishes and caring for other people's children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children."¹

More could be said in Holladay's book, too, about Rich as a disabled person, who lived much of her life in chronic pain from rheumatoid arthritis. Holladay does make clear that in her personal life Rich was reticent and stoical about her pain, although her disability was at times obvious to people who met her — and startling if they had known nothing about it.

In later life Rich did begin to address the issue politically a little. Her work served as an explicit inspiration to disabled activists and scholars.²

Lesbian Feminist

A half-century later, it is difficult to fathom how sharply Rich cut herself off from her East Coast left-wing intellectual milieu in 1970 by becoming a feminist.

When in 1975 she had the temerity to contest Susan Sontag's assertion that the women's movement was responsible for promoting the Nazi films of Lili Riefenstahl — feminists had in fact protested the films' screening — Sontag accused her of "one of the roots of fascism," an anti-intellectualism that was "a persistent indiscretion of feminist rhetoric."

Although Rich, like Sontag, had been a long-time contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, Sontag's influence helped ensure that Rich's work hardly ever appeared in it again.³

Today we can distinguish the conclusions about women's oppression that Rich affirmed from the 1970s to the end of her life from other standpoints she developed in the 1970s that she later qualified.

She continued to assert, for example, that a "change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution."⁴

"I go on believing," she said in 1984, "that the liberation of women is a wedge driven into all other radical thought."⁵

The close link she saw between lesbian identity and feminism also remained a constant. As she wrote in 1976, "It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively ... the full connection between woman and

woman."

This meant for her that all consistent feminists were tapping into a lesbian ethos, (289) resisting the myriad forms of women's oppression that simultaneously constricted lesbian possibility, and moving in countless ways across history in and out of a "lesbian continuum."

Not that she discounted the sexual component of lesbianism. On the contrary, she wrote, "the physical passion of woman for woman ... is central to lesbian existence."⁶ Her poetic explorations of lesbian eroticism were groundbreaking and compelling.

This conception led her to deemphasize commonalities between lesbians and gay men. She was not one of the lesbians who took part in mixed gay/lesbian radical groups around the time of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion.

She had almost no sense of a common lesbian/gay culture, especially in the 1970s, insisting that lesbianism was not a "mirror image" of male homosexuality but rather "a profoundly female experience."⁷

In those years she denounced gay male culture as "reflecting such male stereotypes as dominance and submission as modes of relationship, and the separation of sex from emotional involvement — a culture tainted by profound hatred for women." (296)

Her critique focused on gay men's male identities more than their sexuality, however; even in the 1970s she doubted whether gay men feared women any more than straight men did.⁸

In any event, such generalizations became less common in her writings from the 1980s on. She expressed solidarity with gay men devastated by the AIDS crisis, memorializing dead friends, and gay men increasingly became her enthusiastic fans.

At the same time, she rightly denied any vision of a unified gay community. She cited gay Black poet Essex Hemphill to reject "a one-eyed, one gender, one color perception of community," insisting that it was at best made up of "communities engaged in a fragile coexistence."⁹

Rich's relationships with straight men from the 1970s on were more lastingly problematic. Initially her turn to feminism led her to move out of the New York apartment she shared with her husband Alfred Conrad (Alf). Her transformation was so traumatic to Conrad that it apparently helped trigger his subsequent suicide.

Rich spent many years processing and reprocessing that trauma herself. In a poem she wrote two years after the suicide, she wrote, "Next year it would have been 20 years / and you are wastefully dead / who might have made the leap / we talked, too late, of making."¹⁰

The frenetic pace and pressures of post-1968 activism had taken a terrible toll on

both Rich and Conrad, even before Rich's immersion in feminism. Holladay's persuasive verdict is that what saved Rich from her husband's despair and self-destruction was her poetry, her constant "true north." (195)

Rich's prolonged wrestling with the memory of her marriage to Conrad sheds light on her lesbian "separatism" in the 1970s. While she did sometimes opt for all-women classes and all-women discussions at her readings, she also tried to engage deeply with male friends about how feminism should make them change their lives.

She insisted in 1976 on "the dawning hope that women and men may one day experience forms of love and parenthood, identity and community that will not be drenched in lies, secrets and silence." (287)

This was a dialogue that the men often refused or evaded. They were quick to conclude that in choosing a women's community, Rich was rejecting them.

She later told the story of a reunion after several years with a male poet who exploded at her: "*You disappeared!*" She had not realized that her joining a women's community and "taking part in an immense shift in human consciousness" would "for him [be] so off-to-the-edge [that] it seemed I had sunk, or dived, into a black hole."¹¹

Her love for her sons at least was strong and unconditional. Recalling the "delicious and sinful rhythm" of their lives one summer that the four of them spent together while their father was studying abroad, she described watching "their slender little-boys' bodies grow brown" as they "lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children."

Looking back at how later, together, they lived through Alf's suicide, she saw the four of them as "survivors, four distinct people with strong bonds." Her sons' "love, intelligence, and integrity have been resources for me since we first began to talk to each other," she wrote.¹²

Even with them, though, she remained a clear-eyed feminist intellectual. She described them in one 1981 interview as "full grown, adult, white males whom I am very fond of and like very, very much, about whose feminism or pro-feminism I would not swear an oath on any account." (335)

In fact, Rich was always too critical-minded and radical to fit comfortably into any community, even a lesbian feminist one. Although she and Cliff moved to western Massachusetts in 1979 to become part of the strong women's community there, Holladay notes, "she didn't find the utopian community of lesbian sisterhood she seems to have imagined.... She was concerned that women were turning inward, getting distracted by New Age pabulum." (314)

In Rich's later summary, "A feminism that sought to engage race and colonialism" was

being pushed aside by a “model of female — or feminine — self-involvement and self-improvement, devoid of political context or content.”¹³

She remained in many ways a cosmopolitan intellectual. She fully agreed with Cliff’s admonition, “We need to allow ourselves complexity.” (316) Soon Rich’s political development would magnify her distance from the lesbian feminist milieu.

Toward Marxism

Reagan’s election in 1980 spurred a process of rethinking for her. It led among other things to a trip in 1983 with socialist feminist Margaret Randall to Nicaragua.

In this “tiny impoverished country, in a four-year-old society dedicated to erasing poverty,” she “could physically feel the weight of the United States of North America [and] the cold shadow we cast everywhere to the south.”¹⁴ She felt impelled to battle against a world in which “every public decision has to be justified in the scales of corporate profits.”¹⁵

She concluded that radical feminists had been wrong in the 1970s when they “shrugged away Marx along with the academic Marxists and the sectarian Left.”¹⁶

They had failed to appreciate the pioneering work done by Marxist feminists. And while some radical feminists had looked at the intersections of race, class and gender, they had focused too narrowly on individual women’s poverty and class identities, and not enough on how class and poverty “are produced and perpetuated in the first place.”¹⁷

She returned to Marx’s writings, where she found “a skilled diagnosis of skewed and disfigured human relationships.”¹⁸ Her freedom to create poetry, she saw now, was linked to historic struggles to give working people generally the time for free creation: “the sacred struggle for the worker’s freedom in time.”¹⁹

Without joining any Marxist group, Rich increasingly engaged with Marxist milieus. Several of her poems were for example first published in the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. By 1984 she was questioning the status of patriarchy as (in her 1978 description) “a model for every other form of exploitation.”²⁰

“I am less quick than I once was to search for single ‘causes,’” she said in 1984. “Patriarchy exists nowhere in a pure state; we are the latest to set foot in a tangle of oppressions grown up and around each other for centuries.”

Citing the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement, she acknowledged that most “women in the world must fight for their lives on many fronts at once.”²¹

This turn helped precipitate a break in 1985, initially around the issue of pornography, with several women who had for years



Adrienne Rich (right), with writers Audre Lorde (left) and Meridel Le Sueur (middle) in Austin, Texas, where they taught at a writers’ workshop in April 1980.
K. Kendall, CC by 2.0

been close feminist allies. To their shock, Rich took a “dramatic leap” to the other side of the “sex wars,” supporting a court challenge by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) to an anti-pornography ordinance. (347)

For Rich, this reflected a concern that “lesbian sexuality was being downplayed” to avoid alienating potential conservative allies in the fight against pornography. She was also reluctant to see “further powers of suppression ... turned over to the State.”²²

Rich’s changed position was part of a broader de-centering of feminism. Her “thinking was unable to fulfill itself within feminism alone,” she concluded.²³ Even as she turned to Marxism, however, she sought to preserve a feminist rootedness in unique, ever-changing personal experience.

She found a Marxism that did this partly in the work of Raya Dunayevskaya. This Marxism rejected “resorting to a party line,” she wrote. It tried to “conceptualize a miners’ strike, a poor people’s march, a ghetto revolt, a women’s demonstration both as ‘spontaneous activity’ and as the embodiment of new ideas.”²⁴

Rich’s Marxism also drew on Rosa Luxemburg’s stress on the close bonds between socialism, democracy, reform and revolution, and on Gramsci’s call for “a new culture” and “a new moral life.”

She drew as well on Walter Benjamin’s insistence on the need for a “backward vision of disasters and defeats ... to alert us to our contemporary perils”²⁵ — though in her poem “Benjamin Revisited,” she concluded that the “angel of history is / flown,” leaving to the janitor in the basement “the

job of stoking / the so-called past / into the so-called present.”²⁶

Rich’s politics, more and more comprehensively radical, cut her off from the “fraternally-twinning” Democrats as well as Republicans.²⁷

Her intransigence captured national attention in 1997, when she refused to accept a National Medal of Arts “because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics” of the Clinton Administration. Art “means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power.”²⁸

Jewish Identity

The years when Rich came to identify as a Marxist were also a time when she began identifying as Jewish, despite her Protestant mother and her father’s deep ambivalence about his Jewish background.

There was never any religious content to Rich’s identification, and still less any allegiance to Zionism. (In 2009, after some hesitation “as a believer in boundary-crossings,” she publicly endorsed the call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel.²⁹)

She firmly rejected the idea of “Jewish sameness,” insisting on “[d]issidence and argument” as “acutely characteristic of Jewish life.”³⁰ She felt a special affinity with Marxists of Jewish origin like Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky.³¹ “I’m an American Jew,” she wrote, laying claim to “a history of internationalist radicalism.”³²

At a deep personal level, identifying as Jewish required her to wrestle with the Jewish father whose unrelenting demands had first made her a writer. In her sister

Cynthia's words, Arnold Rich "was the patriarch of patriarchs who created a woman confident enough to later rip away at patriarchy." (136)

Ironically, Arnold was so deeply assimilated that his daughter's decision to marry a Jew elicited antisemitic tirades from him that ended their closeness. In her 1981 poem "For Ethel Rosenberg," she recalled her father's "seventeen pages / finely inscribed harangues," adding drily, "I hadn't realized / our family arguments were so important."³³

Yet after his death, Adrienne found that she could "decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own." (351) She recognized that "in his mind ... every day of his life was a Jewish day."³⁴

In coming to terms with her Jewishness, Rich was strengthened by Michelle Cliff's struggle to come to terms with her Black identity.

Cliff was a light-skinned Jamaican who could pass for white; her family belonged to the island's colored elite that emphatically did not identify as Black. Both Cliff's lesbianism and her embrace of Black self-identification were factors in her mother's and sister's break with her — while Rich never felt close to her own mother and became estranged from her sister Cynthia.

The title of Cliff's book *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* could almost have summed up Rich's attitude to her Jewishness. The title of her own essay "Split at the Root," reflecting her parents' mixed marriage, encapsulated her attitude in other words.

Epic

Like Walt Whitman, one of the earlier American poets who inspired and influenced her,³⁵ Rich ultimately made poetry, not "an escape from history,"³⁶ but "an instrument of prophecy." (403)

She made her life and work an epic of her country, living by her definition as a "patriot ... who wrestles for the soul of her country,"³⁷ in the knowledge that "every flag that flies today is a cry of pain."³⁸

She infused politics with poetic inspiration, rescuing it from the "despair [of] the political activist who doggedly goes on and on, turning in the ashes of the same burnt-out rhetoric, the same gestures, all imagination spent."³⁹

She stayed true to the spirit she remembered from the late 1960s and the early women's movement, of politics "as an expression of the impulse to create."⁴⁰ She embraced radical politics as "a great confluent project of the human imagination, of which art and literature are indispensable tributaries."⁴¹

Her death hardly ended her struggles — she left them as a legacy to us all — but her hard life and intense efforts enriched our capacity to carry on these struggles. In her own words:

She died a famous woman denying
her wounds/denying/
her wounds came
from the same source as her power
(329) ■

¡Dianna Ortiz Presente!

AN URSULINE NUN, Dianna Ortiz was gang-raped and tortured by a Guatemalan "security" force while teaching literacy as a Catholic missionary there in 1989, which *The New York Times* reported "helped lead to the release of documents showing American involvement in human rights abuses in that country."

Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous Guatemalans were massacred in decades of U.S.-backed repression and dictatorship. The attackers told Dianna they "knew who she was" and about her work in Huehuetenango province.

As she testified at a Congressional hearing, on the second day of her captivity a certain "Alejandro" — whom she suspected of being an American from his accented Spanish — turned up and told the torturers to stop because her kidnapping was becoming an international story. As he was driving her to what she expected would be her execution, she managed to escape at a traffic stop and call for help.



Her memoir *The Blindfold's Eyes: My Journey from Torture to Truth* was published by Orbis Press in 2004. As Joseph Mulligan, a Jesuit priest, writes in *The Catholic Worker* (June-July 2021), Ortiz

"dedicated her life and work to denouncing torture and other gross violations of human rights."

A 43-year member of the Assisi House community in Washington D.C., Dianna Ortiz died of cancer February 19. The funeral homily by Fr. Joe Nagle recalled her "long struggle against the horrendous policies of torture which stain our American soul. She stood publicly against the horrendous sin of our country — violence as policy. And she turned that terrible experience into a challenge, even to the highest levels of U.S. political life..."

"She achieved an immense goal in forcing our government to significant accountability for the inhuman way our government was acting in order to 'protect' our American way of life — torture." ■

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 15.
2. See e.g. Robert McRuer, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2016, <http://dsfnetwork.org/assets/Uploads/DisabilitySunday/31206-McRuer-Compulsory-Able-Bodiedness.pdf>.
3. Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*, New York: ECCO, 2020, 396-97.
4. *Arts of the Possible*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 66.
6. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in Ann Snitow et al. eds, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, 183-85, 194, 195.
7. *Ibid.*, 178, 193.
8. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976, 210.
9. Adrienne Rich, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 104.
10. Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973, 50. Rich and Conrad had married in 1953.
11. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, 164-65.
12. *Of Woman Born*, 194, 32, 17.
13. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
14. *Arts of the Possible*, 71-72.
15. *What Is Found There*, xv.
16. *Arts of the Possible*, 69.
17. *Ibid.*, 5.
18. *Ibid.*, 4.
19. *What Is Found There*, 42.
20. "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 202.
21. *Arts of the Possible*, 69-70.
22. Martin Duberman, Andrea Dworkin: *The Feminist as Revolutionary*, New York: New Press, 2020, 193. Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, the authors of the ordinance, as well as Dworkin's biographer Martin Duberman and Rich's biographer Holladay, have all insisted that because the ordinance only empowered women as civil plaintiffs, it did not rely on the state. But civil verdicts too can only be enforced by state action.
23. *Arts of the Possible*, 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 86.
25. *A Human Eye*, 63-64, 67, 68.
26. Adrienne Rich, *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 17.
27. *Ibid.*, 131.
28. *Arts of the Possible*, 98-99.
29. mondoweiss.net/2009/02/adrienne-rich-turns-on-morally-stoneblind-israel-and-us-media.
30. *A Human Eye*, 23.
31. Rich cited Trotsky's essay on revolutionary art at length in *What Is Found There*, 44-47.
32. *Arts of the Possible*, 143.
33. Adrienne Rich, "For Ethel Rosenberg," *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981), <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2768&context=iowareview>.
34. *A Human Eye*, 20.
35. Rich celebrated Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and especially his Calamus poems, in *A Human Eye*, 107-12.
36. *What Is Found There*, xiv.
37. I am indebted for this insight to the *London Review of Books* podcast by Seamus Perry and Mark Ford: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts/close-readings/on-adrienne-rich>. Thanks to Jeff Webber for drawing this podcast to my attention.
38. Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991, 23.
39. *What Is Found There*, 17.
40. *Ibid.*, 25.
41. *A Human Eye*, 102.

REVIEW

A Memoir of Anti-Racist Struggle

By Dick J. Reavis

Haunted by Slavery

A Southern White Woman in the Freedom Struggle

By Gwendolyn Midlo Hall

Haymarket Books, 2021, 234 pages, \$21.95 paper

GWENDOLYN MIDLO HALL, now 92, has for 50 years been a noteworthy scholar of Western Hemisphere slavery, ever since the 1971 publication of her first book, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Studies: A Comparison of Santo Domingue and Cuba*. Her 1992 work *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* put her on the map of historians of American slavery and was followed by four more books with American settings, all of which are still in print.

This year she released her autobiography, *Haunted by Slavery*, and it's not merely a journal of archival discoveries. About half is an account of her life before the 1990s, when she became a tenured academic.

Midlo was born in 1929 to the family of a Jewish attorney who was often vilified for his defense of labor unions and African Americans in Louisiana. She was an exceptional child who says that she refused to play with dolls, or accept them as gifts, because she saw them as instruments of genderizing.

By her early teens, she writes, "I was aware of the wide gap between the myths and the realities of the white supremacist world and how shallowly white people felt and how little they perceived." Black liberation, and to a lesser extent feminism, were the motivations of the rest of her life.

At 15, she joined the New Orleans chapter of the American-Soviet Friendship Committee, "inspired by gratitude to the Soviet Union for stopping the Nazi invasion at Stalingrad." Through the Friendship Committee she began meeting members of the Communist Party, but she was more enthralled by the bravery of the New Orleans Youth Council, an integrated local group that defied segregation.

In 1944 the Communist Party, which, if only in theory had been a revolutionary, Leninist organization, dissolved and reconstituted itself as a social-democratic group. Midlo decried the change. "One result," she writes, was that the Communists abandoned their insistence that all organizations be



Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, scholar and activist.

interracial ... to avoid offending the sensibilities of white southerners."

But within a year the Party reverted to "Leninism" and a fully anti-racist posture. She joined in 1946.

"I became a revolutionary in the Deep South at a time when few white people dared to oppose racism, and those who did most uncompromisingly were almost all Communists," she says. "My experience in the CP of Louisiana was overwhelmingly positive... I was an enthusiastic, devoted teen-ager who had found the first and only society I felt comfortable in," she adds.

Shortly afterward, the Party ensured her election to the executive board of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a broad front organization with goals beyond those of the Youth Council. To her displeasure, a few months later the national office of the CP ordered its New Orleans members to abandon the Youth Council, which it saw as a competitor to the SNYC.

Despite her irritation, Midlo remained with the CP, and in 1948, after participating in a successful campaign to get the Progressive Party's candidate for the Presidency, Henry Wallace, on the Louisiana ballot, the CP dispatched her to work with volunteers from New York on a similar campaign in Atlanta.

Like many Party members in former Confederate states, she found her northern comrades insufferable. "...They were aggressive, self-righteous, and contemptuous of the South and of southerners," she says.

During her youth, Midlo twice married men from the New Orleans Jewish com-

munity. The first of those marriages, when she was 16, was brief, but the second lasted for four years, most of them spent in Paris, where her husband took private lessons in classical piano but she was unable to enroll in college classes.

The couple returned from Europe in 1953 and Midlo rejoined the Party in New York. She took up work as a typist and legal secretary, but on job after job, the FBI informed her employers, who routinely fired her. Ultimately she found a refuge in short-time assignments from a series of temp agencies.

"Passionate Political Love Affair"

In 1955 she ran into Harry Haywood — the "Party name" of Haywood Hall — whom she had met at a Paris demonstration five years earlier. Both he and Midlo were estranged from their spouses at the time of their New York encounter and soon began cohabiting. In 1956 when their divorces cleared, they married, each for the third time.

Though Midlo was 26 and Haywood, 58, "Ours was a passionate political love affair," she says. The marriage produced two children, a son in 1956 and a daughter in 1963.

Haywood was a legendary figure in the CP. Following in the footsteps of his older brother Otto Hall, in 1919 he had joined the African Blood Brotherhood, a socialist group that merged into the Party in the early '20s.

A veteran of Chicago's Red Summer, two world wars and the Spanish Civil War, Haywood was the leading advocate of creating a Black nation from dozens of contiguous Dixie counties where Blacks were a majority.

Midlo favored the scheme, which in 1928 the Communist International, or Comintern, had adopted as a call for referendum on Black Belt nationhood — as a right, not a recommendation. The referendum, of course, could not be held until after the United States was socialist.

According to the scripture that both its proponents and opponents shared, Stalin's *On the National Question*, a nation was an entity that occupied a common territory and economic niche, had a common psychology and spoke a common language. Opponents of the idea, including Otto Hall, argued that African Americans didn't speak a language unintelligible to other Americans.

More important by the 1950s were what we would today call "facts on the ground."

Dick J. Reavis is a retired journalist and author living in Dallas. In 1965-66 he was a civil rights worker in Alabama.

The second phase of the Great Migration was underway, as Blacks were moving from the rural South to industrial cities north and west.

Black veterans of World War II were pressing for essentially assimilationist reforms, and cotton production, which in 1928 had been the strong suit of the South, was moving to drier locales, where boll weevils were a lesser menace. In short, the Black Belt's population was declining and few of its remaining residents relished the idea of living in a homeland whose heartland would have been Mississippi.

In *Haunted*, Midlo defends the Black Belt thesis as a concept that "forced the CP to take the African American struggle seriously

indeed, especially in the South." She and Haywood set about defending it in African-American and Party publications.

But in the meantime the CP's kinship with the Soviets inserted an overriding controversy. In early 1956, Nikita Khrushchev had delivered a speech, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," denouncing the late Stalin as a tyrant. The Chinese Communist Party and many members of the Foster faction of the American CP joined in condemning Khrushchev as "revisionist."

Haywood took a leading role by forming a group called the Provisional Organizing Committee to Reestablish the Communist Party. It splintered and foundered within two years. Perhaps because he anticipated his

expulsion and the removal of the Black Belt thesis from the Party's program — both of which came in 1959 — he decided to take his family to Mexico City.

Feminist Renewal

At the time Midlo had married Haywood, she says "I still didn't believe I could accomplish anything important on my own — only by standing by my man." As his wife, she had served as Haywood's "typist, then his secretary, then his editor."

Her Mexican surroundings apparently inspired a revival of her childhood feminism. Resuming her long-delayed pursuit of higher education while mothering her children, she won a BA in 1962 and two years later, an MA in Latin American studies, both from Mexico City College, today's Universidad de las Américas, all the while working on a book manuscript for Haywood, "Towards a Revolutionary Program for Negro Freedom."

Her account of that labor is not charitable. She charges that "Harry's contribution to the writing process was to lie on the bed in the room where I was typing ... occasionally opening one eye, not two, and saying 'How is it coming, Gwen?'"

Midlo demanded a byline as a co-author of the work, but Haywood resisted until she told him, "You take the manuscript, I'll take the kids." Their estrangement lasted until Haywood's death in 1985, though the couple from time to time spent weeks together and never divorced.

With the distancing of their personal lives came political disagreements, too. Midlo was shocked by the harsh treatment accorded professors during China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, she despaired of Marxism itself, she says, because "it reduced people to small cogs in a great wheel."

Haywood left Mexico before 1965, when Midlo returned to the United States to accept a teaching job at Elizabeth City State College in North Carolina. She was ousted after a year because of renewed FBI meddling.

Midlo was unmoved by Haywood's continuing activism — he joined the short-lived October League, chaired by former SDSer Michael Klonsky — and undeterred by the FBI. She moved her children to Ann Arbor and began work toward a 1970 doctorate in Latin American studies at the University of Michigan, which led into careers at Rutgers and Michigan State University.

A great part of her work was compiling and elaborating electronic databases on the American slave trade and its victims, useful to genealogists and today's crop of the historians of slavery. She now lives with her son, a cardiologist named Haywood after his father, in the Mexican state of Guanajuato. ■

What Cuban Protests Reveal: Cynical Sanctions, Popular Aspirations — The Editors

ANYONE WHO BELIEVED that in the arena of imperialist foreign policy at least, the Biden administration would be an improvement on the rampages of Trump, has come in for some rude awakenings. Biden's no better and in some ways worse.

Far from easing the additional sanctions that Trump's gang imposed on Cuba, Venezuela and Iran, Biden has maintained and even doubled down on them. Amidst a resurgent pandemic, these measures are not only cynical but sadistic — blocking Cuba's access for example to syringes to administer its own effective COVID-19 vaccines.

In the Iranian case, "crippling sanctions" (as U.S. officials have boastfully called them) serve to strengthen Tehran's most reactionary and vicious factions who oppose returning to the multinational nuclear deal, negotiated by the Obama administration, that Trump dynamited.

Most galling perhaps is that Biden's preserving those savage punitive sanctions on Cuba and Venezuela isn't even driven today by imperialist "regime change" fantasies, but by pandering to rightwing forces in exile communities in Florida and a couple other states — a futile gesture anyway, as those elements are firmly committed to the Trumpster Republican Party.

While Washington's rhetoric about "the democratic desires of the Cuban people" is as sickening as it's been for six decades now, it's also true that the July 11 eruption of protests in Cuba shines a harsh light on an undeniable fact — a substantial part of the Cuban population is deeply alienated from the government, and no longer frightened into silence by fear of repression.

It's a result of complex multiple factors

including the collapse of tourism, food insecurity, and growing inequality within a "dollarized" economy that tends to affect Black Cubans more severely than the average. The criminal U.S. blockade causes severe damage, but so does what longtime Cuban-American socialist author Samuel Farber argues "lies at the very heart of the Cuban economic system: the bureaucratic, inefficient and irrational control and management of the economy by the Cuban government."

The socialist left has a two-fold obligation: First and always, we must speak out in petitions and protests against the cruel and cynical blockade policy, joining with all others who share our opposition. Second, as revolutionaries in the tradition of models like Rosa Luxemburg, in our own name we should support the rights of the Cuban people to a workers' democracy — just as we stand for principles of human rights, democracy and social justice everywhere — and not leave that issue in the hands of the hypocritical right wing. We insist that the defects of the revolution are to be rectified by the Cuban people themselves. ■

Some further reading:

NACLA Update, August 13, 2021: Four articles by Michael Wolfe, Margaret Randall, Rodrigo Amirolo and Julio Martinez-Cava, and Bryan Campbell Romero, <https://nacla.org/>

"Why Cubans Protested on July 11" by Samuel Farber, <https://inthesetimes.com>, posted August 9, 2021.

"In View of the Popular Mobilizations in Cuba and Imperialist Aggression," statement by the Executive Bureau of the Fourth International, July 27, 2021, <https://fourth.international/en/566/latin-america/353>.

Two statements from the Comunistas Cuba group posted at <https://solidarity-us.org>, "The July Protests in Cuba," July 19 and "Call for the Release of Detainees in Cuba," July 13, 2021.

REVIEW

We've Been Here Before: Inner Lives in Hard Times

By Lukas Moe

The Emotional Life of the Great Depression

By John Marsh

Oxford University Press, 2019, 320 pages, \$45 hardcover.

THE SLOWEST POPULATION growth in the United States since the 1930s. Average life expectancy in Black and brown communities nearly three years lower than pre-pandemic levels. As the economic and ecological crises of this century generate headlines, the long-term story comes into view.

Morbidity among poor Americans was chronic, of course, before COVID-19. But one effect of the COVID epoch has been to inject reality back into facts and statistics, even for the well off.

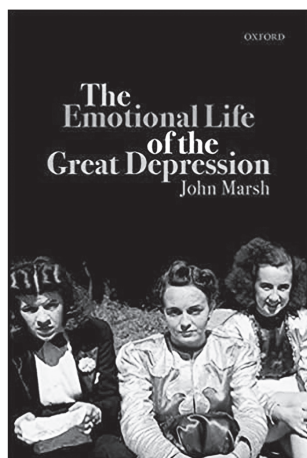
It makes sense that we feel panicked. Unlike the alternatives of blind rage and blank despair, panic permits us the fantasy at least of laying hold of reality. To feel “bad” feels better, somehow, than the numbness of numbers.

In *The Emotional Life of the Great Depression*, John Marsh chronicles the complex inner lives of Americans when the future looked as grim as it does now. The author, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University who's written for this magazine (“Where Did Our Red Love Go?” in *ATC* 184), brings a critic's rather than a historian's expertise to the archives and texts he reads.

Marsh begins with the strange causality of the Wall Street Crash in 1929. He shows how the stock market did not collapse all at once but deflated over time, the fiction of infinite growth punctured by one bad decision after another. Panic and confusion caused a cataclysm, which led to greater and more confused panic, before nerve-wracked normality set in.

It would be similar to how the United States and Britain are easing lockdowns while knowing full well the cost, if not for the fact that the New Deal saw the passage of a new framework for civic life. Today, there is budget reconciliation.

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notion, at least in San Diego, to move one in five residents to join “Townsend Clubs.”

It makes sense that such a scheme appears in the Universal Basic Income debate today. Townsend's idea may have been quixotic — it would have cost roughly 40% of the nation's tax base — but no less grounded in practical necessity: witness Social Security, established a few years later. Americans “borrowed back from the future to pay for the present,” Marsh writes.

Yet as the Townsend example shows, policy was not always planned, arising instead on tides of collective feeling, through crests of hope and fear, and troughs of defeat.

Through the feedback loop of moralizing talk and market fluctuations, the market crash exemplifies Marsh's sense that the psychic drives of a society do as much to distribute its well-being and wealth as do differences in power between classes.

The Depression was neither the end of capitalism nor a divine judgment on modernity run amok, the sins of one generation visited on the next. Instead, it was a combination of self-interest and austerity, of brute reality, dumb luck and rigged fortune.

Then and Now

During the 1930s Americans experienced the hunger of food insecurity, the spiritual thirst for redemption, and patriotic feelings of solidarity, sometimes in a week's time. Sound familiar?

Look around and you'll soon find the assorted legacy of the Depression's emotional lives: the failed attempt to privatize Social Security a generation ago; the ongoing

The Emotional

Life traces the aftershocks of the Crash into economic theory, pulp fiction, dating habits and retirement schemes. There is the story of physician Francis Townsend, who came up with idea for the universal old-age pension financed by taxpayers. This was a popular enough

demolition of the welfare state ever since; cities in trusteeship, pensions in escrow; stock-market feeding frenzies.

Politics became popular in the 1930s — better described as a passion play of spectacle than a populist turn in sympathy for the downtrodden. “The red decade” is not Marsh's focus, but in theme and temperament his study is a product of recent insurgency: the rank-and-file struggles of teachers and nurses from West Virginia to Los Angeles; voter turnout in the South; the Movement for Black Lives and the George Floyd uprising.

Significantly responsible for reviving class and antiracist consciousness, booting a thug out of power, and pushing the new administration to pass the biggest spending bills since FDR, the allied left of today is redolent of the thirties — a welcome return to militancy, but also, the disturbing affinity in how little the left has to lose.

Marsh's book is a guide to a truism that bears repeating: *we've been here before*. When Herbert Hoover initially responded to the Crash by appealing to the divine punishment of profligate financiers, it may have naively cast the economy as a “morality tale,” as Marsh notes, but no less sanctimonious was the Obama administration, after the too-small and inequitable relief bills of 2009, in tightening the budgetary belt. Instead of a green new deal, however, we got Trump.

For readers uninterested in the latest trends in affect theory and psychoanalysis, Marsh makes plain the moebius strip that is affective life. “Fear itself” — the special dread that FDR made into the country's rallying cry — has always been a curious alloy, part anxiety and panic, part Hollywood romance and undimmed hopes.

Fear “makes children of us all,” Marsh writes, inspiring the “helplessness” of bodily exposure that COVID-19 has visited on even the most powerful and protected. By seeing the Depression as an age of wonders — the Empire State Building; the sublime dignity of Southern sharecroppers; Jesse Owens' great leap at the 1936 Berlin Olympics — Marsh has written a fresh history of a period well worked over.

Unsurprisingly, given his background as a literary scholar, Marsh tells a story of stories — treating canonical authors such as Richard Wright and F. Scott Fitzgerald as well

as countless mostly forgotten authors whose stars rose and fell in the years between the Crash and the New Deal.

Beyond his own discipline Marsh dredges insights from economic history, sociology and psychology that he makes accessible to lay readers. There is a lucid explanation of margin trading that should help anyone confused by the recent GameStop imbroglio.

The Emotional Life contains case studies of “fear” as well as “joy,” “hope” and “anxiety,” that are more compelling taken together.

At times, this feels like a survey of the materials that a talented researcher decided to study and then compile into a book. I wanted more discussion of the logic of selection (why labor economics, but not Marx?) The trees were often interesting enough to make me forget the forest — a dubious distinction, perhaps, for a cultural history — but then Marsh is a reader of complexity, happy to leave readers to tie threads together or leave them hanging.

New Metaphors

Like novels, history is shaped by human passions, everyday whims as well as obsessions that belie our tendency to think about epochs in terms of single events and turning points, beyond our comprehension. We don’t stop the flow of events to step back and say, here we are, history is forever changed, despite this kind of navel-gazing dominating Trump-era journalism.

COVID and climate, however, perhaps demand new metaphors — not just new stories — for the history of our emotions. *The Emotional Life* is aware of its constraining anachronisms. The parallel between the Depression decade and the post-2008 Great Recession has acquired a currency verging on cliché, one thrown into still greater relief by the COVID-19 era.

Stock market booms and contraction in the real economy; debt and unemployment crises; extreme weather; police brutality; breadlines; even the pandemic itself has a precursor in Depression-era polio outbreaks. From Puerto Rico to Flint, Americans have come to see how the nation-state abandons its most vulnerable populations in the name of austerity, filling the coffers of disaster capitalists while slashing pensions and public services at the whim of private equity.

The declining birthrate is a case in point. It suggests that Americans have come to regard the future dimly, doubting if not condemning the imperative to grow, to reproduce, to pass down one’s genes and heritage — however ideologically.

Whether from student debt or climate change, the cost of having a family for many now seems unaffordable. This sort of calculation, we learn from Marsh, became “a way of life” for ordinary people around the time that economists and policy makers could no

“Stock market booms and contraction in the real economy; debt and unemployment crises; extreme weather; police brutality; breadlines; even the pandemic itself has a precursor in Depression-era polio outbreaks.”

longer predict the future.

Uncertainty; chaos; volatility: insofar as these words described “the irresistible force of business cycles,” for Marsh they are more than metaphors. Ups and downs are a measure of felt experience, not simply fluctuations in price and production.

Average Americans took an interest in the security of their savings and assets once they became charged with emotional meanings. Or as often was the case, only when jobs, houses and money disappeared did their function as ballast for the social order, shaping “the trajectory of American life,” become unmistakable.

To his credit Marsh avoids the haphazard analogies and allegories that “emotional life” invites as a lens onto social reality. Recent scholars of the politics of affect, such as Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, might have bolstered Marsh’s account of the Depression-era structure of feeling, but his interest is less in theorizing how emotions work than in showing how pervasively they did.

By turns packed with detail and tethered to a briskly moving if sometimes thinly argued narrative voice, *Emotional Life* models a way of talking about “culture” not as an attaché to “politics” but as its most durable ground. For how often are we aware of our actions as political performance? How conscious are we of rational reasons for feeling the way we do — especially when it comes to “politics”?

The poet Allen Ginsberg implied such questions when he reminisced in his mock address to the nation. “Are you going to let your emotional life be run by *Time Magazine*?”

That was in 1956. The emergencies of the thirties had begun to fade by the time the fifties announced a crisis of another kind — more inward and quiet, more paranoid and despairing. The Depression was boisterous and exuberant by comparison. Attending to the “ugly feelings” in Ngai’s term (*Ugly Feelings*, Harvard University Press, 2005) allows Marsh to give a full picture of emotional life in times of emergency.

Struggle for Dignity and Resilience

Crisis made Depression-era Americans take a lead in the struggle for dignity. Reading their stories is a shot in the COVID-weary arm, a momentary summons of resilience

against the torpid nerviness of cable news and social media.

Shifting the focus off questions of labor and politics that guide most cultural histories of the Depression, Marsh’s case studies paint outside the lines of grim scholarly tableaux of poverty and unemployment.

He doesn’t entirely evade the horsemen of the apocalypse — “Panic”; “Fear”; “Anxiety” are chapter titles — but Marsh is primarily concerned with the uneasy ironies, unexpected pleasures, unreasoning fantasies that drove individuals to great imagination and foolishness: the “righteousness” of refusing relief to hungry masses; the “hope” that was less exploited than simply “oversold” by Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Succeed*; the speculative hunches, whether betting on a stock or selling it short, that cathected faith in the future and denial about the past.

Instead of simply “overwhelming human beings,” the unprecedented scale of social ruin and public works during the 1930s paradoxically ushered the individual back to the center stage of history.

According to Marsh’s “labor theory of the sublime,” the debunking of market wizards such as Yale economist Irving Fisher did less to demystify capitalist ideology than to relocate questions of value in the old-fashioned ideas of human dignity and spirit whose sympathetic power “worked from the bottom up.”

This makes for an old-fashioned book, as well as one invested in the democratizing potential of lived experiences and struggles. Tracing the Americans famous and forgotten who called upon their innermost selves, Marsh ranges across literary history, economics and pop culture to make sense of how we’ve made the best of it in the worst of times.

According to analytic philosophy and cognitive psychology, the word for this is adaption. Emotions take shape in response to environmental stimuli. The climate crisis will test our adaptive capacity beyond imagination.

But there is cause for skepticism here, too. The Dust Bowl made for plenty of despair, but did agricultural industry become a better planetary steward as a result? Do emotions — psychic phenomena, if nothing else — hold a candle to the id-like ferocity of the profit motive?

Adaptation to change is also a key tenet of neoliberalism. The lack of a systemic alternative to capitalism since the Great Depression has led global humanity to the ecological precipice where we stand now — socially distanced, unprecedentedly anxious, and poorer than our parents. How we feel, as a matter of collective life, might matter less than we’d like to think. ■

REVIEW

A Study in “Populist” Racism By Yoav Peled

Global Elites and National Citizens:

The Attack of the Upper Classes on Israel's Democracy

By Gadi Taub

Tel Aviv: Meir Sela, 2020, 224 pages,
NIS 94 paperback (in Hebrew).

GADI TAUB IS the most prominent intellectual promoter of right-wing populism in Israel. With a PhD from Rutgers in American history, he is a published author of fiction and children's books, a professor at Hebrew University, and a high-profile public intellectual.

This book, however, is not an academic book but a political manifesto, a catalog of populist tropes adapted to the Israeli context. The African asylum seekers (“infiltrators” for Taub) who had been coming illegally into the country between 2007 and 2012, and who now count about 30,000 people (0.3% of the Israeli population), are the equivalent of the Muslim immigrants who are threatening to turn Europe into an Islamic continent.

The “mobile” liberal elites are rootless cosmopolitans who abhor national uniqueness, are contemptuous of the “people” for being “sedentary” — attached to their country and national culture — and wish to establish a global state where bureaucratic “governability” will replace democratic politics.

Political correctness, aided by post-modernism and multiculturalism, supposedly bred identity politics, emptied the concept of truth of all meaning, and legitimated anti-Semitism.

Like populism in general, however, on the way to his absurd bottom line Taub goes through a number of steps that are not completely divorced from reality.

Liberalism and democracy: Fear of “the tyranny of the majority” was an essential element of liberalism until the 20th century. Only when it was assured of its cultural he-

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Yoav Peled, Israeli author and peace activist.

gemony did liberalism embrace democracy and become practically identical with it.

In the Israeli context, it was the late Yonathan Shapiro who coined the term “substantive democracy” — majority rule limited by individual and minority rights — to be distinguished from majoritarian democracy, which is merely procedural. Taub attributes the concept of substantive democracy to former Chief Justice Aharon Barak, and claims that it reflects the Supreme Court’s “fundamental and consistent opposition to democracy,” no less. (96)

Liberalization and empowerment of gate-keeping institutions: The process of economic liberalization, which began in Israel in 1985 with the so-called Emergency Economic Stabilization Plan, transferred power from elected institutions to non-elected ones such as the Supreme Court, the Bank of Israel and, most importantly, the Treasury bureaucracy.

The empowerment of these institutions indeed was meant to limit the ability of the opponents of economic liberalization to challenge it democratically. Taub, however, objects only to the empowerment of the political and judicial gatekeepers, not of the economic ones which have been promoting neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism and multiculturalism: Indeed they came together into the world — but not, as Taub claims, to dismantle the nation-state simultaneously from above and from below. On the contrary, Will Kymlicka, the first theorist of multiculturalism, sought to prevent the breakup of the Canadian nation-state which was threatened at the time

by secessionist forces in Quebec.

Multiculturalism was adopted in many countries as a liberal-democratic alternative to the failing melting-pot policy of integrating minorities into the majority society. Identity politics came about because of the failure of multiculturalism, not because of its success.

The democratic deficit: Neoliberal globalization indeed transferred to a great extent the locus of decision-making to multinational corporations and to non-elected or semi-elected international bodies such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Union.

A symbolic reaction to that was the burning in 2012 of a building in Athens that used to house the Gestapo, in reaction to the cruel austerity measures imposed on Greece nominally by the European Union, but really by Germany. And in Britain, of course, the slogan of restoring popular sovereignty moved enough people to vote for Brexit.

Rhetorical Mobilization and Democracy

As a rhetorical device of political mobilization, populism’s appeal is based on a double exclusion of “us” versus “them:” externally by ascriptive criteria of ethnicity, religion, place of birth, etc. and internally by class — “elite” vs. “the people” — or even by political position.

Thus Trump: “American Jews who vote Democratic are traitors to their country — Israel,” or Benjamin Netanyahu: “The Israeli Left forgot how to be Jews.” For Taub, surprisingly, the external enemy is not the Palestinians, but the African asylum seekers. Why not the Palestinians?

It can be assumed that Taub preferred to avoid the unpleasant historical questions that could have arisen if he had cast the Palestinians as the external enemy. The internal enemy is, of course, “the elites,” particularly the judicial elite.

The book’s most significant chapter is the one dealing with the judicial system. Taub’s main argument is that under chief justices Meir Shamgar (1983-1995) and Aharon Barak (1995-2006) the Supreme Court, by adopting judicial activism, inserted itself into areas of social life where it had no place to be. As Barak had stated: “everything is justiciable.”

This process was enhanced in 1992, with the passage of two “basic laws” with the equivalence of constitutional status in the

Israeli system: *Human Dignity and Freedom and Freedom of Occupation*.

Although these two laws were very weakly entrenched, they were enough to enable the Court, in its famous 1995 Mizrahi Bank decision (Israel's *Marbury v. Madison*, infamous to the Israeli right wing), to assume the authority of judicial review of primary legislation of the Knesset.

With that decision, Taub claims, the Court usurped the sovereignty of the people. In 2018 the Court went even further, agreeing to consider appeals against the so-called "Jewish nation law" (Basic law: *Israel — the Nation State of the Jewish People*), thus potentially passing judgment on the constitution itself, on the basis of "the fundamental principles of the system" — a concept that Taub abhors.

The intuitive identification of the popular will with legislation enacted by the people's representatives is quite common, but needs to be considered a little more carefully. The representatives usually face their constituents only once every few years. During their terms they act on the basis of their evaluation of the common good, in the best case, and under the influence of lobbyists of various kinds in the not-so-good cases.

When a constitutional court reviews primary legislation it does so according to the constitution, which was supposed to express the popular will at the time of its adoption, and in Israel according to the Basic Laws enacted by the Knesset itself. The constitution, obviously, needs to be interpreted to fit the particular case at hand, and that interpretation is done in accordance with the court's understanding of the fundamental principles of the system.

What makes it so clear that the fundamental principles of the system, such as equality before the law, for example, are less expressive of the popular will than the particular piece of legislation under review by the court?

Bizarre Arguments

In addition to Taub's outlandish claims that are nonetheless somewhat connected to reality, there are also some arguments in the book that border on the bizarre.

Although he admits that Muslims constitute slightly more than one percent of the American population, Taub is convinced that they pose a grave danger to American Jews, who will shortly have to hide their *kippot*, and to the United States as a whole. (202)

He also admits that so far all terror attacks on U.S. Jewish institutions have been motivated by "extreme right-wing anti-Semitism," but still insists that "the danger to the future of American Jews coming from the other side of the political spectrum is graver by several orders of magnitude." (189)

In the context of this discussion, he

also describes Donald Trump as "the most philosemitic President in U.S. history." (203) This is the same Trump who said that among the demonstrators who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, with swastikas and chanted "Jews will not replace us" there were "very fine people — on both sides." Luckily for Taub his book was published before Trump unleashed his followers on the U.S. Capitol.

In contrast to Trump, under the Obama administration left-wing anti-Semitism was allegedly legitimated. Obama's famous speech in Cairo in June 2009 expressed the idea, Taub claims, that "under the cover of respect for the other's culture ... religious fundamentalism, violent chauvinism, political or racist terror, and even sweeping declarations about the need to destroy the entire West" should be tolerated. (46)

Obama's policy, not the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, is said to be responsible for the tragic collapse of the state and society in Syria and Iraq.

Taub's vision for Israeli society is hard to decipher: After listing all the bad perpetrated by the liberal elites, the book does not have a concluding chapter which would present his own conception of the good.

Between the lines one can learn that Jewish nationalism and popular sovereignty should be restored by restraining the judicial system and human rights organizations, and discarding the universalist values of the "mobile" liberal elite.

As for the cardinal political question facing the society — Israel's relations with the Palestinians — aside from a passing reference to the "lies of Oslo" there is no indication what is the author's preferred course of action.

Populism, I would argue, is not a coherent ideology but a rhetorical vehicle of mobilization for gaining political power. In the general elections held in Israel in March 2021, the fourth general elections in two years, the populists and anti-populists were deadlocked once again. Taub does not explicitly endorse a political party or candidate, but his sympathies, expressed in interviews and on social media, clearly lie with the populists and their leader, Benjamin Netanyahu.

In the populist struggle against the shaky anti-Netanyahu government formed on June 13, 2021, Taub will undoubtedly play a prominent role as house intellectual. ■

On Israel's New Government

SUZI WEISSMAN INTERVIEWED Yoav Peled for her program on Jacobin Radio, June 21, 2021. The following are brief excerpts from his comments on the new Israeli governing coalition. The interview can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3y7WEjy>.

I DON'T THINK the alternation (between Naftali Bennett and "centrist" Yair Lapid — ed.) will ever come about. I don't think this government will last two years because it only has a majority of two votes in the Knesset. These two include four members of the Islamist party called the "United Arab List," which was perfectly willing to join with Bibi Netanyahu's coalition, except that the more extreme rightwing Jewish religious nationalist party vetoed that. That's the only reason why Netanyahu could not form a government.

Prime minister Bennett himself leads a party of only six Knesset members. In the current anti-Netanyahu coalition government there are three rightwing parties. They don't have any problem with Netanyahu in terms of policy, ideology, of politics in general. They have a problem with the person they see: the issue was Netanyahu's corrupting many of the state systems.

The leaders of these parties know him very well, and realized it is dangerous to let him continue. He needed to be removed. It has nothing to do with economic policies, or policies toward Palestinians. These parties have no major differences

with Likud (Netanyahu's party — ed.).

There are two possible scenarios with this government. One, that it will disintegrate while Netanyahu remains leader of Likud, and he will return as prime minister. More likely, I think, the Likud eventually — and I think rather soon — will get rid of Netanyahu, because now he's a liability, the only reason they couldn't form the government.

When he was prime minister, Netanyahu tried to pass a law that would give him immunity (against multiple corruption charges — ed.) as long as he served, but he never had enough votes to get this law through the Knesset.

(But) Netanyahu's followers are completely committed to him. They either don't believe or don't care that he's done what he's accused of, and they support him totally. Netanyahu's downfall will come from his colleagues in Likud, leaders who know they can be government ministers, and one of them prime minister, as soon as they get rid of him.

The coup within Likud will come from the leadership. The rank and file, I think, will remain committed to Netanyahu for a long time. ■

[For further discussion of the new Israeli government see "Israel: Geography, Demography, Racism" by Yacov Ben Efrat of the DA'AM organization, posted at <https://againstthecurrent.org/>.]

REVIEW

Dialectics of Progress & Regression By Jake Ehrlich

Critique of Modern Barbarism:

Essays on fascism, anti-Semitism
and the use of history

By Enzo Traverso

Second Edition, 2020

International Institute for Research and Education,
Amsterdam, 302 pages, \$24 paperback.

THE NOTION THAT history moves on an inevitable trajectory towards ever-greater Progress is a hallmark of many philosophies of the Modern West. Marxism, of course, was no exception to this: Marx himself asserted that the development of capitalism had some liberatory aspects compared to medieval European serfdom, and saw it as a catalyzing force towards the expected result of socialism.

Even though postmodernism has made the notion unfashionable in the Academy, the sense of the inevitability of Progress is still quite common, whether we're talking about the "I believe that we will win" activist cheer, the frequently trotted-out quote from Martin Luther King, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," or the redemptive hope that many put behind the extra-planetary aspirations of Elon Musk and his ilk.

But what becomes of this belief in guaranteed Progress when the signs of the present point more towards utter chaos and destruction, as in the case of the Holocaust? When the very tools of modern progress that ought to contribute to an increase in human prosperity, advanced technology, sophisticated social organization, attitudes of futurism and lofty ideals regarding the collective good — instead are deployed for genocide, political repression, and other forms of violence and control?

We can cling to the linear model of Progress, finding ways to explain this violence — as either a dialectical stage in the coming eventual utopia, or a regression into an earlier stage of civilization, i.e. "barbarism" — or instead realize we may need to rethink this model entirely. What should we choose? And what have our forebears chosen?

This line of inquiry underlies Enzo Traverso's *Critique of Modern Barbarism*, an expansion of Traverso's earlier work *Understanding The Nazi Genocide: Marxism After Auschwitz* (Pluto Books: 1990). Rather
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than presenting a singular argument, this book is a constellation of essays, articles and book reviews that explore various aspects of historiography of the Holocaust from a Marxist lens.

"The red thread that connects them," Traverso writes in the book's Foreword, "is the relationship between Marxism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust... Rather than a monolithic theory, Marxism appears in these pages as a plural current of critical thought shaped by tension and contradictions, a source of both illuminating intuitions and dramatic, sometimes tragic incomprehension." (9)

Informed by the critical, heterodox traditions of Western Marxism (best represented by the likes of Walter Benjamin historically, and today, perhaps, by Traverso's own teacher Michael Löwy), Traverso charts the histories and interrogates the follies committed by scholars and interpreters of all streams, be they mainstream scholars, Marxist intellectuals, or pop culture.

The Challenge of Auschwitz

Traverso poses the central problem: "Re-reading Marx after the catastrophe, in the shadow of Auschwitz, is not a pointless task, because the gas chambers raise questions about the intellectual tradition of which he was the founder." (36)

We learn of how "Auschwitz" comes to serve as the go-to symbol for the Holocaust only long after the war years, whereas initially the Jewish genocide was seen as only a part of the Nazi onslaught that destabilized all of Europe, not just its minorities. (58)

We learn also how mainstream analyses that posit the utter uniqueness of the

Holocaust fail to consider its context in the world of 20th-century violence, while the neglect of the uniquely irrational character of the genocide (that Jews, Roma and others were being purged even when it meant inhibiting the efficacy of the Nazi war effort) serves to apologize for Nazism by framing it as equivalent to other violence. (124)

And with Traverso we explore how even the more lucid of postwar Marxist thinkers, like Ernest Mandel, have come up short in making sense of Nazism by emphasizing economics over ideology as its driving force. (229)

Because Traverso details and responds to large swathes of 19-20th century European history and refers to a galaxy of diverse thinkers of Marxist and non-Marxist schools of thought, it's worth reprinting a key passage to reveal Traverso's overarching project. Namely, that the Holocaust and the failure of mainstream Marxism to adequately grapple with its impacts should be understood as a call for a paradigm shift amongst socialists:

"Along with the idea of progress, Auschwitz disposed once and for all of the conception of socialism as the natural, automatic and ineluctable outcome of history. Auschwitz's challenge to Marxism is thus twofold. First, history must be rethought through the category of catastrophe, from the standpoint of the defeated. Second, socialism must be rethought as a radically different civilisation, no longer founded on the paradigm of the blind development of the forces of production and the domination of nature by technology.

"Socialism must be based on a new quality of life; a new hierarchy of values; a different relationship with nature; egalitarian relations among sexes, nations and 'races'; and social relations of sisterhood and solidarity among peoples and continents. This means reversing the line of march followed by the Western world for several centuries. It means jettisoning the naive optimism of a way of thinking that claimed to be the conscious expression of the 'movement of history', and of a movement that believed it was 'swimming with the tide'. It also means restoring socialism's utopian dimension." (40)

Not only are we thus called to rethink our faith in the notion that capitalism's "seeds of its own destruction" will surely bear fruit, Traverso insists that we envision the socialist world we're fighting for, lest we replicate the harms of the status quo.

Some of the stand-out essays in this collection include Traverso's exploration

and rejoinder of Sartre, whose 1946 text *Anti-Semite and Jew* reveals the immediate inscrutability of the Holocaust in Sartre's neglect of contemporary Jewish genocide in favor of an older model of medieval European Jew-hatred; his critical appraisal of Norman Finkelstein's 2000 polemic *The Holocaust Industry* as simultaneously worthwhile yet sloppy; and in his concentrated mapping of Marxist Holocaust historiography in Chapter 10's "On The Edge of Understanding: From the Frankfurt School to Ernest Mandel."

This chapter expands upon the potent work of his earlier book *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate* (2nd ed, 2018), but rather than exploring the likes of Kautsky, Luxemburg and Trotsky, instead focuses instead on the post-Second World War attitudes of Walter Benjamin, Max

Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and more.

As a layperson in the fields of this book's focus, I found Traverso's treatments of these various thinkers to be simultaneously expansive and accessible, enabling readers to understand with some nuance the various particulars of different takes on 20th century Marxian thought.

Why This Subject Matters

When the world is burning all around us, the importance of this kind of historical/historiographical study may seem hard to pin down. I think, however, that the value of this collection — in addition to its important interventions in the field of Holocaust Studies, and its useful cataloguing of Marxist thinkers through history, particularly those of the Frankfurt School — is contained in the

questions it raises about our own particular historical moment.

For example, it is worthwhile to understand not only the particular deficiencies of the postwar Marxists in understanding the impact of the Holocaust, but also as socialists today, the question of what current struggles we — like Sartre — are blinkered by our own positionality to fully grasp and engage.

Analyses and histories of BIPOC oppression in the United States written in 2021 may not — perhaps, cannot — make complete sense of the contemporary dynamics of police brutality and uprisings for Black Lives. We learn from Traverso's treatment of Sartre that we ought to practice humility when it comes to issuing pronouncements about what is to be done and what is to come, and a sense of particular sensitivity to our blind spots.

Traverso's takedown of the conviction that socialism is somehow natural or automatic pushes us to resist the similar temptation to see the growing socialist movement in the United States as an inevitable herald of lasting change for the better. The forces are always to be contested, and relying on faith in a transcendent idea of Progress — or even just couching our hopes in a perceived sense of momentum and movement — will only cede our victories to the other side.

As Traverso writes, the socialists of Weimar Germany's belief in the inevitability of Progress led to an unwitting mischaracterization of the rise of Nazism, as a dialectical unfolding towards mass revolution, instead of one towards mass murder. We ought not make that same mistake with the current cropping-up of 21st century (proto)fascist currents in the USA and beyond, even if we are excited by the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Finally, we must take to heart Traverso's call that we restore the utopian and humane dimensions of socialist vision in our work. Our agitation and organizing efforts ought not be articulated (only) through the language of machinery and apparatus, "productive forces" and "economic determinism," but through the language of possibility, thriving and new modes of joyful existence.

The Holocaust, just one of many cataclysmic demonstrations of the capriciousness of "Progress" in human history, calls us to recognize how unpredictable, malleable and adaptive humans are — for better and worse — and invites us to rededicate ourselves to investigate the potentialities of our time, and choose which is the future we wish to work for.

The question, still, is "socialism or barbarism," but a straight answer is not in the cards. *Critique of Modern Barbarism* helps reveal just how complex it all can be. ■

Whistleblower Hero: In Praise of Daniel Hale

IT MAY BE no real surprise that ninety percent of people killed by U.S. drone strikes in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) weren't supposed to be targets. And while it's impossible to know, it might also be that the ferocity of U.S. air strikes on real-or-suspected Taliban targets may be contributing to the reported extreme brutality of the Taliban as they overrun more and more of the country with the chaotic U.S. military pullout.

We owe our detailed knowledge of the drone carnage to Daniel Hale, "a man of tremendous conscience, courage, and moral clarity" as described by *The Intercept* reporter Jeremy Scahill. Hale, like Chelsea Manning, is one of those ordinary-people-turned-heroes who didn't leave his ethics at the door when he joined the military.

Beginning work at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in 2012 as a signal intelligence analyst, tracking phones labeled as belonging to enemy combatants, Hale witnessed what happened to men sipping tea, "peacefully assembled, posing no threat" in the vicinity of a suspected Taliban member:

"I could only look on as I sat by and watched through a computer monitor when a sudden, terrifying flurry of hellfire missiles came crashing down, splattering purple-colored crystal guts on the side of the morning mountain."

Eventually unable to remain silent, Hale leaked the information that became *The Intercept's* explosive report "The Drone Papers." While the Obama Justice Department didn't prosecute him, "the Trump administration dug up the case and threw



the book at him in an obvious ploy to stanch leaks about President Donald Trump and his corrupt administration." (Jeremy Scahill, "Drone Whistleblower Daniel Hale is a Truth-teller in a Time of Systemic Deceit and Lethal Secrecy," *The Intercept*, July 30, 2021)

Code Pink

The Biden Justice Department disgracefully continued the prosecution, as Scahill observes, "an ominous reminder that the war on whistleblowers is a permanent fixture of the U.S. system." Charged under the Espionage Act that prevents any effective defense, Daniel Hale was forced to plead guilty to one count. He was sentenced on July 27 to three years and nine months in federal prison — a term that might have been much longer without the outpouring of support he's received.

While this prosecution stands as testimony to a vicious bipartisan government policy of terrorizing whistleblowing and journalism, Daniel Hale takes his place alongside Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and in an earlier generation Daniel Ellsberg, among our greatest living Americans.

To find out more about the case and sign a petition for his release, check out <https://standwithdanielhale.org/>. Once Hale is transferred to federal prison, the website will post his address so you can write to him. ■

REVIEW

Challenges for Democratic Socialists By Dan Georgakas

The Socialist Challenge Today:

Syriza, Corbyn, Sanders

By Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin with Stephen Maher

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020, 100 pages, \$12.95 paperback.

Crisis, Movement, and Strategy: The Greek Experience

Edited by Panagiotis Sotiris

Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019, 297 pages, \$28 paperback.

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS AND their allies now working in the Democratic Party will find *The Socialist Challenge Today* and *The Greek Experience* very practical and instructive reading. Without passing judgment on democratic socialism as a viable political strategy, both books examine the inevitable challenges faced by this approach. Examples are drawn from recent experiences in the United Kingdom, the United States and Greece.

Sadly, *The Socialist Challenge Today* is the final work of Leo Panitch, the prolific Canadian writer who died in December 2020 after contracting COVID-19 in hospital where he was being treated following a cancer diagnosis. (An extensive memorial tribute by Vivek Chibber appears in *Jacobin*, December 22, 2020. See also “Leo Panitch and the Socialist Project,” posted at <https://socialistproject.ca>, December 26, 2020.)

Panitch and co-author Sam Gindin preface their analysis by differentiating between “social democrats” and “democratic socialists.” The specific reforms proposed by each are often similar, but social democrats are not disturbed if their activism ultimately strengthens capitalism by showing its ability to change.

An example of this orientation is Senator Elizabeth Warren’s insistence that her proposed reforms are essential for the health of American capitalism. Panitch and Sam Gindin further note that social democrats mainly speak for the working classes, rather than directly reflecting their views.

The reforms of democratic socialists are defined as meaningful when they are posed in a manner that they cannot be totally coopted, but in some manner, build class consciousness that challenges the existing

capitalist creed. At their best, democratic socialists shape the content and nature of their reforms by being in constant contact with the working classes, becoming their voice rather than their self-appointed champion.

British Labour’s Disaster

The Socialist Challenge gives considerable attention to the example of British Labour Party’s debacle in 2020. It notes that a solid democratic socialist agenda generated in tandem with Party locals had been very successful in the 2018 by-elections.

In the following two years, however, the factionalism of the Labour Party became vicious with militants less engaged in grassroots organizing and more focused on theories and personalities. (This notoriously included Labour’s right wing launching a smear campaign to drive out pro-Palestinian activists on the pretext of “anti-Semitism” — ed.)

Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, although holding on to formal power, was unable to forge a sense of unity and congeniality. Matters worsened when the public became aware he was not an effective public speaker. Corbyn and his faction spent most of the 2020 campaign in London, taking the vote of the traditional Labour strongholds for granted.

The factional divisions in Labour led to activists not listening to the sentiments of their own rank and file. They somehow missed the essential demand being made that there must be a resolution of Brexit — either in or out. Labour’s inability to take a position on the issue meant that if Corbyn prevailed, the UK would remain in an unacceptable limbo.

In the election, traditional Labour voters would drift to parties that had taken firm positions on Brexit. Panitch and Gindin cover other particular aspects of the election, but argue that the party leadership’s major failure was its inability to maintain a dialog with its core constituency.

Evaluating the Sanders Movement

The Bernie Sanders campaign is identified as a movement mainly built around a leading personality. In that sense it was more like Robert La Follette’s Progressive campaigns of the 1920s than Henry Wallace’s attempt to build an alternative party in 1948.

Sanders, the authors argue, was very effective in promoting a handful of crucial issues but proved unable to coordinate with grassroots movements. The exceptions were labor unions in California and Nevada that

persuaded him to amend some particulars and rhetoric regarding his healthcare policies to solidify their support.

He proved unable to do so with other groups, most obviously African Americans in the South. Sanders also began to use the word *revolutionary* to describe his political program. This rhetorical hubris proved harmful as voters began to question his sense of what was possible and his ability to govern if elected.

Centrist Joe Biden, on the other hand, had decades-long interactions with African American communities in the South. He followed the advice of African American leaders in South Carolina with whom he had forged personal relationships.

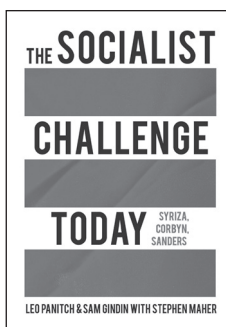
Biden’s lopsided victory in the 2020 South Carolina Democratic primary enabled him to rally the Democratic center. Again, consulting closely with African-American leadership, he swept the Southern primaries and devastated any chances of a Sanders victory.

Post-election, Sanders and his allies have gained leverage in the Democratic Party. Some of their particular reforms will become law, but it will be in a Biden format designed to strengthen rather than question capitalism. In this regard, Panitch and Gindin see the current impact of the U.S. democratic socialists as not much different than that of social democrats.

What Happened in Greece

SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) as indicated in its Greek acronym is a loosely knit amalgam. It was founded by the former dissident left wingers of PASOK (the traditional Greek Socialist Party) and small but activist Leninist groups with Trotskyist, Luxemburgist and Maoist roots.

Critical to this unique coalition were massive public square town meetings where thousands of people voiced their views on all the major social and political issues of the day. SYRIZA won the national election of 2015 with the promise that unlike the established parties, it would resist the austerity measures that the European Union had



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imposed on Greece — and advance socialist reforms.

The twelve essays in *Crisis, Movement, and Strategy: The Greek Experience* plunge into the details of SYRIZA's negotiations with the EU.

Although some are marred by wretched academic jargon, each offers a compelling final evaluation that SYRIZA's basic negotiation assumptions were naïve at best.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his economic minister Yanis Varoufakis are judged to have abrasive styles that masked their inexperience in formal foreign negotiations. Varoufakis believed once he presented the truthful realities of the Greek economy, the EU would agree that imposing austerity was not the best option.

SYRIZA also assumed that the activism of comradely groups in various EU nations would nudge their governments to cooperate with Greece. Its bottom line was that if it could not win concessions, Greece would become the first nation to leave the EU.

The Greek Experience essayists demonstrate how the fragile Greek economy is so entwined with EU financing that going alone would create even greater hardships than austerity had brought.

The EU bankers knew the economic facts in play just as well or better than Tsipras or

Varoufakis. They cared little about Greece's endemic corruption as long as they were able to make lopsided agreements that bolstered their manufacturing and financial infrastructure.

Nor were established governments going to make concessions to Greece that would fuel dissenting voices in their own countries. The EU was willing to call what it considered SYRIZA's bluff regarding "Grexit," as SYRIZA had no alternative financial assistance in place and had not educated the Greek public about the increased hardships Grexit entailed.

The end result of negotiations was a new stringent austerity package. Varoufakis described this Memorandum of Understanding as "a catalog of cruelty," but had no economic Plan B to fall back on.

Tsipras decided the best political option was to save political face by calling for a national referendum where Greeks could vote yes or no to accepting the austerity package. Tsipras desired a yes vote, but wanting to reaffirm his image as a revolutionary, he opted for a cynical policy of vigorously organizing a no vote.

To the SYRIZA leadership's dismay, their "for show" organizing efforts succeeded in winning a majority "No" vote. Knowing the nation was not prepared to go forward alone, the leadership ignored the referendum it had initiated and signed the agreement it had campaigned against.

Various factions of the party immediately withdrew from the coalition in what became

a steady withering away of the SYRIZA base. Attempts to organize an "honest" coalition got meager response as most Greeks saw such efforts as punching the same keys and expecting a new outcome.

The conservative New Democracy, the party favored by the EU, won the next election handily and began to privatize as many national assets as quickly as possible.

The Aftermath: Greece Today

SYRIZA contracted to mainly being supported by former Papandreou (PASOK leader — ed.) people and careerists. It has managed to at least temporarily remain the main opposition party by merging with other leftist parties with representatives in the Greek parliament. Its long-term viability, however, is in doubt as New Democracy's privatization policies have brought billions of dollars into the failed economy, and the EU has eased repayment deadlines and made other concessions it had denied to SYRIZA.

The scholars in *The Greek Experience* underscore some factors about Greek public opinion that the Greek left often ignores. Despite rhetorical outbursts to the contrary, Greeks in general like being in the EU. They are delighted to be able to work easily in prosperous northern states and still be a short plane ride from home.

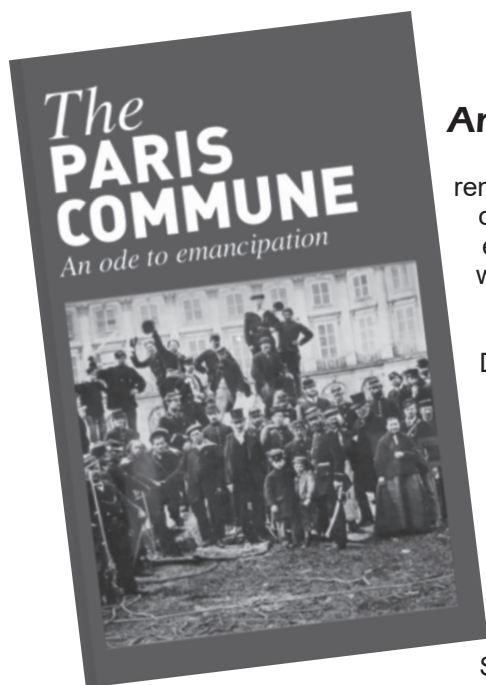
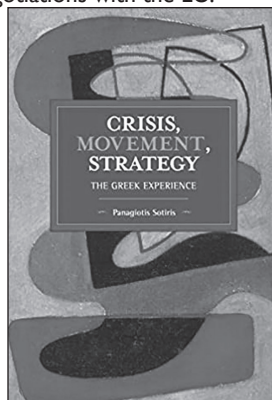
Nor are Greeks resentful of being considered a vacationland as long as tourism flows through communities as it does currently and is not overwhelmed by international corporations.

The Greek islands get considerable press, but tourism focused on Classical Greece is just as robust and brings considerable business to local restaurants, farmers, artisans and service workers. Considerable funds have gone to maintaining and preserving the ancient sites. A big bonus of such tourism is that it bolsters Greek pride in being the seedbed of western civilization, and reinforces its international prestige.

Despite the immediate economic improvement created by New Democracy, the Greek public remains unsettled with much of its agenda. The combined vote for all socialist parties continues to be at or about 50%, as it has been for decades.

The grassroots dynamism generated by the public square movement remains a positive memory. Sporadic local demonstrations occur constantly, often on environmental and privatization issues. Greek universities remain hotbeds of political discourse.

Leftists thinking about how to form a new mass movement understand that if Greece is to avoid yet another future round of euphoria and bitter defeat, serious study and analysis of the SYRIZA experience is essential. ■



THE PARIS COMMUNE

An ode to emancipation

This is a collection of essays remembering the 150th anniversary of the heroic uprising of the workers of Paris and its legacy for our world. Contributors include Daniel Bensaïd, Olivier Besancenot, Sandra Bloodworth, Penelope Duggan, V.I. Lenin, Michael Löwy and K. Mann. Of particular interest are two essays on the role of women by Mathilde Larrère and Judy Cox as well as Eric Toussaint on banks and debt.

Published by Resistance Books and the International Institute for Research and Education.

Available for \$18 from Solidarity, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit MI 48210

REVIEW

“Dripping in Blood and Dirt”

The Many Lives of Money

By Folko Mueller

Blood and Money:

War, Slavery, Finance and Empire

By David McNally

Haymarket Books, 2020, cloth, paperback and ebook.

IN HIS LATEST release, *Blood and Money: War, Slavery, Finance, and Empire*, David McNally is doing nothing short of challenging the common belief that money emerges as a universal measuring stick to facilitate the exchange of goods. Instead of seeing it as merely overcoming the tedious barter system, he demonstrates that it is inextricably linked to foreign conquest (war) and human bondage (slave trade).

The gory name, reminiscent of perhaps a neo-noir novel, should not come as a surprise to readers familiar with some of McNally's earlier work. His previous two books, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires* and *Global Capitalism and Global Slump* indicate that he is not only a political economist, but unafraid of pursuing unconventional angles in reinterpreting history.

Blood and Money is organized in five chapters, begins with ancient Greece and Rome, and ends with Britain and the United States. McNally specifically chose these empires because their domination was underpinned by monetary innovations that became generalized.

Chapter 1 begins with ancient Greece's slave trade. McNally connects ancient Greek philosophy to the emergence of money and commercialization of slavery. Aristotle considered the submission of slaves to their masters as part of the natural order, as did Plato. Like cattle, slaves were branded and monetized.

It was the burgeoning slave trade, however, in conjunction with the monetization of society, that truly commodified the slave body. While for the Romans slaves were initially just part of the plunder accumulated during military campaigns, they soon followed the Greek example. McNally quotes Cicero, in a letter to a friend, as describing a platform full of slaves as worth about 120,000 sesterces.¹

In Chapter 2, “The Law of the Body,” the

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David McNally: interpreting history as neo-noir novels?

author illustrates the interrelationship of money and the body. He informs us that during the days of bartering, early forms of money consisted of things that sustain the body (foodstuff), things that adorn the body (such as shells and precious metals) and tools that assist the body in producing other things.

By the end

of the tour, McNally concludes that the payment of mercenaries as well as the large-scale sourcing of weapons and provisions was crucial in the emergence of coined money. Money and military power became symbiotically related.

Chapter 3 covers the period from the Middle Ages until 1650 and focuses on England. According to McNally, over the course of time and involving intense political struggle, the extraction of modern money from the “bones of princes” is transferred “into the blood of the commonwealth.”

From Feudalism to Market Dependence

Eventually English feudalism evolved into a network of decentralized legal and military powers exercised by local lords and bishops based on the exploitation of peasants. While still loyal to the monarch, they wielded extensive powers at the level of the local manor including their own court system and gallows.

For the first hundred years, farming and the reclamation of uncultured land grew substantially, with new revenues flowing from the peasants to the lords. But in the end, the system proved a hindrance to progress.

By the end of the 13th century — with no investment into technological advances in agriculture, such as animal traction and improved tools — agricultural productivity lagged behind population growth, while to further the political standing of the individual lord, investments were poured into the

military.

The resulting depression, combined with the Black Death and other pandemics, halved the workforce. Consequently the lords were forced to relax obligations and serfdom ended up largely disappearing. Estate lands were increasingly leased out.

McNally notes that this went far beyond just the erection of hedges and fences, ultimately paving the way toward a privatized agricultural system. Large-scale commercial farms employed poorer peasants as wage laborers and as output rose from subsistence to petty accumulation (initially just to stave off lean years), market-driven pressures arose.

The result was that wealthy farmers (selling their produce to the market) and landlords (making changes to their land to attract the farmers and their rents) became market dependent. By the middle of the 17th-century, English society was a predominantly agrarian capitalist one.

Colonialism and Perpetual War

Chapter 4 plunges the reader into the age of colonialism. As international trade intensified, a payment standard became necessary. Barring a national currency that could meet that role, global payments had to rely on precious metals. Consequently, the acquisition of precious metals, in particular gold, became an obsession.

By the 1580s, Spain had amassed control over vast New World territories; their inflow of precious metals was staggering. However, even at this stage, it was suffering from massive financial crises due to weak domestic production and geographic overextension.

England on the other hand, had invested in agriculture, trade and manufacture, with its plantation colonies in the New World backed up with military might.² Soon England moved into first place in the new imperial order.

Perpetual wars and colonialism require money, lots of money. The first source of revenue is taxation. By the first quarter of the 18th century, the English were paying more than twice as the French per capita. McNally points out that in 1691, the English government spent £3 million for military expenditures and within four years that figure reached £8 million. However, tax revenues over the same years averaged only

£4.5 million.

The shortfall had to be covered by borrowing. What unfolded over the next century was the beginning of a capitalist banking system based on innovative debt-financing tools to wage war. The Bank of England was founded for one single purpose: to fund war with France. In figuring out ways to monetize public debt it came up with two groundbreaking features:

1) *For the first time in English history a loan to the state was made largely in paper currency (banknotes and bills) rather than gold and silver coins.* This was so novel that the government insisted that the bank hold a £200,000 gold reserve to back up its paper currency to reassure the public.

2) *The people who bought the loan (in essence shareholders of the bank, for the bank got started as a consortium of investors in public debt) were now able to cash out by selling their shares on the developing stock market.*

These notes were good as long as the government upheld its debt payments to the bank. In theory, the bank agreed to exchange them for silver and gold coin. In actuality, it only held about 12-15% of the precious metal reserve equivalent.

With the already existing shortage in coinage, further devaluation by clipping³ as well as counterfeiting exacerbated the fragile monetary system. Lawmakers were aware of these inflationary threats and did not want the paper money to proliferate out of proportion. The result: extremely draconian measures for those two offenses, including the death penalty.

Isaac Newton, the famous English mathematician and scientist who was master of the mint during the last stage of his life (1699-1727), was merciless in his pursuit of perpetrators and in his very first year executed at least 15 people for coinage-related crimes.

His contemporary, the English liberal philosopher John Locke, shared Newton's enthusiasm for harsh punishment. Locke declared that clippers did more damage than all the country's enemies and identified money as the blood of world commerce rather than just the blood of the commonwealth.

It is no surprise that a young Locke was also among the earliest investors in the Royal Adventurers into Africa, a British company which was given a monopoly on the English slave trade. Slavery's twin brother, colonialism also failed to raise any eyebrows among English liberals. Locke was appointed to the new Board of Trade and Plantations in 1669, concurrent with serving as secretary to the Lords Proprietors of Carolina.

McNally points to the Lockean nexus of money-slavery-colonialism at the very heart of liberal political philosophy in England. Slavery and colonialism were the cornerstone of their economy until the industrial revolution. Classical liberalism was constructed to

defend the rights of property and the role of the state was to protect these rights, including property rights over persons.

The U.S. Rise to Empire

In the fifth and final chapter the author examines the political and economic powerhouse that eclipsed the British empire over the first half of the 20th century — the United States.

He identifies Virginia's tobacco receipts, which became legal tender in 1642, as its earliest forms of money, together with notes based on mortgaged land which originated in South Carolina in 1712 and expanded to eight other American colonies. The first is based on slave labor and the second on settler colonialism — the thread continues.

As the reader already learned from previous chapters, wars need massive amounts of financing and the War of Independence was no exception. Colonial officials issued notes, which were basically backed by land that would be seized from Indigenous people.

Just as in the ancient Greco-Roman world, war was a medium for monetizing social life. This manifested itself in two ways: One was the massive demand for supplies and weapons bought from the "market."⁴ The other was through wages paid to soldiers (many of whom came from a subsistence farming background where no money was required).

While slaves were the largest capital investment in the U.S. Southern economy, the Southern slave-based banking system was thoroughly integrated not only into financial markets in the eastern United States, but also global markets based in London.

The North had a more advanced industrial system which ultimately helped it to be victorious in the Civil War. The monetary transformations resulting from this victory propelled the country forward. The Civil War "nationalized" the state and the banking system.

Predictably, this began with war finance — the Union had been issuing Treasury notes to finance the war from the war's beginning. When commercial bank purchases exhausted their supplies of gold, however, government suppliers went unpaid and Treasury notes ended up heavily discounted in money markets.

Facing the collapse of war finance, paper bills were introduced without the backing of precious metals. This was enforced by the Legal Tender Bill (signed by Lincoln into law on February 25, 1862) and the notes known as "greenbacks" were born. Within a couple of years, a 10% tax on the remaining currency-issuing state banks was imposed. It had the desired result — the state banks heeled and the greenbacks reigned.

Once this was established, it did not take long for calls to reimpose dollar-gold

convertibility. This occurred for two reasons: 1) a concern over inflation should the supply of paper money spin out of control, and 2) the now uniform national currency carried no global legitimacy yet (at a time when the world was moving towards an international gold standard). These calls prevailed: by 1879 the United States was back on the gold standard.

McNally reminds us that a dynamic process of capital accumulation in industry, agriculture and transportation with finance serving as a leavening agent brought about the internationalization of the dollar.

During the 1870s, farm acreage grew by 44% nationwide. Kansas corn production rose from 30 million bushels in 1866 to 750 million in 1886. Increased production was tied to rapid industrial transformation ranging from steamboats to telegraphs and railways. Complex financial markets also developed in tandem: by the end of the century roughly 60% of the loans made by New York banks were backed by negotiable securities.

By the time World War I broke out, the U.S. economy accounted for one-third of global industrial output. Rising exports to European states for war supplies (in particular grains and cotton) increased the value of the dollar. By the time the war was over, the dollar had displaced the pound sterling as the leading global currency.

Neither World War I nor World War II was fought on U.S. soil. While the other major participants were ravaged by war, the U.S. economy boomed, primarily due to military demand and exports to Europe.

McNally reminds us that at the beginning of the hostilities in 1939, the U.S. economy was about one-half the combined size of those of Europe, Japan and the Soviet Union. By the time the war was over, the United States accounted for half of global industrial production and held almost three-quarters of the world's gold reserves.

U.S. ascendancy to imperial hegemon was from then on unstoppable. It culminated in the transformation of the dollar from local currency to what the author terms "imperial or global fiat money" after the United States moved off the gold-standard and the Bretton-Woods agreement collapsed in 1971. Half a century later the U.S. dollar is the currency which is used in 85% of all foreign transactions.

While the author points out that the Nixon administration could not have grasped how exactly this reconfiguration of international finance would play out, the timing was beneficial for U.S. finance since this deregulation went hand-in-hand with increasing foreign direct investment and global manufacturing and production. This transformation was thus conducive to global capital in general.

continued on page 43

REVIEW

Reading Walter Benjamin Politically By Joe Stapleton

The Benjamin Files

By Frederic Jameson

Verso Books, 2020, 272 pages, \$29.95 hardcover.

IN THE ACADEMIC fields of cultural studies and critical theory, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) is generally read in a particular way. He is more often than not mobilized to critique so-called “grand narratives,” to alert us to the ways narratives of historical progress paper over history’s more barbaric side, casting his dour gaze toward the cuts and the breaks that erode modern society’s pretensions to continuous improvement.

The dominant focus on these themes in Benjamin can hypostatize his thought as timelessly critical of political projects and historical thinking as such. As a result, he is at times categorized as some sort of apolitical early postmodern thinker, suspicious of any totalizing project, even the socialist project of the total transformation of human society, to which he was actually committed from the Bolshevik revolution until the end of his life.

In his newest book *The Benjamin Files*, the Marxist cultural critic, Frederic Jameson attempts to bring Benjamin back to political consciousness by showing the one-sidedness of this interpretation.

Jameson is certainly not the first writer to re-politicize Benjamin: the fight over Benjamin’s theoretical legacy is nothing new. But of course, readers will not pick up this book for an introduction to Walter Benjamin. When a theorist of Jameson’s stature addresses someone like Benjamin, we read to see what Jameson does with him.

Through a series of investigations into Benjamin’s work, from his early *Origins of German Tragic Drama* to his final writings on history, Jameson gives the reader a Benjamin for whom responding to the political and historical moment was his primary task of writing. This foregrounding of the political gives a new energy to the well-known diversity of Benjamin’s theoretical registers (Jameson will call them “language fields”) — among them theology, Marxism, philosophy and historiography.

It also, perhaps inevitably, makes Benjamin “speak” in Jameson’s language and address the latter’s preoccupations. Even if Benjamin scholars will certainly quibble with aspects

of Jameson’s interpretation, readers will find it easy to forgive him, given the insights that Jameson’s reading of Benjamin yields.

Connected Thematic Essays

The Benjamin Files is structured as a series of relatively autonomous essays. Some are on specific works by Benjamin, like “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” and “One-Way Street.” Others examine a whole area of Benjamin’s work through attention to a specific work — Jameson treats Benjamin’s literary criticism through examining his essay on Eduard Fuchs.

But the essays are only relatively autonomous, connected by themes arising in Benjamin’s work that strike Jameson’s eye. The concept of “similitude,” for example, which Benjamin uses to elaborate his theory of language, is given political and historical weight when Jameson sees it as replacing historical causality in Benjamin’s later writing.

Similarly, Benjamin’s idea of cultural “regression” and its reconciliation with Benjamin’s non-progressive concept of history is a theme throughout the book, with Jameson reading it as “aestheticization,” or the flight from the political in art that Benjamin aligns with fascism.

The question of our “access” to other historical moments and time periods is a concern, from the opening pages through the discussion of Benjamin’s historical “monads” in chapter four all the way to the end of the book, when the relations of discontinuity between the past and present become the fulcrum of Benjamin’s concept of history.

It’s no surprise that Jameson privileges this last one given his own preoccupation with this question, though it would be more accurate to see this as a question Jameson inherited from Benjamin himself rather than importing his own concerns into Benjamin’s



Walter Benjamin: Jewish mystic or heterodox Marxist?

work.

Themes like these are sustained throughout by constant references to future discussions (“we will return to this later on ...” etc.), and many of them do find something of an “end point” in the final chapter on history. However, this shouldn’t suggest some sort of linear narrative to the book itself.

Re-politicizing Benjamin

While it is difficult to categorize Walter Benjamin, this hasn’t stopped people from trying. From the early fight over his legacy — was he a Jewish mystic or a heterodox Marxist? — to the more recent efforts to make him an “anti-totalitarian” (whatever that might mean) early theorist of the postmodern, writers working with Benjamin tend to see their own interests and commitments reflected back at them.

This is certainly true of Jameson’s book. But to categorize Benjamin is to miss the point and Jameson recognizes this. The coexistence of Benjamin’s different language fields (say, messianic theology and historical materialism) allows him to “translate” the one into the other depending on the political situation.

That Benjamin’s translation work was responding to the concrete political movements of his day should attune us to the requirements of our own concrete historical situation. As Jameson says, learning to recognize in our own time “the forces of communism and fascism at work beneath the surface of world politics” is in fact the key to drawing “new energy from (Benjamin’s)

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prophecies.”

Keeping Benjamin’s thought moving, or keeping lines of communication between language fields open, thus becomes one of the aims of *The Benjamin Files*, which makes sense given the thrust of Jameson’s general historicizing project. “Historicizing” for Jameson is not some banal “placing a work in its context,” which presupposes a sharp division between the work and its context.

For Jameson as much as for any other Marxist, “history” is another word for the class struggle and the class struggle literally forms the productions of the superstructure, to the point that through these productions we can catch the movement of history itself.

This movement is systematically obscured by the tendency of capitalism to reify not only its social relations as a mode of production but its cultural forms (and even the methods by which these forms are analyzed). In other words, they are made to appear “natural” or beyond the possibility of historical change.

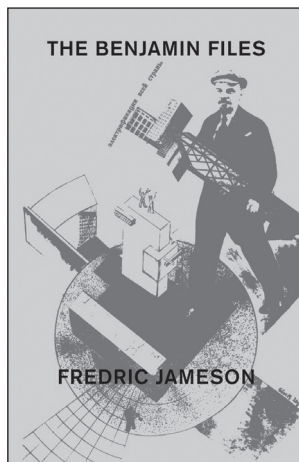
This problem — the way cultural productions systematically reveal and obscure their own being as historical — animates Jameson’s dialectical perspective. In Jameson’s work, reified or naturalized elements of capitalist society can once again be set in motion and seen clearly: not as static objects to be interpreted but as historical elements of a living world to be changed.

As Jameson points out, history works on cultural production in a double sense, both on its form and its content and few critics have a better eye than he for the interaction between form and content in a work.

Take one formal element of Benjamin’s work: his obsession with taking quotations from a work and placing them alongside others from different works (“A criticism consisting entirely of quotations should be developed,” Benjamin says).

Benjamin’s quotations have often been read as a way of breaking up a given text as a critique of its pretension to wholeness. This is, in its own way, a statement about the relationship between form and content in Benjamin’s work: it takes the form of the quotation and interprets it as its own content (a comment on wholeness as such).

Jameson, however, has a different, fuller reading of the formal question of the quotation. By bringing to bear Benjamin’s writings on Baudelaire and historical materialism, he shows how it is just as important that the quotation forms a “new thing” that “has a generic life of its own.” This in turn illuminates



the ethical ambiguity of the destructive act for Benjamin.

While it's true then that “wrenching” a quote from a text vitiates the presumptive wholeness of that text, it does so in the course of creating a new whole of which new interpretations are possible. Observations like this one show how paying attention to the function of concepts in Benjamin’s multiple language fields can yield new insights about those concepts.

The Concept of History

One episode that strikes a chord with our current moment comes during a discussion of Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility.”

In this essay, Benjamin examines how both what constitutes art and how we perceive art changes drastically with the advent of mass culture after World War I. What previously had made art recognizable as such — its uniqueness, its authenticity, its connection to some ritual or another — dissolves with its technological reproduction for a mass audience.

At this point, two options open for art, each with a distinct political valence. Aestheticization, “art for art’s sake,” is an attempt to get back to the work of art’s lost authenticity — for Benjamin, this is aligned with fascism; politicization, the democratization of art for the formation of new revolutionary habits appropriate to the masses — this is aligned with communism.

One of the themes Jameson picks out of Benjamin’s work during the period of this essay is how new mass political movements developed new ways of seeing and thinking suited to the age. These call forth concepts that, in Benjamin’s words, “neutralize” the traditional categories like “creativity” and “genius” that are more suited to the individual — and are more easily manipulated by fascism.

Jameson posits that we have in fact “regressed” in our own time from “a world of class struggle to a world of virtue and corruption, an eighteenth century world.” This is difficult to deny, as in our current climate in the United States even the political itself has not escaped aestheticization, becoming little more than personal branding and symbolic gestures by individuals.

Here we can see how Benjamin’s translation between the language fields of aesthetics (the work of art), economics (mass production), and politics (the two roads for art of fascism and communism) has the effect of eroding one of them. As Jameson notes, economics appears to signal the end of art in politics.

In the mesmerizing final chapter, Jameson engages the endlessly-discussed passages that make up Benjamin’s theses “On the concept of history,” written in early 1940 near the end of his life by suicide after attempting to flee from the Nazi occupation of France.

For Jameson, the theses constitute an effort “to separate historiography from history,” or concepts of history from the movement of history itself.

Benjamin stands resolutely against any attempt to impose some contrived progressive narrative onto the fullness of history. According to Benjamin, Germany’s Social Democrats imposed precisely this narrative onto history. Their sanguine faith in the inevitability of the progress of mankind toward socialism, made revolution fade ever further into the distance or neutralized it altogether as an “infinite” task.

But we don’t need Benjamin to convince us of the dangers of progress narratives — we here in the United States are certainly familiar with their sedative effects. What’s important is that this concept of history as human progress — “universal history” — is indissolubly bound up with a certain concept of time as empty and homogeneous, just waiting to be filled up chronologically with one thing after another.

Such a concept of universal history doesn’t have what Benjamin calls a “constructive principle.” Historical materialism, however, has such a principle, called revolution. This principle is based on a very different concept of time — rather than empty, homogeneous time, the time of history is already full with what is often translated in Benjamin as “now-time” and Jameson conveys as the “now of recognizability.”

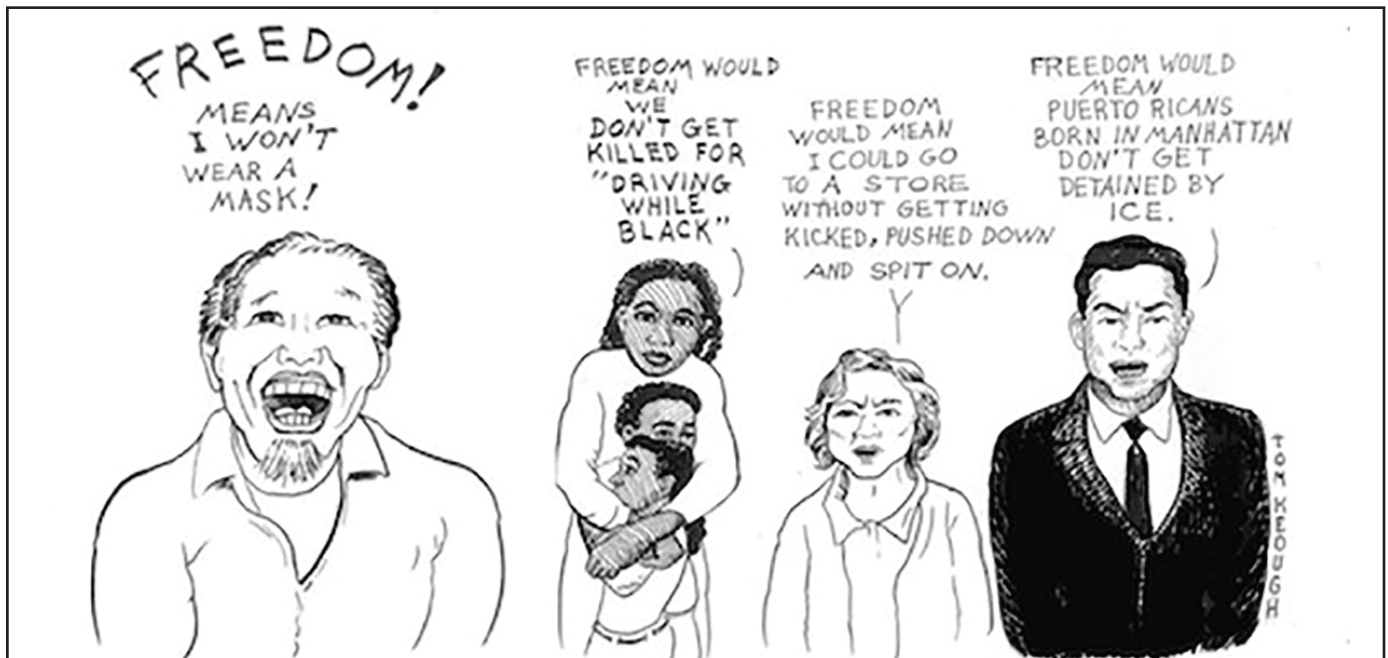
This is a past time made present, unlocked by a given political situation or revolutionary possibility. If we no longer can relate past events or historical periods to our present one through a narrative or series of continuous casual events, they are now related through discontinuity — that is, they are related politically.

It is the political situation of the present that renders the past accessible, the current crisis from which, as Jameson says, the past moment “draws enough energy to gain a new (and perhaps only momentary) lease on life.” The present moment of the class struggle grants us access to the past as it imbues the past with new life.

A Living Task

But how is this past moment related to this present moment? Now that the former is “charged with now-time,” what is its relation to the latter?

This is where the theological language field becomes necessary for both Benjamin and Jameson. Benjamin uses the language of the messiah and redemption, while Jameson



uses the language of allegory and fulfillment. The former draws upon the Jewish messianic tradition, the latter on medieval Christian biblical exegesis.

The upshot is that the past stops being something dead, or an artifact, or even an inert store of historical “lessons.” Instead it becomes a living task, an event we experience again but in a new way, an incomplete project we are called upon to finish. The failed revolution is merely incomplete — it becomes a prefiguration as soon as the present situation calls for its fulfillment.

Not only is the past made present, but the present is made past. Our present, through contact with this past moment, takes its own place as history. We historicize ourselves, becoming alive to the historical nature of the present as a task to be completed in time.

As Jameson notes, Benjamin’s concept of history calls for “action and activism, for reenactment and completion on a higher plane.” In fact, this concept of history calls for us to make it ourselves.

As we can see, to stop reading Benjamin at the famous thesis IX — where history is nothing but a single catastrophe and historiography itself little more than its valorization — is to miss the revolutionary force of Benjamin’s thought. In the Benjaminian spirit, we might translate it into Christian parlance and say it is to end the story on Good Friday, the day of Christ’s execution, rather than Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection.

But this way of reading Benjamin is what has led many to take him as a melancholy theorist of the “end of history” or at least the end of historical thinking. Jameson’s book is one of the most forceful yet to revivify the centrality of the political in Benjamin’s thought which in turn makes history come

alive again.

This is not to make Benjamin some sort of “optimist” — Jameson’s final, provocative thoughts on hope and redemption make that reading impossible. It is simply to understand that for Benjamin, the class struggle continues: we are in it, and it is not over.

This book probably won’t end up on the reading lists of many union study groups outside of university faculty and graduate student unions. Like Benjamin, Jameson uses his own fair share of language fields — Marxism, psychoanalysis, continental philosophy, linguistics, etc. — and unfamiliari-

ty with these can occasionally make his work difficult to comprehend.

Jameson is short on concrete political proposals — you won’t find any call for independent, mass working-class organization at the end of his books — but that isn’t really his job.

I still believe that not only academics but also militants should read Jameson. Simply put, Jameson’s work offers one of the most compelling, comprehensive, and rigorous examples of what it means to think like a Marxist. *The Benjamin Files* is challenging but in a good way, and the payoff is worth it. ■

The Many Lives of Money — continued from page 40

Conclusion

A number of books on the history of money are available, such as Jack Weatherford’s *The Ascent of Money*, Niall Ferguson’s *The History of Money* or Frederick Kaufman’s recent *The Money Plot*. Some have tried to popularize the history of money, to make it accessible to a large audience. Others have taken a more anthropological approach, while yet others have explored money’s metaphorical significance.

Weatherford in *The History of Money* (1988) acknowledges the reoccurring impact across time and societies — “As money swept through history and across societies, its impact seemed surprisingly similar from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Japan and Germany” — but fails to mark out the continuous blood trail.

One would think that Ferguson’s second chapter of his *Ascent of Money* (2008), “Of Human Bondage,” might discuss money and slavery, but it is more of a pun on government-issued bonds (although their role in financing wars is discussed).

Blood and Money is a welcome addition because it is the only one that shows from start to finish how the two are inextricably linked. Further, it utilizes a Marxist framework.

McNally refuses to endorse easy mono-causal explanations, for example, around the emergence of coined money. Rather he views the world through a dialectical lens, taking into account the interplay of underlying socio-economic and cultural processes. More importantly he shows us that capital does indeed come into the world “dripping in blood and dirt,” as Marx wrote. ■

Notes

1. Sesterces were the predominant Roman coin at the time.
2. The English Navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, which had not only strong political and religious repercussions, but even impacted future technological advancements.
3. Clipping is the act of shaving off a small portion of a precious metal coin for profit. Over time, the precious metal clippings could be saved up and melted into bullion or used to make new coins.
4. During the winter of 1777-78, American soldiers consumed almost 2.3 million pounds of flour and nearly as much beef.

does — huge tax cuts for corporations and the rich putting the country on the path to bankruptcy, vicious attacks on abortion rights, destruction of unions, packing the courts with reactionary cadres, ecocidal deregulation, and now of course wiping out the protections of the Voting Rights Act.

But in a decreasingly white-majority country, it's a party whose ability to govern nationally increasingly depends on restriction and suppression of nonwhite voters.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, by now is at least tentatively supported by most of the "mainstream" of the ruling class. Corporate America on the whole recognizes at least the desperate need for serious infrastructure (both material and human) investment and at least some efforts at things like climate-change mitigation and immigration reform. But how actively this politically indolent ruling class, having become so fattened by its wealth, is prepared to intervene to preserve the system's longer-term stability is a complex question that will require deeper future discussion.

The Democratic Party of course, whatever its "progressive wing" might want, remains firmly committed to maintaining — and handsomely profiting from — the U.S. imperial mission to rule the world. The latter is an obvious remaining pillar of "bipartisanship," but the elites generally recognize that Trump's America-First antics and romances with Russia's President-for-life Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-un damaged Washington's global standing.

As the Democratic voting base increasingly depends on communities of color — while the much-discussed "suburban vote" remains a hotly contested arena — Democrats need voter access and turnout to expand, just as desperately as Republicans need to curtail it. In this sense, the January 6 riot wasn't a one-day incident but a point of transition from the Trump presidency and the 2020 election to a chaotic new political dispensation with an outcome very much in the balance.

What's at Stake

The left and socialists in particular obviously can't be indifferent to the outcome of this political war. We advocate the *expansion* of democracy, not only in guaranteed rights and ease of voting but abolishing the overwhelming difficulties of ballot access for third parties, the truly antiquated slave-relic Electoral College, lifetime Supreme Court appointments and so much more beyond the scope of the present brief discussion.

Many of these anti-democratic institutions and procedures, including the Supreme Court, were established precisely to protect the wealthy and privileged from the threat that democracy posed to their power. Together with the entrenched two-party system, which has played a big role in hampering the emergence of independent working class politics, these measures greatly enforced the "stability" of a setup that's powerfully served the elites through wars, depressions and social upheavals including militant labor upsurges and the Civil Rights revolution.

Today from within the system itself, these very institutions, e.g. the anti-democratic filibuster in the U.S. Senate — itself the most unrepresentative elected body in the more-or-less democratic world — are ironically but ominously becoming weapons of a far-right party threatening that stability.

The uncontained wildfire of voter-suppression state

legislation, protected by the Republican Senate filibuster against federal voter protection and by WSCOTUS against constitutional challenge, raises the specter of minority-party Republican "state capture" of both houses of Congress in the 2022 midterms — crippling the Biden administration's hope for any legislative agenda — and the White House in 2024. That could happen even if the Republican candidate massively loses the national vote, and regardless of whether the aspiring fuhrer Trump is that candidate.

Even without such an extreme outcome, the necessity of serious infrastructure investment — and climate change prevention and mitigation, inadequate as the Biden program is in that regard — is blunted by the filibuster-induced coma of the U.S. Senate. We discussed this in our previous editorial statement ("Infrastructure: Who Needs It?" in ATC 213). As we go to press, the smaller "bipartisan" bill has cleared procedural Senate obstacles while complicated maneuvers continue over the ten-year \$3.5 trillion Democratic package.

On the face of it, the fate of voting rights seems to depend on West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin. *But deeper forces are at work.* It's possible for those of us on the left to welcome the truly heroic defiance by the Texas Democratic legislators who left the state to deprive their state legislature of the quorum for enacting massive vote suppression, while we insist that the capitalist and imperialist Democratic Party itself is very much part of the problem.

The left needs to point to the underlying factors that brought about this political crisis long before it crystallized in the insanity of the Trump presidency and the "long January 6 riot" in its aftermath. These developments are the fruits of decades of mainly bipartisan neoliberal and "free-trade" policies that have eviscerated workers' rights, made the corporate ruling class obscenely rich, spawned a new sector of plutocrats capable of financing extreme rightwing initiatives, and exposed large sectors of the U.S. population to massive insecurity and impoverishment.

No wonder that a considerable sector of white workers as well as middle-class people have been attracted to the racist lies that are now the core of the Republican appeal. The political crisis cannot be resolved in a progressive direction unless the U.S. labor movement is rebuilt on the basis of a popular social justice program and above all, rank-and-file energy and democratic power.

Above all, that goal is where the energy and strategic thinking of today's socialist left must be, whether in our unions or communities or anti-racist mobilizations. Let's remember that this is not only a time of rightwing menace, but also a moment when popular resistance movements and anti-dictatorship struggles are exploding globally. In the United States there's a revival of interest in socialism, even if organizations of the revolutionary left coming from the struggles of the 20th and early 21st centuries are at low ebb.

Both the viciously reactionary Trump phenomenon and the Bernie Sanders upsurge; both the emboldened rightwing militias and the magnificent movements spearheaded by Black Lives Matter, Water Protector activists and immigrant rights fighters; these are all products of the long-developing crisis of a deeply unequal, exploitative and racially unjust society. Grasping that dual reality is the beginning of confronting a dangerous moment ■

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