

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

# AGAINST THE CURRENT



**On Richard Wright's  
*The Man Who Lived  
Underground***

♦ ALAN WALD

**Why Critical Race  
Theory?**

♦ MALIK MIAH

**Forget the Alamo!**

♦ Dick J. Reavis



## A Letter from the Editors:

# COP26: Success Not an Option

THE GLASGOW CONFERENCE (COP26) should have given priority to 1) making good on the promise of the “developed” countries to contribute to the Green Climate Fund, from 2020 onwards, at least one hundred billion dollars a year to help the global South meet the climate challenge; 2) forcing these same countries to intervene financially to cover the enormous “loss and damage” caused by warming, especially in the “least developed countries” and small island states; 3) “raising the climate ambitions” of governments to achieve the adopted COP21 (Paris, 2015) goal of “keeping the temperature increase well below 2°C while continuing efforts not to exceed 1.5°C compared to the pre-industrial period.”

The balance sheet is clear: on paper, Glasgow clarifies the ambiguous Paris goal by making it more radical (1.5°C is now the target) and mentions the responsibility of fossil fuels; but in practice, the conference did not take any steps to stop the catastrophe.

A “step in the right direction,” some said. On the contrary: obsessed with the post-Covid neoliberal recovery and their geostrategic rivalries, the masters of the world decided to: 1) postpone the promise of one hundred billion for the Green Fund; 2) say no to compensation for “loss and damage;” 3) leave the field almost completely free for fossil fuels; 4) consider climate stabilization as a market for “carbon offsets” and technologies; 5) endow this market with a global mechanism for trading “rights to pollute;” 6) last but not least, entrust the management of this market to finance... which means to the rich whose investments and lifestyles are the fundamental cause of global warming.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on 1.5°C (2019) had demonstrated the imperative need to stay below 1.5°C. The dangers of warming had been underestimated. Beyond 1.5°C, cascades of positive feedbacks threaten to tip the Earth into a “hothouse planet” regime.

This would have dire consequences (including a rise in sea levels of 13 meters or more). The average surface temperature has risen by 1.1 to 1.2°C compared to the pre-industrial era. At the current rate, the 1.5°C mark will be passed by 2030... Conclusion: “net” global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions must be reduced by at least 50% before 2030, by 100% before 2050 and become negative in the second half of the century.

## A Bombshell for Capital

The report was a bombshell. The leaders of the capitalist class can no longer bury their heads in the sand. Those with a modicum of brains have to admit that global warming can spiral out of control to the point of endangering their system.

In this context a capitalist policy that claims to be “based on the best science,” even when carried by neoliberals like Boris Johnson, could not possibly maintain the ambiguity of the Paris agreement... The British presidency of COP26 proposed that a maximum of 1.5°C should be the sole target, and this clarification was ratified by the Conference.

The IPCC is explicit: the burning of fossil fuels plays a key role in warming. As a result, the shockwaves of the 1.5°C report were felt even by the International Energy Agency (IEA).

*This guest editorial is excerpted from the opening and conclusion of an extensive article by Daniel Tanuro, titled “Neoliberal apotheosis: COP26 creates the global fire market and offers it to capitalist arsonists, at the expense of the people.” The full text with footnotes, which also includes treatments of methane emissions, reforestation and other issues, is posted at <https://fourth.international/en/394>*

In 2021, the IEA issued a report that clearly states that “carbon neutrality” in 2050 requires drastic measures in the very short term: a ban from 2021 on the development of new oil and gas fields, the opening of new coal mines, the expansion of existing coal mines, or the authorization of the construction of new coal-fired power stations; the abandonment of coal from 2030 in the “advanced” economies;

and the closure of all coal- and oil-fired power stations worldwide from 2040.

This report was also a bombshell. The Agency was suddenly advocating a radical shift towards a “green capitalism” organized around renewables. Just as it could not maintain the ambiguity of Paris, the Glasgow summit could not continue to hide the responsibility of fossils. Under pressure from the energy sector and major users, every COP since 1992 had avoided the subject!

This silence was no longer tenable. The British presidency submitted a draft declaration to delegates calling on parties to “accelerate the phasing-out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels.” This text was neutralized to “phasing down” (by a last-minute intervention by India), but the mention of fossils remains in the final version.

## Challenge More Daunting Every Year

The Paris agreement made a big gap between the goal (“keeping the temperature increase well below, etc.”) and the national climate plans, or “Nationally Determined Contributions” (NDCs). On the basis of these NDCs, the IPCC projected a temperature increase of about 3.5°C in 2100. To reduce this “emissions gap,” the COP21 adopted the principle of a review every five years, to “raise ambitions.”

This is the gap (surplus emissions) that must be eliminated before 2030 to stay below the 1.5°C increase. In September 2020, the gap, all greenhouse gases included, is estimated at between 23 and 27 gigatons (Gt) of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. *Global emissions must therefore be halved.*

With the 2020 summit cancelled (pandemic), the governments decided to make another effort to “raise the ambitions” for Glasgow. The result: an additional 3.3 to 4.7 Gt of reductions. On this basis, the scientific network Climate Action Tracker projects a warming of +2.4°C (range: +1.9 to +3°C).

Johann Rockström, director of the Potsdam Institute, continued on the inside back cover

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# AGAINST THE CURRENT

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*"A Global North greenwash festival, a two-week-long celebration of business as usual and blah, blah, blah."  
 "The voices of future generations are drowning in their greenwash and empty words and promises."  
 — Greta Thunberg*



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# Afghan Women and Self-Determination: Always Resisting Empire

By Helena Zeweri & Wazhmah Osman

IN RECENT MONTHS we have seen the resuscitation of the “saving Afghan women” narrative in media commentaries following the U.S. military withdrawal. As much scholarship has shown ever since the 2001 military intervention, this narrative functions to do two things.

First, it ignores the fact that Afghan women have not only been critiquing the inhumane Taliban regime, but the human consequences of U.S. empire. Second, it fails to consider how Afghan women’s resistance over the past 100 years has been deeply committed to an anti-imperial politics.

From resisting the British to the Soviet Union, to more recently the United States, since the mid-19th century women in Afghanistan have been struggling against imperial rule and occupation. From female revolutionaries of the mid-19th century who fought the British, to the women of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) who continue to resist imperialism, Afghan women have been front and center.

While the valorization of anti-imperial male heroes like Ahmad Shah Massoud, known as “the Lion of Panjshir Valley,” and tropes like “the graveyard of empires” paint Afghanistan as a site marked by a rugged warrior-like masculinity, women get dismissed in narratives that center local forms of resistance.

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*Afghan folkloric ethno-national hero, Malalai of Maiwand.*

As we have written elsewhere, two of the most prominent Afghan women anti-Soviet occupation activists were Nahid-i-Shahid, often known as Nahid the martyr, and Meena Kamal, the founder of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Yet unlike their male counterparts, they have received little attention in the mainstream western press. (<https://theconversation.com/afghan-women-have-a-long-history-of-taking-leadership-and-fighting-for-their-rights-167872>)

Even when Afghan women’s voices have been the subject of media commentaries and policy forums, such as over the last few months, their voices are routinely used as evidence to fuel the narrative that the U.S. and international presence in Afghanistan were critical to ensuring their freedom and human rights.

By recognizing the anti-imperial orientation of Afghan women’s politics, we can better understand how Afghan women have actually been part of a bigger and more global conversation on empire, occupation, and by extension decoloniality. This framework is in direct contrast to portrayals of Afghan

women’s struggles as insular and only concerned with the Taliban or Islamic fundamentalism.

## Malalai’s Legacy

One of the most well-known female activist figures that can be called anti-imperial is Malalai of Maiwand, a folkloric ethno-national hero among Afghans. Malalai played a pivotal role in the second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880 in the Battle of Maiwand, in Kandahar Province.

Although there are various accounts of her exact role in the battle, the general consensus in oral stories and Afghan history books is that she rallied a demoralized Afghan army on the verge of retreat and near surrender. She raised the Afghan flag and proclaimed that dying under the fire of the British artillery was an honor.

Through treating and assisting wounded soldiers, she helped boost the morale of Ayub Khan’s forces. In some versions, her role in the battle is more active as she participates in directly fighting the British army. While she herself was killed in battle by the British army, the Afghan army emerged victorious.

Malalai’s name has been enshrined within many institutions like schools and hospitals in Afghanistan as well as in folklore and poetry. Her grave has become a shrine where people visit from near and far to pray.

Like the female poets before her who routinely deviated from social and cultural norms around femininity and gender (people like Rabia Balkhi and Zebun Nissa), Malalai of Maiwand has inspired generations of girls in the region including the iconic Malala Yousafzai. In fact, in her autobiography *I am Malala*, Yousafzai states that she is named after this historical heroine, and cites her struggle against the British as inspirational.

Not surprisingly, however, Malalai of Maiwand does not appear anywhere in the fastidious archives of the British. Her story nonetheless reminds us that the erasure of strong, politically active Afghan women who attempted to resist the status quo is not

unique to U.S. imperial discourses, but goes back to the post-imperial historical narrative-making of the British (Osman 2019).

Alongside the self-determination movements that spread throughout the former British and French colonies in the Middle East and North Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, Afghanistan underwent its own consciousness-raising movements. Women in Afghanistan have long been speaking out against imperial occupation, using globally circulating ideas around anti-imperialism and decoloniality for inspiration.

Ideas of coloniality and decoloniality have a long history in Afghanistan. The pejorative Persian word *gharbzadegi*, a term first coined by Iranian intellectuals that literally translates to being hit or struck by the West but is commonly translated as “Westoxification” (referring to the harms imposed by Western colonial impositions and values), had already been spreading from West to East Asia.

### RAWA's Struggle

In 1977, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan was formed with the aim of promoting women's human rights and democratic governance. While created by urban educated women, RAWA aimed to include women from across socioeconomic strata into the struggle for women's rights.

Over the decades the group has spoken out against the Soviet-backed government in the 1970s, the conservatism of the anti-Soviet resistance (*mujahedin*) in the 1980s, the Taliban regime in the 1990s, the role of the Pakistani state in creating the Taliban and the U.S. occupation of the 2000s.

They have continued to speak out against both Islamic fundamentalism and U.S. imperialism, drawing upon global anti-imperial efforts and declaring their solidarity with other decolonial movements. For example, in late August 2021, RAWA put out a statement drawing connections between their resistance to the Islamic State in Afghanistan (which they frame as a kind of imperial power) and Kurdish women's resistance in the YPJ (Women's Protection Unit) to the Islamic State and Turkish occupying forces.

They discuss YPJ's emphasis on democratic confederalism as a form of direct democracy that moves beyond the nation-state paradigm, and is decentralized and bottom-up:

*“Just as in Afrin, where the YPJ, which inspires women from all over the world, was founded, and where today women are subjugated and murdered as a result of the policies of the global hegemonic powers, also the women in Afghanistan face the same threat now. Their struggle against ISIS and other medieval-aged criminals have given us huge lessons. We know that no force on earth, not ISIS and its superpower backer and other countries in the region, can stand in the face of true resistance from the masses. We*

*understand the sacrifices we have to make in order to attain our dream society.”* (<http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2021/08/28/afghan-and-kurdish-women-revolutionaries-urge-joined-up-global-resistance.html>).

RAWA gained notoriety in the American political imagination in the early 2000s when the Feminist Majority Foundation mobilized their images of women being persecuted in public to solidify the case for war and militarized humanitarian intervention. (Cooke, 2002)

As Wazmah Osman has written, “Due to their lack of cultural access, even transnational feminist organizations that genuinely sought to help, directed their attention to and gathered their information from the same few websites of Afghan women's organizations that were available in English.” (Osman, 2014, 877) It is also important to note that RAWA itself has also mobilized the language of women's cultural oppression in ways that have made it vulnerable to instrumentalization and co-optation by pro-war feminist agendas, including that of FMF.

Over time, however, RAWA has become more critical of the instrumentalization of women's stories as a justification for military escalations (<http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2009/07/08/why-is-a-leading-feminist-organization-lending-its-name-to-support-escalation-in-afghanistan.html>).

In September 2019 in an interview with Samia Walid, Afghan women's freedom is also tied to the struggle against U.S. imperialism and its Afghan “internal lackeys.” Walid's take is a particularly illustrative example of how RAWA views the extent to which imperial ideas have been internalized among putatively progressive Afghan women activists:

*“The US is a master at diverting revolutionary and political struggle of people, especially women. In the past eighteen years, in addition to supporting the most anti-women elements all over Afghanistan and ensuring that these elements remain untouchable, the US has introduced a stream of educated women into the government and other institutions, NGOs, civil society, and women's networks. This has a dual purpose. First, it uses these women to deceive the world about the real situation of Afghan women and presents them as its achievement in its tiring war. Second, by taking such educated women under its wing, it makes sure that they don't join the revolutionary struggle, thus depriving the women's movement of valuable people.”* (<http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2019/09/20/interview-afghan-women-s-struggles-against-patriarchy-imperialism-and-capitalism.html>).

### Solidarity, Not Benevolent Saviors!

The organization has also been inspired by a broader global effort to critique the imperial idea of “saving Muslim women,” which has come to characterize so many liberal NGO and feminist organizations' approaches

to women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

In its critique of the Feminist Majority Foundation, RAWA cites Columbia professor Lila Abu-Lughod's writing on the colonial history of the “saving Muslim women” narrative as a way to speak truth to the colonial power dynamics and principles undergirding contemporary feminist projects:

“Columbia Professor Lila Abu-Lughod, a woman of Palestinian descent, writes: ‘We need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives; so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women.’” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013)

Here, RAWA's citation of Abu-Lughod is also a commentary on the dangers of benevolent governance as a pretext for intervention. The notion of “benevolent governance” as a system of power relations refers to the idea that certain forms of authoritative rule are an expression of generosity on the part of those who rule, usually under the pretext that a given population lacks the infrastructure, reasoning, and public will to rule themselves.

This is a discourse through which imperial projects justify themselves as anchored in an ethics of care as opposed to what they really are: *a politics of exploitation, extraction, and geopolitical grandstanding.*

Finally, RAWA's commitment to a global solidarity politics is expressed through their engagement with other revolutionary women-led groups, such as their meeting with South Asian feminist activists in 2015, including Heela Faryal's visit to meet with Kamla Bhasin, the coordinator of the One Billion Rising in South Asia, Ananthi Sasitharan, an activist with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, and Elahe Amani, an Iranian activist working in Afghanistan. (<http://www.rawa.org/rawa/2015/12/01/rawa-member-attends-women-in-black-conference-in-india.html>)

Afghan women's anti-imperial activism has continued into recent years. As the War on Terror continued into the mid-2000s, activists like Malalai Joya (who is also named after Malalai of Maiwand) spoke out against the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians as a result of U.S.-led drone warfare. Joya who was elected as the MP of Farah Province in 2003 and re-elected multiple times thereafter, has repeatedly denounced the United States' political maneuvers of bribing and empowering regional warlords and breeding other forms of corruption in the central government.

Joya has been one of the most outspoken public voices on how the Taliban fundamentalism and U.S. imperialism benefit from

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Guangzhou port, gateway to the massive transformation of the global political economy and of China itself.

Dianne Feeley

## Entangled Rivalry: The United States and China

By Peter Solenberger

THE ENTANGLED RIVALRY of the United States and China partly repeats old patterns. States and empires have been rising and falling, cooperating and clashing for 5000 years, capitalist ones since the early 17th century, and imperialist ones since the late 19th century.

As China gains on the United States, tensions are rising, trade wars are breaking out, and shooting wars threaten. A familiar pattern.

The rivalry presents new elements too. It developed as part of a process of capitalist restoration across Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, China and Southeast Asia.

By the early 1990s the United States was the sole superpower, and China a relatively backward capitalist country. Thirty years later the Chinese economy is approaching the size of the U.S. economy; China and the United States are imperialist rivals.

How did China do this? Why didn't the United States block it? What's the situation now? How might it develop? What interests do workers have in the conflict? What should socialists advocate? This article begins to explore these questions.

### China in the 20th Century

The subject of this article is the U.S.-China conflict, not China itself, so the account in this section is necessarily highly schematic.

*Against the Current* has covered China over the years. Here are five ATC articles and reviews I found particularly useful: "The Realities of China Today" by Martin Hart-Landsberg (ATC 137, 2008), "Resistance in China

Peter Solenberger is a Solidarity member and activist in Michigan.

Today" by Au Loong Yu and Bai Ruixue (ATC 161, 2012), "China: Rise and Emergent Crisis" by Jase Short (ATC 175, 2015), "China: Workers Rising?" by Jane Slaughter (ATC 178, 2015), and "Hong Kong: An Uprising and Its Fate" by Promise Li (ATC 210, 2021). For additional background and global analysis see the article "China: A New Imperialism Emerges" by Pierre Rousset, <https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7401>.

From the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century China was a semicolony, formally independent but dominated by the "great powers" of Europe, the United States and Japan. China won full independence and national unification through a series of revolutions and wars from 1911 through 1949. It split from the Soviet Union, its erstwhile patron, in 1961 and set its own course.

China succeeded in part because it is an immense country in land area, natural resources, and population. But these alone would not have been enough for it to make the breakthrough it has. The additional factor is its revolutionary history.

China was never socialist, but the government that came to power through its 1949 revolution expropriated the capitalists and landowners and prevented the U.S. and European imperialists from reestablishing their domination. The government, with Mao Zedong at its head, was authoritarian, often cruel, and often stupid, but it transformed the country economically and socially and laid the basis for China's subsequent growth and development.

In the latter 1980s the Soviet government under Mikhail Gorbachev experimented with *perestroika* (market restructuring) and *glas-*

*nost* (political openness) to try to get past the stagnation of the economy and society. The effort failed. The Soviet Union collapsed and the government bureaucracy restored capitalism, turning state property into private property through "shock therapy."

The process went too far and threatened to turn Russia into an impoverished vassal of European and U.S. capital. The Russian ruling class, mostly the old bureaucracy and its friends, turned to Vladimir Putin and the security apparatus to restore an authoritarian state.

The Chinese bureaucracy, led by Deng Xiaoping, saw *perestroika* as necessary but rejected *glasnost*, as it brutally demonstrated with its repression of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989.

It managed the process of capitalist restoration more smoothly than the Soviet bureaucracy did, essentially offering rising living standards in exchange for acceptance of its rule. Despite massively increased inequality, disappearance of workers' job security, particularly in the private sector, and dispossession of peasants, China grew rapidly. Wages and salaries rose, and workers and the professional and managerial middle class gained more freedom in their work and personal lives, although not in political life.

### Growth and Contradictions

The International Monetary Fund estimates the 2021 nominal (exchange rate) gross domestic product (GDP) of China to be \$16.64 trillion and that of the U.S. to be \$22.94 trillion. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic China was closing the gap, growing at an annual rate of five to seven percent to

the U.S. rate of two to three percent. China's population is more than four times greater, so its per capita GDP is just \$11,819, compared to \$69,375 for the United States.

If China were to continue growing as it has in the past, it would overtake the U.S. economy and become the alpha imperialist power. That certainly is the intention of Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But China has many contradictions which may prevent this. Here are some:

*An insufficient resource base* (and misuse of some of what it has). It scours the world for energy and raw materials, but this makes it vulnerable to their being cut off.

*An aging population, out of the labor force but needing to be supported.* This, combined with the draining of the peasantry from the countryside, limits its ability to keep growing on a labor-intensive basis.

*Technology that's highly advanced in some areas but inadequate in others.* Production still relies too much on foreign firms and imported designs, machinery and components.

*Impressive results achieved through extensive growth — doing more of what it has done before — but market and bureaucratic blindness misdirects investment.* For example, bank loans to developers to build buildings that aren't needed has produced a real estate bubble with the potential to become a financial crisis unless the government intervenes massively.

*Unregulated growth has destroyed China's environment, poisoning land, water and air and jeopardizing its (and the world's) future.*

*The party-state-directed capitalism-without-democracy model makes the regime vulnerable to demands for democratic rights by workers and the urban middle class, whether or not living standards continue to rise.*

*China's capitalists may not accept government tutelage much longer, which could turn China toward a more conventional neoliberal capitalist model.*

*An intense but somewhat hidden class struggle, which could escalate and open up new possibilities.*

*The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the strengths and limitations of the Chinese system.* The government could impose lockdowns and quickly bring down the rates of infection and death, but its vaccines use older technology and aren't as effective as those made by more advanced countries, and its top-down, all-or-nothing methods impose too much unnecessary hardship.

## **U.S. versus China**

The U.S. and Chinese economies are entangled by trade and investment. In 2018, according to Chinese government figures, China exported \$478.4 billion in goods to and imported \$155.1 billion in goods from the United States, making them each other's

leading trade partner.

U.S. corporations make immense profits from trade with and investment in China. This tempts what they will allow the government to do, but the U.S. ruling class sees the threat China poses and is concerned.

Barack Obama tried to shift the focus of U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East to Asia to counter China's growing power. His "pivot to Asia" included diplomatic approaches to Pacific rim countries, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), military buildup in the Pacific, and a trillion dollar program to "modernize" U.S. nuclear weapons, forcing China into an arms race it can't afford, as Ronald Reagan did the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Donald Trump scrapped diplomacy and the TPP to pursue a unilateral confrontation with China. He continued the military buildup and imposed tariffs and trade restrictions, most dramatically barring Huawei, a Chinese electronics company, from doing business with U.S. firms. Joe Biden has doubled down on confronting China, while returning to Obama's multilateralism.

There is much the United States could do, if it really tried to contain China. U.S. per capita GDP is six times that of China, reflecting its higher overall labor productivity. This gives it potentially a much larger surplus to develop its technology, its productive forces, and its military.

It could, hypothetically, adopt an industrial policy to shift production from China back to the United States or to countries with which it doesn't compete. The U.S. ruling class of course is typically allergic to anything labeled "industrial policy," but to a certain extent this shift has happened as a result of market forces.

Wages of Chinese workers have risen enough so that China is no longer a low-wage supplier. Production of clothing and shoes has shifted to Vietnam, Bangladesh and elsewhere in Asia, and to Mexico, Central America and elsewhere in Latin America.

The industrial policy could include quotas to limit imports from China, tariffs to equalize prices, and subsidies to consumers for higher prices. It could include directing U.S. companies to produce domestically what they used to import from China.

Import substitution wouldn't be easy. For example, Apple designs and markets smartphones and computers, but these are assembled in China in factories run by the Taiwanese company Foxconn. Apple couldn't immediately move production elsewhere.

For another example, China processes most of the lithium and other metals needed for batteries. The United States might obtain supplies of the raw metal, but it couldn't immediately process them.

The United States could, hypothetically, blockade China and prevent delivery of energy, raw materials, components, and ma-

chinery. But China could retaliate, cutting off shipments to the United States and bringing world trade to a standstill.

The last time the United States tried to strangle an imperialist rival was in the leadup to World War II. Washington wanted Japan to get out of Manchuria and China, and tried to cut off its supply of oil, gasoline, iron and steel, and other commodities. Japan responded with the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, hoping to knock out the U.S. fleet and force it to back off.

Both China and the United States have nuclear weapons. A miscalculation now could mean a much bigger catastrophe than World War II.

## **The Rest of the World**

Washington could not contain China on its own, since other countries could provide China with anything the United States tried to deny it.

During the Cold War, Washington built alliances which it could now try to activate against China. These include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which links the U.S., Canada and Europe; various treaties with Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, most recently the AUKUS security pact announced in September 2021; and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty.

Germany, Britain, Japan and other U.S. allies have an entangled rivalry with China similar to that of the United States. They also have entangled rivalries with the United States and with each other. Getting the U.S.-led imperialist alliance to act against China would be essential to U.S. containment efforts, but it wouldn't be easy.

China has its own alliances, most importantly with Russia. The two countries just extended the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship for another five years. Through it Russia gets capital and consumer goods, and China gets energy and military technology. Iran and Venezuela supply China with oil in exchange for investment and manufactured goods.

China has developed economic relationships with many countries around the world. Its "Belt and Road Initiative," adopted in 2013, is an attempt to extend these. Borrowing imagery from the ancient Silk Road, "belt" refers to land transportation to connect China with the rest of Asia, Europe and Africa, and "road" refers to sea routes extending to Oceania and Latin America.

In 2018, again by Chinese government figures, China exported \$1.188 trillion in goods to Asia, \$104.9 billion to Africa, \$474.6 billion to Europe, \$148.8 billion to Latin America, \$513.5 billion to the United States and Canada, and \$53.1 billion to Australia and New Zealand.

In 2018 China imported \$1.193 trillion in goods from Asia, \$99.2 billion from Africa,

\$379.4 billion from Europe, \$158.4 billion from Latin America, \$183.7 billion from the United States and Canada, and \$116.9 billion from Australia and New Zealand.

In 2018 China's stock of foreign direct investment was \$1.982 trillion. \$1.276 trillion was in Asia, \$46.1 billion in Africa, \$112.8 billion in Europe, \$406.8 billion in Latin America, \$75.5 billion in the United States, \$12.5 billion in Canada and \$44.1 billion in Australia and New Zealand.

These economic ties would be sufficient for China's economic development, if the United States and the other imperialist countries left it alone. But that's a big if.

### Imperialist Outcomes

If the future of the U.S.-China rivalry is determined solely by inter-imperialist relations, the result could be unfortunate for the world. No one has a crystal ball to see what will happen, but there are some possible scenarios to stimulate thought.

China's contradictions and the maturing of its economy might slow its growth to the rate of the United States and the other advanced capitalist countries. This is essentially what happened with Japan, which gained on the U.S. through the 1980s and then fell back.

Or China might continue to grow at its current rate and catch up with the United States, recreating the bipolar world of the Cold War but with two capitalist superpowers vying for supremacy.

That's a scary prospect, since the last period of unchecked inter-imperialist rivalry led to two world wars. If the United States and its allies block China's access to energy, raw materials, markets, and sites for investment, China has to choose between backing down or chancing a limited war. The history of the United States and Japan 80 years ago doesn't inspire confidence.

Possibly, the United States and its allies might disentangle their economies from China and force it back on itself, slowing China's growth and containing the inter-imperialist

rivalry. But this would require a degree of planning that capitalist countries generally show only in wartime.

Or conceivably, the current imperialist alliances could break down, and new ones form. However fraught the present situation looks, if the working class doesn't intervene the future is likely to be worse, since capitalist expansion and environmental collapse will intensify the inter-imperialist conflict.

### Working-class Internationalism

Republican and Democratic politicians and the corporate media denounce China for being authoritarian and violating human rights and for unfair trade practices. Much of what they say about authoritarianism and human rights is true, but their criticisms reek of hypocrisy.

The United States itself is no model of democracy. An 18th century federal system designed to limit government, first-past-the-post elections, compounded today by racist gerrymandering and voter suppression, unlimited campaign spending, corporate media, and the two-party system mean that the government does only what a consensus of the ruling class wants.

The U.S. Constitution supposedly guarantees civil and human rights, but the rights of Black, Latinx, Indigenous and other people of color, of immigrants, of women, and of LGBTQ+ people remain constantly under attack. Racist policing, the militarized border, and white vigilanteism spread terror. This country locks up far more of its population than China (or any other nation) does.

To say that China engages in unfair trade practices begs the question: *By what standard?* What's unfair is the inequality within and between nations. In a fair world, the Chinese economy would be four times the size of the U.S. economy, so that the two countries could have equal living standards.

Workers don't have an interest in maintaining inequality domestically or internationally. We would all live more happily in a

world in which everyone had peace, security, food, water, housing, a strong public health system, medical care, education, recreational opportunities, a stable and clean environment, meaningful work, personal and political freedom, and leisure to enjoy them.

Workers get drawn into "America first" and similar nonsense when they're persuaded that life is a zero-sum game in which they have to deny a good life to others in order to have one of their own. They can be won away from this if they come to see that fighting together against their mutual oppressors is more effective than fighting each other and letting their oppressors win.

Socialists can promote this learning process by helping to build struggles and raising a class perspective, an internationalist perspective, within them.

To do this we need to consistently oppose U.S. militarism and war, including the Obama-Trump-Biden buildup against China. We need to consistently oppose protectionism. Workers in Michigan can't gain at the expense of workers in Ohio. The employers will just whipsaw us. Similarly, workers in the United States can't gain at the expense of workers in China.

This doesn't mean covering up the crimes of the Chinese capitalists and government. Internationalism requires solidarity with workers and the oppressed in other countries, not apologies for their rulers. We just have to remember that living in the United States, our main enemy is at home. ■

## Marx on Global Solidarity

KARL MARX CONCLUDES the 1864 Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association (the First International) by saying:

*If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfill that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure?*

*[The actions of the ruling classes] have taught the working classes the duty to master themselves the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all means in their power; when unable to prevent, to combine in simultaneous denunciations, and to vindicate the simple laws of morals and justice, which ought to govern the relations of private individuals, as the rules paramount of the intercourse of nations.*

*The fight for such a foreign policy forms part of the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes. ■*

THE "METOO" movement in China has bubbled up over the last decade, first exposing predatory university professors, some of whom were removed from their positions. Since 2020 sexual harassment has become a crime. But when women attempt to expose sexual harassers, particularly through social media, their posts are quickly removed. They are bullied while those who support them are threatened by police and employers.

The first suit against a sexual harasser was filed by Zhou-Xiaoxuan against prominent CCTV anchor Zhu Jun for groping her. She demanded a public apology and a financial settlement; he denied her charge. In September 2021, the court refused to examine her evidence and threw out the case, citing insufficient evidence.

Two months later Peng Shuai, an internationally known tennis player, accused a top party leader — former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli — of pressuring her to have sex. She understood the force of her accusation, writing "Even if it's just me, like an egg hitting a rock or a moth to a flame courting self-destruction, I'll tell the truth about you." Although her Weibo account was deleted within 20 minutes, her case has gone viral. What's actually happening to Peng remains uncertain. ■



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## How Electric Utilities Thwart Climate Action: Politics and Power

By Isha Bhasin, M. V. Ramana & Sara Nelson

SPEAKING AT THE Glasgow Conference of Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 26), U.S. President Joe Biden pledged to reduce U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases to at least half of 2005 levels by 2030. The ambitious goal is necessary to limit the likely temperature increase due to climate change to within 1.5 degrees Celsius, the preferred target at the 2015 Paris Conference of Parties.

A major bulwark of that plan is the decarbonization of the electricity sector. As John Kerry, the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, described at the London School of Economics in October 2021: “we’ve committed to reducing our emissions this decade by 50 to 52 percent and heading to net zero, and we’ve laid out a path to get there. That means millions of new electric vehicles. Charging stations from coast to coast. A carbon-free power sector by 2035.”

The emphasis on the power sector makes sense. Compared to other emissions-heavy sectors of the economy, electricity is easier to decarbonize. There are many low-carbon technologies to choose from, and two of them — wind turbines and solar photovoltaics — are the cheapest sources of electricity today in the United States and in many other countries.<sup>1</sup>

Even for other sectors, such as transportation, mainstream narratives of decarbonization lean on technologies like electric vehicles — as reiterated by Kerry. But switching to electric vehicles can only contribute to emissions reductions if the electricity they use comes from a decarbonized power system.

Will the United States succeed in decarbonizing electricity supply by 2035? The

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answer rests on a bunch of large corporations that dominate electricity generation in the country. Many of these have market capitalizations running into the tens of billions of dollars, often a result of successive mergers and acquisitions. They employ thousands of workers and contribute significantly to local tax bases.

These utility companies have enormous political power, enhanced by the many lobbyists they employ to ensure that no new climate legislation harms their interests — and by government allegiance to capital and corporate profits over its responsibility to the population.

Utilities regularly voice their commitments to climate mitigation, usually by adopting some far-off target date — say, 2050 — by which to achieve “net zero” carbon emissions.<sup>2</sup> The date is late enough to not do anything for the present, and the claims all use the problematic idea of net-zero carbon emissions rather than zero carbon emissions.

Talking about net-zero enables utility companies to rely on unproven technologies and implausible quantities of “offsets” to allow them to continue in a business-as-usual fashion for the foreseeable future — certainly long enough to produce business-as-usual quarterly profit statements and shareholder returns. But they also have more subtle ways of stymying climate action by a variety of means. Or they steer it in directions financially beneficial to themselves.

### In Love with Natural Gas

Although coal has largely — although not entirely — fallen out of favor among major utilities, they all continue to rely on natural gas plants. Natural gas is commonly touted as a “bridge fuel” toward a low-carbon future because, when compared to coal, it generates lower carbon dioxide emissions per unit of electricity generated. But burning natural gas still results in carbon dioxide, and additional gas infrastructure guarantees that it will continue to be so for decades.

A further problem is that there is, and will continue to be, leakage of methane from the entire fuel chain required for these plants. A 2020 study estimated 630,000 leaks in U.S. natural gas distribution mains, resulting in approximately 690,000 tons of

methane emissions annually.<sup>3</sup> Methane is a potent greenhouse gas that, ton for ton, contributes far more to global warming than carbon dioxide, especially in the short term.

A closer look at the actions of utilities further belies claims that natural gas presents a temporary bridge to a cleaner future. Because utilities seek to profit from their upfront investments, these natural gas plants will be anything but temporary, certainly when viewed in light of the timescales in which climate scientists are calling for emission reductions.

Consider for example Entergy, a corporation with a market capitalization of around \$21 billion, as of November 2021. The company was recently in the news concerning the large-scale loss of power in Louisiana following Hurricane Ida. Entergy announced a commitment to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 across its service territories,<sup>4</sup> but the company is still expanding its fossil fueled fleet — especially natural gas.<sup>5</sup>

Another large utility heavily invested in natural gas is Duke Energy. With a market capitalization of around \$80 billion, it is one of the largest power production companies in the United States with over 105 power plants in the Carolinas, Florida and the Midwest. Of these, roughly a half — 51 to be precise — are fossil fuel based.

Its 35 natural gas plants constitute the largest fraction of its fleet, and it still maintains a dozen coal powered plants. In addition, Duke has been expanding into the business of distributing natural gas to homes for heating and other uses.

This isn’t likely to change.<sup>6</sup> In September 2020, Duke submitted several future scenarios to North Carolina’s utilities commission. In all but a token “no-gas” scenario, the utility planned to add up to 9,000 megawatts of natural gas production through 2035. In comparison, its fleet only had 3,000 megawatts of solar and wind power plants as of July 2020.

NextEra Energy, the largest utility in the United States with a market capitalization of nearly \$170 billion, derived roughly 50% of its electricity in 2020 from fossil fuels, with natural gas contributing 47.7%. Between 2005 and 2020, its generation from natural gas jumped over 70%. Its largest subunit, Florida Power & Light Company, derived

73% of its electricity from natural gas — but even in 2030, it projects a 61% share.

Many of these utilities justify their continued reliance on natural gas by denying that there is any other option. The CEO of Exelon, another large utility with a market capitalization of \$53 billion, claimed that he sees “no path to get off natural gas without technological advancements” even while offering a net-zero by 2050 goal.<sup>7</sup>

But this is a false narrative; energy modelers have come up with several scenarios for decarbonizing without the use of natural gas.<sup>8</sup> Instead, utilities promote gas because it sustains their own political power and control against newcomers and distributed generation via solar and wind.

### Nuclear as Savior

The other technology that these large utilities are invested in, and tout as a solution to climate change, is nuclear power. Although some environmental activists and climate scientists have argued that nuclear power is necessary for decarbonization,<sup>9</sup> many others (including one of the authors of this article) have disputed that contention.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this dispute, utilities claim they would like to contribute to climate change mitigation by continuing to invest in nuclear power. The problem: many nuclear plants are no longer economically competitive. That nuclear power plants are hugely expensive to build is well known, with construction costs routinely running into tens of billions.

The traditional argument has been that once these costs are paid off, they are cheap to run. As the Tennessee Valley Authority puts it on their webpage: “Nuclear power plants run economically, second only to hydroelectric power in low operating costs.”

That argument is no longer true, because its chief low-carbon competitors — wind and solar — have even lower operating costs. The U.S. Department of Energy, for example, estimates that for each kilowatt of installed capacity, utilities have to spend around \$15 per year on solar photovoltaic plants, \$26 on onshore wind power plants, and \$42 on hydropower plants.<sup>11</sup>

Nuclear plant owners, on the other hand, need to spend around \$122 every year. And this is without including the cost of uranium fuel and radioactive waste management. Finally, as long as gas prices are low — which they are, partly as a result of fracking — natural gas plants produce cheap electricity.

These differences in operating costs affect the profits of utility companies that operate in states where electricity is traded on the market. (Other states, where a state regulator approves electricity projects, allow utilities to pass on costs to rate payers.) Nuclear plants routinely fail to make much money on either the energy or capacity markets because the prices offered by other



*Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant on the coast of California*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diablo\\_Canyon\\_Power\\_Plant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diablo_Canyon_Power_Plant)

power plants are lower.<sup>12</sup>

The number of nuclear plants this trend affects is quite large. In 2018, Bloomberg analysts estimated that “more than one quarter of all nuclear plants don’t make enough money to cover their operating costs.”

An instructive example is the case of Diablo Canyon, California’s last-operating nuclear power plant. In 2016, the utility Pacific Gas & Electric negotiated a deal with labor unions and environmental groups to retire the plant by 2025.<sup>13</sup>

The Diablo deal came as a shock to some pro-nuclear environmental groups, who claimed that the state was perversely abandoning its largest single source of emissions-free power. But PG&E’s actions were driven by the realization that the plant was inhibiting, rather than supporting, the state’s ambitious decarbonization goals, which mandated 50% renewable power by 2030.<sup>14</sup>

Because nuclear plants are best suited to producing a steady quantity of power, they are not adaptable to the needs of a flexible grid dominated by intermittent solar and wind sources. Even a PG&E-funded report warned that power from Diablo Canyon would become increasingly superfluous after 2025.<sup>15</sup>

The Diablo case shows that nuclear power is by no means a straightforward or cost-effective solution to climate goals. But PG&E and California are exceptions for historical and political reasons. In many other states, utilities have put protecting their nuclear investments over emission reduction goals, and sustain their control over the electricity system.

### Lobbying and Corruption

To continue to profit from their nuclear plants, utility companies have managed to get state legislatures to subsidize them. At least five states so far — Illinois, New Jersey,

Ohio, Connecticut and New York — have implemented large subsidies to allow utilities to maintain the profitability of nuclear power plants.<sup>16</sup> In all of these cases, the annual financial benefits to these large corporations run in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

The subsidies — and the enabling legislations that makes consumers pay more for the electricity they use — do not come about by themselves. Electric utilities and various associated organizations have engaged in extensive lobbying and large-scale propaganda campaigns to get state governments to act in their favor. Perversely, these strategies increasingly mobilize the rhetoric of climate mitigation even as they actively work against that goal.

In recent years, Illinois has been a site of intense lobbying by Exelon and its subsidiary Commonwealth Edison (ComEd), primarily to get more nuclear subsidies from the state.

“At least two dozen former Illinois state lawmakers have lobbied on behalf of ComEd or Exelon since 2000,” according to Illinois Policy, an independent public policy organization.

Exelon’s actions in Illinois have been rightly dubbed “the nuclear hostage crisis” by David Kraft of the Nuclear Energy Information Service.<sup>17</sup> The strategy is to threaten to close nuclear plants and lay off all the workers, which would immediately affect local budgets, and thus goad legislators to come to their aid. Thanks to such strategies, earlier this year, the Illinois legislature passed another piece of legislation — for the second time in a decade — that would funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to Exelon.<sup>18</sup>

The subsidies have improved these companies’ financial situation, which in turn contributes to their clout in state and national policy making and their ability to fund advocacy efforts — including by paying politicians tidy sums of money.

FirstEnergy, a \$21 billion company now called Energy Harbour, has lobbied for years for a subsidy to maintain its unprofitable nuclear plants.

When lobbying efforts failed to produce subsidies, it resorted to bribery to gain legislative support for House Bill 6, legislation that forces state consumers to pay into something called “the Ohio Clean Air Fund.”

The greenwashing language hides the real purpose: to siphon nearly \$150 million annually to FirstEnergy to keep its nuclear power plants and two coal-fired power plants operating, while simultaneously gutting Ohio’s renewable energy standards and efficiency programs.

These energy efficiency programs had saved consumers and corporations hundreds of millions of dollars. When citizens tried to organize a referendum to repeal the bill, FirstEnergy indulged in various dirty tactics to thwart this democratic opposition.<sup>19</sup>

In July 2020, the company was charged with the “largest bribery, money-laundering scheme ever perpetrated against the people and the state of Ohio,” resulting in the arrest of Larry Householder, Speaker of the House of the state of Ohio, and four others on charges of racketeering.

Ohio eventually retracted these subsidies. But the political power of FirstEnergy is so great that its stock price has risen roughly 30 percent since the July 2020 charges.

Also in July 2020, Commonwealth Edison (ComEd), a subsidiary of Exelon, was charged with bribery to “Public Official A” in Illinois. Though not named, the filing makes it clear that “Public Official A” is Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan.

Exelon also finds itself at the centre of another ongoing investigation by the United States Securities and Exchange Commission on charges of corruption related to lobbying for state subsidies and special treatment of nuclear power plants.

For these utilities and their political allies, environmental rhetoric touting nuclear as a clean energy solution provides a thin veneer over tried-and-true dirty politics designed to preserve entrenched political and economic power. It is the latest in a long history of strategies that the industry has used to justify hefty investments in its uncompetitive energy sources.

Their ability to get the public to pay higher costs in order to maintain the profitability of nuclear power plants despite renewable energy sources becoming cheaper all the time — all while mobilizing the language of climate mitigation — testifies to their growing power.

## Conclusion

The political and economic power of electricity utilities is a critical factor influencing the prospects for achieving rapid emis-

sions reductions. In a number of contexts, utilities are positioning themselves as leaders on climate action even while working against the most effective and efficient reforms to the energy system.

A specific target has been renewable energy sources, especially when they are not controlled by utilities. Entergy Corporation, for example, has been fighting “competition from other companies or homeowners trying to generate their own power from the sun.”<sup>20</sup> But the opposition to renewables is more general, because they represent a threat to the vested interests of utility companies.

Under capitalism, these companies have strong financial motivations to operate their existing fleets for decades, initially to recoup the money invested and then for profit. Achieving rapid system change of the type necessary to avert climate disaster will require restructuring not only energy generation, but also the political economic system that sustains the power of these. Democratic control over utilities is an essential first step.

Without such actions, broad calls for “climate action” or declarations of climate emergency risk providing further opportunities for powerful private energy incumbents to justify greater subsidy of undesirable energy technologies. ■

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## Death-by-Incarceration for Children: Ending Michigan's Inhumane Policy

By Efrén Paredes, Jr.

NEARLY A DECADE after the U.S. Supreme Court issued its landmark *Miller v. Alabama* ruling which forbids mandatory life without parole (LWOP) sentences for people convicted of homicide when they were minors, Michigan shamefully leads the nation as the state with the largest number of people still serving the extreme sentence.

In 2012 the nation's high court ruled that trial courts now had discretion whether to impose a LWOP or term-of-year sentence in cases. Previously the only option Michigan courts had when sentencing a juvenile convicted of certain homicide offenses was LWOP.

The decision meant the nationwide cases of all 2500 people sentenced to LWOP when they were children ("juvenile lifers") had to be reviewed by their respective trial courts to determine whether the individuals are capable of change and rehabilitation.

The U.S. Supreme Court held that only rare juvenile offenders who are permanently incorrigible, wholly incapable of change, and for whom rehabilitation is impossible for the remainder of their lives can receive LWOP sentences. The court recognized the robust body of evidence that reflects children possess an enormous capacity for change and rehabilitation.

In Michigan juvenile offenders who can demonstrate they have the capacity for change and rehabilitation are entitled to receive term-of-year sentences with minimum terms ranging between 25 and 40 years (pursuant to MCL 769.25a).

Of the 367 cases of people in Michigan originally sentenced to LWOP when they were children, 250 have been resentenced. The overwhelming majority have received term-of-year sentences averaging 31 years and only six percent have received LWOP sentences again. Approximately 127 juvenile lifers still await to have their cases reviewed.

### Appellate Courts Intervene

This year the Michigan Supreme Court and Michigan Court of Appeals have vacated

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the sentences of three of the 18 juvenile lifers who had been resentenced to LWOP. The primary reason appellate courts have cited for vacating the LWOP sentences is that trial courts provided no evidence to substantiate that the juvenile lifers are permanently incorrigible.

The most recent case was vacated by the Michigan Supreme Court on November 4, 2021. The appellate rulings held that the trial court judges in all three cases misapplied U.S. Supreme Court and Michigan Supreme Court precedent and abused their discretion when reimposing LWOP sentences. Several other juvenile lifer cases are also pending in the appellate courts.

The Michigan appellate court rulings this year have been a response to trial court judges who have proven incapable of fairly reviewing and applying the law to juvenile lifer cases. They have betrayed the rule of law and their oath of office. Their decisions have been fundamentally unfair and fallen outside the range of reasonable and principled outcomes.

A 2016 dissenting opinion penned by the late conservative U.S. Supreme Court associate justice Antonin Scalia conceded that the requirements delineated by the nation's high court to sentence a juvenile offender to LWOP "make imposition of that severe sanction a practical impossibility."

### COVID-19 In Carceral Facilities

In the nine-and-a-half years since the *Miller v. Alabama* court ruling seven juvenile lifers have died while awaiting resentencing hearings. One of them died of COVID-19 last year a month before his release date.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly complicated the campaign for juvenile lifers to be released and presents a persistently grave danger to their safety. To date an astonishing 82% of the entire Michigan prison population — 27,005 total — have contracted COVID-19. One hundred forty-five of them have succumbed to the infection.

The largest clusters of COVID-19 have occurred inside the nation's prisons. Overcrowded housing units, eating in congested cafeteria-style dining halls, and using the same unsanitary bathroom and shower areas have transformed prisons into microbe factories and biological contagion tinderboxes.

The majority of juvenile lifers have already spent decades behind bars. Keeping them incarcerated is endangering their lives and putting them at a tremendous risk of perpetual exposure to COVID-19 in an environment from which they are unable to protect or extricate themselves.

As prosecutors continue filing frivolous motions seeking LWOP sentences against juvenile offenders, and judges persist delaying resentencing hearings, it can potentially transform LWOP sentences into death sentences — a sentence not allowed under Michigan law.

### Call for Basic Decency

Any parent or reasonable adult understands that children are not miniature adults, nor do they understand the long-term consequences of their actions. This applies to both positive and negative behavior. They figure out their way through life by trial and error which can sometimes result in making reckless decisions.

Research shows that imposing extreme sentences on children is an ineffective deterrent to crime or repairing the harm it causes. Everyone agrees that youthful offenders deserve accountability. However, a fair and principled approach to justice requires ensuring the punishment is proportional to the offender. This is best accomplished by utilizing the juvenile legal system, which since its inception in 1899 has considered the unique characteristics of children when weighing the consequences of their actions.

Condemning people to die in prison for crimes they committed when they were children ignores the human potential to change and the concept of redemption. It also engenders a throw-away culture that permits the state-sanctioned disposability of human life. Espousing this draconian position makes the legal system no better than the criminal actions it is designed to deter.

According to her article published in the *Fordham Urban Law Journal* titled, "Forgiveness and Public Trust," author Linda Ross Meyer writes:

*"[P]eople do not exist in an eternal moment ... [they] are constantly changing their minds, projecting new actions into the world, learning and growing. We cannot reduce them to one*

*continued on page 13*

## The Persistence of Racism

# Why Critical Race Theory Is Important By Malik Miah

WHO WOULD EVER think that the issue of public education — aside from masks — in the time of a pandemic would be one of the central issues for voters in Virginia, New Jersey, and many other states?

Commentators and analysts say it's because "parents seek more control" of their children's education, especially when it discusses race and racism. It's led to some parents calling for bans of books by prominent authors including Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

The attack on "Critical Race Theory" is fraudulent. The real issue, as every Black person knows, is not about democratizing public education. It is about race and racism, reflecting the long history of racial and national oppression of Black people.

How many indignant white parents can explain what the theory is, and how they've lost control of their kids' educations? Previous dog whistles about "welfare queens" or "law and order" or some other manufactured "cultural" issue were used to target the most oppressed peoples of the country. Racial wedging has gone on for 240 years.

Critical Race Theory is not the real issue, but it's still an important discussion to have about racial awakening and the role of racism in politics — the past, the present and the future.

### CRT is Realism

Two authors, Claire Suddath and Shera Avi-Yonah, concisely explain that Critical Race Theory (CRT) "proposes that any analysis of American society must take into account its history of racism and the role race has played in shaping attitudes and institutions [including] the ways policies, procedures and institutions work to perpetuate racial inequity even in the absence of personal racial animus." ("How Critical Race Theory Became a Political Target," Bloomberg Equality online, October 2, 2021)

They cite as an example the well-known history of redlining African Americans in perpetuating poverty.

CRT is realism, not pessimism or anti-white. Its critique of the system is true. One could remark that CRT itself helps us understand why any public school teaching

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about racism comes under such vicious, lying attacks.

The radical reforms won in the 1960s with the victory of the civil rights revolution that smashed the Jim Crow system in the South and its extension to the rest of the country as seen in employment, education and housing policies, led to immediate white backlash.

The primary beneficiaries of the changes were the Black middle class. Many more African Americans were able to attend top-notch universities, buy homes in once all-white neighborhoods and get skilled trades jobs in industries.

This was a break from the pattern of 200 years where the most skilled and educated Black people were denied these options.

The 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights and Voting Rights laws were adopted by Congress. Legally speaking, Black people then were to be treated as equal and full citizens, not segregated into urban ghettos and not denied entrance into the best public schools and colleges. But further progress did not happen as hoped.

### Myth and Backlash

Just as there is a myth of the immigrant "melting pot," there is a myth of the colorblind "American" citizen.

The white backlash (a common theme in history) has eroded or taken back the most significant changes from voting rights to desegregation and housing opportunities.

Public schools remain segregated in practice. Nor did the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president in 2008 lead to a "post-racial" society. It led instead to Donald Trump — a bigot, misogynist and supporter of white supremacy.

Proponents of Critical Race Theory in academia for more than 30 years have

explained that racism is systemic in the laws and how the positive reforms won after the 1960s could and were eroded precisely because racism is permanent within the system founded and codified in the United States Constitution. They explain how civil rights are eroded by the laws and the existing system, but they do not have an alternative system to replace it.

It seems a defeatist vision, which is why longtime defenders of civil rights argue that CRT is also a pessimistic vision. Why continue to fight to change laws that discriminate if it doesn't matter in the long run?

Of course, none of that is what the far right and the Republican Party are talking about. They are demonizing CRT to convince mostly whites of all social economic classes to support the white supremacist "replacement theory" that black and brown immigrants are coming here to make whites a minority and lose their advantages.

At school board meeting and racist demonstrations at schools around the country, CRT is an epithet. It is presented as a threat to white children. The very idea that racism permeates every aspect of U.S. history and society is deemed a Big Lie.

### Founders of CRT

Who developed the theory, and why?

Derrick Bell, who died in 2011, explored the weakness of the civil rights legislation and laws won in the past. He said in every case, white backlash occurred that led to civil rights retreats.

Bell points to the gains after the 1865 Civil War period known as Reconstruction and the vicious counterrevolution called the Redemption Era.

Kimberlé Crenshaw took the critique further with her analysis of *Intersectionality*, which means the interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, producing overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.



*Derrick Bell saw how the civil rights decisions of the 1960s did not root out the country's racism.*

In other words, Critical Race Theory, along with understanding intersectionality, is a way to fully understand the permanence of racial and national oppression under the current capitalist system.

Karl Marx analyzed capitalism and answered the question: How to end class exploitation and working-class political subordination? Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto* as an action program to “win the battle of democracy” and ultimately replace the old undemocratic system and with communism.

That theory and perspective of revolution isn’t what creators of CRT advocate or believe, including Crenshaw or Bell. But their analysis presents a strong indictment of racism and capitalism.

### Kimberlé Crenshaw

Crenshaw is a law professor at Columbia University and UCLA. She runs the African American Policy Forum, the social justice think tank she cofounded 25 years ago, and hosts a podcast on the term she coined in 1989: intersectionality.

Rita Omokha interviewed her in the July 29, 2021 *Vanity Fair*:

“Crenshaw breaks it down. ‘Critical race theory is based on the premise that race is socially constructed, yet it is real through social constructions.’ In other words, ask yourself, what is a “Black” neighborhood? Why do we call ‘the hood’ the hood? Labels like these were strategically produced by American policy.

“Critical race theory says the idea of a Black person — who I am in this country — is a legal concept. ‘Our enslavability was a marker of our degradation,’ Crenshaw explains. ‘And our degradation was a marker of the fact that we could never be part of this country. Our Supreme Court said this’ — in the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* ruling of 1857 — ‘and it wasn’t a close decision.’”

Crenshaw explained that the concept of CRT was to understand the laws after the post-civil rights revolution and their impact on African Americans. The key word, she said, is critical thinking.

“In 1989, during her third year as a law professor, Crenshaw — alongside four thought leaders, two white allies, and three organizers — introduced the term at a workshop. The label was happenstance. ‘We were critically engaging law but with a focus on race,’ she says, recalling a brainstorm session.

“‘So, we wanted critical to be in it, race to be in it. And we put theory in to signify that we

weren’t just looking at civil rights practice. It was how to think, how to see, how to read, how to grapple with how law has created and sustained race — our particular kind of race and racism — in American society.”

Rita Omokha writes:

“What those on the right describe as a threat to democracy in fact promotes equity. It’s how we’ve become, historically, who we’ve been — how the fiction of race is made real... ‘You cannot fix a problem you cannot name,’ Crenshaw says. “You cannot address a history that you’re unwilling to learn.”

Critical race theory pays attention to the ripple effects of policy decisions, asking “the kinds of questions the other side doesn’t want us to ask because it wants us to be happy with the contemporary distribution of opportunity,” Crenshaw says.

Crenshaw and her co-editors Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas noted, in the Introduction to the 1995

anthology, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, that attacks on CRT have conveniently overlooked the fact that not all its founding scholars are Black. They began publishing work in legal journals that furthered the discourse around race, power, and law.

“I don’t think this is about a real difference in opinion, nor is it a debate that is winnable,” Crenshaw says. “This is about a weapon they’re using to hold on to power.”

### Derrick Bell

“The man behind critical race theory,” by Jelani Cobb appears in the September 20, 2021 issue of *The New Yorker*.

“Bell,” Cobb writes, “spent the second half of his career as an academic and, over time, he came to recognize that other decisions in landmark civil-rights cases were of limited practical impact.

“He drew an unsettling conclusion: racism is so deeply rooted in the makeup of American society that it has been able to reassert itself after each successive wave of reform aimed at eliminating it. Racism, he began to argue, is permanent.

“His ideas proved foundational to a body of thought that, in the nineteen-eighties, came to be known as critical race theory. After more than a quarter of a century, there is an extensive academic field of literature cataloguing C.R.T.’s insights into the contradictions of antidiscrimination law and the complexities of legal advocacy for social justice.”

Cobb continued that Bell, Harvard Law’s

first Black tenured professor, developed an analysis “that racial progress had occurred mainly when it aligned with white interests — beginning with emancipation, which, he noted, came about as a prerequisite for saving the Union.

“Between 1954 and 1968, the civil-rights movement brought about changes that were thought of as a second Reconstruction. King’s death was a devastating loss, but hope persisted that a broader vista of possibilities for Black people and for the nation lay ahead.”

Yet, within a few years, as volatile conflicts over affirmative action and school busing arose, those victories began to look less like an antidote than like a treatment for an ailment whose worst symptoms can be temporarily alleviated but which cannot be cured.

“Bell was ahead of many others in reaching this conclusion. If the civil-rights movement had been a second Reconstruction, it was worth remembering that the first one had ended in the

## The Horror of Oxford

THE HORROR OF the Oxford, Michigan high school mass shooting has highlighted the brutal contradictions of the current legal system. As a conservative *Detroit News* columnist Nolan Finley wrote of the 15-year-old shooter, “Ethan Crumbley, as charged, is a stone-cold killer... He is despicable. He is evil. He’s also something else: a child.”

Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald has charged Ethan Crumbley with four counts of first-degree murder, each carrying mandatory life without parole sentences, as well as other crimes include one “terrorism” (?) count. Although she “likely felt she had little choice in charging Ethan as an adult,” Finley writes, there was an alternative “blended sentence option that would allow Ethan to be prosecuted in the juvenile system and, if found guilty, imprisoned in a youth facility until he’s 21” when “he would be evaluated whether he’s still a risk to society. If so, he could be resentenced as an adult.”

That looks like common sense, especially as Crumbley’s parents — who bought the gun as a Christmas present, and refused to take him out of school on the day of the shooting when he had displayed alarming behavior — are charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter. Deborah La Belle of the ACLU’s Juvenile Justice Project posed the pertinent question: “If you’re going to charge the parents, how do you not recognize that he’s a child?” (Nolan Finley, “A child killer, perhaps. But still a child,” *Detroit News and Free Press*, Sunday, December 5, 2021)

fiery purges of the so-called Redemption era...

"Bell seemed to have found himself in a position akin to Thomas Paine's: he'd been both a participant in a revolution and a witness to the events that revealed the limitations of its achievements."

After the *Bakke* ruling by the Supreme Court that ruled quotas or concrete goals were illegal as tools to end historical racism, Bell concluded it is important to understand while many Black elites and white liberals see fighting racism with reforms of the system, these reforms cannot last because the legal system will not allow it.

Laws will be changed to accommodate white power. The gutting of voting right by the Supreme Court in 2013 reversing 50 years of precedent shows that. Jelani Cobb notes that's exactly what's happened since Trumpism took over the Republican Party:

"(C)onservatives have been waging war on a wide-ranging set of claims that they wrongly ascribe to critical race theory, while barely mentioning the body of scholarship behind it or even Bell's name.

"As Christopher F. Rufo, an activist who launched the recent crusade, said on Twitter, the goal from the start was to distort the idea into an absurdist touchstone... Accordingly, CRT has been defined as Black-supremacist racism, false history, and the terrible apotheosis of wokeness."

Patricia Williams, one of the key scholars

of the CRT canon, refers to the ongoing mischaracterization as "definitional theft."

### What Solutions?

Understanding what CRT is, and isn't, is crucial to taking on racist attacks on Black people. Ironically, CRT has become a fixation of conservatives despite the fact that some of its sharpest critiques were directed at the ultimate failings of liberalism, beginning with Bell's own early involvement with one of its most heralded achievements — the defeat of legal segregation.

Derrick Bell was less focused on white politicians curtailing discussions of race in public schools than that they did so in conjunction with a larger effort to shore up the political structures that disadvantage African Americans.

During the civil rights struggles before the end of Jim Crow legal segregation, there was sharp debate among Black leaders and militants about how to end racism and bring freedom and equality. In the 1960s the two main voices were Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

King advocated that Black people fully integrate into U.S. society and believed African Americans would eventually become full citizens in word and deed.

His closest associates after his death in 1968 continued to believe that capitalist society could be reformed, and equality won

under the "free market" system. They created a new middle class that is the largest and most powerful in Black history.

Yet the vast majority of working-class Black people made little progress; the wealth gap remains as wide as ever, especially after the 2008 housing and financial crash.

Malcolm X, before he was assassinated in 1965, had come to the conclusion the problem was the system. He advocated more radical solutions than legal equality.

Malcolm was the father of the Black Power militancy of the late 1960s. Many African Americans made demands beyond civil rights, including calling for anti-capitalist solutions. These militants created all-Black groups to fight racism, but many also saw the need to build alliances with white allies in the fight against racism and the capitalist system.

Supporters of Critical Race Theory, advanced a theory that Marxists and Black revolutionaries have always explained. The convergence is that race and racism are man-made social constructions that only can be changed and crushed through revolution.

It begins with pressing for school education to tell the truth about settler colonialism as the basis of the United States. While the legal term "genocide" did not exist until after World War II, what white English settlers did to the native tribes was genocide and ethnic cleansing.

Asians were excluded in the late 1800s and African slaves and their descendants were never seen as human, much less as equal citizens even after the end of slavery.

Supremacist ideology is racism. Donald Trump was not the leader of that ideology. He is a 21st century mouthpiece.

Attacking CRT is no different than calling civil rights organizations like the NAACP "communist" — a diversion from facing the real history of the country.

The civil-rights movement had been based on the premise that the American system could be made to live up to the creed of equality prescribed in its founding documents. But Derrick Bell had begun to think that the system was working exactly as it was intended — to erode and roll back racial progress.

How to end that cycle, Bell did not answer. From Bell to Crenshaw and a new school of academics who support CRT, the solution may not be at hand, but the understanding is clear: every step forward in civil rights leads to a backlash that can only be defeated by a radical political economic revolutionary movement.

Critical Race Theory and intersectionality are valuable concepts to better understand issues of race, gender, class and social justice. But full equality and freedom for African Americans is not possible until a new socialist economic system is constructed. ■

## Ending Michigan's Inhumane Policy — continued from page 10

moment only, to one crime or one good deed."

### Legislative Action Needed

Youthful offenders should be afforded the opportunity to demonstrate they have been rehabilitated and can make better choices. And when they do they should be allowed a second chance at freedom, citizenship and life.

Children under the laws of our state are disallowed from voting, purchasing tobacco or alcoholic beverages, or being married without the consent of their parents — all this is largely due to their immaturity and limited life experience. As one often quoted court opinion states, "[i]t seems inconsistent that one be denied the fruits of the tree of the law, yet subjected to all of its thorns."

In Michigan children under the age of 18 aren't even allowed to visit anyone in prison without an adult, but the law allows them to be caged there for the rest of their lives. This is woefully illogical and incongruent with common sense.

Said differently, a child too immature to do lawful activities is too immature to be subjected to extreme punishment for committing an unlawful act.

Before the *Miller v. Alabama* ruling, six states prohibited LWOP sentences for children. Since that time 25 additional states

have abandoned the practice or have no juvenile offenders serving the sentence in their states.

As the nation is learning more about the advancements in the study of brain and behavioral development in children it is trending away from extreme punishment for juvenile offenders which reflects the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a civilized society.

Michigan lawmakers need to pass legislation which bans LWOP sentences for juvenile offenders. Allowing LWOP sentences to remain on the menu of punitive options is empowering rightwing activist judges to continue making a mockery of the criminal legal system by defying higher court rulings and legislating from the bench.

It's long overdue that lawmakers embrace forward-thinking legal policies that focus on healing and rehabilitation. They must answer the call to join the 31 other states that have rejected the dark fatalism of sentencing juvenile offenders to be banished to penal tombs.

To join the chorus of voices urging Michigan lawmakers to pass legislation to abolish LWOP sentences for juvenile offenders and support other needed prison reforms readers are urged to sign the Support Michigan Prison Reform online petition by visiting <http://Bitly.com/MichPR>. ■

## Texas in Myth and History By Dick J. Reavis

### Forget the Alamo

The Rise and Fall of an American Myth

By Bryan Burrough, Chris Tomlinson  
and Jason Stanford

Penguin Books, 2021, 386 pages, \$32 hardcover.

THE HOLIEST PLACE in Texas is the Alamo, a former Spanish mission in today's downtown San Antonio. The site of an 1836 battle between Mexican forces and Texan rebels, it's the state's most-visited tourist site. A plainspoken new book, *Forget the Alamo*, examines that conflict and the lives of its principals.

Three of the some 200 men who died at the Alamo on March 6, 1836 — William Barrett Travis, Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, along with a non-combatant, Stephen F. Austin, the land promoter who colonized Texas with white people — are today revered as the founding fathers of the Republic of Texas.

In a mandatory, year-long state history course, every seventh-grader in Texas is taught that these whites (called "Anglos" in the local vernacular) were and are heroes. Hollywood has probably contributed even more to the myth that *Forget* calls the Heroic Anglo Narrative of Texas.

The first of a dozen Alamo movies was *Martyrs of the Alamo*, produced by D.W. Griffith in 1915 following his *Birth of a Nation*, Hollywood's first blockbuster, which revived the Ku Klux Klan. The most popular Hollywood film was probably *The Alamo*, produced and directed in 1960 by John Wayne, who also played the role of Crockett. But today, amidst a national controversy over Critical Race Theory, the supposed heroism of the founders and martyrs of the Republic is under challenge.

All the signs of a long-running controversy are in place. Texas Governor Greg Abbot, notorious for promoting a measure to ban abortions, has already laid on down the law on Twitter: "Stop political correctness in our schools. ... Texas schoolchildren should be taught that Alamo heroes were 'Heroic.'"

*Forget* was written by three figures with chops in the state: an author, Bryan Burrough; a newspaper columnist, Chris Tomlin-

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son; and a political consultant, Jason Stanford. The content of their book can be divided into roughly four themes: slavery, the Alamo battle, its historiography, and the shrine's absurd place in current events. But its linkage of slavery and Texas is what packs a wallop.

### Basic History

To comprehend the impact of *Forget*, a reader needs to know only the barest facts of Texas history. The Anglo colonization of Texas began in 1821, shortly after Mexico won its independence from Spain. *Forget* argues that Austin's land schemes fell into plots by Americans to expand the Cotton Kingdom westward.

"Nothing is wanted but money and negroes are necessary to make it," Austin, a former Missouri legislator, told his backers. For 15 years, while Texas was still part of the Mexican state of Coahuila, Austin lobbied with dozens of heads of state, congresses and legislatures to exempt or ignore Mexico's *de jure* prohibition of slavery.

Initially he persuaded Mexican authorities to honor paperwork showing that Texas slaves were indentured servants, under contract — for as many as 60 years! The Mexicans accepted the claim because they had legalized peonage under a similar scheme.

Under a subsequent agreement, planters were allowed to import slaves from the United States with the provision that any children born in Texas would be free. But subsequent censuses indicated that no such children were born.

Anglo colonists and Texans of Mexican descent (called "Latins" or "Latinos" in the local vernacular), rose in arms as early as 1834, ostensibly in support of Mexico's 1824 Constitution, which did not mention slavery.

Alarmed, Mexican authorities in Saltillo arrested Austin and carried him to prison in Mexico City, where he remained for the rest of the year. But by then, volunteers from militias in the American slave states had begun trickling into Texas.

Before another year had passed, Mexico and Texas were engaged in a full-fledged if brief war. The Texans named Sam Houston, a former U.S. Army general and governor of Tennessee, as their commander in chief.

Three notorious 1836 events, two of them poignant defeats, led to a decisive and

nearly split-second rebel victory. On March 6, after a 12-day siege, troops commanded by general Antonio López de Santa Anna, a past and future president of Mexico, killed and/or executed about some 200 rebels who were holed-up in the Alamo and burned their bodies.

As the Mexican forces marched toward the Gulf Coast three weeks later, he ordered the execution of some 320 rebel prisoners of war held at Goliad, 90 miles east of San Antonio. Among those killed was their commander Jim Fannin, 32, of Georgia, a slave-trader and smuggler who specialized in African stock.

On April 21, Texans led by Houston, shouting "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" swooped down and massacred Mexican troops who were encamped near the city today bearing his name. They captured Santa Anna and forced him to sign a treaty granting independence to Texas.

Although the rebel leaders wanted Texas to become an American state, Abolitionists blocked the move in Congress. So the rebels declared a republic that upheld slavery, outlawed manumission, and forbade free Blacks to remain within its borders. Their Republic, however, was not much more than a government-in-waiting-for-annexation, bankrupt from its start to its finish.

Texas Latinos were, and are, perplexed by the creation of the Republic. Though nearly a dozen Latinos were felled at the Alamo and no doubt more at Goliad, *Forget* reports that "many Anglos suspected that Tejanos sympathized with Mexico. In the months after San Jacinto, they forcibly expelled them from the towns of Victoria and Goliad, taking their homes and stealing their livestock."

Contemporary Latinos whom the book's authors interviewed said that they avoid the subject whenever possible.

### Slavery, Bribery, Profit

Most of *Forget's* material on slavery is mined from scholarship, dating to *Empire for Slavery*, a 1989 work by noted Texas historian Randolph B. Campbell. But both the latest work *Forget* and a 2020 account of Austin's diplomacy, *South to Freedom*, share an unfortunate generosity in the treatment accorded Texas-Mexican negotiations. They take Mexican abolitionism at face value.



“For Mexicans, newly freed from Spanish oppression, abolishing slavery was a moral issue. For the American colonists, it was an issue of wealth creation” *Forget’s* authors say.



Yet Mexico, like Spain before it, needed to populate its northern reaches. Neither *Forget* nor *Freedom* allege bribery or legislative horse trading as a motive for the creation of loopholes in Mexican law. It’s likely that neither was ever recorded, but that doesn’t mean that it didn’t happen.

If Austin was a lobbyist for slavery, the reputations of the leading defenders of the Alamo don’t come away much better in *Forget*. William Barrett Travis, though only 26, had been named as the Alamo’s commander. An Alabama newspaperman who in 1831 abandoned a wife and child for Texas, *Forget’s* authors say that he “was a pompous, racist agitator and syphilitic.”

While the troops of the rag-tag regular Texas army obeyed him, the Alamo’s volunteers recognized Bowie as their chief instead. With him to the Alamo, Travis brought a slave, known only as Joe. When the mission fell, the Mexicans captured Joe and two of Bowie’s slaves whose names are unknown. After interrogating them, the Mexicans turned them loose.

Jim Bowie is often noted even today as the designer of a distinctive, wide-bladed knife. He settled in Texas in 1828. In his home state Louisiana, he had been a slave trader who, according to *Forget*, expanded his human holdings by “laundering” them by means that are stunning even by the standards of their era.

The United States had outlawed slave imports in 1808, but when its agents ran across smuggled slaves, rather than freeing them, they sold them at federal auctions. Between 1816 and 1820, pirates Jean and Pierre Lafitte were smuggling slaves from Cuba and selling them at cut-rate prices at Galveston on the Texas coast.

Bowie and two brothers, *Forget* reports, “signed on as middlemen, driving groups of emaciated, enslaved Black people into Louisiana. At the border they cloaked themselves as customs officers, earning a reward of half their purchase price. Their costs halved, they then bought their own slaves at auction, giv-

ing them legal title to resell them. The profits were huge.”

Only the third fabled hero of the Alamo, Davy Crockett, gets off without censure in *Forget*. He was a folk hero who fled to Texas after losing an 1835 Congressional election in his home state, Tennessee. He didn’t join the Texas rebellion until weeks before his demise.

### Making the Myth

*Forget’s* second thrust is a reworking of the military events of 1836. According to the received myth, when with his sword Col. Travis drew a line in the sand and asked his

troops to step across it if they were willing to fight to the death, all of them did — and they died as they’d promised.

The authors admit that Travis was a combat casualty but Bowie was bedridden with typhoid when the Mexicans attacked, and according to some Mexican accounts, Crockett was executed shortly afterward with some two dozen other survivors.

A third section of *Forget* examines the historiography of the Alamo and its restorations. In the late 19th century, Texas practically forgot the Alamo. “When the battle’s fiftieth anniversary arrived in 1886,” *Forget* notes, there was no commemoration, no services, no fireworks, no nothing, nor the slightest impulse toward historical preservation.”

Commercial considerations had taken the place of reverence. Among other things, a building from which most of the Alamo defenders battled, known as the Long Barracks, had been turned into a grocery store.

That changed in 1905 after a San Antonio socialite, Clara Driscoll, met Adina De Zavala, a granddaughter of Lorenzo de Zavala, the first vice-president of the Republic. De Zavala collected writings and lectured about San Antonio’s half-dozen Spanish missions and had already formed a small group dedicated to their celebration.

Driscoll brought an Anglo name, Alamo-centrism and personal wealth to the effort, soon becoming a power in the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, formed as a social club in Galveston. At her prodding the state entrusted Alamo restoration and management to the DRT.

Against De Zavala’s will, Driscoll’s wish dictated that the attractive mission chapel, instead of the drab, blockish Long Barracks, be billed as its centerpiece. Thanks to her restoration biases, most Texans also do not know that when they walk the Alamo’s grounds, they tread on the unmarked burials of Indians who died a century before the place became a battleground.

The final section of *Forget* is material for

comedy. The faded British musician Phil Collins developed an Alamo obsession at the age of five, after seeing the Walt Disney series “Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier.” In 2004 he began collecting Alamo artifacts.

“Collins soon wanted to own just about anything that could even remotely be connected with the Alamo,” says *Forget*. Over the next ten years he amassed a collection perhaps worth millions of dollars. But “According to a dozen prominent antiquities collectors and archaeologists, not to mention the Alamo’s longtime official historian, the Collins collection is not what it’s cracked up to be.”

In 2014 the musician donated it to the General Land Office of Texas in exchange for a promise that within seven years, it would house it in a museum on the Alamo grounds. The Land Office had ousted the DRT as caretaker of the shrine and soon produced a \$450 million plan to make “reimagine” the Alamo as a “world-class attraction.”

The plan included a museum for the Collins collection and called for the expansion of the Alamo’s footprint. One of its proposed changes was moving a 60-foot tall cenotaph, or empty grave for the martyrs, to a location 500 feet away.

Land Office commissioner George P. Bush, a son of Jeb who had launched a political career in Texas, soon faced demonstrations by militiamen, armed and wearing camouflage — in downtown San Antonio — who swore that the monument would be moved only over their dead bodies.

Bush then repudiated the plan, having already alienated both the militiamen and the planned restoration. Time is running out and the Collins museum is in limbo.

The closing line of *Forget* says that we “need to forget what we learned about the Alamo, embrace the truth, and celebrate all Texans.”

That notion is far-fetched today. The Alamo legend is too embedded in Texas lore to overcome the nostalgia of an aging generation of Anglos who as children took Hollywood history for truth or who attended Texas schools. But the route to forgetting is taking shape.

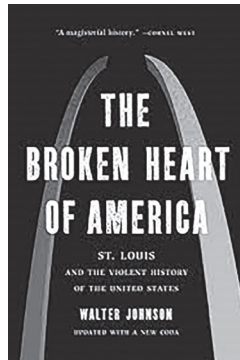
Someday, thanks to *Forget* and scholarly works, the city of Austin and its county, Travis, will probably change their names. Divining future monikers for trendy Austin is worthy of a parlor game.

Will Austin revert to Waterloo, its original name, or in recognition of its over-sweetened real estate market, be called Gentry or Upsell instead? Or maybe Willieopolis, after its pot-smoking balladeer? Since he has lately bought properties across Texas and says he’s now living in Austin, where he is building a Tesla factory, maybe the town’s name should be Elonville, or as wiseacres are already calling it, Musklandia. ■

# A City's History and Racial Capitalism By David Helps

## The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States

By Walter Johnson  
Basic Books, 2020, \$19.99 paperback.



ON JUNE, 2020 a middle-aged white couple in St. Louis greeted Black Lives Matter protesters on their street by brandishing firearms. The images became instantly iconic: neither was wearing shoes, he holding an AR-15, she waving a semiautomatic pistol — sometimes at his head — outside their palatial mansion in a gated section of St. Louis' Central West End.

The couple was soon identified as Mark and Patricia McCloskey, two highly litigious personal injury lawyers. Despite their nouveau riche occupation and high-powered weaponry, that day the McCloskeys shared a paranoid fantasy with propertied whites of centuries past: that of the slave revolt.

"They were going to kill us," Patricia told Sean Hannity on Fox News, certain that the mob would have set fire to the home, or else murder the owners and claim it for themselves. "They pointed to different rooms and said, 'that's gonna be my bedroom... I'm gonna be taking a shower in that room...'"

### Right Place for Wrong Reasons

In *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*, released last year and now out in paperback, Harvard historian and Missouri native Walter Johnson traces the history of St. Louis from its emergence as a fur-trade outpost in the early 1900s to the 2014 uprising in Ferguson.

Johnson argues that Americans' understanding of racism focuses too narrowly on slavery and its legacies, a counterintuitive claim for a celebrated historian of slavery. Rather, white supremacy is rooted in the capture of Black resources and the containment of Black people, as much as labor exploitation associated with chattel slavery.

By reconstructing a city's history, Johnson recasts U.S. history as one of racial capitalism: the fusion of "white supremacist

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ideology" with "empire, extraction, and exploitation." St. Louis is "the right place for all the wrong reasons," Johnson observes. Here the imperatives of westward expansion, capitalist growth and racial ordering converged.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition

created the blueprint for what Johnson calls "Black removalism." A year after the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map the newly acquired lands that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico through present-day Montana.

Euro-American dependence on Indigenous knowledge and hospitality — on "the choreography of gift giving and bargaining" — gave way to a regime of elimination. Most of the former French colony became the Missouri Territory, with Lewis and Clark each having a chance to serve as governor.

Their influence was never confined to the frontier, however. After Missouri became a state in 1820, Clark became the federal government's first Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Over more than a decade, he negotiated treaties that forced 81,000 Indigenous people off their land and established a culture of settler violence emanating from the frontier.

Federal treaties established new lines on the map but it was capitalist expansion that made settler sovereignty a reality. St. Louis's population tripled between 1810 and 1820 as enterprising white men sought commercial opportunities. Among them was Thomas Hart Benton, a slaveholding land speculator and one of Missouri's inaugural senators.

In Washington, Benton fought to subsidize land purchases and later the transcontinental railroad. You'll find him at St. Louis's Lafayette Park — carved in bronze and clad in a Roman toga, eyes forever pointed westward.

After statehood, legislators turned the "practices of removal and containment" toward Black Missourians. In 1847, Missouri im-

posed a \$1000 bond on Black "immigrants," treating them like Indigenous persons: trapped somewhere between foreigners and citizens as codified by the 1831 *Cherokee v. Georgia* Supreme Court decision.

### No Rights to Respect

A decade later, the Supreme Court ruled on Black people's contested legal status. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* which originated in St. Louis's federal court, Chief Justice Roger Taney held that Black people "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." The Founders of the Republic could never have intended for the "African race" to be on equal footing with the white man, Taney insisted.

Taney's objections to equal rights revealed an obsession with Black mobility, political organization and armed struggle: that Blacks might travel "without pass or passport," would "hold meetings upon political affairs," or "keep and carry arms wherever they went."

It would take the Civil War to overturn whites-only citizenship. Enslaved people fled the Confederacy for border states like Missouri in what W. E. B. Du Bois later correctly recounted as a "general strike." St. Louis's Black population increased 600 percent after 1860.

Black Missourians also fought for full social citizenship based on reparations and greater economic rights for all. St. Louis established some of the first public schools for Black students west of the Mississippi, including Toussaint L'Ouverture Elementary School, named for the once-enslaved hero of the Haitian Revolution.

After 1870, however, moderates in the Republican Party became more concerned with restoring suffrage to ex-Confederates than with protecting Black citizenship, let alone expanding its meaning. Following the disputed presidential election of 1876, Republicans made a backroom compromise which included withdrawing federal troops from the South. The revolution that was Reconstruction gave way to "the dictatorship of property," in Du Bois' trenchant phrase.

The U.S. federal army of liberation that safeguarded Black civil rights in the former Confederacy also massacred Indigenous people and cleared the way for the trans-

continental railroad. Better known for his order to provide the formerly enslaved with “forty acres and a mule,” William Tecumseh Sherman also promised president Grant that “a few thieving, ragged Indians” would not stop national (and industrial) “progress.”

### **Wages of Whiteness**

With the “railroadization of the West,” St. Louis grew to nearly 600,000 people by 1900. The following year, a residential segregation ordinance passed by popular vote.

In 1904, St. Louis marked the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase by hosting the World’s Fair. With exhibits on “primitive” cultures, daily re-enactments of frontier battles and segregated restaurants, the fair helped crystallize white imperial masculinity — a powerful “solvent” in a city where the majority of workers were of European immigrant stock.

This wages of whiteness superseded class solidarity. On May 28, 1917, whites began to attack Black residents of East St. Louis, just across the Mississippi River in Illinois. For over a month, whites of all classes assaulted Blacks on streetcars, shot them in broad daylight and torched their homes. Hours before, a well-to-do white lawyer had suggested that Black migrants might steer clear of East St. Louis if the next family had to watch their house burn down.

*The Broken Heart of America*, however, isn’t primarily an account of Black and Indigenous victimhood. Johnson lays much of the blame with the radical agitators of St. Louis for failing to recognize the dynamism of white supremacy.

During a 1933 strike at the Funsten Nut factory, the largest employer of Black women in St. Louis at the time, Black and white Communist Party members marched alongside the nutpickers, helping to win major employer concessions once the police realized they couldn’t jail them all.

The alliance didn’t last, however. Once the strike ended, labor radicals failed to see that Black women’s militance developed from their broader experiences with racism and sexism, particularly housing discrimination.

Racism was not just an attitudinal obstacle to working-class unity. Rather, racial difference shaped capitalism in St. Louis from the very beginning. The narrow focus on racism as a barrier to shop-floor solidarity continues to hinder the left: the old “Negro question” warmed over.

A myopic focus on the workplace also meant that labor organizers failed to anticipate the most urgent threat to working-class Blacks in the immediate postwar decades: urban renewal programs.

“Negro removal by white approval,” as St. Louis activist Ivory Perry dubbed it, would displace hundreds of thousands of families in the 1950s and 1960s. In St. Louis and

beyond, labor unions often welcomed urban renewal: either because they believed it would alleviate poverty or more selfishly for the construction jobs that inevitably came with it.

### **Colorblind Racial Blindness**

After World War II, St. Louis politicians replaced explicit references to segregation with the color-blind rhetoric of property values and blight. The city’s 1947 master plan zoned industrial sites away from white, middle-class neighborhoods and forced new “superhighways” through the ghettos. St. Louis used federal funds to raze “slums” on the Northside, one of the few areas Blacks had been able to purchase homes.

Exclusionary zoning and urban renewal left most Black families with two options. They either lived in the remaining slums where absentee landlords and predatory sellers charged more than what housing in middle-class neighborhoods cost or in poorly maintained public housing like the notorious Pruitt-Igoe.

By the late sixties, media coverage of Pruitt-Igoe made St. Louis symbolic of the national “urban crisis.” Architect Oscar Newman, a professor at Washington University of St. Louis, popularized the view that the project failed because tenants abused the property.

To test his theory, Newman wandered the gated enclaves of the Central West End (where the McCloskeys bought their mansion in 1988), concluding that the area’s “defensible space” produced residents’ feelings of security.

St. Louis implemented Newman’s theory by installing hundreds of concrete bollards over the course of two decades. Besides effectively enclosing public space, disciplining the streetscape made it easier for police to preemptively patrol Black neighborhoods.

When such architecture of exclusion fails, vigilante homeowners become the last line of defense for white wealth. “Once again,” historian Robin Kelley writes of the most recent presidential election, “an unstable ruling class drapes itself in white sheets, puts on its badge and brings out its guns.”

To some critics, the insistence that capitalism and racism are intertwined is anachronistic or even un-American. In a review obtusely titled “Is Capitalism Racist?” *The New Yorker’s* Nicholas Lemann accuses Johnson of reducing U.S. history to “variations on racial hierarchy and economic exploitation.” Lemann doubts whether such a “politically charged” book could provide “a politics for the here and now.”

From the social democratic left, historian Jefferson Cowie wonders if Johnson has written himself into a corner, creating the impression of racism and capitalism as twin towers of “an impenetrable fortress.”

It’s a story heavy on victims, “without much space to figure out how the world can be changed.”

Cowie’s review appeared in *Dissent*, where editor emeritus Michael Walzer fired off against the “racial capitalism” school of thought as last year’s antipolice rebellions reached their zenith. In the midst of an historic uprising against racism, Walzer warned against treating race as “a necessary feature of American capitalism.” The struggles for racial equality and economic justice are not the same, Walzer argued, since “capitalism won’t totter as the statues fall.”

True, removing white supremacist statues won’t guarantee racial and economic justice for all. If protesters ever tear down the statue of Thomas Hart Benton in St. Louis, capitalism will still be standing. But while racism and capitalism are not coterminous, they are, in Johnson’s phrase, “organically linked.” To understand the origin of that relationship, look to the policies of removal and extraction that have flowed from St. Louis.

At moments, Johnson does appear to conflate economic exploitation with racial control. In the early twentieth century, the neighboring city of East St. Louis received much of its revenue from licensing saloons and taking payoffs from unlicensed ones. For Johnson, this directly prefigured the police gangsterism found in Ferguson, where fines and fees made up more than 20 percent of the budget according to the Department of Justice’s 2015 investigation.

But a century ago, unlike now, East St. Louis remained overwhelmingly white. Its extortion of saloons was clearly something different from Ferguson’s systematic plunder of Black residents. To equate the two creates a mistaken impression that economic exploitation is reducible to a sweeping logic of racial control.

But *Broken Heart* is instructive precisely because overall it shows the opposite of what its critics claim to be true. Johnson is no pessimist or crank: again and again he insists that racial capitalism is dynamic but unstable, the messy product of “improvised solutions” to economic and political crises of its own making.

### **Revival of Resistance**

In *Silencing the Past*, the late Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot famously argued that the 1791 Haitian Revolution was “unthinkable” in its time — and remained unthinkable well into the 20th century.

By this Trouillot did not mean that slaveholders failed to anticipate armed revolt by enslaved people. Slaveholders imagined the signs of insurrection everywhere: they wrote the legal codes that protected the institution of slavery, whipped or sold enslaved people for learning to read, and

carefully monitored the presence of white Northerners (the “outside agitators” of their day).

Rather, what was “unthinkable” to slaveholders and white historians after, was that insurrectionary violence could be motivated by something other than revenge — the primitive drive to “burn down the house,” as Patricia McCloskey put it. In the McCloskeys’ gated community, as in the revolutionary violence of Haiti, Black people came to confront the system of racial capitalism itself.

In a year defined by the interlocking movements for Black lives, livable housing and safe work, racial capitalism appears to be in crisis once again. St. Louis’s history tells us that the national uprising that brought protesters to the McCloskeys’ gate has been decades in the making.

Beginning in the 1950s, wealthier residents and whole industries abandoned St. Louis for the suburban dream of high property values and low taxes — the logical endpoint for the ideology of propertied whiteness.

With deindustrialization and white flight, St. Louis’ population plunged from nearly 900,000 in 1950 to one-third of that today. By 1970, it joined the list of cash-strapped cities scrambling to cover budget shortfalls by subsidizing corporate redevelopment: luxury condos, stadiums, waterfront shopping.

In Ferguson, the Fortune 500 company Emerson Electric paid just \$68,000 in property taxes in 2013, while the city extracted almost \$3 million in court costs from some of its poorest residents. The following summer, Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown after stopping the teenager for walking in the street, an offense which carries a \$302 fine and for which Black people make up 95% of those charged.

If the McCloskeys put St. Louis on the 2020 election map, it’s their Congresswoman who has a chance to remake the city’s history. In August, Cori Bush, who had worked as a street medic during the Ferguson uprising, defeated a 10-term incumbent in the Democratic primary for Missouri’s 1st congressional district.

In November, Bush became Missouri’s first Black Congresswoman on a platform that included Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, tuition-free college, canceling student debt, and ending cash bail. She has called for reallocating funds from the U.S. warfare state to low-income healthcare, a demand with particular historical resonance given St. Louis’ history as an outpost of settler conquest.

Like the Black Lives Matter movement from which she comes, Bush has revived the spirit of abolition democracy. It is a broad and inclusive program to address, as Johnson writes, “lives, urban and rural, Black and white, made precarious by the disappearance

of good work and the inaccessibility of basic social support, the criminal neglect of young minds, and the imperial tragedy of hometowns where military enlistment provides the most reliable road out of town.”

### The Force of History

In the months after their armed standoff with protesters, Mark and Patricia McCloskey became minor rightwing folk heroes. As reward for standing their ground, the couple spoke at the Republican National Convention last August, parroting the claim that Democrats want to “abolish the suburbs.”

When St. Louisans marched for Black lives and forced their way down Portland Place in June 2020, Cori Bush was among them. In the couple’s RNC appearance, Mark McCloskey referred to Bush as a “Marxist

liberal activist” and a “revolutionary.”

Once again, the couple channelled the paranoia of their slaveholding forebears who failed to contain the Black insurrection they had long anticipated. He described Bush as directing “the mob” to stop at their property, “screaming, ‘you can’t stop the revolution.’”

It may be tempting to dismiss the McCloskeys’ would-be vigilantism as yet another bizarre viral episode in Trumpism’s final months. But the couple’s armed display reveals how land enclosure, white violence, and the spectre of Black revolt have long determined American politics.

The “St. Louis gun couple” may have been opportunistic Trump partisans, but they had the full force of history at their backs. ■

## Afghan Women: Always Resisting — continued from page 3

each other. Many of her public interviews denounced the U.S.-backed Karzai regime’s bringing former warlords into the government where they committed war crimes, abused civilians and continued their ties with narcotics, smuggling and criminal networks. As Joya noted in 2021: “Unfortunately, they pushed us from the frying pan into the fire as they replaced the barbaric regime of the Taliban with the misogynist warlords.” ([https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/15/afghanistan\\_taliban\\_us\\_withdrawal](https://www.democracynow.org/2021/7/15/afghanistan_taliban_us_withdrawal))

The U.S.-backed peace deal between the Ghani government and Hezb-e Islami warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, also known as “the Butcher of Kabul” for his brutalities during the 1990s warlords’ conflict, was another example of this.

For Joya, the 2016 agreement with Hekmatyar set the stage for the 2020 U.S.-led peace negotiations between the Kabul government and the Taliban in Doha.

Groups advocating for Afghan women to have a seat at the table were frustrated with the Trump administration for empowering the Taliban while delivering a setback to the causes of Afghan women over this past year.

Joya’s anti-imperial stance is inspired by other global efforts that resist settler colonialism and empire. In a recent video Malalai Joya talked about “being a Palestinian in her own country,” referring to the displacement Palestinians routinely experience as a result of ongoing dispossession of their lands and cultures.

As Prachi Patankar, co-founder of the South Asia Solidarity Initiative, has quoted Joya saying in an analysis of her activism, “The movements and uprisings in Arab countries show that the majority of people view fundamentalists as a plague. The fight against fundamentalism is a war for freedom and justice irrespective of being a Muslim, Hindu, Jew, or Christian... Afghan people are squashed between three enemies: Taliban,

fundamentalist warlords and NATO troops. If the foreign enemy leaves Afghanistan, my people would face two internal enemies, and it would be easier to fight against them” (Joya, interview by the author, email, May 2011)” (Patankar 2011, 285-86).

Joya has also built a strong coalition of progressive people consisting of women, students and the poor who have joined with her to struggle for a better future, inspired by the Arab Spring and other revolutionary movements (*ibid.*, 286).

Through pointing to these examples, we show a rich Afghan women-led resistance, from direct combat against empire to calling out the government for failing to engage in direct democracy. We also show how Afghan women have critiqued benevolent governance as a premise for militarized humanitarianism, and the collusion of fundamentalist Islamists with U.S. imperial forces.

These examples demonstrate how that occupation has always been a central focus of Afghan women’s resistance, rather than the concern of a few elitist groups. For women in Afghanistan the struggle for self-determination has always been a struggle against empire. ■

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## Reduction to Oppression By David McCarthy

### Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism

By Touré F. Reed

Verso (2020), 224 pages, \$19.95 paper.

THE MURDER OF George Floyd on May 25, 2020, added renewed vigor to long-standing debates on the left over what is to be done about racial injustice in the United States.

On May 30th, the Democratic Socialists of America in New York City agreed to cancel a planned presentation by political scientist Adolph Reed, after a statement by the DSA AFROSOCialist and Socialists of Color Caucus described his viewpoints as “reactionary, class reductionist and at best, tone deaf.”<sup>1</sup>

But the term “tone deaf” implies that there is a tune to be carried. And a few months earlier, a new book by Reed’s son, the historian Touré Reed, attempted to recount the historical development of just such a tune.

Reed describes this tune or theoretical framework as “race reductionism.” According to him, race reductionists believe that racial inequality can and should be understood principally as a matter of race and racism, to the exclusion of broader socio-economic systems and structures.

Although a less polemical term might have done more to promote understanding and reconciliation within a fractured left, Reed’s arguments about the historical emergence of this theoretical framework should prove of great interest to critics on all sides of current debates.

Drawing upon a rich academic literature, much of it influenced by historian Harvard Sitkoff’s pioneering *A New Deal for Blacks* (1978), Reed shows that the intellectual and institutional groundwork for what came to be known as the civil rights movement was based in trade-unionism and its focus on economic relations.

The critique of capitalism was central to this movement. In 1948, W.E.B. Du Bois asserted as a matter of plain fact that it was

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*THE EDITORS OF* *Against the Current* are publishing this review essay by David McCarthy toward inaugurating what we hope will become a critical discussion of the complicated relationship of the anti-racist struggle in the 21st century to the ultimate goal of transforming the class structure and state of our society. Marxists have long argued, of course, that racism is rooted in political economy. But that is far from the full story: like sexism, racism cannot be understood simply as a reflex of economic relations.

*While unity among all working people around common interests is required for an effective socialist movement, those impacted by racism or other oppression cannot stand by and subordinate their needs to the recalcitrance or ignorance of the majority. Sometimes self-organization and direct action are required, and often such actions by a minority can be a spur to educating and motivating allies.*

*For another discussion of some of the issues raised in Touré Reed’s important book, especially around the legacy of A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, we recommend an informative essay by Kim Moody in New Politics: <https://newpol.org/cedric-johnson-and-the-other-sixties-nostalgial>.*

“suicide for us, as Negroes and as Americans, to assent” to the idea “that individual enterprise with the least possible social control, and spurred mainly by the incentive of private profit, is the only method which can bring and preserve prosperity and freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

Many critics today have argued that broad economic approaches to racial inequality simply do not work: white supremacism will not allow them to work. According to public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Black poverty is fundamentally distinct from white poverty.”<sup>2</sup>

Coates’ observation, much trumpeted by such outlets as Bloomberg.com and the Rockefeller Foundation, rests upon a germ of truth, as Reed himself acknowledges. It is not a new observation.

Even during the New Deal era, when support for economic measures was part and parcel of race politics, critics pointed out that Roosevelt’s programs were structured

and administered in ways that disfavored Black workers. Organizations such as the National Negro Congress, Reed shows, objected to the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from New Deal protections, since such exclusions disproportionately affected Black workers.

Yet Reed also points out that, even considering discriminatory aspects of the New Deal, hundreds of thousands of Black manufacturing workers were directly protected by the National Labor Relations Act (1935), the Social Security Act (1935) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).

According to Reed, “millions of African Americans benefited from New Deal initiatives — sometimes in greater proportion than their share of the general population, even if they were underrepresented in relation to their need.” (19)

Even more profoundly, the NLRA changed the way civil rights organizations did business. “The organizing genius of A. Philip Randolph and associates notwithstanding, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters owed its legal recognition to the protections afforded unions” by progressive federal legislation, Reed explains. (23)

This legal recognition made it viable for race leaders to mobilize what Amiri Baraka referred to in 1963 as “the rest of the Negroes.” The New Deal, in other words, paved the way for what Reed describes as a “transition from clientage politics to protest activism.” (32)

“Public-good-oriented measures,” as Reed describes them, were important for race politics not only because they dramatically improved the material conditions of African Americans — although they did that — but also because African Americans used those improved conditions to build a more democratic, participatory polity.

### Structuralists vs. “Institutionalists”

Reed argues that attacks on public-good-oriented government and resistance to economic approaches to racial injustice were tightly intertwined within the context of Cold War anti-communism.

In language that sounds uncannily current, Daniel Patrick Moynihan asserted in his notorious *The Negro Family* (1965) that widening racial inequities were a product of

a nebulous “racist virus in the American blood stream,” rather than a direct consequence of postwar liberalism’s hasty retreat from public-good-oriented politics.

Today’s constricted view of a “systemic racism” without economic foundation, Reed argues, is derived from efforts such as Moynihan’s “to synthesize a cultural and structural analysis of poverty,” producing “a conception of *structure* rooted not in political economy but in *ethnic pluralism*.” (80)

Reed draws a parallel between Coates’ claim that “Black poverty is not white poverty” and the Johnson administration’s insistence that Black poverty was exceptional. Both, he points out, avoid situating African-American poverty within a broader political-economic context.

As Reed explains, Moynihan rose to fame by helping to shift hegemony away from “economic structuralists” such as John Kenneth Galbraith, Gunnar Myrdal and Michael Harrington, who saw full employment and public works as crucial, and toward “institutional structuralists,” who emphasized “services they deemed ‘structurally oriented’ — education, training, improvements in mental health services and so on.” (87)

What institutional structuralists had in mind were families and mutual aid societies, not labor unions, government agencies or federally sponsored Community Action Programs. And the services they proposed were meant to correct what they perceived as deficiencies in Black “institutional life.”

In Reed’s view, this way of conceiving of Black poverty had a clear material motive. “The Council of Economic Advisors incorporated institutional structuralism into its analysis of poverty largely to protect the tax cuts — which would benefit middle-class and upper-income Americans — from attacks from the left.” (89)

Reed is appreciative of Coates’ appeal to reform-minded readers confronted with the “reactionary fantasy,” as Reed describes it, of “post-racialism.” (102)

At a moment when prominent writers were suggesting in all seriousness that the Obama presidency indexed a totally new era in American race relations, it was important to hear oppositional voices maintaining that racial inequality remained an abhorrent fact of American life. “Scholars as well as liberal and even conservative pundits have hailed Coates for his courage, his passion and his insights into the history of American ‘race relations.’” (101)

But Reed argues that Coates’ “post-post-racialism” was merely the “ying-yang twin” of post-racialism. “Whether the culprit



is African Americans’ cultural pathologies or whites’ ingrained contempt for blacks, each of these frameworks divorces what we tend to think of as racial inequality from political economy.” (103). Coates’ arguments furnished a leftward path to similar conclusions.

### Complexities of Integration

Reed’s broad historical frame of reference does not always allow for

an especially nuanced appreciation of the ambiguities of “ethnic pluralism.” He is at his strongest when underscoring the plain absurdity of the idea that “ethnic identity” automatically equates to political interest. But he draws his own questionable equivalence between the innate conservatism of historian Oscar Handlin’s theory of “ethnic pluralism” and Handlin’s opposition to “forced integration.” (49–75)

This equivalence can be misleading. What made Handlin conservative was his suspicion of governmental interference, beyond cultural education and job training for non-existent jobs. But working people often had their own reasons grounded in their own local circumstances for solidarity along “ethnic” or racial lines.

One wonders what Reed might say about the dockworkers in Baltimore’s overwhelmingly Black International Longshoremen’s Union Local 858 who resisted federal efforts in the late 1960s to integrate their Local with the predominately white ILU Local 829. The two locals already collaborated with each other, and Black dockworkers reasoned that a single, totally integrated local would both undermine their leverage within the ILU and disrupt a complex “gang system” crucial to worker safety. “Forced integration” meant something very different for the oppressed than it did for the oppressors.

Whether they knew it or not, the dockworkers were adapting the reasoning not of contemporary Black Power but of Du Bois’ much earlier progressivism. “There is no magic, either in mixed schools or in segregated schools,” Du Bois argued in 1935. “Other things being equal, the mixed school is the broader, more natural basis for the education of all youth. ... But other things seldom are equal.”<sup>3</sup>

In debates about integration, the important thing was not noble ideals, but facts on the ground, the interests of actual people living in much less than ideal circumstances. Black people needed better schools, jobs, healthcare, homes and neighborhoods. There was room for debate about how to get

them.

Yet if Reed tends to downplay the complexity of debates over integration, the book’s strength is that it places contemporary debates within a deeper historical context. Race politics once encompassed a much broader frame of reference than it usually does today, and it could be made to do so again.

Handlin, Moynihan and Myrdal benefited from the ascent of reactionary bourgeois politics, but there were many thinkers, many of them extremely influential at the time, who offered alternatives.

Chapter by chapter, Reed contrasts an emergent race reductionism with writings by “left-liberal economic structuralists,” including activist Michael Harrington, economist and lawyer Leon Keyserling, economist Charles Killingsworth, labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph and March on Washington organizer Bayard Rustin.

The influence of these thinkers may be at a low tide today, but the sheer hostility with which thinkers such as Adolph Reed have been greeted by middle-class progressives is indicative of the threat their ideas pose to the current paradigm.

Indeed, as Rustin pointed out 50 years ago, economic structuralism has the power to capture the popular imagination. The idea “that we are a class society and ... that we are engaged in a class struggle ... may not provide some people with their wished-for quotient of drama,” Rustin acknowledged. But “I would think that the GE strike or the UAW strike against GM were sufficiently dramatic.”

For some, the ongoing union drive among predominately Black Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama has been that and more. As Rustin explained, the outcome of such struggles “will determine whether we will have a greater or lesser degree of economic or social equality in this country.”<sup>4</sup>

As for Adolph Reed himself, not only has he spent his entire career talking about race, he was among the leading critics of precisely the sort of racial “moderation” attributed to him. In the introduction to a volume he edited in 1999 on what he described as the “retreat from racial equality” under Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council, he excoriated a “New Liberal orthodoxy” whose cruel “punch line” was that “restoring liberal, or Democratic, credibility requires establishing distance from ... supposedly ‘marginal’ constituencies and appealing to a ‘mainstream’ American voter.”<sup>5</sup>

### Identity Politics and Neoliberalism

Touré Reed argues that the Johnson administration’s treatment of Black poverty as an exceptional matter was part of a broader effort to treat the poor as a conglomeration of “out groups — the aged, mentally or mor-

ally deficient individuals, single mothers and groups who were marginalized by geographic isolation or racial discrimination.” (87)

Handlin’s ethnic pluralism, he argues, “offered a framework that harmonized with postwar liberals’ disregard for political-economic interpretations of inequality.” (54)

The Democratic Leadership Council’s disregard for “marginal constituencies” itself relied upon the idea that people who suffer injustice in contemporary American society are inherently marginal. Conversely, interpolating racial inequality back into a broader social context threatens the hard-won hegemony of bourgeois progressivism as it has been advanced under the guise of “identity politics.”

If the left wing of neoliberalism was advanced as “identity politics,” as Reed seems to suggest, then the current moment of crisis in the neoliberal order provides fertile ground for a much broader application of the critique outlined in *Toward Freedom*. “Race reductionism” could provocatively be interpreted as one instance of a broader liberal effort to portray the political realm not as a domain of conflict between competing interests but as a morally transcendent realm of anti-racist “enlightenment” or so-called “wokeness” versus benighted “oppression.”

In one case decided 50 years ago this year, *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, a unanimous Supreme Court found that job requirements that were “fair in form, but discriminatory in operation” were unlawful.

Duke Power Company, the defendant in the case, could not institute high school completion requirements for jobs requiring only a primary school education, since such requirements served no apparent purpose other than to discriminate against African-American applicants whose opportunities for schooling had been curtailed by pervasive racial discrimination.

*Griggs* obliged courts to take account of race even in cases where explicit race discrimination was not at issue. Yet in his

decision, Chief Justice Warren Burger indicated that taking account of race meant only taking account of “artificial, arbitrary, and unnecessary barriers.”

The rational order of the underlying bourgeois body politic may have been infected with racism. But in its own iron necessity, it could not itself be identified as the material foundation of racial inequality.

How and why then did a conservative Supreme Court under Warren Burger unanimously reject judicial colorblindness, a doctrine progressives still shadowbox against today? Reed’s study suggests an answer: liberal color-consciousness is not nearly so new or even controversial as liberal pundits would like to believe. As the literary critic Kenneth Warren explains, contrary to the claims of anti-racism pundits, “there is nothing particularly radical in insisting that race continues to matter in U.S. social life.”<sup>6</sup>

Indeed there is not necessarily anything left-of-center about it. In a recent book on Clarence Thomas, reviewed in this magazine by Angela Dillard (*Against the Current* 207, July-August 2020), political scientist Corey Robin points out that the jurisprudence of the most right-wing justice on the extremely right-wing Supreme Court today has been consistently rooted in the idea that race has been an immutable fact of American life for the last 400 years, the periodization adopted by the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Dillard helpfully raises questions about whether this makes Thomas a “black nationalist” in a meaningful sense, Thomas’s outlook overlaps with contemporary progressivism in ways that warrant serious reflection.

As early as 1969, the journalist Gary Wills, then a rising star in the circles of right-wing agitator Bill Buckley, suggested, “[What] if we took seriously black ghettos as special communities, in need of indigenous [!] leaders with appropriate leverage upon society as a whole?”<sup>8</sup>

Wills’ already not-so-very-controversial idea for a new corporatist politics capable

of recognizing “‘constituencies’ not defined by locale,” including students and racial minorities, was already informing actual policy in the Nixon White House. In the so-called Philadelphia Plan, developed between 1967 and 1969, Nixon instituted “affirmative action” in its modern sense.

Whereas Johnson’s Executive Order 11246 in 1965 mandated that government contractors evaluate applicants and employees “without regard to their race,” Nixon mandated a system of racial quotas to take account of race.

Nixon’s motives have been much debated.<sup>9</sup> Yet as with so many Republican policies of the last 50 years, Democrats adapted Nixon’s version of affirmative action to their own purposes without needing to revise it.<sup>10</sup>

“In order to get beyond racism we must first take account of race,” liberal Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun remarked in 1978. “There is no other way.” For African Americans to be treated “equally, [...] we must treat them differently.”

Certainly Blackmun was right. But both Blackmun and Wills, from opposite ends of the political spectrum, elided the key question: *what did it mean to “take account of race”?* Was it enough to focus on bad attitudes and artificial, arbitrary or unnecessary discrimination? Or was the rationality of American society itself at issue?

### Linguistics of Oppression

The reduction of social injustice to a matter of artificial, arbitrary and unnecessary oppression registers even in the evolving lexicon of American English. Although there are limits and biases built into the extreme abstractions of a Google Ngram search, such a search would seem to confirm what readers of radical literature might already have detected: that “oppression” has become the left’s preferred term for social injustice.

The word “exploitation” appears to have been roughly twice as prevalent as “oppression” at the end of World War II. It remained so for the next three decades, even as both words grew increasingly prevalent during the social upheavals of the 1960s. Yet after a high point in 1972, “exploitation” declined precipitously. It leveled off at about its 1945 level around 1990, rising slightly after the capitalist crises of 2008.

“Oppression” also began declining in the early 1970s. But after bottoming out in 1978, it began to rise sharply, in recent years becoming about as prevalent as “exploitation.”<sup>11</sup> That this shift has been driven by changes in the radical literature is suggested by the fact that the verb “exploit” was vastly more prevalent than “oppress” throughout this entire period.

My point is not to say that one word would inherently be better than another. I could easily imagine an expanded under-

## Save Julian Assange!

JUST AS JOE Biden wrapped up his “Democracy Summit” and called for protecting persecuted journalists, the U.S. “Justice” Department won a British appeals court ruling for the extradition of Julian Assange on espionage charges — for publishing information on U.S. war crimes in Iraq, which the Wikileaks founder obtained by the standard means of investigative journalism.

The British judge ruled that extradition can proceed on the basis of U.S. commitments not to hold Assange in solitary confinement or a maximum-security hellhole. After 20 years of the Guantanamo prison, we pretty well know what those promises are likely to be worth.

While further appeals to Britain’s highest court continue, Assange remains locked up in a state of deteriorating mental as well as physical health. This is a human rights emergency, as well as the assertion of a monstrous legal doctrine of U.S. extraterritorial jurisdiction over journalists — which could then be exploited by any regime on the face of the earth.

To follow the case in depth, visit <https://assangedefense.org>. ■

standing of oppression that would do the critical work that bourgeois progressivism studiously avoids. But the rise of the term “oppression” has been paralleled by a retreat from structural approaches to social injustice. And in my view, this betrays a symbiosis between bourgeois politics and “radical” discourses.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), for example, was intended as a bipartisan response to mounting evidence that persons with disabilities were being arbitrarily excluded from the workforce, thereby placing an artificial and unnecessary burden on the capitalist economy.

The ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) expanded the definition of disability in an effort to combat reactionary attempts to narrow the scope of the original ADA. But neither the ADA nor the ADAAA have done much to correct for low labor-force participation among persons with disabilities, the original impetus for the legislation.

As one legal scholar points out, “merely providing access to legal remedies cannot address the constellation of issues that affect unemployed people with disabilities in the labor market, or achieve the social transformation that will be necessary for people with disabilities to achieve full participation in the workplace.”<sup>12</sup>

Much the same could be said for unemployed, underemployed and underpaid Black workers.

### Defining Injustice

The liberal sociologist Daniel Bell noted approvingly in 1973 that recent social criti-

*No matter how racially prejudicial collapsing health care, declining union participation and activism, predatory globalization, or the disintegrating welfare state can be shown to have been, there has been nothing artificial, arbitrary or unnecessary about any of them.*

cism questioned American “values,” but “not in the way socialists and radicals questioned them a generation ago — that they were achieved at the cost of exploiting the worker.” Critics had finally matured enough to appreciate the “value” produced by modern corporations.

Bell explained that instead of foolishly indicting capitalism, critics were questioning American values at “the very core, the creation of more private goods at the expense of other social values.” As long as bad values could be corrected, society could flourish on the basis of social relations as they already existed.

Reducing injustice to a matter of oppression ensured that social transformation could be limited to social factors judged artificial, arbitrary and unnecessary. But this excluded from scrutiny much of what is ugliest about modern America.

No matter how racially prejudicial collapsing health care, declining union participation and activism, predatory globalization, or the disintegrating welfare state can be shown to have been, there has been nothing artifi-

cial, arbitrary or unnecessary about any of them. Quite the opposite: in the bourgeois mind, their logic and necessity have been nothing short of ironclad.

“Negroes are almost entirely a working people,” Martin Luther King remarked at the Fourth Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO in 1961: “Our needs are identical with labor’s needs.”<sup>13</sup>

There is plenty to quibble with in that conclusion. Yet despite the growth of the Black professional class over the last six decades, the first part of King’s statement still generally holds true. Most African Americans labor for a living.

King saw an indissoluble alliance between “the labor movement” and “the Negro freedom movement” built on a shared interest in “decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community.”

The collapse of the civil rights movement coalition and its cross-racial working-class alliance cannot be blamed in its entirety on the bad faith of professional-class liberals. But the reconstruction of some such alliance will depend in large measure upon our ability to think critically about the interests served by current anti-racist discourses. Reed’s contribution will greatly improve that ability. ■

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13. Martin Luther King, Jr., Address to the Fourth Constitutional Convention of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), Bal Harbour, Florida (December 11, 1961), reproduced in Martin Luther King, Jr., *All Labor Has Dignity*, ed. Michael K. Honey (New York: Beacon Press, 2012), 38.

## Upa Lehulere, An Organic Intellectual

PATRICK BOND WRITES: “We have lost a great organic intellectual, a highly influential educator, and a fierce critic of not only neoliberals but also mealy-mouthed social democrats. Everything Upa wrote and spoke I tried to acquire and learn from. It is a great benefit to all that so many of his position papers and articles are up online: <https://oupalehere.org.za/> and <https://karibu.org.za/> and <https://khanyajournal.org.za/author/oupa/>.”

Upa Lehulere died November 29, 2021. This biographical information is excerpted from <https://oupalehere.org.za/>: (For a tribute on Lehulere, see page 30.)

Upa Lehulere was born in Cape Town in 1960. After primary school he went to Fezeka High School in Gugulethu. Fezeka High School had a history of political activism, with many senior students active in Black Consciousness-inspired student organisations. Upa’s first introduction to resistance politics was the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools in 1975. But it was in 1976 with the students’ uprising that he became politically active. Although new to student politics, Lehulere became one of the student leaders who organised and directed the student uprising in Cape Town which took off on 11 August 1976.

Since 1976, Lehulere was involved in all the various uprisings: in 1980 as a student leader, in 1985 as a student activist at UCT (University of Cape Town), in the 1990s as an activist linked to communities and the labour movement; and since then as an activist in the social movements that arose in the 2000s. Lehulere was introduced to Marxism in the late 1970s and since then framed his political activism in the broad Marxist traditions. Since the mid 1990s Lehulere was based at Khanya College, a movement building institution that arose out of the turbulent 1980s. There his work focused on cadre formation and political education in the labour movement and the social movements. ■



## Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* **Protesting the Protest Novel** By Alan Wald

### **The Man Who Lived Underground**

By Richard Wright

New York: Library of America, 2021, 240 pages, \$22.95 hardback.

### **The Nightmare of Racism**

WHEN THE POSTHUMOUSLY published *The Man Who Lived Underground* appeared in the spring of 2021, after a year in which fifteen to twenty million people protested in the streets over a number of police killings, political antennae in the media went on high alert. Some subjects are elusive and ambiguous, but at this moment there was a turbocharged awareness of the vicious actuality of racial subjugation in the United States.

Suddenly a new generation of anti-racist adversaries was living in a near-permanent state of emergency over the very form of cop violence recounted in the book's opening pages. In the midst of what a *New York Times* article declares has grown into a "tsunami" of volumes about anti-Black racism, allusions to the re-emergence of Richard Wright seemed everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Unsurprisingly, such a frame of mind brought with it the temptation to corral what was envisioned to be a multi-faceted work of the imagination of a different era into a reflexive political appraisal. Add in a marketing campaign by the publishers with an historical "presentist" tilt, and the more involved artistic aspirations of the writer became ever more edited from view.

A further assist to likely misperceptions of the creative intentions of *The Man Who Lived Underground* came from the pervasiveness of the generally accurate but incomplete popular literary reputation of its author.

The African-American Marxist Richard Wright (1908-1960), after all, is commonly evoked as among the most astute exemplars of the anti-racist "protest" tradition of the Old Left.<sup>2</sup> Born in Mississippi and coming of age in Chicago and New York, he emerged in the latter years of the Great Depression as a popular Left-wing fiction writer.

Wright was also a public member of the Communist Party (CP-USA) from 1933 to 1942 and is remembered above all for his unquenchable sense of urgency about the social and psychological costs of oppression by color and class.

In his story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938; expanded edition, 1940), novel *Native Son* (1940) and autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), he put pen to paper with unvarnished bluntness. Although there was pressure on him to delete language deemed obscene and passages about interracial sex, there is



no evidence that he ever pulled punches to dumb down or sanitize explosive material about the double wallop of economic exploitation and racial bigotry.<sup>3</sup>

Moving to Paris after World War II, and traveling from there to several continents, Wright lived and wrote in exile as an independent-minded revolutionary anti-capitalist until his death at age 52. Even as he enjoyed an international reputation, he remained haunted to the end by an over-riding question, sometimes torqued to maximum volume in fiction and prose: Will the Black experience in America be a slow progress to freedom or an unending nightmare?

Now, 60 years after his passing, we have a curious book from the Library of America, a non-profit producer of "classic American literature" originally funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The first 150 pages consist of *The Man Who Lived Underground* (hereafter shortened to *Underground*), which provides the title for the volume. This is a novel-length extension of a long-revered short story (more like a novella) that Wright first published in an anthology called *Cross-Section* in 1944 after the full manuscript was rejected by Harper and Brothers publishers in early 1942.<sup>4</sup>

This edition also contains an essay intended to be a companion to the novel called "Memories of My Grandmother" (hereafter shortened to "Memories"), composed by Wright in the winter of 1941-42.<sup>5</sup> "Memories," focused on the autobiographical nature of his source material for the fiction, is a 50-page treatise that was previously unpublished but frequently consulted by researchers in Wright's archives at Yale University.

### **Transformation of a Crime Story**

Technically, the fictional part of the Library of America volume is a blend of literary naturalism, pulp and surrealism, partly stimulated by an article that Wright came across in *True Detective* magazine about a white burglar who lived in an underground bunker in the Los Angeles sewers.

Wright's transformation of this crime story starts with his depiction of the frame-up of a 29-year-old African American worker, Fred Daniels, for the double murder of a wealthy white couple. In Part One, the description of Daniels' horrific "interrogation" and forced confession at the hands of "law enforcement" feels like a frontal assault on the reader:

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“Johnson yanked him up and clapped steel bands upon his ankles, then Johnson and Murphy lifted him bodily and swung him upside-down and hoisted his feet to a steel hook on the wall. The steel bands on his ankles were looped over the hook and he hung toward the floor, headfirst. Blood pounded in his temples and his heart and lungs sagged heavily in his chest. He could barely breathe.” (20)

Every sentence relating Daniels’ hours of torture in captivity, accompanied by racist language and insults, can hit home like a slap in the face. This book may not be for everyone.

In Part Two, Daniels escapes into the vast sewer system of a metropolis, recalling Jean Valjean’s descent belowground in Paris in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862). The city is never identified, although there are vague suggestions — names of streets, a proximity to the ocean — that it might be New York.

Slogging in darkness through the dank water, Daniels locates a cave as home base and digs into the basements of a church, movie theater, and several businesses and stores. From there he observes aspects of humanity from new angles while also retrieving objects — a radio, watches, jewelry, cash — that he brings back to his underground alcove in order to create a kind of surreal “art installation” that seems to call into question the conventional values of the items.<sup>6</sup>

In Part III, under the belief that he has now achieved a more authentic understanding of the human condition, Daniels resurfaces after a Biblical three days to spread a Christian-like message of compassion and universal guilt to the world. To his astonishment, he quickly learns that no one will listen and once more he finds himself treated as subhuman by the police.

Since the true murderer, an Italian-American, was discovered during Daniels’ disappearance, the main concern of the cops who had formerly arrested him has changed; now they must rid themselves of Daniels so that he won’t reveal how they forced his confession.

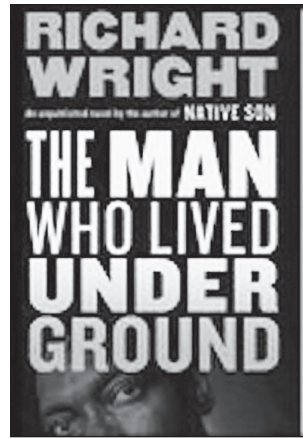
To get him out of the police station, they agree to follow Daniels back to his underworld habitat. Like an artist who believes that his or her work should speak for itself, Daniels believes that displaying his symbolically decorated cave and underground passageways to the cops will communicate his new vision in a way that his verbalizing cannot: “If he could show them the things he had seen, then they would feel as he had felt and they in turn would show them to others and those others would feel as they had felt...” (155)

Unexpectedly, as they approach the manhole in the street where Daniels originally descended, the unnamed city is attacked by unidentified airplanes: “to the east a tongue of red flame licked the sky....Explosions burst about them, jarring the earth.” Daniels’ first reaction is to associate the air raid with four of the items that went into his cave installation. He thinks of the diamonds, the radio, the hundred dollar bills, and “the distant sound of explosions was like the awful ticking of those golden watches.” (157, 158)

Then, with the chaos of the bombing as cover, a cop shoots Daniels and tosses his fatally-wounded body back into the same dark sewer where he thought he had found enlightenment: “The current spun him forward. He closed his eyes, a whirling black object, rushing along the darkness, veering, tossing with the grey tide, lost in the heart of the earth.” (159).

It’s a bleak ending suggesting that the novel’s three-part structure could be taken as a pessimistic counter-narrative

to the familiar Hegelian triad of the progress of history: A thesis (the frameup) and anti-thesis (the escape), followed by a highly disturbing synthesis (the return) that “overcomes” or “sublates” (*aufheben*) nothing.



## A Tale for Today?

Without doubt *Underground* demands attention as a beguiling volume effectively unveiling in a strange new form Wright’s dark vision of the depth and durability of murderous racism. Whether that is the prism through which this entire text should be seen is another matter.

Mostly mesmerized by the power of the opening pages and their reverberation with current events suggesting that

Black Americans live in an urban police state, reviewers acclaimed the book in the major intellectual publications of the United States with unusually well-informed critical essays.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly it climbed straightaway to the best-seller list<sup>8</sup> and was promptly acquired for film production by Paramount Pictures.<sup>9</sup>

Yet is telling that the *New York Times*’ headline declared, “Richard Wright’s Newly Restored Novel is a Tale for Today,” and the *Los Angeles Times* announced, “Richard Wright’s Newly Uncut Novel Offers a Timely Picture of Police Brutality.”<sup>10</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* headline was “Richard Wright’s Novel of Police Brutality: The Most Relevant Novel of 2021.”<sup>11</sup>

CNN ran an on-line Opinion essay called “The Long Lost 80-Year-Old Novel that Sums Up Our World.” This last item emphasized that the book “triggers instantly recognizable parallels” and then “a deeper resonance” with “the legacy of [George] Floyd’s killing.”<sup>12</sup>

Episodes in the first part and conclusion in *Underground* may well be “for Today” and “Timely.” These definitely include police brutality with “parallels” to and a “resonance” with what happened to George Floyd. Nevertheless, as several of the more substantial review essays noted, an overemphasis on a tie-in to the social issues of the present moment fails to accurately capture Wright’s actual project. *Underground* was not a dramatized political lecture, but a novel of emotional and psychological exploration and discovery; a full-bodied and complicated bid to enlarge his artistic reach beyond the framework of his prior thinking and writing.

No one can deny that the novel’s portrayal of the law in 1941 and its similitude to the present does point unswervingly toward the need for the kind of “abolitionist” rather than reformist solutions to policing. The conundrum is that an attentive reading of the “Memories” section of the book reveals that a literary performance of police brutality and legal manipulation against African Americans was never the *primary* artistic or political aim of the novel.

In fact, Wright provides only one fleeting and rather lackluster mention of all this, as if it were included in the novel merely as an enticing set-up for the main event: “He is picked up by the police, beaten, tortured and charged with a horrible crime.” (190) Moreover, in all of the previous publications of

partial versions, it was the appalling staging of Daniels' inculpation, mistreatment and forced confession by the cops that Wright omitted.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, Wright insists in "Memories" that "the far-reaching, complex, ruling idea-feeling" (163) of *Underground* is "a picture of the inner religious disposition of the American Negro....the living inner springs of religious emotion." (165)

He goes on to elaborate this point with a discussion of his grandmother's (Margaret Wilson's) exemplification of these qualities, and of the blues and surrealism as aesthetic techniques most appropriate to recreating her Seventh Day Adventist way of imagining the world. The thinking and behavior of Fred Daniels is meant to display how this same state of mind operates in different circumstances.

It is evident, then, that the underground voyage of Daniels cannot be seen simply as a reprieve from the "everyday fascism" of cop thuggery; a journey to some clear-headed understanding of the U.S. social order as a racial prison as a Marxist conceives it. On the contrary, the subterranean journey is artistically calculated to parallel a religious conversion from an intolerable secular existence to a far-out theological understanding.

But the latter form of consciousness is no advance, inasmuch as it processes experience through the categories of universal guilt and pity instead of the social and economic determinants of inequality and oppression. Daniels may be a man in search of decent behavior, but the beliefs and conduct resulting from his underground life can't possibly be intended as a model of effective conduct.



### Daniels in the Bardo

The novelist Ralph Ellison is known to have admired the 1944 shorter version of *Underground*, but his unnamed narrator's act of fleeing to a secret basement in his own *Invisible Man* (1952) is quite different from Fred Daniels' flight.

In Ellison's case, going beneath the surface seems to provide a political solution for a time; it takes one into space liberated from the above-ground domain of continuously projected identities for the Black man and suggests a restorative process. Daniels, however, is impelled by the threat to his life to move into a Bardo-like state of being (as in the Buddhist concept of Bardo) that is transitional between two varieties of existence.<sup>14</sup>

The first is normative, in the sense of the typical life experience of subordinated Black working people in capitalist America; the second is near-magical, in the sense of allowing a short-lived and untenable autonomy marked by the mirage of uncommon powers of agency and perception that ultimately lead nowhere. This is summarized by Wright as going from "life-in-death above him [into] this dark world that was death-in-life here in the underground" (134).

During this temporary, intermediate period of divorce from what was (and is) accepted as the normative physical environment of racial capitalism, Daniels endures near-hallu-

cinatory experiences, both frightening and enlightening. This includes the recognition that another person has been blamed for one of his own mischievous actions and paid the ultimate price. Thus, he returns to the terrain of his prior existence (the normative) with a changed way of thinking, bursting with a saintly empathy for a humanity branded by a shared guilt.

Wright insists in "Memories" that his main goal in *Underground* was the recreation of a mystical, transcendental inner experience, which explains why there are only two places in the novel where the topic of racism is treated incisively: At the beginning, in the interactions with the police, and at the end, when Daniels hears racist voices (accusing a young Black man of theft) just before emerging to find himself soon back in the hands of law enforcement.

The middle section mostly depicts a "raceless" and often mysterious world focusing on physical details and objects that are suggestive of some additional symbolic meanings that remain unspoken.

When Daniels, living underground, has direct dealings with whites (in a movie theater, in a store), these are quite respectful. There is also an episode in which a white man is subject to police brutality and a frameup in a manner similar to Daniels' own. If this is a "protest novel," the protest may be a more philosophical and existential one than the incontrovertible indictment of white supremacy that is actually relegated to bookending the tale.

Readers who are looking for political solutions to present-day racism, or even just an expansion of hope, are bound to find *Underground* a profoundly unsettling read. In all probability, Wright was less fixated on promulgating a social thesis than on honing his skill in crafting a language of precision to vivify Daniels' altered perceptions.

### Born Guilty

Nevertheless, it is precisely those powerfully-handled scenes of racism that will dominate the responses of contemporary readers. In appraising the now-reconstituted manuscript as a whole, one finds that Daniels' encounter with the racial violence of the state is addressed with considerably greater muscularity and clarity than his recreation of his grandmother's religious disposition in the character of Daniels. In style and sensibility, it recalls the earlier Wright with whom we are familiar from previous fiction — especially the two-dimensional (although credible) white-supremacist cops.

To appreciate more fully Daniels' adventures in the underground requires taking an approach very different from that of a direct translation into politics, and more like the multi-perspectival deliberation one brings to a Cubist painting.<sup>15</sup> The novel's protagonist is now free of many earlier illusions, and yet his embrace of what appears to be Christian (rather than legal) guilt, and his declaration of universal compassion, operate as a disempowering outlook.

What the reader took to be Daniels' escape only brings social and psychological consequences that are devastating. In the closing events, Daniels' public declamations of his newfound religious passion come off as near insanity.

To be sure, once clued in by "Memories," one can go back and re-read the underground life as a delirious religious fantasy; and "Memories" tells us directly that the newly transformed Daniels is imitating Wright's grandmother's behavior by sub-

stituting an abstract love of humanity for a true caring about individuals closest to him (such as his wife and newborn son, who are still aboveground). But it's hard to correlate Daniels' resulting impotence and passivity — as he sings “I got Jesus in my soul” (154) to the threatening cops — with the kind of empowerment actually attributed to the grandmother in “Memories.”

After all, Margaret Wilson managed to live a relatively long life and raise children and grandchildren in several different environments that presented challenging circumstances. Her illusions operate as a protective shell allowing her to go on the offensive: “My grandmother was a rebel, as thorough a rebel as ever lived on this earth; she was at war, ceaselessly, militantly at war with every particle of reality she saw.” (170)

This is not the first time Wright addressed Black religion, but earlier efforts were unmistakably inflected by politics. In the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*, several stories demonstrate the appropriation of Black Christianity for revolutionary ends in the context of Southern and rural folk culture.

Then in *Native Son*, Christianity in a major urban center (Chicago) seems to play the part of encouraging servility. Perhaps in *Underground* and “Memories” the reader is not being asked to pass political judgment on any of Wright's portrayals of the religious mind — only to look at them.

Then there is the matter of whether one can reconcile the reasons as to why Wright's grandmother and Daniels embarked on their shared course of unworldly belief. Surely Daniels' escape into the sewers to find a new consciousness of humankind and social relations is a response to the intensity of the aboveground racist violence that precedes it. His going “underground,” literally (to hide) or psychologically (to achieve a new perception), is the only choice he has for survival and even a bid for freedom.

## Totalitarianism American-Style

The situation might have been different with other options, especially if Daniels were somehow connected with a community of resistance — a social movement, a race-conscious trade union, a Left-wing political party, or a church with a strong civil rights commitment. In Wright's rendition, however, there are no realistic allies, not even a radical lawyer (as in *Native Son*) to take his side.

Moreover, Wright's depiction of Daniels' situation above ground seems calculated to communicate the all-encompassing and unforgiving totalitarian character of a racist system that criminalizes its targets. As in Nazi Germany, resistance can only occur underground.<sup>16</sup>

The opening of the novel is a tour-de-force of Wright's clear-headed Marxist anti-racism.<sup>17</sup> For example, Wright depicts the substance and procedure of law enforcement as premised on an assumed white privilege, a color hierarchy inhering in ways that are not openly acknowledged.

What we learn is that under racial capitalism, founded on



Margaret Wilson, Richard Wright's grandmother.

the super-exploitation of kidnapped peoples from Africa, those who are objectively victimized by the socio-economic system are consequently perceived in advance as a threat. Daniels, like other people of color, is *always already criminalized* to the point of being an empty vessel into which the dominant group can pour projections and illusions of bad behavior.

This is clearest in the police interrogation of Daniels, which consists of officers Lawson, Murphy and Johnson unthinkingly attributing motives and deeds to their captive without bothering to check out the explanations and alibis that are offered. To them, Daniels never comes into view as an authentic human but only as a delusional trope of racism. Although a man of modest stature, mild mannered and a church-going husband, he is automatically perceived as more dangerous, violent, and delinquent than he actually is, due to his skin color.

In an essay written to explicate a conventional protest novel, one might expect that Wright would extrapolate on the historic condition of Black Americans being “born guilty” to explain why Wright's grandmother herself embraced extreme religiosity. In a society in which Blacks are criminalized as shiftless and dangerous, and forced to live a life constantly threatened by false accusations, one needs a means to escape and survive if collective defiance is not possible.

His grandmother's response of theological fantasy and illusion could then be understood as parallel to Daniels' descent into the underground. Perhaps the pro-Communist lawyer in *Native Son*, Boris Max, would make that point if he were asked for an analysis.

Yet “Memories” goes in a very different direction. Wright does provide an explanation of the theme of false accusation in the novel, but he does not refer to racist criminalization at all. Instead, the motif stems from two episodes of false accusation that occurred in his own life, neither involving the police or bigotry.

The first incident, relatively minor, took place when, as a child, his grandmother mistakenly accused him of stealing biscuits. The accusation meant that he had been “pushed out from the warm circle of trust that exists in all families.” (209)

More significant is the second, “upon which I built the emotional structure of *The Man who Lived Underground*” (209):

“[O]nce in my life I was accused without cause. And when you are...a member of a minority political party and you are suddenly and violently accused of holding notions you've never held, of having done something you've never dreamed of, I can tell you that is one of the most agonizing, devastating, blasting, and brutal experiences conceivable. Fred Daniels's feeling of being accused without cause was woven out of my memories of having been accused without cause” (206)

This allusion to “a period of two years ...when many people...suspected me of having...uttered dreadful political notions” (206) will be no mystery to students of Wright. It is undoubtedly a reference to the 1935-37 period in Chicago when Wright came into conflict with the Black CP-USA leader Harry Haywood and was rumored to be guilty of “Trotskyism.”<sup>18</sup>

Wright's public identity as a Communist at the time he wrote *Underground* was widely known, yet he intentionally

fogs all his references to the CP-USA in the “Memories.” This is apparently because everything he wants to say is negative. For example, at one point he recalls: “In a leading labor journal...I came across a violent attack on the prose of [Gertrude] Stein, an attack that branded her the apogee of all that was degenerate in English and American literature. I was puzzled. Because I had admired how she wrote, I was condemned, too.”

The ridicule of Stein, however, was not in a “labor journal” but the Communist-led *New Masses* magazine, and the article was the famous 1934 assault on Stein (“Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot”) by leading Communist writer Mike Gold who proudly reprinted it in his 1936 collection *Change the World*.<sup>19</sup>

There is another oddity regarding the relationship of *Underground* to Wright’s political life, also indicative of his desire to maintain a distance from the CP-USA. As biographer Hazel Rowley indicates, Wright almost certainly wrote the part of the novel about the mistreatment of Daniels very early, immediately following, and in response to, the police beating of his Black Communist friend Herbert Newton.<sup>20</sup>

We know that Wright came up with the title for the novel on July 8, 1941,<sup>21</sup> and Newton was arrested on July 18th for leading a protest of fired employees of the Works Project Administration (WPA, a New Deal Program). Newton was then taken to the police station where six policemen punched and kicked him, throwing him over a chair and then taking him into a closed-off room where they jumped up and down on his back, breaking his ribs.<sup>22</sup>

Although Wright subsequently spoke out publicly against New York City police brutality in the *Daily Worker*, in “Memories” he includes no references to the Newton incident and simply omits any source or explanation for the beating episode.<sup>23</sup>

## The Teller and the Tale

The odds are that the apparently candid, confessional quality of the information revealed in “Memories” is meant to disguise and distract from other relevant autobiographical issues that Wright preferred not to openly examine. That is why the reader may sense an incompleteness about the personal background he summarizes in “Memories”; it fails to adequately explain the burning emotional intensity of this novel and the slippage between the first two parts.

Such an incongruity brings to mind D. H. Lawrence’s famous dictum: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.”<sup>24</sup> From such a perspective, looking not at what the author claims but the writing in context, Wright’s most careful biographers reveal

that aspects of his multipronged piece of imaginative work might be correlated to his increasingly unhappy relationship with the Communist movement around political as well as literary matters.

One learns from Michel Fabre’s *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973) and Hazel Rowley’s *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2001) that tensions between the writer and the CP-USA were coming to a boil in June of 1941. By the next month, Wright had been sufficiently provoked — for reasons that I will explain in a bit — to strike out on his own.

First, he reoriented himself by switching his writing projects; at the start of July, he halted work on a long novel called “Black Hope” and unexpectedly started writing a new kind of narrative he immediately titled, “The Man Who Lived Underground.” Later would come a step-by-step political distancing from the CP-USA, well under way in 1942 but kept quiet until a press conference in 1944.

Such a newfound emotional freedom from prior restraints accounts for his theatrical declaration of creative independence at the outset of “Memories:” “I have never written anything in my life that stemmed more from sheer inspiration, or executed any piece of writing in a deeper feeling of imaginative freedom, or expressed myself in a way that flowed more naturally from my own personal background, reading, experiences, and feelings than *The Man Who Lived Underground*.” (183)

Even as there are continuities, there would be something very distinctive about this project.<sup>25</sup> What, then, provoked this leap to “imaginative freedom”?

## This Is/Is Not Our People’s War

The most obvious sign of Wright’s break from past impingements on his imagination was the manner in which *Underground* made it explicit that he no longer felt pressure to assuage the CP-USA’s shifting politics in his writing. This is evident by the lack of any conventional sign of hope in *Underground* in the form of a character associated with the CP-USA — an absence that represents a striking difference between *Underground* and Wright’s earlier fiction.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, political views in imaginative writing do not in themselves have any positive or negative valence in assessing the quality of fiction; it is always a matter of how they are communicated. The main point at issue is that of trying to figure out what Wright was up to. A closer look at immediately-preceding events provides a clue.

When *Native Son* appeared in March of 1940, Wright was rightly suspicious that it would be met with misunderstanding by some members of the CP-USA, not to mention the literary establishment. This was also several months into the “Little Red Scare” that began with the Hitler-Stalin Pact in the Fall of 1939, and there was much talk in the press of international war.

To escape all these pressures, Wright and a new wife (the dancer Dimah Rose Meidman) went “underground” to Mexico that very same month. From Cuernavaca, Wright received reports from Ralph Ellison and others about the controversial response to *Native Son* in the Communist milieu as well as the mainstream press.

It is possible that Wright had originally planned not to resume permanent residency in the United States, as would



Herbert Newton, a close Communist friend who was arrested by police and badly beaten shortly after Wright began writing *The Man Who Lived Underground* in July 1941.

be his decision when he relocated to France seven years later. Unhappily, the marriage to Dimah collapsed after a few months, and he traveled back alone, detouring through Mississippi where he briefly met with his long-estranged father.

Once returning to the world he had known in the Communist movement in New York, Wright was asked to defend the current CP-USA orientation of opposition to a U.S. intervention in the European war. This he did happily, as he was firmly opposed to the notion that African Americans should give their lives by fighting in a segregated army for a system that treated them as racial inferiors.<sup>27</sup>

When the Communist-initiated Fourth American Writers Congress occurred on June 6, he gave the keynote speech “This is Not My People’s War,” which was printed in the *New*

*Masses* on June 17. His plan was to use a similar talk when he received the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP for notable achievement in Houston at the end month.

However, the USSR was invaded by Hitler on June 21 and overnight the CP-USA reversed its position on the war. Now he was informed that he should say that it would be an honor for Black Americans to fight and that the United States should open a Second Front to intervene.

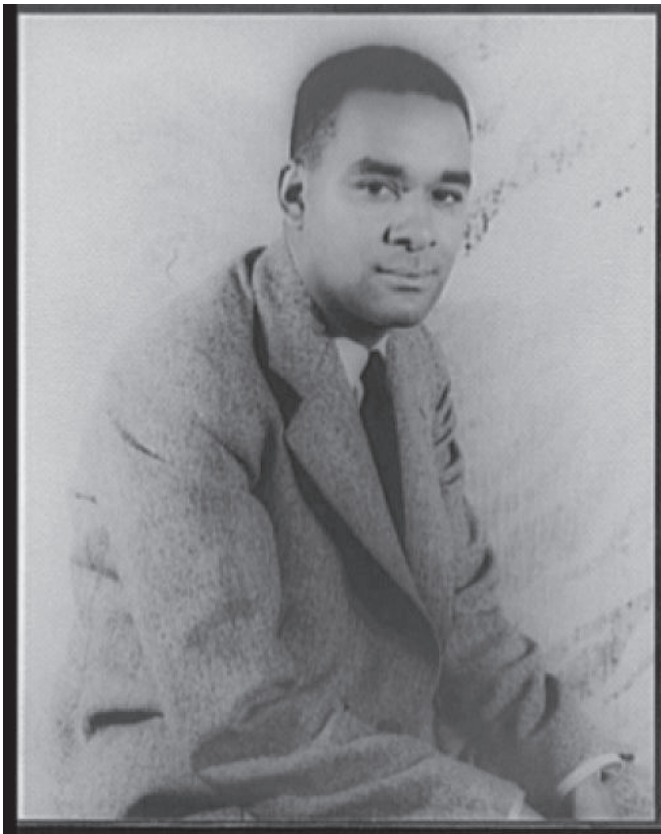
A humiliated Wright was pressured by the CP-USA to sign statements to that effect as well as change the contents of his Spingarn acceptance speech. Wright’s chief biographer, Michel Fabre, dates this conflict as the beginning of Wright’s terminal break with the CP-USA.<sup>28</sup>

Bitterness over the pressure to sign, and then repudiate,

## Notes

1. Elizabeth A. Harris, “Books on Race Are Best Sellers, With More on Way,” *New York Times*, 16 September 2021, B4.
2. As is well-known, in 1949 James Baldwin published an essay called “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in which he promoted his own career by disparaging Wright’s work as depicting Blacks defined by hate and fear. This label stuck and the caricature led to a popular perception of Wright as the author of narrow works of realism and naturalism. Baldwin’s essay is online at: <https://faculty.gordonstate.edu/jsanders-senu/Everybody%27s%20Protest%20Novel%20by%20James%20Baldwin.pdf>
3. Wright did accede to the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club to publish in a different venue the section of his autobiography taking his life story to the North.
4. Two excerpts from this version had earlier appeared in the Spring 1942 issue of the literary journal *Accent*, and the 1944 version of the story was later reprinted in Wright’s posthumous short fiction collection, *Eight Men* (1961).
5. The essay seems parallel to “How Bigger Was Born,” originally a lecture explaining the sources for *Native Son* that Harper and Brothers published as a pamphlet later in the same year as the novel (1940).
6. I am grateful to my friend Paula Rabinowitz for proposing this apt characterization.
7. For example, see: *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/06/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground/618705/>; *Times Literary Supplement*: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-man-who-lived-underground-richard-wright-review-douglas-field/>; *New Republic*: <https://newrepublic.com/article/162080/richard-wright-broke-communists-man-lived-underground>; *Nation*: <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground/>; *Daily Beast*: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/heres-the-novel-richard-wright-wasnt-allowed-to-publish/s-articles&via=rss>; *National Catholic Reporter*: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/newly-released-richard-wright-novel-puts-surreal-eye-1940s-black-life>; and *Los Angeles Review of Books*: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/richard-wright-underground-novel/>.
8. See: <https://www.loa.org/books/652-the-man-who-lived-underground>
9. See: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/kenya-barris-adapting-the-man-who-lives-underground-for-paramount-exclusive-1234972655/>
10. See the *New York Times* review: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/20/books/review/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground.html>, and the *Los Angeles Times* review: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-04-19/richard-wright-the-man-who-lived-underground>.
11. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-ent-richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground-20210415-jzhwmqzndzgmmbaqmako7kifa-story.html>
12. See: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/26/opinions/richard-wright-man-who-lived-underground-george-floyd-seymour/index.html>
13. Several of the reviews and articles about the book, and especially the *Oprah Daily*, claim that the original manuscript was censored for fear of a negative reaction to the opening section to appear in print. Yet the evidence for any of this is entirely speculative, based on a single comment by one reader for the press about the “unbearable” quality of the violence and conjectures by Wright’s grandson. Wright’s published work up to that time had shown plenty of racist violence at the hands of authorities, and the main concerns of censors had been suggestions of interracial sex — something that is absent from *Underground*. Unless further documentation is found, the cause of the rejection could simply be that Harper and Brothers did not think that an experimental work of this type would be well-received by the market expectations created by *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*, and that Wright then published the excerpts of what he considered to be the most original and critical parts. For the view that the violence was suppressed, see: <https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a35887249/richard-wright-unpublished-novel-excerpt-grandson-interview/>. For a fine essay that questions this interpretation, see: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/what-we-want-from-richard-wright>
14. The concept of the Bardo came to national attention with the publication of George Saunders’ best-selling *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), where it stood for an intermediate space between life and rebirth.
15. See the excellent discussion of surrealism in relation to this part of the narrative by Scott McLemee in *Inside Higher Education* that was reprinted on the *Against the Current* website: <https://againstthecurrent.org/notes-from-the-underground/>.
16. This view of the United States harboring a racial system parallel to that of Nazi Germany was one of the reasons why many Black radicals opposed the Cold War

- bifurcation when the United States was promoted as “The Free World” against a “Red Fascist” Soviet Union. See Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (2016), reviewed in *Against the Current*: <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc192/p5185/>
17. These views also bear a resemblance to certain aspects of contemporary Critical Race Theory.
  18. “Trotskyism” was a multi-purpose scare-word in the CP-USA to designate that someone was an enemy. The basis for the accusation seems to be that Wright had been interviewing David Poindexter, an outspoken and critical-minded Black member, for biographical material that he might use in his fiction. There may have been additional reasons for Wright’s maltreatment, including jealousy on the part of Haywood. The result of the unproven accusation was Wright’s being given the special status of a Party member who was not operating in a unit, a situation that changed once he moved to New York and began writing for the *Daily Worker* in 1937. Wright wrote up his version of these events two years later as “I Tried to Be a Communist.” This appeared in two parts in *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1944, 61-70, and *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1945, 48-56. It has been reprinted in several editions since that time. In an informative essay written for the *Nation*, Joseph Ramsey points out that Wright was also accused by his comrades of writing “pornography” on the basis of a report of his reading a draft of some fiction; see: <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/cancel-culture-richard-wright/>
  19. The article is available online: <https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/stein-pergold.html>
  20. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 255.
  21. Toru Kiuchi and Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright: A Documented Chronology, 1908-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McPharland and Company, 2014), 125.
  22. *Op. cit.* The beating was probably a cause of Newton’s premature death a few years later. For more information on Newton, see John Beasley, *A Life in Red: A Story of Forbidden Love, the Great Depression and the Communist Fight for a Black Nation in the Deep South* (2015).
  23. See Beth McHenry, “Negro Leaders Hit Police Terror,” *Daily Worker*, 9 November 1941, cited in *ibid.*, 558.
  24. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), on-line: [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/60547/60547-h/60547-h.htm#l\\_THE\\_SPIRIT\\_OF\\_PLACE](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/60547/60547-h/60547-h.htm#l_THE_SPIRIT_OF_PLACE)
  25. Regarding continuities, *Underground* may have been partly an attempt to address certain criticisms of *Native Son*, both by presenting a more empathetic protagonist and through the theme of Daniels’ art project in the cave that he is unable to explain effectively. According to the materials on-line at [loa.org/underground](http://loa.org/underground), the early version of the novel contains a scene in which “Mrs. Wooten [his wealthy employer] asks Fred Daniels whether he knows the Black Communist writer who published the novel *Native Son*. Daniels responds by saying, ‘I don’t agree with men like that. I think we colored folk are solving our problems . . .’”
  26. In *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1940 edition), the presence of the Communist movement emerges over time and is represented in two stories near the end. In *Native Son*, there is the presence of Mr. Max, the Jewish lawyer who is connected with the CP-USA, and a final message of greeting from Bigger Thomas to the young Communist, Jan, whom he had tried to frame.
  27. Wright never wavered in this view on a personal level, but he did not want to be drafted as a regular soldier and would later volunteer to serve as an officer and make other statements suggesting that he endorsed the U.S. war effort. This is part of a pattern of understandable self-protective behavior, although it became questionable when in Europe he collaborated with the CIA in trying to offset Communist influence at a 1958 Black writers conference. See Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 201.
  28. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 226.
  29. See my discussion of Wright’s relation to Marxism and communism after his CP-USA membership in Alan Wald, “He Tried to be a Communist: Richard Wright and the Black Literary Left,” in Michael Nowlin, ed., *Richard Wright in Context* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 87-97.
  30. In this sense it is a prelude or transition to Wright’s most challenging and misunderstood work, *The Outsider* (1953). See my discussion of it in: <https://againstthecurrent.org/site03/p2031/>



Richard Wright, photographed by Carl Van Vechten around 1938.

Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection [LC-USZ62-54231]

various declarations is perhaps reflected in the scenes in *Underground* where Daniels is forced to put his name to a paper by “a man in a grey business suit,” who demands: “I’ve got something here I want you to sign, boy.” (24) Daniels is being pressured to make a statement of something that he doesn’t believe, which is burned up three days later when things change.

One more indication that Wright’s anger at the revised Communist attitude toward WWII affected the novel comes with appearance of bombers over the city in the closing pages of *Underground* — an element that no critic has so far addressed.

Presumably these are fascist planes, but from Daniels’ situation the home-grown fascist police are already in power. Why in the world would he then join with these goons in blue to drive off the threat from outside when the threat from inside is just as great? One can almost hear Wright himself intoning, “This is not my people’s war.”

## Titanic Creativity

This is not to suggest that one thread — Wright’s estrangement from the CP-USA — is the straightforward key to unlocking *Underground*. Among other things, one cannot accurately explore the matter responsibly without considering all the positive dimensions of Wright’s association with Communism that rendered his withdrawal from the organization so painful.

Moreover, Wright’s was a titanic creativity that can never be fully decoded. There are abundant suggestive insights in *Underground* that potentially reveal some of the very nerves of American society and culture. Approximating a Geiger count-

er, Wright’s narrative seems to emit increased noise as Daniels travels through the sewer and approaches radioactively explosive ideas in the form of symbolic objects, incidents and encounters.

Reminiscent of Daniel of the Old Testament, Fred Daniels struggles to interpret these dream-like events. Moving through the underground, he bumps into a dead baby, hears strangely familiar church singing, witnesses a suicide, and so on. Yet the parsing of these encounters is fiendishly difficult for Daniels and perhaps unnecessary.

Multiple ambiguities may be precisely Wright’s point; as with Daniels’ underground art installation, the narrative itself is meant to communicate something not entirely translatable into logical terms. Feeling free of the pressure to use his “art as a weapon” (the CP-USA slogan), Wright was simply not out to “solve” any problem in this novel.

Beyond that, a refusal to put one’s art at the service of a larger “cause” does not mean that the writer is no longer political; a “committed” writer takes stands in the area of politics but may still create according to what he or she regards as aesthetic judgment. Some questions explored through artistic strategies don’t lend themselves to obvious answers, and Wright was never one to flatten irreducible ambiguities into pedestrian messages.

The events befalling Daniels may well have been designed to resist drawing a clear-cut meaning from them. After all, a struggle to find purchase in a shifting landscape between a racist normativity and delusory underworld can feel as uncertain and enigmatic as the realm we actually inhabit in our capitalist United States as we make desperate efforts to interpret and possibly transform it.

*Underground* may be less a political statement than an investigation of how one fashions one’s own realities and then dwells within one’s own constructions. He professed in “Memories” that he had witnessed this type of behavior in his grandmother and was applying his observations to the situation of Fred Daniels, but perhaps Wright was also semi-consciously conveying a self-criticism of his own former relation to the CP-USA.

Wright’s refusal to reprise some of the strategies of earlier fiction — in which there are gestures toward CP-USA solutions — does not mean that Wright, as a person, had abandoned revolutionary convictions. While *Underground* may not dramatize any Communist doctrinal “positions,” his principles remained revolutionary Marxist.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, it’s hard not to draw the conclusion that Wright’s depiction of a grotesque social system, which disheartens, devastates and annihilates human beings, is of one that must itself be replaced.

*Underground* and “Memories” more than anything else shed light on Wright’s evolving creative process and fill in spaces that were previously unexplored in his published oeuvre. The result is a book that might be seen as a meditation on the kind of thinking that leads a man to nihilistic defeat.<sup>30</sup>

Historically, it is a signpost in clarifying Wright’s identity as a radiant idiosyncratic talent and not merely a “protest” writer. Artistically, it is also a laudable victory through the range of techniques skillfully harnessed in the head-on assault it makes on normative America and the myths by which it is bolstered. ■

## Remembering Oupa Lehulere, (1960-2021): Renowned South African Marxist

By James Kilgore

I FIRST MET Oupa Lehulere in 1992. He took a job at Khanya College where I was the coordinator. At that historical moment, the foundation of post-apartheid South Africa was being laid. It was an incredibly challenging, complicated, often confusing time. Oupa helped us make sense of it. He was the right person in the right place at the right time.

While many other activists positioned themselves for jobs in the post-apartheid government, positions in the ANC headquarters at Shell House, or set themselves up as consultants and rising stars of BEE (the government's Black Economic Empowerment program — ed.), Oupa focused on building the power of the working class.

When he arrived at Khanya, our only work was an academic bridging program that provided support for activists to enter the historically white universities. We operated under the slogan of "Education for Liberation," but we had no real connection to the organized working class. Oupa was instrumental in transforming Khanya from an academic bridging program to the house of social movements it has become.

While Oupa had a unique genius and an incredibly rich set of political lenses through which he viewed the world, his real talent was building and inspiring organization. At Khanya, Oupa became the founding father of the community division, a part of Khanya devoted to training shop stewards, community activists, student militants — people who were eager to study and learn but would never find a place in colleges or universities.

Their study was directed at building working class power. As South Africa's freedom grew increasingly tarnished, many activists surrendered, choosing an individualist path that could lead them to Sandton (an affluent district of Johannesburg — ed.) or some such hub of luxury. Not Oupa.

He chose to build Khanya College as a source of permanent support and inspiration

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to the working class and genuine activists. While Oupa was the spark at Khanya in those days, he was never alone. He assembled around him a cohort of like-minded individuals who created a hothouse of ideological debate and revolutionary praxis.

Oupa attracted a circle of comrades who focused on how the working class should respond to the failures of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party — the adoption of the neoliberal economic policy framework known as GEAR, the jettisoning of nationalization, discarding demands to share the land "among those who work it" and the retreat from demanding reparations for the survivors of apartheid.

Oupa and the important set of comrades who surrounded him at Khanya — Igshaan Schroeder, Zico Tamela, Neena Benjamin, Margaret Johnson, Bernie Johnson, the late Themba Nobatana, the late Bongani Shingwenyana, Dikeledi Molatoli, and, of course Maria Van Driel his life partner and comrade — became a political pole that kept the vision of liberating the working class and the principles of Marxism alive.

They taught each other and learned from each other. They also attracted key union activists, individuals like John and Patricia Appolis, Dinga Sikwebu, Debbie Byrne, Trevor Ngwane, and the late Heather Hills who became constant visitors to the offices of the college. It was the pedagogy of the oppressed in action.

This is where the roots of the present day Khanya were planted. And though not all the comrades from those days remained in the forefront of the struggle, Oupa definitely did, code-switching seamlessly from theoret-

ical frameworks to popular discourse, from English to isiXhosa to SeTswana.

### Pamphleteer and Chronicler

This was also the moment where he began to shape his talents as what he called a "pamphleteer," a commentator on the politics of South Africa and global capitalism. As Oupa's vision of working-class organization grew, so did his ability to chronicle in his writings the nuances of neoliberalism in South Africa and where the openings, the moments of opportunity for struggle for the working class were emerging. No one did this like Oupa.

Nearly two decades have passed since I worked with Oupa at Khanya. I was constantly learning from his wisdom, trying to absorb the many lessons he had learned from his years as an intense activist, a political detainee and a serious Marxist thinker. Though time and distance separated us, his voice remains in my head.

Even during my incarceration from time to time I received copies of articles from *Karibu*, Khanya College's journal. Today in the complexities of the struggle for liberation in the U.S. heartland where I now live, as I ponder what political course to take, how to perceive movements like Black Lives Matter and events like the murder of George Floyd, I often ask myself the question: "what would Oupa do in this moment? How would he see it?"

Not long ago I was in a workshop where the facilitator asked us to name the most intelligent person we had ever met. Suddenly Oupa's face popped into my head. He could have been a great academic, the person upon whom the scholarly and development world called to translate the events of South Africa for them. He could have written dozens of books and articles for important journals. The policy experts and think tanks would have paid him a huge sum, celebrated him in conferences at Oxford and retreats in the Swiss Alps. But Oupa made other choices.

We are so thankful for that and thankful to his comrades and loved ones, Maria and their daughter, Searatoa, for being on the forefront with him. Oupa was a revolutionary for life. We are honored and blessed to have known him and worked with him. Long live his spirit, long live. ■



## My Life as a Union Activist By Rob Bartlett

I DROPPED OUT of college in 1971, got a job as a janitor at the University of Wisconsin and became an AFSCME member. I didn't have much of an idea of what I was going to do within the union, but quickly discovered a "radical" caucus that put out a monthly newsletter and was active within AFSCME Local 171. This local represented many of the support workers at the university including hospital and janitorial workers among others.

I soon became a steward representing janitors working the night and afternoon shifts. This was right around the time that public employee unions were granted rights in Wisconsin to collect fair share dues from all workers represented by public employee unions (since rescinded under Wisconsin Act 10 and the federal *Janus* decision).

It was relatively easy to get the vast majority of workers to become union members in my area. My decidedly atypical appearance of long hair wasn't much of a deterrent to the mostly rural men I worked with who didn't have a lot of interest in taking on any responsibility in the union. It was easy to convince people, since they were going to be paying what was in essence union dues, that they might as well become union members and have the right to vote on contracts, attend union meetings (few did so outside of the more highly organized hospital unit), and vote on contracts.

Two observations from that time have stayed with me. First was the small number of workers who played an active role in the union, and second was how being in a concentrated work area where many people worked in close proximity to each other was a boost to activism and involvement.

It was an interesting time and caucus to join as there were members of what seemed like most political groups present including members of the Communist Party, Workers World, the Socialist Workers Party, International Socialists, Spartacists and members of various new communist (Maoist) groups.

I became recruited by an internal tendency in the Socialist

*WE ARE CONTINUING a series of articles written by leftists who, under the direction of their socialist organization, took working-class jobs in order to root themselves and their organizations deeper into the U.S. working class. In recent years, an emerging generation of socialist labor activists has become keenly interested in the history of that experience, and lessons to be learned for today.*

*The Democratic Socialists of America's Labor Committee (DSLCL) hosted three panels in early 2021 to investigate what that previous generation of socialists who took working-class jobs had done. Preparation for the panels began with a questionnaire sent to people who joined such cadre organizations in the 1960s and '70s. The questionnaire sought to explore the group's initial expectations and how those changed as they carried out their particular version of "the turn." These responses became the preparatory readings for the panels and are the basis for the articles in this series.*

*This issue features Rob Bartlett, a retired high school science teacher and former railroad worker — active today in mentoring socialists in the workplace — and Wendy Thompson, who over the course of her work life as an autoworker was active in several opposition caucuses. Although they were in different organizations in the 1970s, both are members of Solidarity today.*

*The series will continue in our next issue. ATC would like to thank the DSLCL members who worked on pulling this series together, Steve Downs and Laura Gabby. — The Editors*

Workers Party to the idea that radicals needed to work within the "working class" and that the type of jobs that we needed to get were in "key" or basic industries, where we could influence the coming radicalization which we were convinced was just beginning. This was not the majority "line" in the SWP who were still focused on working in the student movement that remained strong as the Vietnam War continued.

After working there for two years I was convinced to move to Chicago, a center of industrial unions in the Midwest, where there were jobs in steel, auto, and transportation which were seen as having strategic value. Not only could strikes in these sectors have an outsized impact on the economy, but they also represented CIO-style unions that contained both "skilled" but more often unskilled workers who were racially diverse.

My political current thought the much more radical African-American workers would lead the coming upsurge and we strived to be present in both integrated workplaces and industries where there was a history of struggle and class consciousness.

### The Railroad Union Experience

I applied at steel mills, UAW organized shops and on several railroads. I took a job on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad as a brakeman in 1974. I ended up working there for 16 years.

I had looked for a job as a brakeman because the consolidation of several rail craft unions (switchmen, conductors, trainmen and firemen) into the United Transportation Union (UTU) included an agreement by the union heads not to allow union members to vote on contracts, which previously had been allowed in some of the predecessor unions. A nationwide movement of operating craft workers was organized called the "Right to Vote Committee."

At its founding in 1969, the UTU had 230,000 members in the United States. Today its successor union represents



Some former members of the SWP rail fraction in Chicago, 1984. From the left, Norman Christofferson, Guy Miller, Antonio DeLeon (deceased), Vinny Longo, Tina Beacock, Rob Bartlett, David Rollins (deceased), Bill Banta (deceased), bottom, Carl Finamore and Norine Gutekanst. Linda Loew

about 70,000 operating craft rail workers. The Right to Vote Committee's reason for existence was eliminated in 1975 when the UTU changed its constitution to allow members the right to vote on contracts. Without that issue, the national rank-and-file-opposition caucus dissolved and politics within the union were conducted on either a local or system (railroad company) basis.

As railroad employment fell from more than one million at the end of World War II to 170,000 today, mergers took place among the 14 or 15 craft unions that existed when I started working in 1974. But they never merged to form an industrial union that represented all railway unions. A couple of examples are the Teamsters, who have now incorporated the unions for Engineers and Maintenance of Way workers, and UTU, which merged with the Sheet Metal workers union to form SMART. These mergers were necessitated by the rationalizations that railroads introduced to cut the workforce through technology.

The basic industries that much of the left prioritized were being undermined by the very forces of capital itself. Even in transportation, where there was no ability to offshore the work, the workforce declined and the unions didn't have any consciousness on how to unite into a more capable force defending work conditions.

As radicals coming into the working class from colleges, we had a goal of recruiting workers to "class consciousness." We had knowledge gathered mostly through reading about struggles in the 1930s, 1919, the Russian Revolution, and the writings of those who radicalized through the experiences of the IWW and CIO, but we didn't have a lot of allies who had gone through the CIO in the 1930s still on the job.

We understood the advantage of industrial unions in uniting all workers in a company or a plant so they could engage

in more effective job actions and we had some understanding of how racial oppression differentiated workers in their motivation to fight.

Some forces on the left at the time believed that white privilege prevented members of the white working class from acting as a revolutionary force, and focused their efforts on workers of color. A parallel current in the left believed that the possibilities of social transformations were only likely in the third world; the working class in advanced capitalist countries couldn't become particularly radical.

These different appreciations shaped the strategies of various leftists who sought to bring socialism to the working class in the United States and should be subject to a critical summing up of the mistakes that all socialist currents made.

## Changing Work

It was much more interesting to work on the railroad than as a janitor in a university building. As an operating craft employee, I would either work with a crew of three to four people, or I might be a switch tender in an isolated location. Even though we all shared the same challenges of our job categories, it wasn't always easy to have a common space where collaboration and resistance could occur.

Today, many of the jobs that I once worked with three other people now have only a single person. For example, working in a switching yard coupling a track of cars required a crew of four people prior to 1973, but today a single person wears a backpack that controls the engine remotely while they walk the track and align the coupling mechanism to make "joints."

When I started, work was divided between people and there was significant "downtime" when the two or three people on the engine could talk, even have political conversations.

There are only a few locations on the railroad now where people work in a larger shop, particularly engine maintenance facilities and car repair.

There might be between 20-50 people on a shift so there is some capacity to have a shared work experience. People working on section hand gangs (rail maintenance) may also have larger numbers of people working together as well.

Before I get into politics on the railroad, one of the things I most enjoyed about working there was how when you wanted to or had an incentive to really work together as a team, you get a flavor of how work in the future should function.

Working in most jobs means getting there on time — don't be late, your job depends on it — as well as the respect of those you work with. It also usually means working your eight hours and then going home. On the railroad there was a time when that didn't apply.

I remember working in a switching yard where when you started the day, you would get some tracks to switch out, do that for two or three hours, then have a coffee break, then get some more work and come back to the yard office for lunch. There was no mandated time at which you had to take lunch, although if they worked you too long then they had to pay overtime for it.

After lunch, the yardmaster would give you the amount of work to be done and give you the choice of doing it and going home early if you could finish it early. Then the crew could make a decision about how much time the work would take and whether it was worth it to work harder than normal and get eight hours pay for maybe seven or six-and-a-half hours of work.

It was called "going for the quit." Then you didn't do stupid things or take risks, but tried to be as efficient as possible, get it done and go home. I doubt that practice exists anymore.

## Rail Unions Then and Now

The rail unions are craft unions with a divided workforce that seldom works together in bargaining and even competes with members of the same union on different railroads. There would be internecine squabbles over the number of cars exchanged between companies.

When you would bring up ideas of solidarity, for example when the Penn Central and other east coast railroads were being consolidated to form Conrail, abandon redundant track and eliminate jobs, and urge that we work together to help preserve their work rules, the answer would be along the lines of "that's Conrail, that's not us" — sort of like the popular phrase today to "stay in your lane."

Nonetheless, the union is where you try to defend your working conditions and fight to protect people from being fired for arbitrary reasons.

The job of a union officer usually meant little in the way of privilege — except for the local chairman who would represent members who were brought up for investigation by the railroad, and got paid release time to do that work. In a local as large as mine (about 500 members), that might mean almost a full-time job. Other officers were mostly placeholders and had few real tasks.

After being on the job for about eight years I ended up being elected vice-president of the local. It didn't give me any real power and I was hardly so eloquent in my advocacy that holding an office meant much in terms of representing radical

aspirations of the membership, but to be taken seriously in any workplace an activist has to be willing to take responsibility for day-to-day work, sometimes boring, sometimes a matter of losing or keeping a job.

In periods of real consequence you can be a voice for a broader strategy in a contract campaign either before or during a strike. Being a critic from the outside and unwilling to do anything to improve what you criticize is a sure path to irrelevance in your workplace.

Would I advocate that a radical should go to work on the railroads today? Probably not as an individual, and certainly not if your commitment was rather short term. You need years in a workplace to begin to understand who you are working with, the characteristics of the union you are a member of, who in the workplace others listen to, what sort of goals you want to accomplish and what your strategy will be.

## SWP Perspectives

I started working with about seven other members of the SWP on different railroads in Chicago in 1974 and we really didn't have enough density to do much of anything cooperatively. By 1980, the SWP told its members to take jobs in rail as an area of concentration and we ended up with about 16 people working in different crafts and railroads across Chicago.

One could make the case that Chicago is the most important U.S. rail hub where all the East and West coast railroads end, and that gives a potential power if there were to be a concerted job action to really affect the economy. It would also require being willing to defy the provisions of the Railway Labor Act and the courts that ban strikes.

The mandate of the fraction was to be a propagandistic one. We were to sell the newspaper and literature of the group and try to recruit workers on that basis. It was a total failure. Over the four to five years that the fraction existed before I was expelled from the SWP, we lost more members who quit the organization after they took a rail job than we recruited from the job.

I remember two people who joined the organization although others were loosely part of our "periphery." It wasn't just the fault of what I thought was a narrow and somewhat sectarian approach; our analysis of the way the country was moving was just flat out wrong.

The end of the Vietnam War led to the end of the antiwar movement where all groups including the SWP recruited most of their members. The group had grown from several hundred members in the early 1960s to almost 2000 in the late '70s. The end of the war necessitated that the SWP find different arenas in which to organize and recruit.

For a period, there was a focus on community struggles around school busing and community control issues, but a decision was also made to "go into industry" in the late '70s — much later than many other left groups that had also grown out of the antiwar movement. The projection was that the student radicalization was also in parallel with the rise and radicalization of the African-American community. Now we had enough people to place our members into industries where the radicalization was expected to continue to blossom and expand.

While I don't remember specific predictions of success, I think it was just assumed that the politicized and skilled people who joined the SWP would continue their success in this

new arena. The SWP did have a small number of members who were veterans of the struggles of the '30s and had kept some activity within the union movement. Several of the historic leaders of the SWP like James P Cannon and Farrell Dobbs came out of the working class, but the new leadership that replaced them in the 1960s were all from campus work.

The student radicalization of the antiwar movement and the organization of the Black community never resulted in a broad radicalization within the working class as a whole. I don't think we were wrong to try to enter the working class — we won't change society without the broad working class taking the lead in social transformation — but we were delusional in our expectations. This is totally necessary work, but it must be done patiently and with a long-term commitment.

### What Kind of Job?

As part of a long-term commitment, I would argue that the job should be sustainable in terms of compensation and working conditions.

Working a very low-wage job for the purposes of helping in an organizing drive may be doable, but I would ask the question of how imminent is a vote, how committed is the union that is leading this, how long can you work in this job? A year? Indefinitely?

Secondly, the work environment — in terms of access to your co-workers — is key. If you work on the railroad as a clerk and you have a choice between working a control tower by yourself, or in an office with 20-30 people, it's a no-brainer, even if the job in the tower is easier.

Also, if you're a brakeman working in the yards within Chicago and the concentration of African-American workers is higher in the city yard compared to the suburban yards, maybe you want to work in the city yard. Or if you live in the city and those yards are more convenient in terms of commuting, you still might want to go to the suburban yards where maybe 60-70% of the workforce is located.

Those are decisions that are both personal and political in nature. After the rail strike that we lost, I made the assessment that due to my low seniority (12 years), I was probably never going to have a very stable job unless it was the midnight shift, and as I was just starting a family this was not something that I wanted to do the rest of my life.

So I got a crazy idea that if I finished college maybe I could become a teacher and finally have regular hours and a weekend like 60% of the people in the United States. I went back to school parttime and eventually I ended up a high school teacher.

Others in DSA have made the case for getting a job as a teacher. Teachers have a wonderful position in society. We provide a totally necessary function that affects almost all parents and we are able to articulate just what is wrong with education in terms of what resources are needed to truly give everyone an equal, quality education.

When you work on a railroad, issues of public safety are important but it isn't as easy to reach out to the community to talk about why having variable working hours might lead to



Rob Bartlett (lower left) and teacher colleagues with his science fair students.

accidents on the job — which could be as catastrophic as the train in July, 2013 carrying very volatile Bakken oil rolling down a grade, derailling in the middle of the night in the small town of Lac Megantic in Quebec, incinerating the town center and killing 47 residents when it exploded.

The problem for union leaders is that to reach out and build understanding and solidarity requires time and effort — and also the confidence in your members that they can be spokespeople for the union. It also means that they give up some control to rank-and-file members, something they are loath to do.

In the recent charter school strike in Chicago, while on the picket lines with their rather young staff, I encouraged teachers to tell me their stories of how decisions made by the charter operator were having a really negative effect on the education of the students. When city aldermen visited the picket line I was at, I introduced them to selected teachers and just asked them to tell their story.

We all have stories and when we tell them, our struggle is much harder to deny. It also becomes more than just our own personal struggle, but one that we share with everyone else we work with. The lessons I have learned are:

1) To be effective you have to be real and be part and parcel with those you work together with. You're not a temp, but a person who should be willing to be there for the long haul.

2) You can't be a critic from the outside, you have to be part of the struggle, messy though it might be. It is much better to participate in the class struggle than only read about it, although you do need to have some sort of a plan. You can't be dogmatic about what you are doing; you need to be willing to reflect on your successes and failures and continually rethink your strategy.

3) You need allies with whom you can work and learn together in how to be more effective in building democratic and inclusive structures and spaces.

4) There is (to paraphrase Darwin in his summing up of his theory of evolution) "a grandeur in this view of life." I would say this in the view of being activists with the purpose of working to achieve the self-liberation of workers. The stakes are high in terms of the eco-catastrophe that we face and I am convinced that the only social force capable of stopping this is the working class. ■

## Working 33 Years in an Auto Plant By Wendy Thompson

IN 1960 MY family took a trip to Jackson, Mississippi. Shortly after, my father, a Methodist minister, was arrested there for attempting to integrate churches. I became a committed political activist in the civil rights movement at the age of 12.

Years later, when I arrived in Detroit to industrialize and live in the Black community, I felt immediately comfortable. I was fortunate to have grown up on the border of the large Black community in Evanston, Illinois, near Chicago, and to have gone to an integrated elementary school. My brother and sisters and I met and played with Black kids in the alley — the border — even before I went to school.

I chose to go to college in California because of the vibrant student movement. I saw that the University of Southern California was in the Black community and was attracted to that — not knowing it was an almost totally white student body of Southern California's ruling class. I would have left had it not been for an Urban Semester of independent study where I got involved with a local high school in a struggle against a racist principal.

As a French major, I participated in “junior year abroad” in France '68-'69. I wasn't in Paris but rather the university in Aix-en-Provence near Marseille. There I became active in the student movement at its height. Strikers spoke at mass meetings on campus. We handed out leaflets at factories that workers enthusiastically took.

I became a socialist there so I returned to Los Angeles looking for socialists. I ran into the International Socialists (IS) and immediately joined. Because of my experience in France, I was open to get a job in industry. The IS had a list of target industries: mining, steel, auto, telephone and trucking. I had planned on teaching French in inner city schools but was concerned about the relevance of French for them and with having to deal with discipline.

### Industrializing Perspectives

My IS partner became an autoworker in Los Angeles. As I got to know his fellow workers, the idea of doing this kind of work appealed to me. This was just before the 1970 GM strike, when I organized a student strike support committee. We also participated in Teamster picket lines at the beginning of what became Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

We visited IS members who were already in Detroit and were impressed by a city where most workers seemed to have beautiful single-family homes. As autoworkers in Detroit, we would be in the center of the industry. We saw the film “Finally Got the News” about the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). This was the clincher for me.



DRUM was a step beyond the Black Panthers because it focused on the power of workers rather than just the community. The power workers had could protect them from assassination. The massive Dodge Main plant that was DRUM's home base had wildcats against racist foremen, speedup and other working conditions.

In line with our perspective many IS members moved to Detroit to become autoworkers. My partner and I arrived in May, 1971.

Auto comrades were in an auto “fraction” where we would think out campaigns and plan recruitment. Where we had members in specific

plants, that sub-fraction would meet to discuss problems and how to carry out the work. We would be joined by other members not working there. I remember we had ISers in three plants with about five members each and five other plants with one or two members.

The auto fraction would meet as a whole and then report to our branch and national organization. We studied UAW history and knew they had traded away fighting for better working conditions in exchange for higher wages and benefits. We felt the UAW had a left-wing tradition from the 1930s to build on despite the destruction created by McCarthyism. We wanted to rebuild the union from the shop floor.

Our original idea was to build “struggle groups” that did not interact with the bureaucratic union. These would organize around shop-floor struggles and working conditions.

However, we soon dropped that concept for a rank-and-file caucus that used union meetings and structures to put forward our solutions to everyday problems. Our goal was to build a national caucus.

We knew a handful of socialists who had been longtime UAW activists. They stood in opposition to the Administration Caucus, the caucus Walter Reuther built when he became president of the UAW and built an authoritarian machine. By the '50s he called all who opposed him “communists” and tried to exclude them.

### Getting Our Feet Wet

It took a while to find jobs. We would hear rumors of hiring and line up with many others at factory gates at 5 am. I started hearing “no ladies' jobs,” so on my applications I put four years of factory experience instead of college.

Since we weren't immediately successful in getting auto jobs, we also tried to get telephone jobs, another IS priority. In the meantime, I worked in a hospital. I enjoyed working with women in a union organizing campaign, but the pay as a

nurse's aide or ward clerk was terrible.

Finally, in March '72, we applied at a complex of multiple plants on both sides of a city street. Called Chevy Gear and Axle, it had a workforce of 8000. It was the only GM plant where most workers were Black and had a militant history. I got hired but my now husband did not. Turns out they were looking for women. Chevy Gear was an all-male plant but because of the women's movement, GM was afraid of lawsuits. I was one of the first four women (two white and two Black) to walk into my plant in the complex since World War III!

More women were hired. White women were few and far between, but all the women became close as a group because of our situation. All the white men told me I shouldn't be there, I should be at home. The Black men said "welcome."

The scariest thing about the plant was the noise. Conveyors with large metal parts would travel overhead as we walked down the aisles protected by metal mesh. I spent my first week as a janitor on the day shift. On day one there was a knife fight and I had to clean up the blood. Then I was transferred to afternoons and went to work on the assembly line.

As more women came in, the men who'd been happy to see us at first changed their tune. They got upset because they saw us as taking all the "good" jobs. Yet as more women came in, we were given harder jobs. But it took a while for us to get jobs like hi-lo driver, inspector or to break into skilled trades.

Immediately after the 90-day probation, some of the women started going to union meetings. I was told that everyone had been "packing" guns. But that ended when women started attending the meetings. The local leadership formed a women's committee quickly and invited us to the UAW Educational Center at Black Lake.

As more women were hired in, second-shift after-work parties were organized. Another IS woman and I would go to the parties together but most whites didn't attend. Partly as a result, Black workers saw us as different, calling us "friendly."

At first, the white foremen would come flirt with me, but that all changed when I organized a small group to put out a leaflet about our work conditions. We worked 12 hours, seven days and people were tired of it. We had two walkouts, and no one was penalized.

After being identified as a troublemaker, I was put on one of the hardest jobs that no one person should have to do. Of course, I couldn't quite lift the axle above my shoulders onto a hook, so they landed on the floor. I was quickly taken off the job and later a hoist was developed.

Before long I got fired. They investigated my references to working at a factory, which wasn't International Sonics but the office of the International Socialists in New York City. Despite my lie, my case had merit because it was a clear example of being fired for union activity. Management stupidly put it in the second step minutes that they had investigated me — and only me — because I handed out leaflets that were "bad for union-management relations." I was out for nine months.

After my discharge, I distributed my newsletter "Shifting Gears" plant-wide and gained support. In my newsletter I called for a meeting and this led to a rank-and-file group, the Justice Committee. Our base of about 20 — who would attend union meetings — came from the work of one white militant committeeperson and a Black worker who told me: "I know exactly what you are trying to do, and I agree with

you completely."

Three Black workers from a DRUM affiliate, Chevy Revolutionary Union Movement (CRUM), joined with us as well. But DRUM was hostile to IS comrades because they saw us as Trotskyists while they had a Stalinist perspective. However, DRUM as an organization was already losing its strength.

The Justice Committee put out a monthly newsletter discussing our working conditions. We tried to raise the question of racism in each issue. We made what the IS fraction considered later to be a mistake when we declared ourselves in opposition to the Administration Caucus.

As a local caucus, we could not really challenge a national machine and it put us unnecessarily under the gun. The Administration Caucus came into the local and organized an attack on us. We were called into an Executive Board meeting over something we had written in a newsletter and this discouraged participation.

However, we won a significant victory at a union meeting. The UAW Convention had changed terms of office in the Constitution from two to three years. Creating longer terms was part of the bureaucratization process. But to soften the blow, the change allowed Shop Committee terms to remain at two years with a vote of the local membership. We won the vote and were the only local we knew of that was able to pull this off.

## Being "Revolutionary" In the Plant

It was a sign of the times that at one of our Justice Committee meetings, person after person announced they considered themselves revolutionary. Since the IS perspective was to recruit the most militant workers, at one point I invited a lot of workers to come to an IS recruitment meeting.

Some came, but not the key people. The message they took back was that I was crazy out of my mind! I had invited too broadly, but it was significant that the most militant workers didn't come.

An IS member not working in the plant would sell our paper, *Workers' Power*, at the front gates. The goal was to help win workers over to revolutionary consciousness by connecting workers' struggles to broader issues. I often found that workers most interested in our paper would not be interested in being activists.

Besides our local caucus, the IS was also involved in a national caucus, the United National Caucus, along with some of the older socialist leaders we'd met. In fact, one of them wrote my discharge case.

I feel I won my case with back pay because of rank-and-file support. But people warned me that GM would be out to get me. Management had outed me as a socialist in the grievance procedure, but given the local's history that got me points with the head of the retirees' chapter.

I was fired again for five months in '74 but returned in '75 — again, with back pay. Shortly thereafter, I was elected Committeeperson, representing 250 people. Other IS members at various Chrysler locals were elected committeepersons and one was elected Vice President of his Local.

One way to build a campaign on the shop floor is to write a group grievance. Although the Shop Chair said there is no such thing, I established that as a procedure. I would write group health and safety grievances and get everyone to sign. I



*Speaking at the UAW National Convention in 1986 in support of one member, one vote on the election of top officers — a demand members won only in the 2021 referendum.*

spent all my time out on the floor talking to people.

The plant manager (who later became the owner after the plant was sold in 1994) sent a young African-American plant superintendent out on the floor and invited workers to become supervisors. At one point I accused him of being sent in to fire me. He said no, his goal was to get me defeated!

Since he had the power to grant all my grievances, he worked to convince the membership that he was responsible for the gains we won. He also worked with the Shop Chair to put out on the floor that a majority Black plant should not have a white committeeperson and convinced my alternate to run against me.

The sub-fraction discussed the difficulty I was in and decided I should put a leaflet out saying why the membership should vote for me even though I was white. The leaflet backfired and played a major role in my defeat. It made fraction members feel that as whites coming from outside the local they were unable to successfully advise me.

What I learned from that experience was that if there is a rumor on the floor, it is a bad idea to put that rumor in writing because you are doing the opposition's work. (The hotshot superintendent years later sought me out to say how much he admired me and asked me out to dinner. I said no despite his charisma. Vindication, yes!)

Another factor in my defeat could have been because I functioned as a "revolutionary" committeeperson, an idea IS later rejected. When I finished my rank-and-file work, I would engage in revolutionary work on elected time. People felt they did not elect me for my politics, so this was wrong. They had a point. I was trying to recruit key workers to "the revolution."

Two broader campaigns comrades throughout industry conducted during this period were support for Gary Tyler, an African-American teenager in Destrehan, Louisiana falsely charged with murder (I sold Gary Tyler t-shirts) and support work for Zimbabwe; we sent clothes to the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) during the liberation struggle, when Mugabe was still progressive.

[Gary Tyler was sentenced to death at age 16 after a frame-up murder conviction. The sentenced was commuted to life in prison after an international outcry. After 41 years in prison, he was released in April, 2016. —ed.]

In 1975, I took my vacation and went to Portugal to check

out the revolution that had overthrown a fascist government. I went to a small industrial town, Marinha Grande in the north where workers controlled every factory. I toured their plants and found that they could hold meetings whenever they wanted and won all their demands. The mayor's house was taken over and made into a childcare center.

I was so excited about their socialist experiment that I put out a leaflet about it in my plant. I now regard this as a mistake because it launched so much discussion I couldn't possibly explain my point of view.

## The Recession and Its Aftermath

Most auto comrades worked in Chrysler plants and were able to recruit Black workers during this period. We had a youth group that used salt-and-pepper teams to de-escalate racial incidents. A Black collective in Los Angeles joined IS and moved to Detroit to get jobs but no one could find a job. Those were wonderful times, but they didn't last!

The recessions of the late 1970s brought a big change. We thought workers would rise up and form unemployed committees both nationally and locally. Although we participated in a city-wide unemployed committee sponsored by a UAW local, it was unable to accomplish anything.

However, our Justice Committee was able to get a motion for a laid-off workers' committee passed in my local. These Laid-Off Committee meetings were extremely successful for the length of the layoff, and once back to work led to a reactivated women's committee. There was also a militant, activist Women's Council at UAW Region 1 that I participated in. It was very unusual for the Administration Caucus to allow such an activist orientation at this high a level.

New caucuses and leaders in the local came forward who sounded militant and the Justice Committee did not last. I remember one, "The Heat Is On," who were younger and had a militant appearance; they did not allow whites to be members. Their leader was very autocratic and anti-communist.

The IS concluded we had misjudged the political situation. The post-recession period was a vastly different for several reasons.

The Administration Caucus was able to increase their power as they accepted the concessions the companies demanded. They, along with the company, said givebacks were necessary for the corporations to continue and workers to have jobs. Although they claimed we could win back these losses as times got better, that of course never happened. Workers were told we were lucky to have a job.

New caucuses and leaders came forward who sounded militant. Because they lacked an ideology of social justice, they were easily won over to the Administration Caucus' perspectives. Once in office they might continue to make militant statements, but they demobilized members and justified additional concessions. They proved to be anti-democratic and conservative.

My plant's work had been producing axles for the rear-wheel drive Chevette. But GM had moved to front-wheel drive production, and our work was no longer relevant. Both the impact of the recession and the advent of new technol-

ogy made autoworkers more frightened about their future. Workers no longer felt confident that wildcats and other militant action could prevent management from layoffs or plant closures.

In this new period, different perspectives arose within the IS and there were several splits. Additionally, comrades were laid off, some for five years or more. As a result, our auto fraction shrank. For those of us able to maintain our UAW membership, several were hired in other plants. I, fortunately, was able to stay at my plant. Still others moved to different cities and took different jobs. Many remained labor activists but left the IS.

Given that we had to adjust our perspectives, we decided it would be important to try to build an institution that would be politically independent and connect shop-floor activity to building a national labor movement. It could bring together workers in different industries so that we could learn from each other.

In launching *Labor Notes* in 1979, the IS clearly rejected the model that many socialist groups had of maintaining the broad groups they built tightly under their control. Originally staffed by IS members, *Labor Notes* was to be a project where workers would feel they were in a comfortable milieu but also a pond where socialists could swim. It has since published books and organized conferences and trainings.

The United National Caucus of the '70s did not last either. A successful national group continued for a while in the skilled trades called the Independent Skilled Trades Council. We continued building national networks like Locals Opposed to Concessions (LOC) to explain the need to organize against concessions at UAW Conventions and during contract negotiations.

We struggled against the union accepting "joint" labor-management programs and opposed the practice of locals outbidding each other in offering concessions and therefore allowing the company to whipsaw one group of UAW members against another. We also campaigned to win one member, one vote for our top UAW officers rather than the delegate system that allowed the Administration Caucus to control our union.

## New Directions

In the mid-'80s, as the IS merged with other socialist groups to form Solidarity, some of us were elected delegates to a UAW convention where we ran into New Directions, a movement from Region 5 that was running Jerry Tucker for Regional Director against the Administration Caucus candidate.

New Directions had successfully organized opposition to lean production systems by using work-to-rule campaigns. We joined them immediately. In fact, Victor Reuther came out of retirement to join with New Directions and oppose the Administration Caucus strategy of cooperating with the corporations.

Tucker's election was stolen but he appealed to the Labor Board, which ordered a new election that he won. Yet he only had a year left of the three-year term. The Administration Caucus mobilized its full strength against New Directions candidates and defeated Tucker next time around, preventing New Directions from spreading to other regions. They



Retirement award in Plant 3, while Wendy Thompson was committeeperson.

couldn't tolerate a situation where there was a clear alternative to accepting concessions!

Yet one victory New Directions won was forcing the Administration Caucus to provide the actual contract language — and not just a summary they prepared — to the membership before ratification.

I was Shop Chair at the time and the first to put out the actual local contract language. Of course, since the language is not written for working people to understand, there was a lot of misunderstanding about what the contract meant. However, Skilled Trades (a separate division in the local) voted it down twice and production once. We held meetings and were able to go back to the table and win improvements!

Over this decade, my shop floor work continued. Although I was elected Education Director, then Committeeperson again, then Shop Committee, then Chairperson of Shop Committee, then Local President, I couldn't build a rank-and-file group. But I continued to put out and distribute my newsletter and build election slates.

Given that the Administration Caucus collaborated with the companies for joint programs — along with the funding and staff appointments that went with them — some of my allies were later convinced that supporting local Administration Caucus candidates would get them brownie points.

Once I aligned with New Directions, the slander against me became so intense it led to my "sit down and shut up" period. Although I was actively organizing on the shop floor and continuing my newsletter, I could not play a role at union meetings.

However, in my district we had lunchtime meetings of group leaders. We organized a group to go visit a top manager's office. I held break time grievance procedure classes.

## Women as Sex Objects

I never got any support from the UAW leadership on the question of sexually oriented pictures in the workplace. While I was Shop Chair I had to go into a General Foreman's office for grievance procedure meetings I was met with a girlie calendar on the wall. I requested it be taken down; the foreman refused.



I brought a male nude calendar in with me and laid it down on the table next to me, saying nothing. The foreman was clearly taken aback and embarrassed, but still refused to take the calendar down. I reported the incident to upper management, the International UAW and wrote a grievance. Nothing changed.

During the Senate hearings on Clarence Thomas' nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court, I was extremely upset about the way Anita Hill was treated. I didn't hold union office, but I had to do something to fight back in the plant. I wanted to have two 5x7-foot girlie posters — ones I was forced to pass every day — taken down.

I approached the two workers responsible for them and asked that they be removed. Although they had been supporters of mine, they both angrily refused. The skilled tradesman complained to his fellow workers, who organized as a group to retaliate against me.

Eventually, with the cooperation of a mutual coworker, I was able to convince the second man to take down the sexist poster. But he did it grudgingly.

I put out a short leaflet about the sexist and inappropriate posters and expressed my support for Anita Hill. A Black woman who was my political enemy took the occasion to spread pictures of naked men all over the ladies room. I decided not to engage her about it. I had never been as unpopular as I was at that moment!

Later I ran for Committeeperson in the district I had represented previously. I was beaten by a white male who had run in the past but only gained a handful of votes because he rarely came to work. The day before the election, my opponent put a large cardboard stand-up woman on my job. I ignored it, but the word went around the plant in two minutes that I had taken it out back and stepped all over it like a crazy woman. I feel my taking on the male privilege of putting up sexist posters played a role in my defeat that time around. Today hopefully there is a greater consciousness about offensive and sexist images at work.

## Restructuring in the '90s

By the '90s, GM demanded that parts workers within the GM system be paid less than assembly workers. The UAW had rejected this demand in negotiations, so GM's response was to sell off the parts plants.

Then our plant, along with four other GM plants, was sold. We were taken by surprise because axles were considered a core component and all were made within the Big Three. In my newsletter I accused GM of selling so they could lower our wages. With others I organized a picket line down at the GM Headquarters to protest the sale.

The Administration Caucus did nothing to protest the sale and claimed they would protect our wages in subsequent contract negotiations. Most workers moved to other GM plants, but I decided to stay. I put out a copy of the sale Memorandum so we would understand our rights.

The big question was health care. Who was more likely to lose it in retirement through a company going bankrupt? Ironically, it was GM that went bankrupt during the 2008-09 recession while AAM (American Axle & Mfg.) maintained its health care!

A younger workforce came in. They liked my newsletter while the new owner hated it. They say he demanded "Shifting

Gears" be put on his desk every month.

I organized a group grievance against outsourcing, which my corrupt committeeman refused to accept. Immediately afterward, I was fired for a third time and was out for 18 months. Paying to maintain my health care and for what my teenage son needed as he was going to college was stressful as my case went all the way up the steps to final arbitration.

If I lost my case, I would have lost everything including much of my pension. Until the end management offered me money if I would voluntarily quit or transfer to GM. But I won when five witnesses showed up to testify on my behalf; I was reinstated and received \$100,000 in back pay and benefits.

Later, I was elected Local President. However, the most powerful position, the Shop Chair, was a corrupt and bitter enemy who told management not to let me into the plant. I still put out my monthly newsletter, standing at the gates. As president I was one of 10 in national negotiations where two-tier wages was the main issue.

Once it was clear the UAW negotiator was for two-tier as a way of "saving" our jobs, I was the only one willing to oppose it. Another comrade on the shop floor and I worked together to get the contract voted down at our local, but it still passed nationally.

Since we could not turn the slates into an ongoing caucus, our alternative strategy was to mobilize for local classes, committees and special meetings such as celebrations during Black History month. One positive thing I accomplished was to get the entire leadership of 50 elected and appointed people to sign a leaflet that circulated in the plant condemning a racist noose incident.

Despite the difficulties and setbacks, I have to say I enjoyed being an autoworker and working with a majority Black workforce. I disliked the elitism I encountered in college; in the plant I wasn't around people who thought they were better than others. While I was a "strange person" to many, there were other "strange people," so I felt I belonged.

As times got more difficult politically, it was stressful. But it was not dull! I was continually able to engage in organizing projects because the class struggle was there every day. Of course, I benefited from good wages and benefits.

I appreciate my pension and health care in retirement and realize how lucky I am to have had basically one job over the course of my work life. That is not the general experience of working people today.

It would be nice to see some victories after so many defeats. And I'm glad that *Labor Notes*, Teamsters for a Democratic Union and DSA are here to play a role to make a better future possible.

Within the UAW, more than a dozen key members of the Administration Caucus stand convicted of corruption. As a result, the International UAW agreed to a membership referendum on whether to institute one member, one vote for the top officers or stick with the current rotten system.

We won the referendum! This was an issue oppositional UAW caucuses have been fighting for over many years. It's great to see this victory! Hopefully, this will be the first step toward rebuilding a more democratic union. And I'm glad that *Labor Notes*, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the Democratic Socialists of America are here with us to play a role in making a better future possible. ■

# REVIEW

## Michael Ratner, Legal Warrior

By Matthew Clark

### Moving the Bar: My Life as a Radical Lawyer

By Michael Ratner  
OR Books, 2021, 366 pages,  
\$23 paperback.

MICHAEL RATNER (1943-2016) was a trailblazing radical human rights lawyer whose work sets a standard for a lawyer's role in left political movements. His autobiography *Moving the Bar*, published five years after his passing, is a story of his life and legal work. It is a valuable guide for activists and attorneys looking to use the law as part of larger movements for justice.

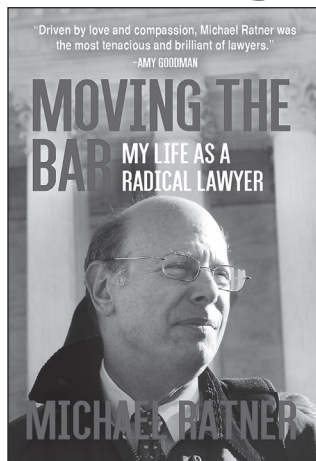
A more traditional lawyer's autobiography might open with high-minded rhetoric about the sacredness of the law and the Constitution. Ratner immediately shows he is not that type of lawyer, opening with the story of his client Julian Assange, who perhaps more than anyone else in the 21st century has exposed the hypocrisy of "the West" and the values its legal systems claim to uphold.

Ratner details the viciousness of U.S. war crimes and other machinations exposed by Wikileaks and Assange, the savagery the government unleashed upon Assange under the imprimatur of the law, and the monumental uphill battle of serving as Assange's attorney.

Ratner similarly describes whistleblower Jeremy Hammond, arrested at age 27 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for hacking into servers from the corporate spy firm Stratfor and turning over millions of their emails to WikiLeaks. He describes the military's horrific torture of Chelsea Manning, all facilitated by the legal system, in retaliation for her exposing U.S. war crimes, and the wider increasing state repression against whistleblowers under the Espionage Act.

Ratner's opening illustrations show the legal system not as some neutral forum but itself as an instrument of state repression. It takes a special brand of tenacity for a radical lawyer to use the law, designed in so many ways to codify unequal power relationships, as a battleground to challenge those power relationships. Indeed, Ratner has shown that a radical lawyer must face often impossible

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odds, and get back up to keep fighting. His autobiography provides valuable insight from his role as part of the legal arm of movement.

### Road to Radicalism

Ratner details his journey growing up in an upper middle class liberal Jewish household in Cleveland, Ohio and becoming radicalized at Columbia Law School in the 1960s. He recalls his law school outlook prior

to becoming radicalized:

*"Law was logical. If you understood the relevant precedents, there was always a right answer that could be worked out. A judge's job, it seemed to me then, was straightforward: to understand the law and then apply it to each new set of facts. The notion that other factors might enter into decisions never occurred to me."*

Ratner soon acquired a very different view of the law, organizing as a student against Columbia's cooperation with federal agencies in the Vietnam War, and against Columbia's construction of a gymnasium in Harlem that essentially segregated students from the predominantly Black neighborhood residents. He was assaulted by police while peacefully demonstrating.

Students shut down the University, and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR, the powerhouse legal advocacy organization founded in 1966 by the legendary William Kunstler and Arthur Kinoy) filed suit against the University on behalf of disciplined students. While ultimately unsuccessful in court, this lawsuit was very effective in granting political legitimacy and support to the students' struggle.

Ratner would later become the long-time President and Legal Director for CCR, where he utilized this style of activist lawyering to great effect.

The hallmark of Ratner's work was to use litigation as a political tool, to provide a platform to shift political consciousness and power. With his understanding that the larger struggle supersedes the narrow confines of a lawsuit, even longshot cases that were "unwinnable" on the legal merits can serve this wider political purpose.

Of course, taking difficult political cases in

an often inherently regressive judicial venue requires a radical lawyer to take a punch and get back up again. Ratner describes his very first court appearance as a lawyer, representing prisoners in the 1971 Attica uprising. After his meticulous preparation for oral argument, the reactionary judge immediately ruled against him without even allowing him to present his arguments.

Ratner recounted another punch in the case of *Palmer v. Thompson*, where CCR challenged the constitutionality of Jackson, Mississippi's closing of its public pools rather than opening them to Black residents, and then giving its last open pool to the YMCA in order to preserve segregation. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to find this obviously racist act unconstitutional.

Ratner attributed this regressive decision largely to the fact that the civil rights struggles in the South had largely died down by 1971 when the case was decided. Without the pressure of an organized mass movement, the Supreme Court quickly regressed from its positive civil rights decisions in the 1950s and '60s.

Later in the 1980s in *Crockett v. Reagan*, Ratner challenged the legality of the United States sending its military to assist the right-wing government of El Salvador in committing atrocities against Salvadorans. While the court acknowledged the validity of Ratner's argument that the government lacked the required congressional approval to take this action, it dismissed the case — because the plaintiffs failed to meet the impossible task of identifying precisely where in El Salvador the U.S. military was sent, or exactly what they were doing.

Despite this familiar judicial trick, the case laid a foundation for future litigation challenging U.S. foreign intervention.

Ratner's work often yielded great political and legal advances, which deserve both celebration and study. In the reactionary post-9/11 political climate, CCR was one of the few legal organizations to stand up for civil liberties of Guantanamo detainees (in fact, Ratner details how he represented unjustly imprisoned Haitian Guantanamo detainees long before 9/11).

When other left-leaning organizations shied away from accusations of "defending terrorists," CCR's principled stand elevated this freedom struggle, and exposed the prisoners' shocking torture and the military's sham "combatant status review tribunals."

CCR led a massive pro bono recruitment of attorneys from all sectors of the legal profession to represent Guantanamo detainees, which ultimately freed many from unjust detention.

CCR even won a landmark legal victory in *Rasul v. Bush*, where the Supreme Court ruled that Guantanamo detainees had the right to challenge their detention as unconstitutional.

### Unorthodox Strategies, Tough Choices

In another unorthodox victory, Ratner details suing the ex-Guatemalan defense minister Héctor Gramajo for atrocities he committed against Indigenous Guatemalans. Gramajo, a close U.S. ally on a fast track to fulfilling greater rightwing political ambitions, was then attending Harvard, and CCR served him with the lawsuit in dramatic fashion at his Harvard graduation ceremony.

CCR eventually obtained a \$47.5 million judgment against Gramajo for his crimes. Although the judgment was not collectible, the lawsuit succeeded in sinking Gramajo's political career.

The Clarence Darrows of the world often take much of the legal spotlight for their dramatic jury trial advocacy. Less appreciated is Ratner's style of legal brilliance — the ability to craft powerful unorthodox legal strategies in service of the movement. Nowhere is this better illustrated than CCR's 1979 defense of Puerto Rico anticolonial activists

convicted of "trespassing" during a protest outside a U.S. naval base on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, where the Navy conducted unpopular practice bombings.

The activists were sentenced to prison for the six-month maximum for these misdemeanors, with one prisoner, Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal, dying in prison by "suicide" under highly suspicious circumstances. CCR's appeal of the convictions rested on an unorthodox technical argument about where the property for the military base began, which according to maps and the old property deed from Spain, was delineated by the "high water mark," an ambiguous designation dependent on the difference between wet sand and dry sand and the highest winter tide over the previous 18 years.

CCR raised a serious question whether the protests actually occurred on the naval base property, and the court reversed the convictions on appeal. It is harder to find a more impressively unorthodox case of "getting off on a technicality" than this.

*Moving the Bar* is also a story of left political eclecticism, both in Ratner's own development and his work within the broader legal community. Early in his career, Ratner clerked for Judge Constance Baker Motley, then the only Black woman on the federal bench. Although the newly radicalized Ratner was to the left of Judge Motley's liberal institution-minded politics, he admired her jurisprudence, informed by her opposition

to the firsthand racism and sexism she faced throughout her life.

In one unexpected degree of connection, Ratner recalled working closely with the Judge to grant an emergency motion filed by young incarcerated Black Panther Afeni Shakur, who challenged the prison's denial of access to her own doctor to treat her pregnancy. Recognizing the prison's unjust actions, Judge Motley ruled for Afeni Shakur, who soon after gave birth to the legendary rapper Tupac Shakur.

Ratner describes the wide scope of his own development and his role in important debates within the left legal community. He charts his movement from a Zionist who "fundraised for Israel in the wake of the 1967 [Six Day] war without a second thought" in law school, to a stalwart voice for Palestinian solidarity, playing a key role decades later in the formation of the important advocacy organization Palestine Legal. He recalled his reconsidered respect for the struggle of the Indigenous Miskito people of Nicaragua, which in the 1980s he had considered counter-revolutionary due to their opposition to the Sandinista government.

Ratner recalled the debates within CCR whether to pursue legal action against the Serbian war criminal Radovan Karadžić.

Although Ratner believed Karadžić was guilty of war crimes, Ratner opposed CCR bringing a case against him because doing so aligned with U.S. imperialist efforts to exploit and fracture the former Yugoslavia's ethnic divisions, efforts that had nothing to do with human rights.

Others in CCR disagreed, and CCR took the case, although the dispute was serious enough for CCR advisory board member Ramsey Clark not only to be removed from the board, but to directly represent Karadžić in opposition to CCR.

Ratner's explication of these difficult disputes shows he did not intend his autobiography to be a simple cinematic narrative, but rather the honest considerations of a serious activist immersed in the struggle. We should respect his sincerity and learn from it.

*Moving the Bar* is filled with a lifetime of wisdom, inspiration, lawyers' war stories, and movement activism, of which this review only scratches the surface. While this book is accessible for anyone interested in movement work, it provides particularly valuable guidance to radical-minded attorneys seeking to navigate the tension between working within the law and serving the radical politics that seek to break through the legal strictures of white supremacy and capitalism.

Ratner exemplifies the ability to do this without subordinating radical politics to the regressive tendencies of the legal system, and to fulfill one's full potential as a movement lawyer. ■

WE'VE BEEN FOREWARNED: Brett Kavanaugh laid out the precedents for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, and Amy Coney Barrett suggested that those who want to terminate their pregnancy should have no problem because they can just continue to nourish the fetus, bring it to full term and then give it away.

Sonia Sotomayor has sounded the alarm, not only for the human consequence but for undermining the authority of the U.S. Supreme Court. The problem for the Court's anti-choice majority is how to put a stop to a medical procedure that public opinion sees as necessary. Meanwhile, the problem for the pro-choice movement — which represents the majority in society — is to make sure the Court's "authority" is *shattered*.

Kavanaugh says that precedents like racial segregation were overturned — so why not *Roe*? — not mentioning that the *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Obergefell* (marriage equality) rulings expanded civil and human rights, while abolishing *Roe* would take them away.

Anti-abortion lawyers maintain that the Supreme Court was mistaken in ruling that "the unborn" are not persons under the Constitution. They maintain that only states have the right to decide the meaning of personhood. In fact, 29 states have laws that bestow personhood on the embryo/fetus before viability. It's nuts to be demanding "personhood" for fetuses when the federal government doesn't have an Equal Rights Amendment for women.

The right wing has attempted to paint medical personnel and clinics who perform abortions as evil, harassing staff, picketing clinics — even invading and vandalizing them. Over the years their supporters have managed to kill 11 doctors.

Along the lines outlined by Barrett, the right has set up a string of phony clinics that promise free consultations and try to influence the pregnant individual to prioritize the fetus. Seeing the possibility of overturning federal law, they are now discussing building facilities that mirror the pre-*Roe* "homes for unwed mothers."

Meanwhile there have been zoom calls, meetings, pickets and demonstrations that reassert the right to reproductive justice. Can the movement force the Justices to take reality into consideration? Chances are that at best they will be convinced to compromise for the present and open the door to even more restrictions. For the reproductive rights movement, the time for mobilization is now — Dianne Feeley

# REVIEW

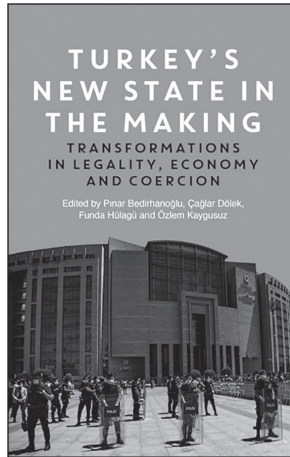
## Fusing Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism: The Turkish State Today

By Daniel Johnson

### Turkey's New State in the Making:

Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion

Pınar Bedirhanoglu, Çağlar Dölek, Funda Hülügü and Özlem Kaygusuz, editors  
Bloomsbury Publishing/Zed Books, 2020,  
320 pages. \$35.95 paperback.



ACADEMIC CONFERENCES ARE generally uncontroversial, even boring, affairs. This was decidedly not the case in October of 2018, when a two-day workshop titled “Turkey’s New Neoliberal State in the Making?” was held at Middle East Technical University in Ankara.

The gathering took place in the midst of a purge of academia by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that began with a failed 2016 coup. Since then more than 6,000 professors lost their positions. (More than 150,000 government employees, teachers, and academics have been fired since the attempted coup).<sup>1</sup>

Of the 21 conference participants, 14 were members of Academics for Peace, an association of scholars who support a peaceful resolution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Peace Academics’ 2016 petition “We will not be a party to this crime,” which condemned the Turkish state’s attacks on Kurdish-majority provinces, was signed by more than 2,000 scholars; more than 700 of these have been or are being prosecuted for making “criminal propaganda.”

Six workshop participants had lost their university positions and the right to work in public service because of state of emergency decrees; most were facing investigations and possible criminal prosecutions for “terrorist” activity. Three were in exile abroad, while five were unable to leave Turkey because their passports had been canceled.

The oppressive political context of the conference turned it “into an act of resistance against political pressure on any critical intellectual activity, and a moment to revitalize ‘the optimism of the will’” (xvix) according to Pınar Bedirhanoglu, Çağlar Dölek, Funda Hülügü, and Özlem Kaygusuz,

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editors of *Turkey’s New State in the Making: Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion* (hereafter *TNSM*).

The collection of articles from the workshop is an illuminating testament to participants’ commitment and perseverance in the face of ex-

treme adversity. Most of them are scholars in the fields of political science and international relations.

Formulating a coherent argument around a collection of 15 essays is always a challenge. According to its editors the unifying theme of *TNSM* is the related development of neoliberalism and authoritarianism under the AKP.

Bedirhanoglu *et al.* acknowledge that “debates on the neoliberal-authoritarian character of the state in Turkey are not new.” (I) Indeed, much liberal and left political analysis in much of the world has concerned the rise of authoritarian leaders and parties in recent years. Turkey under President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan and the AKP is no exception.

Mainstream accounts typically see a break between an early period of liberalization (2002–2013) and a more recent era of authoritarianism (2013–present). *TNSM* instead emphasizes continuity of economic policies, but ruptures at the state level.

### Making a New State

The book’s premise is that “despite its still unfolding, contradictory and crisis-prone character, there is a *new neoliberal state in the making* in Turkey, and the oppressive and coercive policies of the AKP regime have been constitutive of this new state.” (emphasis in original, 3) *TNSM*’s emphasis on “making” usefully suggests process over stasis or reversal (for example the AKP’s betrayal of its founding commitment to democracy). It demonstrates with case studies the compatibility of authoritarianism and neoliberal policies and thus provides an important

corrective to liberal assumptions.

Many, though not all, articles utilize a Marxist framework, and theoretical borrowings from Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas are prominent. If studies of neoliberalism and authoritarianism are not new, *TNSM* is the most up-to-date and expansive English-language collection assessing recent political developments in Turkey.

*TNSM*’s greatest merit is arguably the diversity of topics covered. Insightful articles on familiar subjects like the global political context and political economy are enriched by discussions of AKP housing policies, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the courts, pro-government intellectuals, gender policies, the “war on drugs,” and urban policing.

A major benefit of this diversity is that the usually towering figure of Erdoğan is largely confined to the background. Instead of the Leader’s polarizing personality (and criticisms of an ill-defined “populism”) we see the role of different institutions in shaping people’s everyday lives.

The book is divided into four sections. Part I focuses on the global political context of the Turkish state’s transformation under the AKP. In the opening chapter Bedirhanoglu outlines how a process of financialization beginning in 2002 has led not to a more democratic and free society, as initially promised by the AKP, but rather to a more repressive state.

Özlem Kaygusuz and Oya Aydın examine how the Turkish Constitutional Court and European Court of Human Rights permitted the gradual eradication of constitutional norms (“deconstitutionalization”) in the wake of a state of emergency following the 2016 coup. Essays on foreign policy in relation to the AKP’s Islamist brand of neoliberalism and the geopolitics of Turkey’s decision to purchase a Russian S-400 air defense system round out the section.

Many chapters emphasize how neoliberal economics have generated political repression rather than freedom. This relationship comes through most strongly in Part II, “Politics of Economic Management.”

Fuat Ercan and Şebnem Oğuz argue that the AKP’s inability to transition to a regime of relative surplus value in recent years has resulted in an economic crisis. This, in turn, has fostered authoritarian measures to

contain dissent.

Ali Rıza Güngen and Özlem Çelik examine the growing importance of credit as a source of discipline and class project, respectively. On the other hand, Melehat Kutun interprets the “repoliticization” of Turkey since 2008 as a result of the “depoliticization” of society under neoliberal rule in the early 2000s.

Together the essays challenge common associations of capitalism with minimal state activity and non-interference in markets. On the contrary, economic management in the interests of capital has been a key component of the AKP’s neoliberal project.

### Domination and Coercion

It’s in parts III (“Politics of Domination”) and IV (“Politics of Coercion”) that the diversity of subjects comes to the fore. In Chapter 9 Zana Çitak traces the history of the Diyanet from its 1924 founding to the present.

Although created by the Kemalist government to control religion in the new nation, after a 1980 coup the Diyanet’s function in representing a Turkish-Sunni identity expanded. This was largely an attempt to counter the influence of leftwing ideas, which had gained traction among workers and students in the 1960s and ’70s.

The transformation of the Diyanet under the AKP, however, has been dramatic. Its personnel has more than doubled to well over a hundred thousand, while recent laws have elevated the organization’s status in the government hierarchy.

Tasked with, in its own words, “keeping alive the religious, spiritual and moral values of society” (175), according to Çitak the Diyanet has become the AKP’s main tool for the Islamization of Turkish society. Since the publication of *TNSM* in 2020 the Diyanet’s influence has grown. The directorate’s 2022 budget will increase by 3.2 billion Turkish liras, making it better funded than the interior and foreign ministries.

Diyanet’s head, the cleric Ali Erbaş, regularly makes controversial public statements and has appeared at official state events with Erdoğan with increasing frequency. In October 2021 the government’s official newspaper announced that the organization plans to open 17 new branches throughout the world, from Budapest to Sao Paulo.<sup>2</sup>

The Turkish judiciary has also been politicized, and this is Zeynep Alemdar’s focus in Chapter 11. Recent prosecutions against the Kemalist (and nation’s oldest) newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, activists from the Gezi protest movement, and Academics for Peace have had a major role in stifling the work of journalists, academics and activists.

The trials have forced intellectuals to self-censor while discouraging citizens from taking part in public demonstrations. At the

same time, according to Alemdar these cases have made courtrooms “places of solidarity and resistance,” particularly for Academics for Peace.

Funda Hülügü’s “Domesticating Politics, De-Gendering Women” is an enlightening examination of the AKP’s attitudes and policies toward women. Hülügü notes that for the AKP, the notion of gender equality is a Western construct that reflects the “female-unfriendly nature of Western modernity.” *Gender complementarity*, by contrast, assumes that “women and men are born into their natural destinies; their worldly missions differ according to their biological sex — that is not inequality but rather some divine act.” (247)

Women’s political function is therefore determined by their special ability to perform affective labor; their participation in politics is akin to their role in managing the household. Feminist deviations from this gendered norm — most conspicuously in the gender egalitarianism of the Kurdish movement — are a direct challenge to the AKP’s domestication of politics.

*TNSM*’s concluding two chapters are complimentary. They depart from the political science approach of previous articles by bringing sociological/anthropological perspectives to their topics.

Zeynep Gönen traces the vast expansion of Turkey’s prison population and the criminalization of drugs, beginning in the 1970s but accelerating under the AKP, while Çağlar Dölek examines urban policing with a focus on the Altındağ district of Ankara.

For Dölek, the normalization of the “state of exception” initiated in 2016 has been reflected in the expanded presence of the police in everyday life. This is most pronounced in poor- and working-class urban areas like Altındağ.

### Repression, Deregulation, Islamicization

Although, as briefly indicated here, the breadth of subjects covered are impressive, there are some notable gaps in *TNSM*. While the oppression of Turkey’s Kurdish population is cited in a number of articles, there is no stand-alone treatment of the AKP government’s major shift in policy on the Kurdish issue.

The breakdown of a ceasefire between the state and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in 2015 has resulted in more than 4,000 deaths, the destruction of large areas in Kurdish-majority cities, and the displacement of 350,000 people.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to inflicting massive suffering, this shift has dramatically transformed Turkey’s political landscape. The breakdown of the peace process was quickly followed by the repression of the leftist People’s Democracy Party (HDP). Since 2015 more than

6,000 HDP members and supporters have been arrested while party leaders, MPs, and mayors remain imprisoned.<sup>4</sup>

This development led the AKP to abandon any overtures of support for Kurdish rights and instead to ally with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in 2018. The creation of the AKP-MHP “People’s Alliance” shows without doubt that the AKP was never interested in Kurdish rights, pluralism or democracy.

Similarly, while a few authors cite the repression of labor organizing and strikes, there is no treatment of AKP labor policies — an essential component of the state’s neoliberal project.

Although since coming to power in 2002 the AKP has claimed to represent Turkey’s working classes, trade union density has plummeted while privatizations and weak labor laws have contributed to a vast increase in precarious employment and workplace fatalities. Strikes are stopped by simply declaring them a threat to national security (a legacy of an anti-labor constitution implemented after the 1980 coup) while demonstrations are suppressed by police forces.

COVID-19 has become a working-class disease in Turkey. Industrial production is uninterrupted and the state provides little pandemic-related support to citizens compared with other governments.<sup>5</sup>

According to the International Trade Union Confederation, Turkey ranked among the world’s 10 worst countries for workers in both 2020 and 2021. In addition to the hardships of the pandemic, workers’ rights and freedoms have been violated by crackdowns on protests while trade union leaders were arrested and had their homes raided.<sup>6</sup>

*TNSM* would also have benefited from analysis of another institution that has been extremely important to the AKP — that of education. Erdoğan has long expressed a desire to create “pious generations” through the school system, and educational reforms clearly reflect this aim.

From the revision of primary school curricula and textbooks along “competency-based” and religious lines to the explosion of religious (*imam hatip*) schools, educational reform has been a fundamental object of the AKP government. Deregulation, privatization and Islamization (characterized as “values education”) have gone hand-in-hand in remaking Turkish schooling.

### Challenging the Authoritarian State

I cite these examples not to pick out absences in an otherwise excellent book. The point is rather to emphasize that the Kurdish movement, workers, and young people will be essential to solidifying opposition to the AKP’s authoritarianism in coming years.

Understandably given the context in which they were written, many articles in

TNSM sound a pessimistic note. Since the economic crisis of 2018, however, support for the AKP has plummeted and, despite continuing authoritarian practices and shifting political alliances, it seems unlikely the party will be able to reverse this long-term decline.<sup>7</sup>

Despite close to two decades of educational reforms, young people remain disproportionately opposed to the AKP.<sup>8</sup> Recent campus protests over Erdoğan's imperious and unprecedented naming of university rectors as well as the skyrocketing of dorm rents in autumn of 2021 (and Erdoğan's predictable characterization of protestors as "terrorists" and saboteurs) suggest middle-class youth have not yet become "pious."

Evidence of alienation among other

sectors of the population is not hard to find; the challenge, as always, is mobilizing mass discontent for the purposes of radical social transformation.

TNSM is definitely worth reading. If, however, as the editors acknowledge, studies of neoliberalism and authoritarianism under the AKP are not lacking, we might look forward to analyses of the (however weakened) state of popular struggle and organization. A worthy sequel to *Turkey's New State in the Making* might be something along the lines of *Turkey's New Society in the Making*. ■

#### Notes

1. For figures see <https://turkeypurge.com/>.
2. "Turkey's top religious body to expand globally, establish 17 new branches," *Duvar English*, October 1, 2021 (<https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-top-religious-body-diyabet-to-expand-globally-establish-17-new-branches-news-59045>).

3. Max Hoffman, "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict," *Center for American Progress*, August 12, (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/08/12/473508/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/>).
4. "6,000 People from HDP Arrested Since 2015," *bianet English*, December 11, 2019 (<https://bianet.org/english/human-rights/216945-6-000-people-from-hdp-arrested-since-2015>).
5. Barış Soydan, "The Non-ending of Miseries of Workers under AKP rule," *The Turkey Analyst*, March 23, 2021 (<https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/662-the-non-ending-of-miseries-of-workers-under-akp-rule.html>).
6. 2021 ITUC Global Rights Index ([https://files.mutualcdn.com/ituc/files/ITUC\\_GlobalRightsIndex\\_2021\\_EN-final.pdf](https://files.mutualcdn.com/ituc/files/ITUC_GlobalRightsIndex_2021_EN-final.pdf)).
7. See Daniel Johnson, "End of the Road for the AKP?" *The Bulletin*, March 30, 2021 (<https://socialistproject.ca/2021/03/end-of-the-road-for-the-akp/>).
8. "Opinion Poll: Support for AKP lower among first-time voters," *bianet English*, July 6, 2021 (<https://bianet.org/english/politics/246833-opinion-poll-support-for-akp-lower-among-first-time-voters>).

## COP26: Success Not an Option — *continued from inside back cover*

### The Message to Capital

A few months before COP21, François Hollande opened the business climate summit in Paris by saying: "Businesses are essential because they are the ones who will translate, through the commitments that will be made, the changes that will be necessary: energy efficiency, the rise of renewable energies, the ability to transport oneself with a mobility that does not consume energy [sic!], energy storage, the mode of construction of habitats, the organization of cities, and also the participation in the transition, in the adaptation of countries that are developing."

The political leaders all (or almost all) recognize this: the urgency is maximum, the risk is immeasurable, there is not a moment to lose. And yet, from one COP to the next, despite the light shed by "The best Science available," the time to fight back is being wasted and the march to the abyss is accelerating.

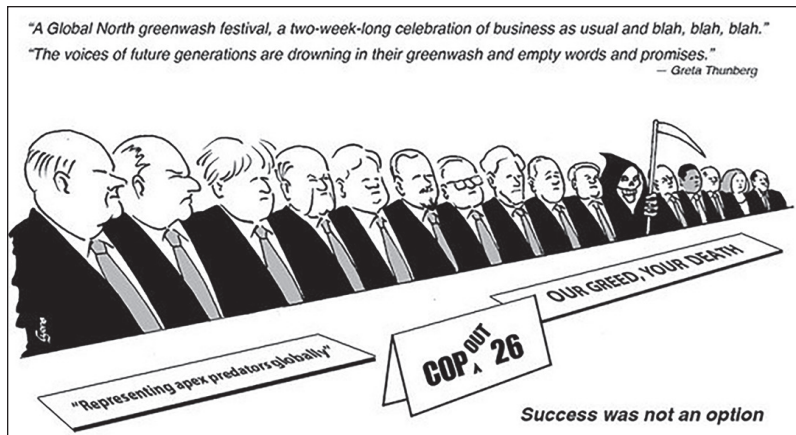
This aberrant, hallucinatory and frightening reality does not result from the imbecility of this or that official, nor from the plot of occult forces: it results from the fundamental laws of Capitalism, and these laws also corrupt the "best Science."

Based on competition for profit, this mode of production forces millions of capitalists, on pain of economic death, to make millions of investment decisions at every moment which aim to increase the productivity of labor through machines. The resulting tendency of the falling rate of profit is compensated by an increase in the mass of goods produced, an increase in the exploitation of labor power, and an increase in the exploitation of other natural resources.

This system functions like an automaton out of all control. It carries with it, like a cloud, not only war but also the potential for unlimited development, unlimited growth in inequality and unlimited further ecological destruction.

It must be forcefully repeated: there is an insurmountable antagonism between prolonging this system and safeguarding the planet as an environment conducive to life and humanity. Therefore, as Lenin did when war broke out in 1914, we must to begin with, and independently of the balance of power, dare to make a clear diagnosis: the situation illustrates the objective necessity of revolution.

With the Glasgow COP, a brief cycle of increasingly urgent warnings begins: either the convergence of social mobilizations will make it possible to begin to bridge the enormous gap between this objective situation and the level of consciousness and organization of the exploited and oppressed (the "subjective factor"), or the automaton will drive us ever deeper into a barbarism of unprecedented proportions. ■



We can only copy here the interpretation of this statement: "Beloved capitalists, we, the politicians, offer you the planet, the cities and the forests, the soils and the oceans, we even offer you the market of the adaptation of the countries of the South to the catastrophe that you are imposing on them; everything is yours, take it: this is the message."

From the point of view of capital, it is wrong to say that COP26 is "blah blah blah" (Greta Thunberg). It is rather a monstrous apotheosis of neoliberalism. This summit took a significant step forward on the road to the total commodification of the Earth, its ecosystems and its inhabitants. For the benefit of finance, and at the expense of Nature and the people.

delivered the ten key messages of the latest science to the COP. The first is that global emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> alone need to be reduced each year by 2Gt (5%) by 2030 to have a 50/50 chance of staying below 1.5°C, and by 4Gt (10%) to have a two-thirds chance of staying below 1.5°C. A similar reduction is required for methane and nitrous oxide.

There is no hope of achieving this at a five-yearly rate of NDC revision. Glasgow therefore decided to move to an annual rate. Seen from afar, this seems to leave a slender chance of success. Seen from up close, it is an illusion.

*First: climate justice must be taken into account.* Reductions of five and 10% are global targets, to be modulated to take account of the “differentiated responsibilities” of countries. Rockström presented the most recent assessment on the subject: the richest one per cent of the world’s population must divide its emissions by 30, while the poorest 50% can multiply them by three. This clearly shows that the climate is a class issue, a major issue in the conflict between the possessing minority and the dispossessed majority.

*Second: a reduction of 2 or 4 Gt/year is linear in mathematical terms, but not in economic, social and political terms.* The more emissions are reduced (or reductions are attempted), and the shorter the timeframe, the more emissions reduction runs up against capitalist demands for growth and profit.

This is very concrete: in the energy sector, the bosses are putting the brakes on fossil fuel investments, to limit the “stranded assets.” As fossil fuels cover more than 80% of the needs, a peak in energy supply will probably precede the peak in demand.

Hence, high prices. This is good for the fossil fuel companies, but it fuels inflation, frustrates the post-covid recovery and weighs heavily on the working classes. They can fight back, or give their votes to national-populists. Both options create instability.

Calming prices and avoiding shortages would require boosting fossil fuel production. China has done it for coal and Biden has asked (unsuccessfully) Saudi Arabia and Russia to do it for oil. But boosting fossil fuels = boosting emissions.... It’s a squaring of the circle.

## **Insurmountable Contradiction**

China and the United States issued a joint statement at the COP. It will be of no use in breaking the deadlock. It is mainly a statement for the sake of appearances. The two great powers have an interest in posing together as the guarantors of the world’s stability and its climate. Perhaps they will try to collaborate on a partial aspect of climate policy (methane emissions?).

But the underlying tensions are very strong and tend to deepen the conflicts. In the United States, the Democratic majority is hanging by a thread: Manchin, the loyal friend of coal. The Republicans have won the governorship of Virginia, hope to win the mid-term elections, and are campaigning against higher fuel prices. Their victory would change a lot!

In China, the stability of the bureaucracy depends on the progress of the average standard of living on the one hand, and on nationalist exaltation on the other. The revival of coal does not prevent the rise in oil prices. There are many reasons for Beijing to continue to turn inward, accelerating its plans to reclaim Taiwan. All this is very unstable.

Wherever you look at the problem, you come up against the impossibility of the capitalist energy transition: you

cannot at the same time revive a growth economy based on 80% fossil fuels, replace fossil fuels with renewables, and drastically reduce emissions in the very short term. It is physically impossible.

*Either we reduce production to achieve the transition, or we sacrifice the transition to GDP growth.* However, “capitalism without growth is a contradiction in terms” (Joseph Schumpeter).

*Conclusion: the contradiction is insoluble, except through a revolutionary systemic change.* As long as this historical possibility does not become a concrete possibility, the contradiction will become more and more serious with every attempt to reduce emissions.

Each capitalist tries to shift the burden to their competitors and to the workers. Each capitalist class uses its state to shift the burden to rival states and to the working classes. And the most polluting states are imperialist states that dominate the poorest.

Consequently, the ecological/climate crisis will be combined with serious economic, social and political (and even military) upheavals along the following lines: 1) deepening social tensions, growing crisis of regime legitimacy, growing political instability and an increased tendency towards authoritarianism; 2) neo-colonial policies of increasing brutality towards the peoples of the South, especially migrants, and especially women; 3) more acute rivalry between capitalists and between capitalist states; in particular 4) growing geostrategic U.S.-China tensions.

To believe that such a context would be conducive to the annual increment of climate agreements that are equal to the challenge is to believe in Father Christmas.

Let’s insist on this point: there is no structural solution without a global decrease in production, consumption and transport, modulated with respect for social justice. It is imperative to “produce less, transport less, consume less and share more” (especially the wealth and the necessary working time).

A capitalist policy of regulation, with an increased role for the state, is therefore not an alternative to the crisis, although it could alleviate the difficulty. But here is a second contradiction: *Capital does not want this policy.*

There has been a lot of press coverage of the “methane deal.” At the COP, more than 100 countries promised to cut their emissions by 30% by 2030. If this were the case, warming in 2050 would be 0.2°C lower than projected (less than half the potential).

But this is only a declaration of intent. There are no quotas per country, no funding for the countries of the South, no sanctions for non-compliance... The United States, European Union and Canada seem willing to act, it’s true, and it’s easy to see why: apart from Trump, the capitalist leaders are starting to panic.

Limiting methane is a fairly easy course of action. But there is a long way to go: China and Russia have not signed the Glasgow text. It is also easy to understand why: they are two major emitters. Their absence will obviously serve as a pretext for capitalists in other countries to resist.

As a result, it is doubtful that anything will be imposed on them. Instead, incentives and taxes will be used, in the hope that the cost of investment will fall below the price of the gas saved. The working classes will foot the bill.

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