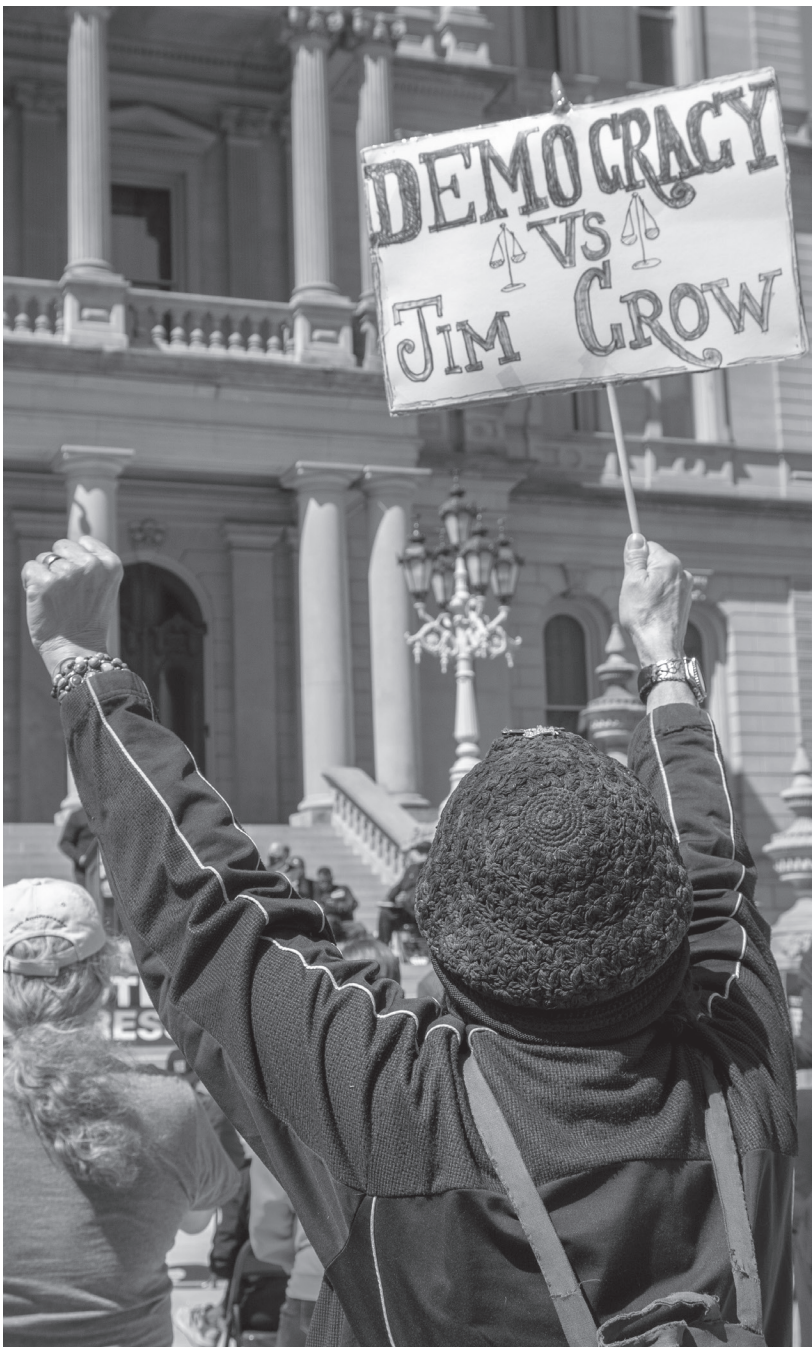


Yassamine Mather on Iran's Gender Apartheid & Workers' Actions

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# AGAINST THE **CURRENT**

**After the Elections — the Smoke Thickens**



**The Black Internationalism  
of William Gardner Smith**

♦ **ALAN WALD**

Reviews on

***Elite Capture & George Floyd***

♦ **OWÓLABI ABOYADE, MALIK MIAH**

Also

**Toward Fascism in Russia?**

♦ **ZAKHAR POPOVYCH**

**Health in Ukraine**

♦ **SAM FRIEDMAN**



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# A Letter from the Editors

## The Smoke Thickens

THE SMOKE HAS cleared, or more accurately thickened, over the U.S. midterm election results. The result of the Georgia Senate runoff means that Democratic control of the Senate (51-49) will become a bit less razor-thin. Has the crisis of “our democracy” passed? Not by a long shot.

The rightwing intention going into the November election was evident: to complete the abortive January 6, 2021 quasi-“insurrectionist” riot by more systematic political means. The objectives were not only to establish large Congressional and Senate Republican majorities, but to elect candidates in the “battleground” state governments with authority to overturn future election results.

That project mostly crashed and burned, due to voter turnout in places like Pennsylvania, Michigan and Arizona — sometimes by decisive but some by very narrow margins. Rearguard rightwing attempts to block routine certification of election results, e.g. in Arizona and Michigan, fizzled — this time. Although the setback of this phase of the far-right power grab marks an important moment, the threat that these maneuvers revealed is by no means ended.

Republicans will take over the House of Representatives by a much smaller majority than had been expected. Democrats may extend a word of thanks to one of the most despicable human beings on the planet — Samuel Alito, author of the unhinged Supreme Court ruling wiping out a half century of federal protection for abortion rights. Alito had been waiting in the weeds for that moment ever since his 2006 confirmation hearings, where he said that Roe “deserved respect.”

While the right wing celebrated its triumph, women-led popular revulsion over that decision spearheaded the voter turnout that held back the anticipated reactionary “red wave.”

Will the Republican Party cling to the soiled coattails of Donald Trump, or cast him aside as he’s outlived his usefulness? How bloody the party’s internal war might be, whether Trump will face prosecution for his astonishing list of criminal acts, or who will be running for president in 2024 for either of the two capitalist parties — all of this will provide full-employment opportunities for commentators.

How gridlocked Congress may be for the next two years is another open question. Certainly, however, serious progress on fundamental issues shaping people’s lives in this crisis-ridden society will be extremely unlikely — whether on access to health care, on inequality and child poverty, on racial injustice at every level, on a potential stagflation recession, and above all on the ever-escalating climate catastrophe.

One outcome emerges clearly: the polarization and crisis of U.S. politics continues. There should not be illusions that the election results mean a “re-normalization” of business-as-usual political stability. The appearance of return-to-normality may result from the receding of immediate prospects of exploding post-election violence. But events like the Club Q mass shooting; a group of organized Proud Boys disrupting a drag storyline event in Columbus, Ohio; and the targeted attack on a North Carolina power system, possibly to cut power to a drag show — all illustrate the pervasive dangers facing especially vulnerable groups in society targeted by the far right.

The slim Republican control of Congress makes it now

THE CORPORATE AGENDA of Joe Biden and both capitalist parties is on full display in the “bipartisan” legislation ramming a wretched contract down the throats of U.S. railroad workers. Before the midterms, the deal — failing to meet the rail unions’ number one demand for a reasonable seven days of paid sick leave annually — was engineered by the self-styled “most pro-labor President” Biden and his Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, a former labor leader. When the memberships of four unions turned it down, Democrats and Republicans in the Congress and Senate united to impose it at Biden’s request under the *Railway Labor Act*. *It’s a shameful betrayal, but entirely in keeping with Biden’s and congressional leaders’ roles as general representatives of the capitalist class.* ■

unlikely that they’d try to ram through a national abortion ban, or force a crisis over government funding. But the institutions of “stability” in this country remain frayed. As much as 40 percent of the population, and a majority of Republican voters, continue to inhabit the reality-free parallel ideological universe of 2020 election denial, “white replacement” theory, extreme transphobia and other symptoms of collective insanity.

This craftily manipulated psychosis is on display at local school board and library commission meetings where the far right, trading under names like “Mothers

for Liberty,” turn out to force removal of books deemed “sexually explicit” in depicting the lives of gay, lesbian or transgender kids. These are vicious and cynical attacks on the humanity of some of this society’s most vulnerable youth. Equally awful, these reactionaries have reached out to minority communities — in the case of Dearborn, Michigan for example, to Arab and Muslim residents — who are themselves menaced by white Christian nationalism.

The spirit of the Capitol riot lives in the shadows. Despite the Republicans’ incipient internal civil war, or actually because of it, they can be expected to feed their base with road-to-nowhere Congressional “investigations” of everything from Hunter Biden’s laptop to the Afghanistan debacle to nullifying the Congressional January 6 inquiry.

### What the Election Meant

Voters’ response to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* obviously stood out. In every state with abortion rights referenda on the ballot, women’s right to choose won. It shows the important role that these referenda can play in exercising the people’s will — and the obstacles to democracy in states that don’t allow them.

The outraged response of women, and of decent people in general, energized a voter turnout that blunted what was expected to be a wave of Republican victories. In Michigan where same-day voter registration exists, college students waited in line for hours to register, then cast their vote.

That turnout contributed to the passage of an expansive

continued on the inside back cover

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## Inequality, Gender Apartheid & Revolt By Yassamine Mather

ON OCTOBER 16, 2022 Suzi Weissman interviewed Yassamine Mather on the demonstrations following Jina (Mahsa) Amini's murder for Jacobin Radio. Arrested by Iran's morality police for wearing a hijab too loosely, Amini was beaten to death and died in the hospital on September 16.

The protest movement quickly spread across the country and around the world as women took the lead, hurling their hijab and chopping off their hair. These demonstrations represent the biggest challenge the Islamic Republic has ever faced and are continuing and even growing larger. But in the first three months of demonstrations throughout Iran almost 500 people have been killed and there have been a number of short workers' strikes, including at the Shana-han steel plant.

Yassamine Mather is an Iranian scholar and chair of Hands Off the People of Iran (See <https://handsoffiran.com>). She's associated with the Middle East Center at Oxford University, where she's also a scientific developer at Advanced Research Computing. She's the acting editor of Critique, a journal of Socialist Theory and has written several articles on the protests in the Weekly Worker, which is available online (<https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/authors/yassamine-mather>).

**Suzi Weissman:** You've written a very strong statement that is available on the Hands Off the People of Iran website condemning the regime violence and analyzing the protest movement. Could you set the stage for us?

**Yassamine Mather:** These protests came at a time when there was a lot of dissatisfaction in the country. The nuclear talks between Iran and various Western powers, Russia and China had come to a standstill. This has a direct effect on people's daily lives as the cost of living is very high.

People are aware of absolutely widespread corruption in the country. The gap between the rich and the poor is everywhere, but in Iran it's one of the highest, even in comparison with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Add to this of course 43, almost 44 years where women have been treated as second class citizens. Iran is different from the Taliban in Afghanistan in that the government hasn't stopped higher education, partly because of what it sees as its position in the

global capitalist world, but also because of urbanization and the longer-term involvement of women in society prior to 1979.

Women were allowed education and higher education. But this didn't mean that gender apartheid, the form of second-class citizenship for women, was taken away. Women didn't find employment after finishing the university. It was very difficult to maintain permanent posts.

They had contract jobs. So in a country where there is lack of employment security, women were at the bottom level. But also, the result of sanctions has made those in power richer and more powerful.

These people have used sanctions to create their own black market, creating a distribution system for basic food and goods at prices ordinary people find very difficult.

### Workers' Protests in Early December

AT THE BEGINNING of December as we entered the 11th week of nationwide protests in Iran, there were reports of strikes in a number of production centers, including important industries such as the plants of the Esfahan Steel company.

According to the Free Union of Iranian Workers, employees at the Zob Ahan Esfahan Steel plant went on strike on November 27, protesting against the company's "failure to fulfil earlier promises." The previous dispute had been about low wages, which workers at the plant say are "lower than in other steel companies in Iran." They are demanding substantial pay rises.

There were also reports of a strike by employees of the Pars Khazar home-appliance company in Alborz Industrial City in Alvand. In a short video published on social media, the workers call out: "Shout, workers, shout for your rights!"

Workers at the Sarma Afarin company at the Alborz Industrial City in Qazvin have also been on strike. The company produces heating and air-conditioning systems, including compression chillers. And employees at the Mortab car company stopped work nine months ago after their wages were not paid.

Of course labor protests are often suppressed in Iran and almost immediately become political. In fact it is clear from the

Here again, women are suffering more than men because it's the women who have to deal with feeding the family. Very few women are free of this task. In that sense Amini's death was the inevitable spark, one still growing every day.

I thought the protests would last two weeks, others thought it might last three weeks. We are now entering the fifth week and it's not dying but continuing.

Of course there have been similar protests, maybe even bigger ones in 2009. But what is different this time is their spread and the fact that it has gone beyond the normal circle. Everybody finds their way of joining the protest. If you're unemployed, you're joining to express your grievance.

If you are a worker like the workers in petrochemical industry or in the steel

slogans of the workers that their demands go beyond wages and include wider social issues. In the industrial city of Isfahan we have seen a level of coordination between workers' strikes and protests on university campuses and on the streets, but we have to note that such coordination is rare.

However, three groups — Haft Tepe Sugarcane Workers, the Coordinating Committee to Establish Labor Organizations, and the Union of Retired Employees — have issued a joint statement supporting the "oppressed people of Kurdistan" and condemning the killings in Kurdish cities. The statement, addressing the "free people of Iran," says:

*"Having freedom in various fields is a basic right, and it is the demand of those who have stepped forward in various fields of struggle in the past four decades and have worked hard in this way."*

The statement notes that the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran "not only fail to listen to our most basic demands, but they have responded to every request and demand with bullets."

The three groups also demand the immediate withdrawal of all repressive armed forces from Kurdistan, the unconditional release of all political prisoners there, and the ending of rocket attacks in the whole Kurdistan region. —Y.M.



Protest in Saqqez, Iranian Kurdistan, 40 days after the killing of Jina/ Mahsa Amini.

factory in Ahvaz, you join it because your salaries haven't been paid, your firm has been privatized, and all sorts of other reasons.

It's becoming a very unpredictable set of protests. An uprising, you could call it. I wouldn't call it a revolution, but uprisings.

### Generations in Revolt

**SW:** *It's gone international, and I think that's really important. You see memes of women chopping off their locks in solidarity with women in Iran, especially in Europe where you're seeing massive demonstrations.*

*But it's more than just women. Could you talk a little bit more about who is marching? Some say it's Gen Z, the younger generation that has grown up long past the time of any revolutionary fervor for the Islamic regime. Have social media allowed them to see what people their age all around the world are like? Is it just young people not wanting to be held back by the reactionary regime?*

**YM:** We have to admit that the younger generation have been very prominent, the first on the streets, students in school, university students. But it's not just them.

This is a generation well aware of what is happening globally. Of course, you could say the same is true of the older generation — it's not like the 30-year-olds didn't know what is happening — but young people see it on their phones. So they are, if you like, more connected to what is going on globally.

A dictatorship normally has the wisdom to stay away from people's private lives. For example, the Shah's regime was a dictator-

ship, but it was very clear that the government didn't interfere in the private lives of people. In fact, it turned a complete blind eye to whatever people did; that's how a regime survives.

The Islamic Republic made a serious mistake, threatening its own survival. It is repressive, it's a neoliberal capitalist system. It exploits workers more than most other countries, it is corrupt — and then it wants to interfere in what people wear, what they drink, where they go.

Can young men and women, or men and women in general mix, in a social gathering? It's not just the young who are upset about this. I think the 30-, 40- or even 50-year-olds find it an unnecessary interfer-

ence in their daily life.

Although it's true that school students have been braver than older women, still you see women with hijabs walking with the protesters, saying, "I want to keep my headscarf, but I defend the right of others to not wear a hijab. That is fair enough."

And you hear all the women joining the protests saying, "I wish I had done something about this 20 years ago."

### Cracks in the System?

**SW:** *There were protests in 2009. The 2019 protests were part of worldwide protests against austerity and neoliberalism. But every time it looks like that's going to be the end of the Islamic regime, and it never is.*

*As you say, this regime does not try to concede even in a way that the shah did. They upped the ante against women and others who will not conform to the dictates of their law.*

*Is crackdown the only thing they know how to operate? Is it a way of saying: "The Islamic regime is not over and we refuse to bend?" Are there any divisions within the ruling groups?*

**YM:** Very important questions. Remember that the Islamic Republic has many different forces for repression, and it hasn't used all of them. It has the *Basij*, which is supposedly a militia type force. It has the Revolutionary Guards — some people say the Revolutionary Guards haven't been fully deployed against the civilian population. It also has what is called the religious police; they are very prominent in these events.

It is becoming clear is that some within these forces are now beginning to doubt. I can't give you a percentage, but there is enough evidence to see that.

For example, there are a lot of stories about the Revolutionary Guards asking over the Internet, or over social media, "Is my pension secure if the regime changes?" This is the first time these people are actually concerned about the possibility that the provider won't survive.

There are examples of security forces being taken prisoner, beaten up and in a number of occasions, at least according to the government, killed by the protesters.

So we are seeing a very high level of tension in the country, and that has created divisions amongst the rulers. The "reformist" faction — this is a false name because I can't really consider someone who supports the Islamic Republic as reformist — the so-called reformist faction is saying, "Maybe we really shouldn't bother about the headscarf. That's not important. Let's go back to the nuclear talks and solve the economic situation."

Among religious people in Qom there are a couple of senior ayatollahs who have said there is nothing in the Koran about the hijab. It's a voluntary decision to wear. And so you can see there are divisions.

However, as you rightly point out, it really is difficult to get rid of this government. The Islamic regime has a lot of people who are paid directly to suppress others, and it will rely on them. Clearly some are in doubt now, but you can't say the problem is solved.

Clearly the government's attempt to say, "This is a U.S. plot" or "It's a Western plot" doesn't really work when people are in the street and see who is going on the demonstration, and even see the slogans at the protests, written on walls or banners hanging from bridges. That's why the security forces rush to clean up before the working day starts again.

A lot of women in the demonstrations say, "my father died for the Iran-Iraq war or 'my brother was in the *pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards)." I don't think they are lying.

It is difficult for the government to say this is just a plot or something. And I think the international support, especially when it comes from women going on the protest and cutting their hair, is helpful. But remember, this is not a government that worries about public opinion outside its borders. It's not a normal state.

### What About Sanctions

**SW:** *What about the larger debate over the effectiveness of sanctions? This seems to be the only tool that the West uses — short of a military option, which is not really something that they see as desirable. The only thing we see is the imposition of even more sanctions. This generally affects the population more than the*

leadership. You mentioned that sanctions have enriched the powerful. Could you talk more about that?

**YM:** Sanctions on Iran are very long term. Some of them started in 1979, then more were added in 2000, 2007, 2014 — every decade has been more and more. So the regime has learned to live with them.

The regime has allies in Russia and North Korea. I know North Korea can't give much to anybody, but in terms of military or nuclear facilities it can help other countries.

Sanctions have been used by the government as an excuse. Every financial issue, whether non-payment of wages or the everyday rise in prices are blamed on sanctions. The reality is that it's not just sanctions, and at times it's not sanctions at all, that have created the economic problems of the Islamic Republic.

The Islamic Republic follows every rule that the International Monetary Fund issues regarding privatizations. The last big protests in Iran were because the government ended subsidies for fuel. The IMF then praised the government for ending those subsidies.

However, placing blame on the sanctions is a very good tool for the government: "Oh, no, the economy is not our fault. It's because of sanctions."

The other tool the government has is the ability of using the foreign enemy to rally its own forces. That's very good for the regime and damaging to protesters. We should be wary of those dangers.

**SW:** Could you tell us about the closer relationship between Iran and Russia, especially as Putin has become a pariah in the world now, even criticized by India and China. In one of your articles you hint at a growing level of collusion, not only with Russia but with Saudi Arabia. Is Putin in some way a role model and hero of dictatorships?

**YM:** I think for some people in the developing world, in the emerging economies as I keep calling them, Putin has become a bit of a role model. This also, of course, coincides with the U.S. decline.

People view it in two different ways. One is that it's beneficial for Iran to have this relationship with Putin. Additionally some people inside Iran remark that Putin invading Ukraine has encouraged regimes like Iran to be tougher, more dictatorial.

That's a very bad sign, especially for those forces on the left who have illusions about Russia and its role in the global economy and world politics. What are they talking about? Are they saying it's a good thing that dictatorships are emboldened by Putin's war?

Iran did provide Russia with drones. Again there are two positions — I'm not sure which one is true because I'm not a military person — some say the drones were completely useless and others are saying they were very useful.

There is also the factor of the new military commander, Sergey Surovikin, whom Putin has put in charge of the war in Ukraine. He has a background in Syria, which is his claim to fame. While there he collaborated with Iranian senior Revolutionary Guards who were on the same side. That's another nasty piece of collaboration.

### The Uncertain Future

**SW:** I can't ask you if you think that the regime will topple, but do you think that there's any possibility of a way out for the regime? Can they find a way to stop the protests and restore some form of order in Iran?

**YM:** That's difficult to say because you have to remember that there isn't a clear leadership in the uprising. There are good reasons why there isn't, but it's a disadvantage when no one sees a potential alternative.

Of course, alternatives proposed by the United States or Saudi Arabia are in such ill repute that they wouldn't succeed without some kind of military intervention.

## Student Strikes, Regime Cracks

THE DAYS OF protests were announced by Iranian university students earlier this week to mark Student Day. Videos from many Iranian cities confirm that shops were closed and many workers went on strike for at least a day in most of the country's larger production plants. Protesters used nightfall to demonstrate and shout slogans — although in some cities, including Tehran, the season's first cold weather reduced numbers.

On December 3, attorney general Mohammad Jafar Montazeri was asked, "Why was the Gasht-e Ershad shut down?" The Gasht-e Ershad (literally "Guidance Patrol") is the so-called "morality police." Montazeri dodged the question by stating that it had "nothing to do with the judiciary," and was "established elsewhere in the past" But, of course, "the judiciary will continue to monitor everyone's behavior in the community."

The statement came at a time when there is talk of "decriminalizing" the "poor hijab" and replacing this with a penalty system, based on CCTV and face recognition systems that will issue immediate fines.

All this was followed by conflicting reports about whether there were actual plans for dismantling the Guidance Patrol. But if anyone thought this was a sign of the regime retreating in the face of mass protests, it is now clear that this was not the case. The head of Iran's judiciary, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i, announced that an unspecified number of protesters had been given death sentences. They were accused of "corruption on earth" and "waging war against god."

Given the seriousness of the crises and mass dissatisfaction, the authorities have been calling the protesters "thugs," who are

The left is weak and divided. It is confused globally, but inside Iran it's even more confused. So it's very difficult to see how some of the slogans that the left and the working class are bringing to the protests can take root under these circumstances.

The state is in a difficult position because they can't back down. They've said these protests are all the work of the United States and Israel. Since they've put their foot down, they can't retreat. The situation is, in a way, at an impasse.

Whether some factions within the regime will force it to make compromises is a possibility, and unfortunately, that would lengthen the regime's life. But the reformers are something of a spent force, especially irrelevant to the younger generation. It is very difficult to see that the spontaneous movement can develop within its own ranks a revolutionary alternative.

**SW:** Yassamine Mather, I want to thank you for your insights and this overview. ■

agents of foreign powers, acting in "mobs." On the other hand, leaked information makes it clear that there is considerable debate on how to respond.

Following a cyberattack on *Fars News*, the propaganda arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), a group called Black Reward managed to copy data and subsequently released it. Iran is accusing Israel's Mossad of responsibility. Among the videos shown by the group there is footage of the terrible conditions in the country's prisons.

Black Reward has also published a series of secret official documents. Some of these show the inefficiency, corruption and power struggles at the highest levels. Clearly in these circles everyone admires the "emperor" (ie, the supreme leader), but no-one admits that the crises unfolding before their very eyes could end up challenging the ayatollah's rule.

According to these leaked documents, a special bulletin prepared by media experts for IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami notes that the *Basij* paramilitary organization is too weak to stop the protests. Indeed, at least 115 military personnel have been arrested on charges of participating in the ongoing protest movement.

The leaked documents cited "experts" as saying that there is "a considerable amount of doubt and uncertainty among the revolutionary forces" (meaning the regime's own forces, of course). Additionally, *Fars* officials noted that the protest movement "considers the greatest achievement of the recent riots to be the loss of fear. Protesters are no longer scared of the military and police forces." — Y.M. (See full article on ATC website.)

## Human Suffering, Mutual Aid, Public Health: Future Struggles in Ukraine

By Sam Friedman



*Ukraine's health care in crisis as even maternity wards are targeted by Russian attacks.*

FOLLOWING RUSSIA'S INVASION of Ukraine last February, the political left in the United States country and much of the world has been divided about whether to support the Ukrainians in defending their right to self-determination, the Russian invaders in their efforts to "defeat Ukrainian fascism" or "restore the Russian homeland," or whether to seek an abstract "peace."

I have taken part in many such discussions as a supporter of the right of the Ukrainian people to determine their own destiny, and thus as a supporter of the defeat of the Russian invasion. What I have rarely noticed in these discussions, however, is any deep understanding of the current realities and future lives of Ukrainian people as people.

I feel this in part because I have worked closely with many Ukrainian friends since 2010 in efforts to prevent the spread of

HIV/AIDS among people who use drugs, sex workers and gay men and other men who have sex with men.

In many of these years, I have traveled to Ukraine two or three times, for up to three weeks a visit. Most of that time has been spent in or near Kyiv or Odesa, but I also spent some time setting up projects in Simferopol and Sevastopol (the two largest cities of Crimea), Kriviy Rih in central Ukraine, and Lviv in the western part of the country.

In the course of these trips, I have made many friends. In many ways they were comrades in struggle, with the struggle in question being the effort to protect people against infection and related efforts to get these people the best possible medical care.

I also recognize that in spite of this involvement with them, and in spite of my own Ukrainian Jewish ancestry, my understanding of Ukraine and of the suffering of its people is only partial.

During the Maidan Revolution of 2013-2014, and the months thereafter, some of my friends took an active part. Others did not. My interviews with them were the basis for a paper I wrote on these struggles. (<https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/what-happened-in-ukraine/>)

### Pandemic, Then War

The pandemic disrupted my ability to travel to Ukraine, and disrupted the lives of my friends. Nonetheless, they continued their work trying to reduce the spread of HIV and to help people get good care.

The invasion of Ukraine seriously disrupted their efforts. Much of their energy has gone into driving what had been AIDS prevention vans to deliver medical supplies and food to hospitals and other organizations that needed them, including in frequently shelled areas. These supplies included medicines for the HIV infected and methadone for people who use drugs.

I have had several zoom conversations with my Ukrainian friends and exchanged many emails with them about conditions in the country. Some of what I will describe may be known or assumed by readers, but much may not.

First, even for those not in the military, the war has led to massive amounts of overwork and burnout. Some of this is due to a commonplace of class struggle: During wartime, governments and employers prevent strikes and routine workplace self-defense efforts, and get a degree of worker support for this based on cries for national unity. (This was much of the motivation for the revolutionary struggles in Europe at the end of World War I, and the wartime strikes and post-war strike wave in the United States in the 1940s.)

In Ukraine, overwork and burnout are increased by volunteer efforts to help in war-related tasks and by volunteering to help those in need. In addition, the frequent need to deal with the aftermath of damages caused by bombs or shelling adds both to stress and overwork.

Importantly, however, much of this volunteering is conducted and led by people who mobilize themselves independently of governments or employers. It is a social mutual aid response to meet each others' needs and to build their own destiny. As such, it is one important seed from which later social struggles may grow.

Second, medical conditions have deteriorated. Hundreds of health facilities have been destroyed by Russian attacks and many others looted by Russian troops. COVID

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*Sam Friedman is a longtime socialist public health researcher and activist, particularly around HIV issues. He makes this important acknowledgment: I wrote this paper in interaction with Ukrainian colleagues who chose to remain anonymous. They fully deserve co-authorship, but under the circumstances chose not to make their names public. They also may not agree with elements of my political perspective.*

vaccination was paused, increasing vulnerability to disease and death.

Ukraine had high tuberculosis rates before the war. TB and COVID spread has probably increased due to the time people spend crowded in subways/bomb shelters, and overcrowded housing due to the destruction of many buildings, with a partial and lesser mitigation due to the decline of nightlife and similar crowded gatherings.

Water supplies have been disrupted in many regions, and there has been unconfirmed news of a cholera outbreak in Mariupol. Many people have had their housing destroyed. Increasingly, as Russia has attacked infrastructure; millions have had their access to power or to heating fuels reduced or eliminated.

Homelessness or informal housing causes stress, overwork, and exposure to cold and the weather more generally. Moving in with others often causes massive stress for everyone. And winter makes these conditions worse — even in southern Ukraine, as in Odesa, winters can be cold and icy.

### **Displacement, Disease and Drugs**

As mentioned above, my work with Ukrainians centered around HIV, particularly among people who use drugs and among sex workers. One effect of the war is likely to be massive increases in both drug use and sex work, and in the diseases like HIV, hepatitis C, and STIs that these spread.

There are already many signs that this is already occurring. Many displaced people — particularly women — are finding that sex work is their best available or only income source. Their potential clientele is increased because many women and children left the country, but this was forbidden for men.

Stress from having to leave your home and moving to another part of Ukraine may be leading large numbers of people to take up drug use. There is some preliminary evidence that this is happening in Odesa, for example. In addition, pain from war-related injuries or psychological trauma may lead some soldiers, ex-soldiers and civilians to begin to use drugs.<sup>1</sup>

There are of course many other health issues to be concerned about. I remember talking with some American veterans of the Iraq War in 2004 or thereabouts about their fear of exposure to depleted uranium from U.S. anti-tank shells. Undoubtedly, many forms of toxic exposure are affecting both civilians and soldiers in Ukraine. Their effects will become evident in future years.

So far, my discussion has focused on people living in areas controlled by Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians, mainly women and children, have fled to various countries in other parts of Europe or to the Americas. They face many but varying problems (even if less severe than those faced by darker-

skinned migrants or those from the global South.)

More ominously, many Ukrainians live in areas controlled by Russian forces, or that have been controlled by Russia and been reconquered by Ukraine. Others in large numbers have been forced to move to Russia.

Most or all of the members of these groups of people have faced various hardships that I know little about. Their traumas will play out in future years.

Drug users and sex workers under Russian rule will have to endure the rigors of Russia's highly stigmatizing environment that prohibits access to lifesaving drugs like methadone or buprenorphine, and is deeply hostile for all forms of harm reduction for people who use drugs or for sex workers.

Hundreds of people died in Crimea after Russia cut off access to methadone there. People who are queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual will have to face the stigmatization and oppression embodied in recent laws against LGBTQ "propaganda" as enforced by a harsh state under constant pressure from homophobic religious and other rightwing forces.

### **Problematic Future Prospects**

Even if the war were to end tomorrow, Ukrainians will face difficulties for many years to come. PTSD will be widespread, as will be the effects of missed vaccinations for childhood diseases and for COVID-19.

In addition, many people may be victimized by the future politics of Ukraine. Any postwar period is likely to see many potential struggles and the effort of government to limit them by divide and rule strategies.

Ukrainian politics is already quite right wing, oriented to neoliberalism and anti-unionism. As mentioned before, working people are likely to make demands and organize strikes and other struggles when the war ends — and financial constraints and the needs of corporations will force them and the government to resist.

Faced with social unrest, governments often respond by moralistic politics that scapegoat the vulnerable. This is what the Nixon forces did in the United States in the early 1970s with their "wars" on drugs and on crime. More generally, in many countries people who use drugs, sex workers, alcoholics, women who need abortions, and (e.g. in Iran) women who refuse to wear the hijab are examples of other people scapegoated by governments and corporations facing challenges to their power.

In a postwar Ukraine, efforts at scapegoating will be hampered by the extent to which the war has built many forms of solidarity among people of various backgrounds — and by the fact that any reactionary policy echoing "Russian values" or "Russian ways of doing things" will seem suspect or

anathema to most Ukrainians.

Nonetheless there remains a strong right wing and moralistic strain within Ukrainian politics, and politicians' and employers' "need" to divide workers and communities seeking improved lives may lead to scapegoating to provoke such divisions.

Although the Ukrainian government has been supportive of donor-funded harm reduction services both before the Russian invasion and so far during the war, these policies might become a critical political battle if the right chooses to focus on people who use drugs, gay men, and sex workers in the postwar period. (This of course assumes that Ukraine will continue to exist and will not be destroyed by a Russian annexation.)

I am continuing to work (from afar) with Ukrainians to protect public health there. As such, if scapegoating politics do become important, I will support efforts to maintain and strengthen harm reduction and other programs that keep people who use drugs, sex workers, sexual minorities and others relatively safe from disease and other harms.

Not only would cutbacks in these programs lead to disease spread, they would be deeply stigmatizing and hurtful of many groups of people. The politics behind such cutbacks would divide working class communities and people at work in ways that weaken their ability to defend themselves against attacks on labor and other demands by the powerful.

There are other ways, besides moralistic ones, to divide the working class and working class communities. If the pressures of neoliberalism and/or the International Monetary Fund for cutbacks in government spending and in workers' wages and conditions become strong enough, and drive unemployment to high levels, this might lead to programs to reserve jobs for men (or perhaps women) who were soldiers.

The probably-unavoidable realities of starving and delinquent orphans and other street kids in the war's aftermath could strengthen a scapegoating attack on "bad mothers" who do not supervise children adequately. Efforts to divide workers who are on strike from those who are not could become vicious. Scapegoating on the basis of language or of having radical politics also might be successful.

In short, we on the American left who support Ukrainian efforts against Russian imperialist invasion and oppression should understand that any end of the war is likely to see heightened social struggle within Ukraine (and indeed in Russia).

It will also lead to many major health problems within Ukraine. During the war, and afterward, we should work to strengthen the power of working-class communities to battle their enemies and to support harm

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*Russian missile and drone attacks on Ukraine's power grid, an attempt to freeze and starve the civilian population.*

## Ukrainian Massacres: Russia's Road Toward Fascism? By Zakhar Popovych

WAR IN UKRAINE is plunging more and more into massacre but possibly the worst is about to come. Mass killings of prisoners and civilians, numerous and systematic rape in Russian-occupied territories are now “normal” news from Ukraine. Millions could be killed this winter by freezing alive in their apartments without heat, water and electricity.

The daily count of dead is far higher than at any moment of the Donbas wars of 2014-2021. According to reports from both sides, the death toll probably exceeds 100,000 from the beginning of the war, and may now be higher than a thousand combatants and civilians daily.<sup>1</sup>

Not just the scale but the cruelty of violence is steadily rising and Russian state propaganda is systematically pushing for escalation. If it is not genocide yet, the ideology for eliminating Ukrainians in the millions is already announced on Russian state TV, and by high-ranking officials.

Russians claim it is “denazification,” but it turns closer and closer to the ideology of fascism and Nazi state practices.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to say how deep Ukraine will dive into this abyss of terror, but it is clear that withdrawal of Russian troops is the best way to “denazify” Ukraine — and possibly Russia.

In October, Russian armed forces began systematic attacks against the Ukrainian electricity grid and civilian infrastructure including water supply facilities of the major cities. These activities don't have immediate military significance and don't

influence Ukrainian armed forces' ability to fight. But these attacks are affecting the chances of the civil population to survive this winter.

Most Ukrainian homes rely on the central heating connected to the unified system of heating pipes that receive heat from the thermoelectric power plants. Destroying thermoelectric power plants, high-voltage electricity supply lines, water supply and sewerage will make Ukrainian cities unlivable for millions of their inhabitants.

People will die if not evacuated, and there is almost no chance it would be possible to evacuate another ten million people quickly. Around 30% of Ukrainian power generation was affected just in days, and if another 30-50% will be destroyed the heating and electricity will immediately halt.

If this happens when the outside temperature will be below freezing, which is typical of Ukrainian winter, water pipes will also crack and most of the people will be cut out of water. People would have just a couple of days to evacuate before their apartments would freeze down and they would freeze to death. Many elderly and disabled will have no chance.

This is exactly what Russia wants. According to the major Russian TV channels they want to “freeze Ukraine” to force it to surrender, as explicitly stated by deputy head Medvedev of Russia's state security council.

That Ukrainian civil infrastructure is now the main target of Russian strikes was confirmed by Putin.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously one Russian TV presenter, Anton Krasovsky, suggested drowning Ukrainian children if they don't like Russian occupation.

You might remember how a member of State Duma of

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the Russian Federation, Aleksey Zhuravlyov, announced that Russia should kill just around two million Ukrainians who are probably not amenable for re-education into little Russians.<sup>4</sup> Later the former leader of the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic, Pavel Gubarev, amended that to say 4-5 million would be killed if necessary.<sup>5</sup>

The previously reported killing of 53 captured Ukrainian combatants in a Russian-held prisoner of war camp also manifested quite persuasively the intention to turn from the war of attrition to one of extinction. We don't know exactly who killed Ukrainian POWs in Olenivka prison, but we do know that such action is exactly in line with Russian state propaganda that already demanded the death penalty for all of them.

All members of Ukrainian armed forces are members of particular units and almost each unit, as Russians claim, is another "nationalist battalion." By Russian official logic all the members of those battalions are "fascists" to be just killed.

Russian authorities are not interested in any kind of investigation of the Azov battalion's crimes of 2014-15, just because most of the current members of this unit of Ukrainian armed forces could not have any relation to those acts because they were not yet conscripted.

It would be good to investigate all the events of 2014 and later years, but that is not what Russia is interested in. If most present Azov members appeared unrelated to any significant crime, it would directly contradict the narrative of Russian propaganda. Probably, the Russian military and Federal Security Service personnel who themselves committed numerous crimes were disappointed that "Azov crimes" appeared much less significant than their own.

We do know that Ukrainian POWs were held in prison in the so-called "Donetsk Peoples Republic" where Russians once again restored the death penalty. And we do know some were tortured in Russian prisons.

If Russians wanted an investigation, they could do it in any prison in Russia where no Ukrainian missile can reach — but they don't want to. Maybe Russian investigators were just afraid to show in open trial those POWs whose "confessions" were made under torture?

Some people say Ukrainians be better off surrendering. Even my daughter, who is 12 and now a refugee in Poland, once asked me: Maybe we should just stop fighting to save lives? I was not sure how to explain to her that I doubt that we really have such an option.

She also raised the question of fascism: Why is everybody talking about the fascism now? Who are fascists? Are Russians fascists? Are people from Azov really Nazis? Not easy questions. Then she became interested in the Holocaust and when I visited her in Krakow, we decided to go for a day trip to Auschwitz and to witness the gas chambers where 5000 human beings were killed by Nazis daily after their countries were occupied.

At that time, we hoped that no mass killings and tortures were occurring in Russian POW camps. After Olenivka we know precisely the opposite: mass killings and tortures are unfortunately the ultimate reality. Anyway, those who still think that it is better for Ukrainians to surrender should think twice.

It's hard to find terms more obscure, yet widely used in mass media, than "fascism" and "Nazism." Russian media

claim that Russian armed forces are now fighting Ukrainian "fascists" for the "denazification" of Ukraine. Contrariwise, Ukrainians claim we are fighting "Russo-fascist" invaders who loot, rape and kill civilians including babies and children of kindergarten age.

The consequences of Russian occupation include mass graves and severe damages to multi-store apartment buildings in Bucha, Irpin and Borodianka (30-50 kilometers northeast from downtown Kyiv). These pictures definitely remind Ukrainians of their fight against Nazi Germany and "Germano-fascist" invaders in 1941-1944.

## Anti-Fascisms?

During the Cold War, Americans were taught to identify their World War II ally exclusively with Russia, while up to one third of the Red Army and Soviet Union military industry was actually from the Ukrainian Soviet republic. Soviet T-34 tanks were actually designed and produced in Ukraine and later by Ukrainian workers and engineers evacuated to the Urals. Tank production on the famous Russian Uralvagonzavod was launched in 1941 by Ukrainians evacuated from Kharkiv.

The fight against Nazi invasion and occupation was relatively more traumatic for Ukrainians (and Belarusians) than for Russians, as only part of Russia was actually occupied and a relatively smaller percentage of its population killed, while the whole of Ukraine was affected by the Axis occupation with the genocidal crimes of Nazism.<sup>6</sup>

In virtually in every Ukrainian family there are relatives killed in World War II. Both my grandfathers Sergii and Vadym were killed in the armed forces while resisting the Nazi invasion, Sergii in 1941 and Vadym in 1944.

It was a bloody colonial war of extinction aimed in the long term to eliminate as many Slavs as possible, including Ukrainians and push the remaining Russians over the Volga river and into the Urals. As Himmler once put it: "I am totally indifferent to the fate of Russians, the Czechs... whether they live or starve, I am only interested in the extent that we need them as slaves"<sup>7</sup>

"Fascism" for Ukrainians is just another synonym of absolute evil. Nothing comparable was experienced by people of Ukraine from October 1944 until February 24, 2022 and it's very natural for Ukrainian who see mass graves in Bucha to recall mass graves of Babi Yar in Kyiv. We are lucky of course that the confirmed scale of mass killings is still significantly smaller than 80 years ago — but unfortunately we still don't know how many people are buried in mass graves in Mariupol.

Hopefully the reader will now understand why Ukrainians claim they are fighting a patriotic liberation war against fascism. It is a natural part of our collective memory. Ukrainians always considered themselves as a nation that defeated fascism in WW II, together with Russians, Americans and all other Allies of course, but as a nation that played its own specific and not less important role than other allies.

I would even argue that the official Russian interpretation of "fascism"<sup>8</sup> which also refers to the World War II experience is a bit different from the Ukrainian one, given the different nature of this experience and its later reflections.

Moscow always saw the victory over Nazi Germany not only as a liberation of Russian soil, but as an important step in building the great Soviet empire headed by Russia and the

Russian people. Victory made the Soviet Union a great world power and secured its military control over huge territories far beyond the borders of Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine as the “second republic” of the Soviet Union of course partially benefited from this new imperialist project, but much less enthusiastically, and also found itself as a subject of the Russian imperialist oppression and Russification. The politics of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet rulers towards Ukraine appeared very different from the declarations of equality made in the 1920s when the Union was established.

I am not denying the Russian anti-fascist narrative altogether, but I will and do argue that Ukrainian anti-fascism is more about self-liberation and self-emancipation, while the Russian, at least the official one, is much more about the liberation of others (sometimes against their will).

Antifascism celebrated by Stalin always was mixed with Great Russian chauvinism. If you had a chance to see the Soviet military memorial in the Treptow park in Berlin, you would notice that it is all packed with Stalin’s quotes about “Great Russian People” and references to the continuity between the Soviet antifascist struggle and the medieval wars conducted by Russian feudal princes like Aleksandr Nevsky against the Germans.

Walking around the Treptow park memorial, one could really suppose that Ukrainians and other peoples of Soviet Union never participated in the Soviet World War II effort.

While “liberating” another nation from its capitalists-blood-suckers can make some sense as an act of international class solidarity of workers and proletarians — at least it was declared in such a way by the Soviets — it is obviously senseless lies when we hear it from Putin, as contemporary Russia has nothing to offer other than semi-peripheral capitalism and imperialist-minded bureaucracy.<sup>9</sup>

Putin denies class solidarity in principle and generally considers solidarity and grassroots self-organization as the major threat to his own rule and imperialist project. This is why he hates Lenin so much.

## Fighting for Identity

Those of the “Left” who consider Putin a “lesser evil” are generally aiming to somehow preserve the status quo of quiet bourgeois life — not to challenge the imperialist system as a whole, bureaucratically dismissing the self-organization of grassroots movements as pro-American mobilizations inspired by CIA, fascists etc.

Grounded in this narrative, Putin identifies “anti-fascism” with the rebuilding of the Soviet Empire. Using such imperialist notions of “anti-fascism,” Russian propaganda can easily claim they are now fighting their “anti-fascist” war in Ukraine. But Ukrainians are fighting their own anti-fascist war of liberation against the brutal foreign invaders.

These invaders just deny Ukrainians’ right to existence, denying Ukrainian identity, state and nation with their “denazification” slogans.<sup>10</sup> As later clarified in an article in the official Russian state news agency, Ria-Novosti, “denazification” in fact means “de-Ukrainisation”<sup>11, 12</sup>

Ukrainians could be accepted into the unified Russian state as part of the “Rossijane”<sup>13</sup> like all other subjects of the Russian federation with some distinct folklore features, but no

right to consider themselves not belonging to Russia. Modern Ukrainian identity is multicultural, significantly Russian speaking and mostly bilingual, but insisting on our own right to decide by ourselves about our identity. And this exactly point is unacceptable for Putin.

Ukrainian identity is now evolving in response to the invasion. It is in the process of shaping and development, but the unprecedented consolidation of Ukrainian citizens of diverse ethnic backgrounds and language preferences strongly moves it from ethnic nationalism towards multiculturalism.

Indeed, knowledge of Ukrainian language is important as a distinct sign of Ukrainian identity, but I would argue that a typical true Ukrainian is at least bilingual. This multilingual identity is not because of limitations of the Ukrainian language, but because of the high level of mass education and higher education, which also attracts students from many countries.

Summing up, Ukrainians have a reason to consider our struggle “anti-fascist,” and it is natural for us, taking into account our experiences of anti-Nazi resistance and partisan guerilla warfare during World War II. Whether to resist is not Zelensky’s choice now. This is the definite choice of the Ukrainian people to wage the war of resistance.

The vast majority of the population in Ukraine absolutely don’t accept Putin’s intention to put them under the governance of his appointees and the terror of secret police, as he already did in the occupied eastern Donbas territories. The choice for Zelensky was only to organize effective resistance or do it inefficiently. To surrender was not an option.

I personally witnessed quite long military signup lines especially in the first days of the war. Millions of people including elderly, poor and Russian speakers voluntarily donated money to the Army. Hundreds of thousands including those with limited eligibility to the military service due to health conditions joined the Territorial Defense units (TD).

A great many men in their 40s, 50s and 60s, ordinary workers with absolutely no political affiliations and no military experience beyond the general conscription service when they were 18 years old, joined the Territorial Defense in their towns, took old Kalashnikov rifles and stopped Russian invaders near their homes. I saw many of them in Kyiv suburbs.

Not all TD members are angels, but you know they are defending their towns as they understand it. Recently even Russian state propaganda recognized that Ukrainians have strong will and readiness to defend their country.<sup>14</sup>

In 2019, most Ukrainians supported Zelensky as the alternative to the previous president Poroshenko’s belligerent ethnocentric nationalism because they believed that a cease-fire in Donbas was possible and desirable (and which Zelensky did almost everything possible to reach in 2020-21). Now in 2022 after Russian systematic attacks against the civil population, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians do not believe in Russian promises and support the Zelensky government in the nation’s war effort.

Putin has graphically proved that this is the only way to deal with him. So, my answer to the question of whether the world would be a better place if the Russian Army is driven back to the border is strictly positive. For Ukrainians, defeating Russian aggression is now a true struggle of grassroots self-organization, dignity and workers’ rights, cultural diversity, democracy and social justice.

## Fascisation of Russia?

Russian official “anti-fascism” is obviously just a mystification, but this of course is not sufficient to prove that Russia is fascist. Nevertheless, “fascisation” of Russia is now widely discussed, and it looks like it has already started and will probably continue.

Grigory Yudin points to the massive propaganda and terror that are pushing previously apolitical citizens to the cooperation with government out of fear of being denounced: passive masses begin to cooperate out of fear of becoming the victims.”<sup>15</sup>

Still, this is not yet the mass mobilizations of Nazi Germany or fascist Italy of 1930s. And again, vagueness and uncertainty of the concept of “fascism” leaves too much space for speculation. To be honest, I am not fully satisfied with most of the fascisation arguments, because they still appeal mostly to some external characteristics and historical comparisons, avoiding the question of the nature of the current phenomenon.

A famous attempt to capture the essence of fascism was made by Walter Benjamin in 1936, stating that it is the aestheticization of war, as the highest stage of *aestheticization* of politics.<sup>16</sup>

One can notice systematic aestheticization of the military in Russian society: from kindergarten children marching in WW II uniforms to the epic documentaries glorifying new strategic missiles and nuclear submarines. Now Russian state propaganda is staging sentimental photo-sessions with eight-year-olds<sup>17</sup> welcoming Russian soldiers who, as we know from Ukrainian media, are killing and raping Ukrainian children.

When Volodymyr Artiuk<sup>18</sup> points that “Ukrainian propaganda erases Soviet symbols and appeals to bodies and affects, [while] Russian propaganda stuffs the symbolic space with iconic signs while erasing [dead] bodies,” we see that Russian propaganda differs from Ukrainian precisely in the aestheticization of this politics of aggression, offence and rape.

I would argue that the new photos of President Zelensky and his wife published in *Vogue* magazine are the very opposite of the aestheticization of war. Many Ukrainian far right dismissed these photos exactly because they are not heroic, glorious and glamorous. One can see just a tired couple visibly trying to fulfill their day to day duties — no arms, no military orders and insignia. Possibly it is aestheticization of dignity and resistance, but not war.

**B**ut can we somehow connect the aestheticization of war with fundamental social and economic logic of the modern capitalist world system? Emmanuel Wallerstein in his book *Race, Nation, Class* (coauthored with Etienne Balibar) offered a simple and instrumental definition of racism as connected with a division of labor in the world system.

Thus, racism is obviously good enough as an ideology for *colonial* war, where states from the core of the world system are fighting to conquer the periphery. But classic racism is not quite suitable for *inter-imperialist* war, especially when it is a total war aimed to eliminate your enemy.

Classical racist arguments sound much less rational when you are trying to use them to justify the war between the European nations. During World War I it became obvious that states lack any kind of convincing ideology appealing enough for the mass mobilization for killing soldiers of the enemy nation soldiers. Instead, we saw fraternization of soldiers at

the front and rise of the socialist movements.

More effective ideology was needed to continue inter-imperialist war. And such ideologies were invented in the form of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, responding to the threat of international socialist revolution. Fascist ideology is the ideology of inter-imperialist war, with total rejection of egalitarian socialist alternatives.

This is exactly the point where the fascist politics begins, as the Nazi thinker Carl Schmitt put it. The rise of totalitarian dictatorship that does not accept any kind of internal opposition grows exactly from the need to mobilize all the population to the total war effort, justified solely by the need to win the competition with the equally strong and insidious enemy.

All arguments of superiority are artificial and seemingly irrational — but they’re not *supposed* to be rational. Their function is to build strong unity and identity, sufficient to strictly separate yourself from the enemy and develop strong loyalty to the leadership, and then to smash every kind of self-organization and push atomized people to transfer all the responsibility to the leader.

Here Orwell’s doublethink emerges, as everybody understands that the ideology is just a screen to cover the leaders’ true goals, but also that the fulfillment of goals (however cannibalistic they are) is beneficial to members of the Nation who survive the war.

It becomes very convenient to pretend that you believe the ideology and to bear minimum responsibility for the brutal means needed to fulfill the goals. It is psychologically comfortable to drive out of consciousness any indications of ongoing crimes as “fake news” and “impossible;” otherwise one should resist the government, which is obviously very risky.

**L**et’s try to use such an understanding of fascism as an ideology and practice of inter-imperialist war for the current war in Ukraine. The situation is of course a bit tricky, because we have fascists inside the anti-fascist struggle and fascism under the slogans of anti-fascism.

It is true that among those who are fighting to defend Ukraine there are people with neo-Nazi backgrounds and ideas. Unfortunately, neo-Nazis play significant roles in some particular units of Ukrainian army like the Azov regiment. But neo-Nazi ideology is not adopted by the state, and not implemented in the practice of Ukrainian state institutions.

The Ukrainian state does not need fascist ideology for mass mobilization and control because people are already naturally mobilized from below to defend their dignity and soil against the insolent foreign invasion.

Electoral results for far-right parties in Ukraine remain far lower than for those in many European countries — National Rally (former National Front) in France, AfD in Germany, Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, Fratelli d’Italia in Italy etc. For some reason, the rhetoric and actions of Ukrainian authorities remain very liberal and riddled with ideas of human rights, democracy and social populism.

It is hard to make a precise estimation about Russia, but even if we assume that the relative presence of open neo-Nazis in Russian armed forces is less significant and that such cases as the reported neo-Nazi unit “Rusich”<sup>19</sup> are rare, we nevertheless have to admit that Russian state ideology and propaganda sounds much more anti-democratic, xenophobic, racist and becoming more similar to fascist examples.

There is terror in Russia against anti-war opposition, and a significant part of the Russian population is motivated to this war by state propaganda. The majority is unfortunately in a position of silent support. I am sure most of this people will claim they just didn't know, that they thought it was about fascism in Ukraine and Russia fighting an "anti-fascist" war — does this Russian "anti-fascism" come steadily closer to classical fascism of the 1930s?

## New Inter-Imperialist War?

The current war in Ukraine is obviously not yet inter-imperialist. For Ukrainians, it is a war of liberation against the imperialist foreign invasion by the Russian army. From the other side, the Russian state is waging a colonial war in Ukraine in order to rebuild its empire.

But the argument of Russian natural superiority over "brother" Ukrainians sounds too schizophrenic even for Russian state propagandists. This is the major reason that Russia claims it is fighting NATO in Ukraine (despite NATO not yet having arrived, as people joke in Odessa). This imaginary fight against the "collective West" naturally leads the Russian government towards threatening global nuclear war and pushing the ideology of broad inter-imperialist conflict.

In many senses, Russian propaganda is so unconvincing for people in Ukraine, and even inside Russia, because the framework of pure colonial chauvinism does not work toward Ukraine. Ukraine was always one of the most developed parts of the Russian empire, and efforts to assimilate Ukrainians made them in Russian chauvinist propaganda a kind of "also Russians" or at least "brothers."

Despite the severe destruction of its economy in the 1990s, Ukraine remains an industrialized European power with its nuclear power plants, aerospace industries and dozens of big universities. It is quite a different place than "classical" colonies.

Russia is pushing toward escalation because it is seeking the redistribution of "spheres of interest" towards recognition of Russia's imperial rights over Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Russia is making all possible efforts to convince China to join forces and drag into the conflict as many countries as possible (e.g. Iranian weapons that kill civilians in Ukraine).

This is what the "multipolar world" means for Putin. He and his gang in power just cannot accept Russia as a country that has equal respectful relationships with the neighbors. In the minds of these people, such an outcome means the end of Russia. As they cannot imagine Russia other than an empire that rules over its sphere of interest, the strategy must be to rebuild the empire or die.

In this crazy logic if the world does not accept Russian's absolutely illegal and bizarre annexation of parts of Ukraine,<sup>20</sup> it means that the world does not accept the existence of Russia. If you do not recognize recent fake referendums at gunpoint that were obviously staged and do not represent the will of the people, you are criminal under Russian law.

The question for Putin's gangsters is that they can possibly accept some territorial losses (e.g. withdrawing from Kherson) but they want the world to recognize and accept their right to annex territories and rule by force in their sphere of influence.

The trick is that if and when the world would succumb to Russian blackmail, the door to the next big inter-imperialist

war would finally be open. Unfortunately, I don't see any feasible forces that would prevent global war in this scenario. All the treaties of the collective security and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons would make no sense anymore.

And if the European and generally the Western left accept this new reality, they will no longer be capable to pretend they are internationalist. Those who are pushing toward the understanding of Putin and recognition of Russia's "legitimate security concerns" are in fact pushing the left further toward the abyss of social chauvinism.

New inter-imperialist war will definitely need a new fascist ideology and new fascist regimes, but unfortunately we are already heading this way.<sup>21</sup> And it looks like Russia is moving towards it fast, and dragging all of us in the same direction.

A quick military defeat of the Russian invasion of Ukraine can possibly abort this process at least temporarily. Otherwise, we will move towards the fascisation of the world and world imperialist war much more rapidly.

This is the big reason why Ukraine should win and the working class of the world should support Ukraine. It will not abolish inter-imperialist rivalry, but can at least restrict and ease it for some time. Hopefully socialists will use it to rebuild the vision and organize for an internationalist socialist alternative. ■

## Notes

1. By some estimations of the U.S. military the total death toll could be more than 100,000 killed from each side: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/blood-treasure-chaos-cost-russias-war-ukraine-2022-11-10/>
2. Detailed consideration of the internal situation inside Russia is outside the scope of this article, which is focused on the actions and politics of Russian government towards Ukraine. Internal fascisation of Russia including destruction of democratic institutions and brutal repression inside Russia, introduction of terrorist dictatorships on occupied territories of Donbass, as well as recent establishment by the private military company Wagner of training camps for rightwing militia in Belgorod and Kursk regions, all of which definitely deserve to be studied.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-attacks-ukraine-infrastructure-not-all-we-could-have-done-2022-10-31/>
4. The Russian MP's comment of two million Ukrainians to be killed: <https://youtu.be/iaRUepc-7VQ?t=446>; <https://youtu.be/iaRUepc-7VQ?t=522>
5. <https://youtu.be/h3sGE5FHN6w>
6. The average rate of death in the Soviet Union as a percentage of the 1940 population is estimated as 13.7%, for Russia it is significantly lower than average — around 12.7% and significantly higher for Ukraine (16.3%) and Belarus (25.3%). For more information see Yorgos Mitralias, "Why Does Putin Make All the Soviet Dead of the Second World War... 'Russians'?" <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/05/23/why-does-putin-make-all-the-soviet-dead-of-the-second-world-war-russians/>
7. Himmler quotation cited by Enzo Traverso.
8. Historian Timothy Snyder remarks that "Calling others fascists while being a fascist is the essential Putinist practice," which Snyder calls "schizofascism." <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html>
9. Ilya Budraitskis, <https://jacobinmag.com/2022/02/ordinary-russians-war-outbreak-ukraine-vladimir-putin>
10. On this point, see Putin's multiple articles and speeches.
11. Article in official Russia state news agency Ria-Novosti
12. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_Russia\\_Should\\_Do\\_with\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Russia_Should_Do_with_Ukraine)
13. "Rossijanie" — is the name of all citizens of Russia, regardless of ethnicity.
14. Russian state TV commentator admits that Russia is isolated and Ukraine's military is formidable: <https://youtu.be/xF6TXAl1tc>
15. Russia in the Shape of the Letter "Z." Putin's Authoritarian Regime Mutates into Fascism [INTERVIEW] <https://oko.press/putins-authoritarian-regime-mutates-into-fascism-interview/>
16. Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (1936).
17. <https://ria.ru/20220516/alesha-1788750012.html#pv=g%3D1788750013%2Fp%3D1788435321>
18. Destruction of signs, signs of destruction <https://commons.com.ua/en/destruction-signs-signs-destruction/>
19. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ukraine-krieg-organisierte-neonazi-gruppen-kaempfen-fuer-russland-geheimdienstbericht-a-f1632333-6801-47b3-99b9-650d85a51a52>
20. On 30 September 2022, Russia, amid an ongoing invasion of Ukraine, unilaterally declared its annexation of areas in four Ukrainian oblasts — Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian\\_annexation\\_of\\_Donetsk,\\_Kherson,\\_Luhansk\\_and\\_Zaporizhzhia\\_oblasts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_annexation_of_Donetsk,_Kherson,_Luhansk_and_Zaporizhzhia_oblasts)
21. You can name it "post-fascism," as Enzo Traverso has done: See *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*.

## Queering “A League of Their Own” By Catherine Z. Sameh

IN *WHY STORIES Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Clare Hemmings (2011) argues that an investment in telling different feminist stories — so that we might redress the problems of an incomplete or exclusive feminist past — entraps us in a continuous loop of reproducing what can always only be partial stories. Hemmings urges us to experiment “with how we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories.” (17)

One of her experimental methods for doing this is to surface the affective attachments we have to our stories and the subjects that populate them. Rather than require our subjects to be more (heroic, agential, feminist) and our stories to be better (complete, inclusive), Hemmings encourages an engagement with the many desires, pleasures, judgments, and disappointments that inform our relationship to feminist storytelling.

In the new eight-episode Netflix series, *A League of Their Own*, a reboot of the 1992 film by the same name, the investment in telling a better story is certainly there, as the series explicitly responds to the blind spots and omissions of the film.

That Penny Marshall film was decidedly feminist, building the history of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) around the character of Dottie, star catcher of the Rockford Peaches. Dottie is played by Geena Davis, her character inspired by the real-life Rockford Peach, Dorothy Kamenshek.

The film’s most consistent critique centers on the bifurcation of “girls” and “ball-players.” One cannot be both in the gender binary world of the 1940s. Higher education and sports signal the masculinization of girls and women, and the film foregrounds the public panic around such gender transgressions.

Davis would go on to found the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media in 2004. The tagline of the institute is “If she can see it, she can be it,” encapsulating the film’s aspiration to write women into a his-



*Chanté Adams plays Max Chapman, who evades her mother's attempts to find her a husband to live an exciting queer life.*

tory that had ignored and forgotten them.

For all the film’s strengths, however, Marshall’s story of the AAGPBL revolves almost exclusively around white women. One Black woman makes a brief appearance as an observer at the AAGPBL tryouts, showing offer her arm as she returns a foul ball. But her character and the league’s segregation quickly recede from the storyline.

The 1992 film also represents the AAGPBL as largely heterosexual. There are winks and nods to lesbian life, but the heavy lifting of reading queer sensibilities into the film is left to the viewer. Doris, played by Rosie O’Donnell, laments that she is “not a girl,” and that there are “a lot of us” in the league. But it is O’Donnell’s real-life lesbianism and her best friendship with Mae, played by queer icon Madonna, that gesture towards rather than explicitly address queer lives.

### A Recuperative Project

The Netflix series, directed by Abbi Jacobson of *Broad City* fame and Will Graham of *The Onion News Network* and *Mozart in the Jungle*, is a recuperative project, rewriting the history of the AAGPBL to redress the film’s white and heteronormative gaze.

The story of some of the women in the Negro Leagues runs parallel to and intersects with that of the AAGPBL. And in this reboot, not much is required of queer imagination. The occasional winks and nods give way to a queer historiography that drives the series.

So even as the series seeks to fill gaps with a different story, its emphasis is more directed towards telling this story differently. In this retelling queer life, queer desire and queer futures are the whole point.

The new series is built around two central characters — Carson Shaw, played by Jacobson, and Maxine (Max) Chapman, played by the luminous Chanté Adams, known for her critically-acclaimed portrayal of the rapper Roxanne Shante in the film *Roxanne Roxanne*.

Carson is white and married; her husband is overseas fighting in World War II. Max is Black and single; she spends most of her time with her best friend, Clance (Gbemisola Ikumelo), an aspiring comic artist and ebullient, funny and all-around cool geek girl.

In the first episode Carson makes the league, becomes a Rockford Peach, and immediately feels sexual sparks with her teammate Greta (D’Arcy Garden).

Max works at her mother’s beauty salon, evades her mother’s attempts to fix her up with a prospective husband, and has sex with the preacher’s wife on the sly. When Max learns that the local screw factory has its own baseball team, she and Clance push to get hired.

Carson and Max each eat, sleep and breathe baseball, but that storyline is secondary to the one that explores their respective queer desires. When Max observes Carson and Greta kissing in an alleyway outside a bar, a spark of recognition connects them, and the series develops an array of queer characters through their different but connected lives.

The exclusion of women from professional sports, women’s participation in the labor force, and the social construction of gendered bodies and norms — all these themes are interwoven through a feminist analysis informed by intersectionality.

As a key conceptual framework of Gender and Sexuality Studies that has arguably come to signal the ongoing dream of fem-

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inism, intersectionality powerfully informs the series by showing viewers how labor is organized around racial and gendered tiers.

Max's mother, Toni, makes Max a co-owner of the salon, emphasizing to her that in a racist and sexist society, owning a business is a path towards at least partial freedom. When Max is hired at the screw factory, she keeps her day job and works nights to conceal her factory job from her mother.

When Max and Clance initially apply to work in the factory, they are told by white women at the recruitment table that there are no jobs for them. Max pushes back, arguing that "the Roosevelt order says you have to consider me."<sup>1</sup> The white women respond, "The women here do delicate work."

As many feminist theorists and labor historians have argued, the gendered and racialized organization of work in the late 19th and into the 20th century, built on the legacy of chattel slavery and the Cult of True Womanhood, constructed Black women in proximity to working-class and masculinized forms of labor and against a white, middle-class femininity focused on marriage, family and the home.

A minor subplot coheres around the Mexican-American pitcher Lupe (Roberta Colindrez), who is dubbed by the league's mucky mucks as the "Spanish Striking Sensation." Instead of peppering the Rockford Peaches with "diversity," Lupe's transformation into a European (and therefore white) player reflects the processes through which

Mexicans became racialized, drawing forth the annexed territory of Mexico and the history of Spanish and U.S. settler colonialism.

### Queer Subculture and Desire

By far the most compelling plotline in the series is the exploration of a thriving underground queer subculture. In Carson's world, this takes place in a speakeasy entered through an accountant's office. Vi — who could be read as butch, nonbinary, gender-queer, passing, trans or all of the above — runs the joint with their wife, bringing Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* to life.<sup>2</sup>

Vi is played in a fabulous cameo appearance by Rosie O'Donnell, who seems to be blossoming within more substantially queer characters, here and in the reprise of *The L Word*. In Max's world, underground queer life is centered around her trans and/or passing uncle, Bert, played by the stunning (be-still-my-heart) Lea Robinson.

Bert is also married and lives a rich life as a successful businessman and influential community member. Bert and his wife host private gatherings for queer Black people and it is here that Max finds an inter-generational thriving queer community.

It is queer desire — indeed, desire as queer — that gathers these beautiful, vibrant subcultures and the many subplots, narrative arcs, and individual and connected storylines of the series. The desire on view is desire for each other, for community, for lives of mean-

ing, solidarity, play and liberation. As Max says, "It's okay to want things," an affective register that enfolds the series' characters, actors and viewers alike.

The desire reflected here is also for an end to Jim Crow, an end to the gendered, sexual and racialized forms of citizenship, labor and nation-building that characterize a putatively vulnerable United States in "uncertain times."

Queer life as a desirable, rich, delicious life is reflected in Carson's attempt to compare her marriage to her husband to her relationship with Greta. "It's like bread, warm bread. It's like warm bread with butter. Nice. With her... Have you ever had pizza?"

Carson has recently tasted pizza for the first time with Greta, on a date of sorts, and her mind and tastebuds explode. Queer desire isn't abject; it's a wild and deeply pleasurable engagement with the uncertainties of living outside of safety and comfort.

As their lives come together in friendship, queer kinship and solidarity, Max says to Carson, "I didn't even know living like this was possible." Carson responds, "I don't know if it actually is."

This tension and uncertainty reflect a world in the making, never fully guaranteed. But telling this story — a story of women's baseball; of laboring, racialized and gendered bodies; of sex, sexuality and kinship; of the many structures of inequality that shape U.S. history — through queer desire, Jacobson and Graham have heeded Hemmings' suggestions to allow affect to inform our storytelling.

The series doesn't promise to fill in all the gaps as much as it offers a sexy, gorgeous world that connects us to these characters in queer temporality, a world they and we will continue to fight for. ■

### Notes

1. This refers to FDR's executive order 8802, which banned discriminatory hiring in the federal government and corporations receiving federal funds.
2. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (Penguin, 1994) recounts working-class lesbian life in Buffalo, NY in the first half of the 20th century, with butch-femme relationships and women who passed as men key themes.

### To Our Readers

THE REVIEW OF *Civil Rights in Black and Brown* in our September-October issue mistakenly identified a pioneering Mexican-American activist in Texas as Hector P. Gonzalez. The correct name is Hector P. Garcia. Thanks to our friend and reader Bill Chandler for pointing out the error! It's been corrected in the online article on our website.

Our year-end appeal to ATC readers is off to a flying start, reaching \$3,600 just before we go to press. The appeal continues until America's secular midwinter festival of Super Bowl Sunday. Thanks to all our contributors, and keep them coming. You can make your donation at <https://againstthecurrent.org> or by check to Center for Changes, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit MI 48210.

## Future Struggles in Ukraine — continued from page 6

reduction and other approaches to disease prevention and mental health.

When the war ends — once again assuming that Russia does not succeed in taking over Ukraine — the experience that working class communities have had in self-organized mutual aid may be the ground for future successes. Even though this experience took place during a war for survival, large parts of the Ukrainian working class have learned how to organize themselves and then perform non-alienated labor. If postwar struggles over the future of the country become intense, workers may generalize this experience and try to build a new world "on the ashes of the old."

Eugene Debs, the famous American labor organizer and socialist, once said, "Years ago, I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth... While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free..."<sup>2</sup>

This statement of solidarity extends to us all and what we should do: During and after the war, support the struggles of the Ukrainian people, and of those Russians

who resist the war; and during and after the war, to support the struggles of workers, including sex workers, of sexual minorities, and of people who use drugs in their efforts to defend their health and happiness and to transform the conditions of their lives. ■

### Notes

1. Major social crises often lead to increases in sex work and drug use and their associated diseases. After the break-up of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, many of its former components — and perhaps particularly Ukraine and Russia — saw massive increases in drug use, alcoholism and sex work. These led to gigantic epidemics of HIV, tuberculosis and sexually transmitted diseases, and to many deaths. Similar increases in HIV took place in South Africa after the end of apartheid and in Indonesia after the overthrow of the Suharto regime. I have written many professional papers about this phenomenon as contingent (that is, it does not always happen) under the heading of "Big Events." As the world increasingly is buffeted by climate change and pandemics of infectious diseases, such Big Events are likely to become more common, and it is important to think about how to prevent their effects of health. The most effective prevention effort is likely to be the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by some form of socialism from below, but this will just provide the framework within which we will have to deal with the aftereffects of capitalism like climate change.
2. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/court.htm>

## The Black Internationalism of William Gardner Smith

By Alan Wald

### The Stone Face

By William Gardner Smith

Introduction by Adam Shatz

New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2022, 240 pages, \$10.99 paperback.

*THE STONE FACE*, republished this past year after nearly six decades, remains a novel down-right fearless in its quest to unsettle. A work of historical fiction, the book's central characters are a tight-knit coterie of Black American expatriates in Paris during the months of 1960-61 when the Algerian Revolution for independence from France (1954-62) was reaching its climax. The insights may not all seem new, but they are profound, and many readers will find the storyline as startlingly radical now as it was in 1963.

Artistically, *The Stone Face* is a hybrid that is at once particular and capacious. To some extent it is a character study of Simeon Brown, a one-eyed African American painter and journalist with a Biblical first name frequently translated as "God has heard."

Although Brown has relocated to France to escape the U.S. racism that cost him his eye in a violent confrontation, he is haunted by a need to make a political commitment in the early Cold War years of anti-colonial struggle and the Civil Rights movement.

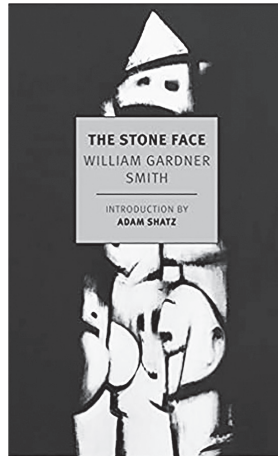
### A Cosmopolitan Political Militant

The precocious author, then 36 years old, was well-suited for an achievement of this intricate vision. Raised in South Philadelphia's Black ghetto, William Gardner Smith (1927-74, called "Bill" by his friends) had already published three previous novels: *Last of the Conquerors* (1948), *Anger at Innocence* (1950), and *South Street* (1954).

In late 1951 he moved to Paris. After 1954 he was employed by the prestigious international news organization Agence France-Presse (AFP) as its first African American reporter. This journalistic training enabled Smith to craft this fourth volume of fiction with the observed immediacy of a skilled reporter.

Yet there was something else: Smith had a background in postwar Philadelphia's modernist cultural circles as a cosmopolitan political militant, one who collaborated with various organizations on the U.S. Far Left and was especially taken with the Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James (1901-89).

Shortly after James had declared Smith's *Last of the Conquerors* to be the foremost voice of a new generation of



radical Black writers in the pages of the Trotskyist journal *Fourth International* (March-April 1950), Smith announced himself with a similar albeit more elaborate artistic and political manifesto in W. E. B. Du Bois' journal *Phylon* (Fourth Quarter, 1950). These two proclamations will be discussed at length in this review essay.

What is noteworthy right away is Smith's experience of immersion in modern literature while negotiating among diverse ideologies and activists. This personal history may explain why Smith had the maturity to avoid facile categorizations and judgments, even when depicting those who rationalize a choice of personal peace and comfort over social solidarity. He also fashioned the connective tissue between seemingly incon-

gruent populations while resisting too-easy universalisms and idealizations.<sup>1</sup>

The upshot of both talents — journalistic skill and a complex understanding of political conundrums and human actors — was an artistic sensibility that pushed borders, unbound by the limitations of predecessors.

*The Stone Face* circles around the dilemma of commitment in exile through segments called "The Fugitive," "The White Man," and "The Brother." It's a three-part structure that transports the melancholic protagonist through the Hegelian dialectical stages of a thesis (as a refugee from U.S. racism), antithesis (as an uneasy collaborator in French racism), and synthesis (through redemption by transnational solidarity).

Despite episodes of brutality and romantic disappointment, the progression becomes one of healing and achieving an emotional coherence in Simeon's life. Throughout the novel Simeon has been laboring to paint an "inhuman" human image on canvas (13), a stone-like face of hatred that symbolizes bigotry. However, he tears this up at the end of the novel.

The narrative can also be read as a meditative exploration of relative privilege across the color line and the conundrum of racial identity and political solidarity apprehended from different angles. This provides a qualifying counter-theme for which the author weaves together multiple points of view — including African American, Polish-Jewish, Algerian, white American, and French.

There are frequent references to the Holocaust, deployed as a prototype of racist inhumanity at its worst. Simeon is visibly shaken by news of the 1960 overthrow by Black Africans of Patrice Lumumba, first prime minister of the Republic of the Congo. In early 1961, Lumumba is executed by a Katangan firing squad and Simeon stares in horror at the newspaper photographs of his killers: "Those faces! Those black faces!" (169)

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In this respect the novel re-introduces us to disturbingly prescient material at exactly the right moment in our current era of fierce debates around identity and solidarity. In recent years these have taken the form of accusations of “race reductionism” (allegedly seeing group-specific anti-racist demands as the principle focus for ending oppression, attributed often to journalist Ta-Nehesi Coates) and “class reductionism” (allegedly concentrating on class-wide economic demands as an alternative, attributed customarily to Marxist scholar Adolph Reed).<sup>2</sup>

Smith’s novel commences its engagement with earlier iterations of these debates by bringing under scrutiny the unacknowledged complicity in France’s anti-Arab racial oppression on the part of the well-treated Black people — who bear more than a passing resemblance to the legendary Left Bank circle around novelist Richard Wright (1908-60) and the famed “Bootsie” cartoonist Ollie Harrington (1912-95).<sup>3</sup>

These ex-pats feel free in Paris because they rarely experience U.S.-style anti-Black prejudice, which they reckon to be the prime threat to their self-fulfillment. Such a narrow fixation on a color binary screens them from coming to grips with the material conditions of the Arabs, who, despite lighter skin and different hair texture, live in ghettos, face police brutality, and are shunned by the Europeans.

Nonetheless, Simeon’s perceptions change by the climax of the narrative, which features a recreation of the infamously bloody 1961 massacre of Algerian demonstrators by Parisian police that measures up to more than a few instances of racist butchery in U.S. history. He now finds that to live a life of principle, he must not only see the color line in another culture but also physically cross it.

In dramatizing Simeon’s choice to join the brutalized Arab protesters and be treated as one of them, *The Stone Face* puts forward the embrace of a class-centered yet non-reductive Marxist internationalism that ought to draw the attention of contemporary anti-racist and socialist activists.

Smith’s point is not to deny the particularities of anti-Black racism and other discrete forms of oppression that require redress through particularist demands; in fact, Simeon will ultimately opt to return to the U.S. to join the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, one must also be attuned to the sometimes tricky mechanisms involved in discerning the boundaries that truly separate the subjugated from the privileged, and potentially unify the former in resistance.

These are not always found by robotically pointing to color, nationality, gender, or even class background. On a global scale, at the very least, what separates out and unifies in struggle can also be in accordance with political principles, shared values, demonstrated commitments, and class interests held objectively in common.

## Race and the Context of Class

The prose of *The Stone Face* is Hemingwayesque — concise, straightforward, and realistic. This enables Smith to depict the taut alchemy of U.S. racism in scenes occurring in flashbacks to Philadelphia and in encounters with white Americans abroad.

He aptly captures the omnipresent, simmering supremacist rage that quickly boils over into shocking violence: “everything was in slow motion. The boys stood around him...Chris [a Polish thug] toyed with a jagged switchblade knife....”Whatchu

lookin at, nigger?”....Simeon screamed at the peak of his voice, falling to the pavement.” (31-33)

At the same time, through a carefully constructed sequence of split-screen parallels depicting the analogous treatment of Algerians in Paris and Black people in Harlem and South Philadelphia, Smith relies on a slow-building, pedagogical tension. This is necessary to dramatize how Black expatriates in Paris become “white” in regard to the treatment of Algerians:

*“The police kept roughing up the Arabs, but they did not touch Simeon....The policeman put his arm on Simeon’s shoulder and said, ‘You don’t understand. You don’t know how they are, les Arabs. Always stealing, fighting, cutting people, killing....you’re a foreigner, you wouldn’t know.’”* (54-56)

The political implications of *The Stone Face* thus can be parsed through at least two storylines. On the one hand, the horror of the anti-Black racist episodes makes the “identity politics” of Black unity plausible and necessary to Simeon and his expatriate friends.

To characterize oneself as “Black” in a white supremacist society is to move beyond an individualist perspective and define a collective predicament. Identity by race produces an alliance among those who face common forms of oppression, and the term itself (Black) moves over time from describing a stigma to a serving as a source of pride.

Smith certainly pulls no punches when it comes to depicting the intense pressure and all-pervasiveness of U.S. style white supremacy, which is hardly limited to specific acts of violence. As Simeon explains, “a hundred tiny things happen — micro-particles, nobody can see them but us.”

Beyond this, “there’s always the danger that something bigger will happen. The Beast in the Jungle, you’re always tense, waiting for it to spring.” He concludes, “we want to breathe air, we don’t want to think about this race business twenty-four hours a day....But...they force you to think about it all the time.” (76-77)

Yet the novel also argues that it is limiting to see the world exclusively through binaries of color, devoid of the contexts of class and colonial exploitation. In a narrow version of identity politics, one can suffer from a kind of political “linkage blindness,” missing the correspondence when it comes to apprehending discrimination in a different social configuration where the hierarchies of power and privilege are determined by economic and structural forces.

Not only does bigotry have no borders, but its forms can vary in disconcerting ways; a population persecuted in one culture may in a different society collude in the persecution of others. In *The Stone Face*, the progressive revelation of elements of the French domination of Algerians come to fit like puzzle pieces into a discernment of the broader political nightmare of European colonialism.

As Simeon takes a bus northward from the student quarter, he observes cheap stores, men hanging out on street corners, police everywhere: “It was like Harlem....The men he saw had whiter skins and less frizzy hair, but....[t]hey adopted the same poses.” (87)

## A Philadelphia Radical

The explanation for Smith’s unique transnational, double perspective partly derives from his earlier and profound immersion in specific Far Left experiences of his youth, an element insufficiently emphasized to date in the scholarly con-

siderations of his achievement.<sup>4</sup>

A voracious reader and outstanding student at Benjamin Franklin High School, Smith graduated with honors at age 16 in 1944 but waived an opportunity to go to college in favor of starting a career as a journalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an African American newspaper.

Two years later Smith was drafted into the postwar army; a period of basic training at Fort Meade, Maryland, was followed by an eight-month stint as a clerk-typist in occupied Berlin assigned to the 661st Truck Company. In this capacity he managed to send articles back to the *Pittsburgh Courier* reporting on the experience of Black soldiers, published under the by-line “Bill Smith.”<sup>5</sup>

Receiving an honorable discharge on February 19, 1947, he returned to Philadelphia and in March enrolled as a journalism student at Temple University on the G. I. Bill, soon finishing his first novel at age 21.

*The Last of the Conquerors* was a best-selling and widely reviewed, sensational story of an interracial love affair between a Black male soldier and a white German woman, a liaison that brings down the racist wrath of the U.S. army even as the Germans show relative tolerance.

The popular success of the novel brought a degree of financial security, enabling Smith to marry his high school sweetheart, social worker Mary Sewell, in June 1949, and get to work on his next literary project, one with all white characters called *Anger at Innocence*.

**T**he European interlude, however, had awakened a more complex view of the workings of racism. This was followed by the development of a socialist political consciousness, not evident before. At Temple, where he spent two years, Smith encountered the iconoclastic philosophy professor Barrows Dunham (1905-95), best-known today for *Man Against Myth* (1947, First Edition) and *Heroes and Heretics* (1963).

Dunham had joined the Communist Party (CP-USA) in 1938, writing in the Party’s *New Masses* under the name “Joel Bradford.” In 1945 he quietly resigned from the Party, unhappy with the rightward trending policies of then general secretary Earl Browder.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Dunham remained a Marxist-Leninist, albeit one who expressed his ideas free of jargon. This can be seen in a chapter of *Man Against Myth* that most likely influenced Smith, “That There are No Superior and Inferior Races.”<sup>7</sup>

In a friendly, informal, and almost talkative style, Dunham focuses on stereotypes about Jews and African Americans, with frequent ironical parallels between Nazi propagandists and U.S. white supremacists like Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo. Dunham also remained an intransigent rebel. In 1953



Smith, a voracious reader and politically engaged writer.

he was fired from Temple, although tenured and chair of his department, for refusing to “name names” of alleged Communists before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.<sup>8</sup>

While Smith often attributed his initial political education to Dunham,<sup>9</sup> his notoriety as a successful author led to his and Mary’s apartment becoming a kind of intellectual salon that attracted an interracial group of writers and intellectuals. Among the African Americans participating was the future novelist Kristin Hunter (best known for *God Bless the Child*, 1964) and her husband, journalist Joseph E. Hunter.

Smith also developed a relationship with Irene Rose, an older white woman who traveled in radical political and cultural circles. An anti-Zionist Jew, Irene Rose was associated with Max Shachtman’s Workers Party (WP, which in 1949 changed its name to Independent Socialist League, ISL) and was considered an expert on the intricacies of various Marxist groups.<sup>10</sup>

## Aesthetes and Revolutionists

Irene Rose and her husband, William Rose, had a friendship with African American artist Beauford Delaney (1901-79), who painted a notable portrait of Irene in 1944.<sup>11</sup> And it was Irene who in late 1949 introduced Smith to the aspiring African American writer Richard Gibson (b.1931), another Philadelphian albeit from the West Side, who was then a student at Kenyon College.

Gibson is best-known today as co-founder of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in 1960, and also because he was exposed in *Newsweek* magazine in 2018 as a collaborator with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from at least 1965 to 1977. Nearly ten years after their friendship began, Gibson was to play a fateful role in Smith’s life.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 1940s, however, Gibson was an aesthete who felt more offended by the low level of U.S. cultural life than its racism, and engaged Smith in intense conversations about James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Henry Miller. When I contacted Gibson in 2002 for information about Smith, he reported that they both admired Henry James’ *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (1909) and favored Black novelist Chester Himes over Richard Wright.

Smith’s personal literary gods were Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, but he was quite taken with Ann Petry’s recent *The Street* (1946), and, surprisingly, the early 20th century social novels of Sholem Asch.<sup>13</sup>

Smith’s FBI file indicates that at the end of the 1940s he was actively in association with the Shachtman group and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and prior to that the Communist Party (CP-USA). Inasmuch as Smith was now a public figure, his involvement mainly took the form of aiding

larger formations in which these organizations participated.

For example, Smith operated with the SWP's working group in the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), in a temporary local body called "The Fred Simpson Defense Committee," and in the "Civil Rights Defense Committee." This last was set up on behalf of SWP member James Kutcher, a legless WWII veteran who had been fired from his government job for political reasons.

With the CP-USA, Smith worked with the Civil Rights Congress, especially on the case of "The Trenton Six," African Americans sentenced to death for the murder of a white shopkeeper, and the Council for the Arts, Sciences and Professions, a Leftist cultural organization. By 1950, however, he was closest to the SWP, attending internal meetings and considered recruitable by the local branch leaders.

Due to his past association with the CP-USA, there was concern among some SWP members about Smith's outspoken admiration for Soviet sympathizer Paul Robeson, but most of the local branch wanted Smith to represent the SWP in a delegation that planned to travel abroad in support of Yugoslavia in the recent Tito-Stalin split.<sup>14</sup>

## A Trinidadian Marxist

Then again, the main attraction to Trotskyism may have been the Trinidadian-born revolutionary C. L. R. James (1901-89), who led a small political current inside the SWP known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency.<sup>15</sup>

James' view that the African American population was destined to play a vanguard role in the coming socialist transformation had been promoted in the Trotskyist press in the late 1930s and was prominent again at this time through the publication of a powerful speech on "The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States" and then a political resolution on the same topic, "Negro Liberation Through Revolutionary Socialism," published in the December 1948 and February 1950 issues of the SWP's *Fourth International*.<sup>16</sup> Although writing mostly under pseudonyms and living in obscurity, James' reputation as an erudite and creative thinker was well-known in Trotskyist political circles.

Around 1950 Smith, at least once accompanied by Mary, began making trips to New York to meet with James. According to Constance Webb (1918-2005), married to James at that time, the association lasted about a year. During passionate discussions over dinner, Smith seemed eager to learn, and the conversation was more about literature than politics.

In fact, Webb recalls that James discouraged Smith from organizational affiliation and activism, insisting that "Your business is to write." To that end James reportedly recommended that Smith "expand his imaginative range, suggesting that he [Smith] learn French so that he could read the classics in their own language."

James then went on to discourse about "*War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Madam Bovary* (one of his favorites)" and "analyzed the works of the Athenian playwrights." He prepared a list of additional books for Smith to read, including those of famous literary critics, and then moved on to talking about "music, painting, sculpture, motion pictures..." Webb believed that James "introduced Bill to Richard Wright [already in Paris], Chester Himes, and Ralph Ellison."<sup>17</sup>

While the FBI alleged that Smith was a member of the SWP,

there is no evidence (other than the opinion of an informer), and formal party affiliation seems unlikely. During the period in which Smith was visiting James, James' followers in the SWP were in the process of splitting away from Trotskyism and by 1951 had launched a new organization called Correspondence.

It's more likely that Smith, who favored collaboration with many groups, drew back from what he saw as organizational sectarianism. However, James' impact on his thinking would become evident.

## Two Young Writers

James' essay about Smith appeared in the SWP journal in the spring of 1950 as "Two Young American Writers," and was signed G. F. Eckstein. Here James pointed to Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Smith's *The Last of the Conquerors* as respectively "brilliant" and "distinguished" novels, the work of writers "repelled by Stalinism, without cultivating any illusions about bourgeois democracy." Although James presents no evidence to document this political characterization,<sup>18</sup> he was certain that the appearance of these first novels was "the unmistakable sign of a new wave of radical intellectuals."

The bulk of the essay is essentially a comparison of Mailer's novel with Herman Melville's 1851 *Moby Dick*, something of a preview of James' by now well-known *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1952). Here, as in that longer work, James argues that a central theme of the times must be to grasp the international power struggle between the capitalist West and Stalinism, requiring a third, independent proletarian force to achieve a socialist resolution.

Mailer, he observes, had almost succeeded in his novel; the fascist power of the West is well exemplified in the character Croft, but representatives of the alternative remained insufficiently realized among the *dramatis personae*.

Turning to Smith, James affirms that "for him as a Negro, the perspective of freedom, in relation to the Negro as he is, is a permanent part of his consciousness." What James found central to Smith's work was the theme of revolt, because the novel climaxes when "a Negro soldier, maddened by [racist] persecution, shoots an officer, and jumping into a truck, seeks some sort of existence different from that which tortures him — the most convenient place is the Russian zone."

Yet *The Last of the Conquerors* is limited in not being framed by a world-historic context, "the sense of a universal social crisis." James then affirms that, nevertheless, both Mailer and Smith have met a precondition "of any artistic development," which is "an uncompromising hostility to the values of Stalinism and to those of American bourgeois society."

Together, these oppressing societies comprise an "enemy" which "must be seen in all its amplitude." Each of these camps "poses an 'either-or' and seeks to encompass the whole field." Mailer and Smith, fortunately, hold to a "systematic and truly philosophical opposition to the decay and perversions of these two barbarisms" so that there is hope that they "can find their way to those deeper levels which will nourish and not desiccate their talents."<sup>19</sup>

## An Age of Struggle

A few months later, Smith published "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," which elaborated on many of

these same topics. He began by embracing James' observations about the limitation of *The Last of the Conquerors*.

The Black writer, explains Smith, "is under tremendous pressure to write about the topical and the transient — the plight of the Negro in America today." While some such novels may achieve greatness due to historical interest, it is the "universal themes" one finds in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* toward which one must aim.

Smith then moves to an argument of his own: To achieve art of this major type, the writer "must maintain emotional contact with the basic people of his society," not become detached so as to move "in a rather esoteric circle...to some degree, into an ivory tower."

Regrettably, in our contemporary political world, "The writer who is detached from society" does not perceive contradictions between "the individualistic and basically self-ethic of Capitalism" and the "socialist tendency" gaining traction among ordinary people.

For the Black writer, this degree of detachment is less likely: "The very national prejudice he so despises compels him to remember his social roots, perceive the social reality...." Racist discrimination at every turn leaves him "bound by unbreakable cords to the Negro social group."

At this point Smith revisits the argument proposed by James — the necessity of embracing the world conflict or the international power struggle. In a paragraph that might have been written by James himself, Smith explains: "We live...in an age of struggle between the American brand of Capitalism and the Russian brand of Communism.... But is this, really, the root struggle?"

He then launches into what is likely veiled autobiography, describing a young writer revolted by the "dog-eat-dog existence we glorify by the name of Free Enterprise...an existence which distorts the personality, turns avarice into virtue and permits the strong to run roughshod over the weak, profiteering on human misery[.]"

Citing Norman Mailer as an example of a writer "repelled" by capitalism and seeking "something which offers hope of a cure," he affirms: "Today, at first glance, the only alternative seems to be Russian Communism." However, "our young writer of intelligence and ideals" embraces Communism only to discover "the evils of dictatorship."

He learns about "purge trials....He learns of the stifling of literature, art and music in the Soviet Union. He learns that Hitler is one day evil, the next day (following a pact with the Soviet Union) good, and the next day evil again."

As the young writer flees from this alliance, "the advantage of the Negro writer is discovered." That's because, "in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases" the white writer (he cites John Dos Passos) will turn back to the "very decaying system which lately he had left, a system he now calls 'Democracy,' 'Freedom,' and 'Western Culture.'"

In contrast, the Black writer "does not, in most cases, come back to bow at the feet of Capitalism. He cannot, as can the white writer, close his eyes to the evils of the system under which he lives." Besides, "Looking at China, at Indo China and at Africa, he cannot avoid the realization that these are people of color, struggling, as he is struggling, for dignity. Again, prejudice has forced him to perceive the real, ticking world."

Smith's summary paragraphs express both components of James' outlook — the vanguard role of Black America and essentially a Third Camp ("Neither Washington nor Moscow") position toward the international power struggle:

*"the Negro — and the Negro writer — rejects those aspects of both American capitalism and Russian Communism which trample on freedom and rights. Repelled now by both contending systems, the Negro writer of strength and courage stands firmly as a champion of the basic human issues — dignity, relative security, freedom and the end of savagery between one human being and another. And in this stand he is supported by the mass of human beings the world over."*<sup>20</sup>

## Symbolism and Realism

This high degree of congruence between the views of James and Smith does not mean that the opinions of the former were artificially imposed on the latter. Smith's experience in postwar Europe and his immersion in Marxism and modern literature in Philadelphia had already launched him on a course of critical cosmopolitanism.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, negative experiences with the CP-USA and discussions with individuals such as Irene Rose had awakened his antipathy to Stalinism.<sup>22</sup> James, however, helped Smith firm up and refine his views, and to a significant extent clarified his self-concept as a Black radical artist.

How much of these views of 1950 made a lasting impact on Smith after his transit to Paris might be questioned. There is also reason to be dubious as to whether James' political admonitions about what was mandatory for the health of creative writing were truly relevant to the production of memorable African American literature.<sup>23</sup>

In any event, Constance Webb believed that there was never any communication between Smith and James after 1951,<sup>24</sup> and his 1970 book *Return to Black America* makes no reference to James. Artistically, there was not a dramatic advance.

There is a consensus that Smith's second and third novels failed to match the achievement of his first, although they do exhibit his gift at characterization. As one astute critic observed, "he [Smith] subjects his major characters to the kind of interior probing we associate more with the French, German, and Russian novelists than with American," and also notes that there are themes and structures suggestive of Dostoevsky's writing.<sup>25</sup> But the books remain out of print with little hope of rehabilitation.

In contrast, *The Stone Face* goes further than any of Smith's earlier fiction in hinting at disturbing but submerged psychological depths provocatively intimated by the author. There are Simeon's dream-like memories of incestuous longings for his sister and of a troubling rape-like sex game ("The Chase") among the neighborhood children in Philadelphia; Simeon's doppelgänger relation with the Algerian Ahmed, who takes up the armed struggle in his homeland even as Simeon professes that he quit the U.S. to avoid having to kill; the black eye-patch of Simeon and the dark glasses of his Jewish lover Maria that suggest a need to keep the horrors of the past partly out of sight; Maria's cryptic reference to the personal pain experienced by her Nazi tormentor (79); and the haunting visage of the stone face on canvas that morphs in meaning between the universal and the specific.

What is more, the novel is set in the context of a world

struggle, although the adversaries are Western colonialism and the anti-colonial resistance, not the “Free World” versus the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup>

Stylistic ingenuity brings this project alive, especially when Smith’s symbolist interventions (haunting memories of Joey the drunk, ominous newspaper headlines from Africa and the United States, Maria’s references to the bad decisions and fate of her parents in the Holocaust) rub shoulders with passages of stark realism (police raids on Algerian homes, hostility from French patrons in a restaurant off-limits to Arabs, descriptions of torture and detention).

No one would suggest, however, that the novel achieved the stature of the major works of Tolstoy.

## Politics Abroad

In Europe Smith possibly maintained some association with the Communist movement. Following a divorce from Mary not long after his arrival in Paris, his romantic partner for some years was Musy Hafner, the ex-wife of an official of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Hafner introduced Smith and Gibson (living in France after military service) to Bertolt Brecht when Brecht visited Paris for a theater festival in 1955.<sup>27</sup> Suspicions of Smith’s disloyalty were sufficient at this time for the U.S. government to refuse to renew his passport for a year after he made a 1956 trip to East Berlin.

His second wife, whom he married in 1961, was school-teacher Solange Royez, a member of the French Communist Party (PCF). His third wife, beginning in 1971, was Ira Reuben, a Jewish woman from India.

Apparently, Smith maintained his critical view of Communism in private conversation. Smith told Gibson that he looked to Jean-Paul Sartre for wisdom far more than PCF leader Maurice Thorez, and in the late 1950s he was very supportive of Tito’s Yugoslavia against the USSR.<sup>28</sup>

The PCF’s position on the Algerian Revolution surely caused Smith dismay; the official view was that the 1954 insurrection was only about individual terrorism, and by the late 1950s well-known anti-colonial militants had left the organization.<sup>29</sup> But there is little published evidence of criticism of the USSR after his *Phylon* essay.

One passage in *The Stone Face* mentions anti-Semitism in the Polish Peoples Republic: “Poland is now Communist and is supposed to stand for equality for all, and it is still horrible to be a Jew there.” (122)

When Smith decided to make a drastic change in his political life in the 1960s, he turned to Africa, accepting an invitation from Shirley Graham Du Bois to move to Ghana and run the state television station. Smith and Solange arrived in 1964, where he joined poet Maya Angelou and novelist Julian Mayfield in Accra.

Regrettably, this idyll lasted for only 18 months before Nkrumah was overthrown in a military coup, and Smith returned to Paris and his previous job.<sup>30</sup> At this point he was privately espousing a kind of Third World Marxism. “I am for Castro and Mao Tse Tung [Mao Zedong],” he wrote his sister.<sup>31</sup>

In the summer of 1967, Smith visited Black radicals James and Grace Lee Boggs in Detroit, while doing interviews for his journalistic account *Return to Black America*. These were two of C. L. R. James’ one-time followers, whom Smith had first met around 1950, but they are not identified in the book

as such and the material about them barely touches on international politics. Grace Boggs recounted in her autobiography that the couple then stayed in Smith’s apartment in Paris in June 1968, during the student-worker uprising, but no political conversations are reported.<sup>32</sup>

## The Gibson Affair

Those seeking information on Smith’s political activities and views in France in the years leading up to *The Stone Face* are left with an unfortunate situation. A paucity of facts has led to an elevation of the importance of his association with “The Gibson Affair,” involving the aforementioned Philadelphia friend, Richard Gibson.

The rubric of “The Gibson Affair” refers to a series of incidents that has been described in many books and is too convoluted to recount in all its intricacies. But the essence is that a letter was published in the 21 October 1957 issue of *Life* magazine denouncing French colonialism and allegedly signed by expatriate Ollie Harrington. Since a foreign guest’s involvement in French politics, especially the Algerian conflict, could bring expulsion from France, Harrington immediately protested to the French authorities that the letter was a forgery and demanded an investigation by the police.

Within a short time, an authorized statement from Smith came into the hands of the police, affirming that the person who sent the letter to *Life* and forged Harrington’s signature was Gibson, who at that moment was working alongside Smith at the French press agency AFP. Gibson was then fired by the AFP and decided to return to the U.S. to seek other work. Just before Gibson departed, Richard Wright, suspicious for some years that “agents” of one sort or another were out to do harm to himself and Harrington, met with Gibson to seek an explanation for his behavior.

Gibson told Wright that it was Smith who had come up with the scheme to have well-known Black expatriates send letters in support of the Algerians to various publications, but with the idea that each would sign other people’s names.

This clever ruse would allow the individuals to legitimately deny responsibility for the letters if they were threatened with expulsion from France. According to Gibson, Smith immediately betrayed him by failing to inform Harrington and Wright of their plan, and then going to the French authorities and to AFP to blame it all on Gibson.

Apparently, Wright believed Gibson’s story and became convinced that Smith was indeed an “agent,” and that behind Smith was the hidden hand of C. L. R. James. This version of the episode became the basis for Wright’s final, unpublished novel, “Island of Hallucination,” in which characters partly modeled on Gibson, Smith, James Baldwin (who had nothing to do with any of this), and C. L. R. James comprise a network of secret spies and provocateurs.<sup>33</sup>

In 2003 Gibson stated to me that he had no explanation for Smith’s behavior in this fiasco and was desperate to know the facts. Several years after the events, Gibson was back in Paris for a visit and learned that Smith regularly took dinner at a brasserie called “Le Vaudeville” on the Place de la Bourse, near the AFP office. Gibson planned to encounter Smith there and finally learn the truth; but he approached Smith’s table only to have Smith run out of the restaurant yelling that he refused to talk to Gibson.<sup>34</sup>

Many aspects of the Gibson affair, including relevant FBI

records, have been investigated by numerous biographers and scholars.<sup>35</sup> While Wright, Harrington, Smith, et al were certainly under surveillance in these years, no evidence has surfaced that any of the Black expatriates, including Gibson, were agents at that point;<sup>36</sup> Wright, on the other hand, himself had named some Communists to U.S. officials in 1954 in order to keep his passport.<sup>37</sup>

Considering Gibson's later behavior, masquerading as a committed Leftist while giving information to the CIA, it seems possible that his version — that he was seduced by his friend into what appears to be a hare-brained ultraleft scheme — may not be the full story.<sup>38</sup>



*The Paris Massacre: Police assaulted a demonstration of 30,000 Algerians protesting their curfew.*

## The Return of October 17, 1961

*The Stone Face*, then, is the product of a long and complex history. A few of the most obvious sources come from news reporting undertaken by Smith. One is an article sent to the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1954, where he first notes the similarity of the treatment of Black people in U.S. cities and Algerians in Paris.<sup>39</sup>

Another is a book, co-authored by Simone de Beauvoir, where the torture of an Algerian woman by the French — similar to that attributed to Smith's characters Jamila and Latifa — is depicted.<sup>40</sup> A third is his recreation of the Paris Massacre of 17 October 1961, for which *The Stone Face* is the earliest known fictional treatment and one of the handful of representations of the event until the 1990s.<sup>41</sup>

The Paris Massacre was an intentional attack on a peaceful demonstration of 30,000 Algerians protesting a curfew imposed on them in Paris. The civil disobedience action was called by the French branch of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which advocated independence for Algeria.

The violent assault on the demonstration was orchestrated by Paris Police Chief Maurice Papon, who would later be convicted of "crimes against humanity" for his part in the Nazi collaborationist government in the Vichy region of France. As Smith graphically depicts the atrocity, over 200 Algerians were slaughtered by beatings and drownings in the Seine. For some, historical retrieval of these events is a main reason to engage Smith's novel.

All the same, *The Stone Face* is not only remarkably clear-sighted about the persecution of the Algerians by the French government, but it focuses as well on a population of citizens who refuse to believe that they are racist. Several scenes dramatize the familiar go-to excuses for such denial.

In one instance Simeon queries his French student friend Raoul, "Is there racism in France?" Raoul responds immediately: "Of course not. The French don't believe in racist theories; everybody knows that. Africans feel perfectly at home here. The French don't understand racism."

When asked specifically about the Arabs, Raoul goes on: "That's different. The French don't like the Arabs, but it's not racism. The Arabs don't like us either. We're different" (65). Raoul, however, is balanced by a "race traitor" — another student, named Henri, who secretly works with the Algerians.

Smith is also candid about Black expatriates in France who made excuses for standing on the sidelines of the Algerian conflict. In a discussion with Babe Carter, the African American

owner of a bookshop, Simeon points to the conditions in the Arab ghetto north of Paris and declares: "Seems to me that the Algerians are the niggers of France."

Babe protests, "It's not the same thing.... Algerians are white people. They feel like white people when they're with Negroes, don't make no mistake about it. A black man's got enough trouble in the world without going about defending white people" (105).

Nor does Smith suggest that the Algerians themselves are free of prejudice. Although Simeon is welcome among them after shedding an initial aloofness,

his lover Maria finds herself confronted with crude anti-Semitism by two political militants named Ben Youseff and Hossein. The latter declares that he hates Jews, "Worse than I hate the French! Worse than I hate the colonialists!" (122)

Simeon, his friend Ahmed, and a white American named Lou all jump in to rebut the charges and try to give historical explanations for Jewish behavior in the Middle East and Algeria. Hossein retorts: "There are historical reasons for everything, even for the French occupation of Algeria, even for slavery.... I just judge by the end products" (124).

## Leaning into Ambiguities

These are some of the troubling conundrums observed in *The Stone Face*. Smith also gives fair-minded representations of the reasonings of those who simply refuse to follow Simeon's unrelenting gravitation toward political commitment.

When Simeon finally announces to Babe that he intends to return to the United States to join the fight of the civil rights movement, Babe, a jaded former NAACP official, retorts: "But fight for what? For integration? Man, I don't want to be integrated! I don't want to be dissolved into that great big messed-up white society there" (145).<sup>42</sup>

Likewise, Maria is never condemned for her choice of pursuing fame and fortune as a Hollywood star. On the contrary, her distrust of making personal sacrifices to improve humanity seems understandable considering the horrors experienced by her and her family in the Nazi hellscape and the persistent anti-Semitism even among those who would want her collaboration — Polish Communists and Algerians.

This may be why Maria tells Simeon, on the eve of her eye surgery, that she would rather go blind than have full sight restored. For the most part, Smith's approach is to lean into such paradoxes and ambiguities, not to run from them.

Yet there is at least one exception. Although Smith makes clear in his depiction of anti-Semitism among the Algerians that movements of the oppressed are not without flaws and can have many layers of nuance, he draws back from any reference to the violent civil war between the FLN and National Algerian Movement (MNA, formed in 1954 by the father of Algerian nationalism, Messali Hadj, 1898-1974).

According to Gibson, Smith was in the early years of the Algerian Revolution a strong partisan of the MNA, which had a reputation as being closer to Marxism, more working class, and influential in Paris.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, this was the view of many Trotskyist groups, including both the SWP and the ISL in the United States, the libertarian communist Daniel Guérin (1904-88), and a party led by Pierre Lambert (Pierre Boussel, 1920-2008) in France that had close contacts with Messali. Only the Internationalist Communist Party (PCI) associated with Pierre Frank (1905-84) and Michel Pablo (Michalis N. Raptis, 1911-96) held a distinctly different perspective; it advocated unity of the two rival currents, not cutting off relations with the MNA but leaning toward the FLN.<sup>44</sup>

Those in France who might be most closely associated with C. L. R. James, the group "Socialism or Barbarism," also held a complex and less definable position, but tended toward an increasing hostility regarding what might happen if the FLN were to be victorious.<sup>45</sup>

The rivalry was not just in polemics. Over 300,000 Algerians and 25,000 French military died in the anti-colonial struggle, but among the insurgents the FLN regarded the MLN as traitors and determined to wipe them out as well. Perhaps 4,000 people were killed in mainland France and 6,000 in Algeria as the two factions clashed.<sup>46</sup>

The general stance of much of the French Left at the time was to keep quiet about the matter, and Smith seems to follow in like manner in his novel. Sadly, it is long past the time for this informational blackout to expire and activists today need to recognize that, in the colonial revolt, repression and torture have not been the exclusive behavior of European colonizers and imperialists.<sup>47</sup>

## Committed Literature

Imperfect as he was, Smith should nevertheless be appraised favorably as an artist who aspired to embrace and to be in the world in accordance with his moral and political convictions, although his life was shortened due to death from cancer at the age of 47.<sup>48</sup>

In an astute essay on "Form and the Anti-Colonial Novel," novelist and Harvard professor Jesse McCarthy observes that "Smith was not a theorist or a philosopher," but he designed *The Stone Face* as an attempt "to narrativize intersectionality, to show how a critical apprehension of it as a lived experience might be a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for any form of emancipatory politics."<sup>49</sup>

"Intersectionality" is a term coined in 1989 by Critical Race Theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, with its roots in feminism, to address systems of inequality interacting to create unique effects. McCarthy convincingly demonstrates how this is imagined in new ways in *The Stone Face*, but the thread that runs through Smith's project is also about narrativizing "Black

Internationalism."

On the one hand, gender issues receive comparatively short shrift in *The Stone Face*, although they are far from absent. On the other, the novel's progression covers the experience of racial/national oppression lived by an African American male to a choice of being a citizen of the world.

In fact, the linkage by which Simeon connects the Algerian anti-colonial movement to the U.S. Black Civil Rights movement recalls the ways in which African American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War linked anti-fascism to battles against racism at home.

As University of Glasgow scholar David Featherstone points out in a study of anti-fascism and Black Internationalism, "through solidarities with other struggles...ways of refusing and challenging the racial divisions of U.S. society were envisioned and articulated."<sup>50</sup> Thus, when Simeon decides to join with U.S. civil rights activists, he calls them "America's Algerians" (204).

What we now call "identity politics" is not condescendingly dismissed by Smith but propelled forward to a higher stage of understanding. Through carefully chosen episodes, no one reading *The Stone Face* can accuse Smith of downplaying the specifics of anti-Black racism at any point. Yet the author manages to integrate Simeon's acute consciousness of confronting a racialized capitalism with a Marxist and class perspective.

When Simeon becomes an internationalist, he has an enhanced understanding of how the group-specific struggle for school integration and voting rights is part of a worldwide movement for liberation. Moreover, in this development Simeon is helped along by his white American friend Lou, clearly intended to be a reliable ally and perhaps an avatar of socialist comradeship.

At a crucial point in the debate with the Algerians over anti-Semitism, it is Lou who follows Lenin's dictum to "patiently explain": "Lou intervened, speaking gently, because he was the only 'pure' white person there. 'Every oppressed group is oppressed in a different way and has a different history.'" (123) Later, when Simeon tells Lou that he is returning to the United States, Lou replies: "I'll meet you back there, and we'll help to turn the States into a place nobody will want to flee." (206)

There is no suggestion of rigid Leninist orthodoxy in any of this. It is more likely that Simeon walked out of the pages of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous *What is Literature?* (1948) as the avatar of *littérateur engagé* (committed literature). An Existentialist aura permeates *The Stone Face*; one cannot count on a safe passage through life and each of us has the choice to speak up and act with authenticity and courage or succumb to *mauvaise foi* ("bad faith" — yielding to external pressures and adopting false values so as to disown one's innate freedom).<sup>51</sup>

Smith wrote his book with cool self-control, but he also makes it clear that the road to understanding can be grueling. Above all, in his treatment of Simeon's political progression, through forceful and sometimes eloquent rethinking, Smith has remolded historically specific political events of 60 years ago into ideas durable enough to be transmitted to future generations of activists for our own use. This is among the maximum imaginable attainments of a committed revolutionary artist. ■

## Notes

1. See the excellent discussion in Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009): 227-266.
2. The polemical and scholarly literature on these matters is far too extensive to summarize. An example of an attack on alleged "class reductionism" can be found in the article by Tattiana Cozzarelli, "Class Reductionism is Real and It's Coming from the Jacobin Wing of DSA" at: <https://www.leftvoice.org/class-reductionism-is-real-and-its-coming-from-the-jacobin-wing-of-the-dsa>. An example of the argument against alleged "race reduction" can be found in the book *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism* (2020) by Toure Reed, the son of Adolph Reed. I admit that I was politically schooled in the notion that race and class demands can and should go hand-in-hand; my views are elaborated in "Race and the Logic of Capital": <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc/192/p5183/>
3. See James Campbell, *Exiled in Paris* (1995) and Tyler E. Stovall, *Paris Noir* (1996).
4. The major biographical source on Smith is LeRoy S. Hodges, *Portrait of an Expatriate: William Gardner Smith, Writer* (1985), which has no mention of the influence of Barrows Dunham or C. L. R. James, or anything substantial about the Trotskyist influence on Smith, or his association with Algerian factions, which are the main original contributions of this present essay.
5. See the information recorded by Khary Oronde Polk at <https://www.interimpoetics.org/384/khary-oronde-polk>
6. Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 59.
7. Barrows Dunham, *Man Against Myth* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), 85-116.
8. See Fred Zimring, "Academic Freedom and the Cold War: The Dismissal of Barrows Dunham from Temple University," Ph. D. Dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1981, online at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/303113735/pq-origi-te=gscholar&fromopenview=true>
9. The impact of Dunham was first mentioned to me in a phone interview with Mary Smith, 9 September 1986, and repeated in a 13 December 2002 e-mail to me from Richard Gibson: "His [Smith's] political education does not start until his return to the United States, and he often spoke of his gratitude to Barrows Dunham for that."
10. Irene Rose is mentioned in the Shachtman group's *Labor Action* as an activist in the American Committee for European Writers, supported by both the WP and SWP: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/laboraction-ny/1947/v11n19-may-12-1947-LA.pdf>.
11. See: <http://lesamisdebeauforddelaney.blogspot.com/2017/01/beaufords-portrait-of-irene-rose.html>
12. See: <https://www.newsweek.com/richard-gibson-cia-spies-james-baldwin-amiri-baraka-richard-wright-cuba-926428>. The Central Intelligence Agency's files on Gibson are available at: <https://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/jfk/NARA-Oct2017/NARA-Dec15-2017/124-90146-10107.pdf>. See also the informative article by Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Stoolpigeons and the Treacherous Terrain of Freedom Fighting" at: <https://www.aahs.org/stoolpigeons-and-the-treacherous-terrain-of-freedom-fighting/>. So far there is no evidence that Gibson was a spy during his years in Philadelphia or Paris, or during the time he was active in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (1960-62). Gibson is still alive in London. For most of his life he was primarily employed as a journalist for mainstream as well as Left publications; he is the author of *Mirror for Magistrates: A Novel* (1958) and *African Liberation Movements* (1972).
13. The preceding information about Smith's relationships and reading is based on a 14 December 2002 e-mail to me from Gibson.
14. Smith's FBI file is now online at several locations in different forms and degrees of completeness. The version I have consulted is available at: <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/files/original/bc239307ad221891787c64a64258d7f1.pdf>. For unexplained reasons Smith either changed his mind about the Yugoslavia delegation or it was cancelled. Some of Smith's activities are mentioned in issues of the SWP newspaper, *The Militant*. See "Philadelphia Meeting Hits Police Assault on Civil Rights," where Smith is described as speaking at a meeting chaired by SWP organizer Max Goldman: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/themilitant/1949/v13n15-apr-11-1949.pdf>; and "Mass Meeting Protests Police Brutality": <https://www.themilitant.com/1950/1435/MIL1435.pdf>
15. "Johnson" was James and "Forest" was Marxist-Humanist founder Raya Dunayevskaya (1918-87).
16. See the informative discussion by Scott McLemee and a reprint of the text of the 1948 speech at: <https://isreview.org/issue/85/revolutionary-answer-negro-problem-united-states/index.html>
17. Letter from Constance Webb to Wald, undated but probably September 1997.
18. Nevertheless, the characterization was accurate for both. Mailer had been a Communist fellow traveler but was recently influenced toward anti-Stalinist communism by his Polish-born French translator, novelist Jean Malaquais (1908-1998), who was also a friend of James.
19. The quotations are from G. F. Eckstein [C. L. R. James], "Two Young American Writers," *Fourth International* XI, No.2 (March-April 1950): 53-56. Max Shachtman's Independent Socialist League also reviewed *The Last of the Conquerors*, but only briefly. See James M. Fenwick (Chalmers Stewart), "Novel Explores Theme of Negro GI's in Germany," *Labor Action*, 15 August 1949, 3. While the SWP's *Militant* did not review *Last of the Conquerors*, in 1964 it published a favorable commentary on *The Stone Face* by Ethel Block: <https://themilitant.com/1964/2807/MIL2807.pdf>
20. The quotations are from William Gardner Smith, "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," *Phylon* XI, No. 4 (Fourth Quarter, 1950): 297-303. This essay was reprinted in C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Black American Writer*, Volume I: Fiction (1969), 71-78.
21. See the application of this concept to Smith in Alexa Weik Von Moser, *Cosmopolitan Minds: Literature, Emotions and the Transnational Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 89-119.
22. Gibson believed that Smith had thought of joining the CP-USA but was repelled by the literary culture of the movement. Email from Gibson to Wald, 13 December 2002.
23. Without getting into a detailed debate on the matter, it's worth noting that many world-class artists of Smith's Day were partisans of the Soviet Union — Pablo Neruda, Pablo Picasso, Bertolt Brecht, Mikhail Sholokhov, and Diego Rivera for starters. James' observations about Melville and Mailer are stimulating and memorable, but the creative process and the development of craft are far more complicated than his postulation of a political precondition suggests.
24. According to Ralph Duman, a specialist in the James archives, there appears to be an undated note from Smith to James praising the publication of *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (1952) by Charles Denby (Simon Owens, 1907-83), a Johnson-Forest Tendency supporter. E-mail from Ralph Duman to Wald, 27 September 1997.
25. Jerry H. Bryant, "Individuality and Fraternity: The Novels of William Gardner Smith," *Studies in Black Literature* (Summer 1972): 1.
26. Of course, the ideological supporters of the "Free World" saw the anti-colonial struggle as mainly a proxy war with the Soviet Union, but Black American radicals saw much of the conflict differently, with the Third World seeking independence from the racist West. See Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century* (2016).
27. E-mail from Gibson to Wald 17 December 2002.
28. E-mail from Gibson to Wald, 14 December 2002.
29. See: <https://jacobin.com/2016/10/pcf-french-communists-sfio-algeria-vietnam-ho-chi-minh>
30. For a thorough view of the Ghana episode among Black expatriates, see Kevin K. Gaines, *African Americans in Ghana* (2006).
31. Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 251.
32. Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 140.
33. Among the most informative discussions of the novel is one by Richard Gibson himself, "Richard Wright's 'Island of Hallucination' and the 'Gibson Affair,'" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 51, No. 4 (Winter 2005): 896-920.
34. E-mail from Gibson to Wald, 13 December 2003.
35. Among the cleverer investigations of Smith's FBI records can be found in William J. Maxwell, F.B. Eyes: *How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (2015).
36. See Craig Lanier Allen, "Spies Spying on Spies Spying: The Rive Noire, the 'Paris Review,' and the Spector of Surveillance in Post-War Literary Expatriate Paris, 1953-1958," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, 1 (July 2016): 29-50.
37. Cited in James Campbell, "The Island Affair," *Guardian*, 7 January 2006: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/07/featuresreviews.guardianreview25>.
38. One of the better reports on the Gibson affair can be found in James Campell, *Exiled in Paris* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 199-205. Among the many aspects complicating the matter are that Gibson and Harrington had had a fistfight over ownership of an apartment; Smith seemed to believe that Wright himself was an agent; Chester Himes was suspicious of Smith as an opportunist and also as a possible agent; and Gibson held that Smith was inspired by an Algerian co-worker at AFP named Jean Chandlerli. While I am dubious about Gibson's version of "The Gibson Affair," I have been able to independently corroborate most of the biographical information he has provided about Smith.
39. This is quoted in the excellent introduction to the 2022 edition of *The Stone Face* by Adam Shatz, xv.
40. Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked Liberal French Opinion* (1962).
41. The depiction of the massacre is one of the reasons that the novel was never published in French until 2021, when it was issued as *Le visage de pierre*.
42. There has been a separate debate over Simeon's decision to return to the U.S. rather than remain in France to fight for the Algerian cause. Most notably, in Paul Gilroy's *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), it is argued that this decision contradicts the logic of the novel's transnational solidarity. Many critics have argued against this, and there is evidence that Smith changed the ending of the novel (which was originally that Simeon decides to move to Africa) at the request of his publishers. These matters are discussed in Anand Bertrand Commissiong, "Where is the Love? Race, Self-Exile, and a Kind of Reconciliation," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21, 1 (Spring 2021): 27-46.
43. E-mail from Gibson to Wald, 13 December 2002.
44. See the debate between Patrick O'Daniel (Sherry Mangan) and Philip Magri (Shane Mage) in the 1958 Discussion Bulletin of the SWP: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/swp-us/idx/swp-1946-59/db/v19n02-apr-1958-db.pdf>
45. See the writings on Algeria by Jean-Francois Lyotard on this website: <http://www.notbored.org/SouBA.pdf>. Thanks to Scott McLemee for pointing this out.
46. For further information see the article by Andrew Coates: <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/931/new-chapter-in-human-liberation-and-the-review-by-ian-birchall>: <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/birchall/2004/xx/pattieu.html>.
47. However, it should be noted that the aforementioned articles in Footnote 41 from the SWP Bulletin do refer to the violence of the Algerian national liberation factions.
48. The fullest discussion of Smith's final years can be found in Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980*, 238-256.
49. Jesse McCarthy, "Form and the Anticolonial Novel: William Gardner Smith's *The Stone Face*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 55, 1 (2022): 78.
50. See David Featherstone, "Black Internationalism, Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, and the Spatial Politics of Anti-Fascism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103(6): 1417.
51. For additional perspectives on Existentialist themes, see McCarthy, "Form and the Anticolonial Novel: William Gardner Smith's *The Stone Face*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 61-93.

# Movement Challenges

By Owólabi Aboyade

## Elite Capture

By Olúfemi O. Táiwò  
Haymarket Books, 2022, 168 pages,  
\$16.95 paper.

*Elite Capture* by Olúfemi O. Táiwò makes critical, controversial, interventions into today's progressive politics. The author is an associate professor of philosophy at Georgetown University and writes from the framework of the Black radical tradition.

Seeking to engage in today's social movements, the book is worthy of intergenerational discussion from the grassroots to the halls of today's intelligentsia.

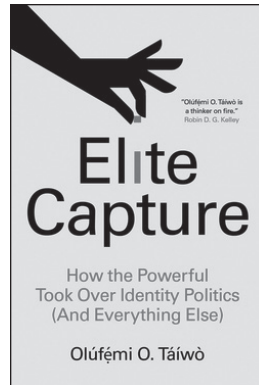
*Elite Capture* uses the folk tale of the "The Emperor's New Clothes" as a central metaphor to investigate the ways in which people, like most citizens in the fable, capitulate to power. Why were they motivated to cheer and encourage the naked ruler?

It is, Táiwò argues, the strength and confidence of the elite to overpower others, even influencing them to act in ways contrary to their core belief system. Perhaps the cheering citizens were afraid of punishment; maybe they had business interests to protect or wanted to advance their political connections. Perhaps some felt the pressure to remain silent in the cheering crowd.

## Captured by Elites

Táiwò defines "elite capture" as the phenomena by which political or social projects can be "hijacked in principle or in effect by the well positioned and resourced." (10) Readers of this magazine know that organizations can shift over time to cater to the needs of philanthropic funders, the leadership of middle-class staff, the trends in social media or the priorities of the

Owólabi Aboyade (William Copeland) is a cultural worker (Creative Calabash, Relentless Bodies) and MC (Will See Music) from Detroit. He worked in various roles at the East Michigan Environmental Action Council (EMEAC) including Youth Organizer, Climate Justice Director and Leadership team. He served as Local Coordinator for the 2010 US Social Forum. He is currently the Community Care Circles Coordinator for Detroit Disability Power.



Democratic Party. Demands of family, health and personal stability can influence radical youth to moderate their public activities.

As slogans with progressive potential such as "Black Lives Matter" become popular, we see forces that are well positioned with media resources or institutional power assimilate them. They provide a version of these movements that is more palatable to mainstream taste.

Mayors, congresspeople and even corporations have proclaimed "Black Lives Matter." Its power as a slogan of resistance is transformed with each instance of elite capture.

Táiwò is critical about today's popular modes of politics, especially as they depend on identity politics. He's critical of "politics of deference," which he sees as capturing and transforming identity politics.

Identity politics began as a way of creating space for peoples of multiple marginalized identities, to enable them to participate fully in broad political projects such as socialism or nationalisms. Now, at its weakest, it is empty of ideology, merely encouraging the group to follow the leadership of the "most oppressed identity" in each space.

The book is not just a criticism of the mechanisms of assimilation or appropriation. Táiwò calls for a principled and "constructive politics" that can bring about change by intentionally working towards "redistributing social resources and power rather than pursuing intermediary goals cashed out in symbols." (84)

The author places his analysis in the context of the "decline of liberal democracy" taking place globally as political institutions have been increasingly forced into the logic of the corporation.

Advancing for almost half a century, this process has led to the privatization of public services, to "public-private partnerships" to finance infrastructure, mega tax breaks, structural adjustment and debt service. Such measures are rarely debated, and in fact are often celebrated as achievements.

Instead, Táiwò argues, struggling collectively for material gains would help activists

understand this shifting global landscape, the landscape in which we all work and survive.

This book calls for movement activists to develop a culture in opposition to the mechanisms of power we experience. These mechanisms facilitate buying and selling — rather than liberation, self-actualization, authentic relationships, or spiritual expressions. Táiwò argues that "value capture" is another mechanism dominant systems use to accumulate participation.

It's one thing to go along with these mechanisms of power and come home and laugh (or cry) at it all. But they are dangerous when they come to replace in our own minds more complex sets of values.

In capitalist society we may be too tired, too overworked, too stressed, or in a few cases positively incentivized, to undertake rich processes of self-evaluation, so we may measure effectiveness by the number of likes or clicks we get or the number of stars we get on evaluation sheets.

*"This kind of process is always a possible result of social interaction, but the distortions to our values are sharpest in social systems and environments where this simplicity is built into the structures of reward and punishment.... Even outside of work, social media features such as likes, shares, and retweets play the role of points in games."* (52-53)

Especially for a generation that calls coping skills "life hacks," processes of incentive creation and use of such shorthand can lead to both changes in behaviors as well as subtle shifts in values for the users.

For Táiwò, a constructive politics is one that produces improvements in the material conditions of peoples' lives with the long-term goal of changing patterns of domination. He uses examples from the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) and their anti-colonial organizing to posit how an organization with strong revolutionary principles can include some people of privilege who can make significant contributions.

*Elite Capture* warns against not just violent and blatant coercion, but also hegemonic and subtle signals that define and then normalizes how the "game" of life should be played. The author quotes PAIGC leader Amílcar Cabral as saying "imperialism domination... for its own security requires

cultural oppression.”

Constructive politics for Táíwò includes institution building, cultural work guided by transformational principles and struggling collectively to meet the material needs of the people. According to him, the latter is too frequently missing from popular identity politics. He links this directly to elite capture of today’s radicalism.

Táíwò sees much of today’s radicalism is about changing patterns of domination via how we interact with each other and symbolic victories. Thus, he suggests the need for “deference” may be overstated in some political circles today.

### Applications to Today’s Contexts

I agree with the criticism that the politics of deference assumes all oppressed people are a monolith. If white activists are encouraged to “listen to the Black voices in the (coalition) room” then they usually aren’t encouraged to question “which Black voices should we follow?”

Táíwò points out that often too few “minority voices” are gathered. Categories of oppression can come to trump political experience or even an organization’s mission.

I don’t think Táíwò states clearly enough that social class has too often been eliminated from the list of identities that progressives fight over. The almost invisible weakening of democratic practices means that market principles have snuck into our daily interactions.

The constructive politics that Táíwò is yearning for needs a class analysis about how low-income, subsistence-income and no-income folks are pushed out of the institutions of this profit-based society — or given shoddy and detrimental versions of these institutions. Again, Táíwò points in this direction with his criticism about prioritizing “how we treat each other in the room,” but fails explicitly to note that the identity of economic class is often left out. Isn’t that a perfect example of “elite capture”?

I find this book particularly valuable because there is a legacy of grassroots organizing in Detroit that has much in common with Táíwò’s call for “constructive politics.” Detroit’s movements have been rooted in collective struggles for the basics of life: water, housing, food, education, electoral and communal power. For a generation or two, I believe younger activists’ identity has influenced their organizing goals and methods more than the local organizing that which preceded them.

### Environmental Justice Politics

I think Táíwò’s description of constructive politics can be pushed further, especially in how he distinguishes it from deferential or identity politics. As someone who spent over a decade in environmental justice (EJ) strug-



gles in and around Detroit, I was struck by his reference to the Flint water crisis. Here I want to raise two important criticisms of his approach, but ones that I think will add nuance to his concept of constructive politics.

First, the author fails to mention that Flint is a majority Black city (54%). Nor does he note the history punitive policies the city has endured. They have the effect of what Walter Rodney would call the “underdevelopment” of these socio-political spaces. Instead Táíwò uses terms such as “the people” or “residents and activists,” implying that Flint’s situation is generalizable to any other American city.

Táíwò does acknowledge that Flint’s struggle for justice is incomplete. But considering the history of Environmental Justice struggles, that gap between what is ideal and what is accomplished is far from random.

When we compare EJ “victories,” we most often we find differences clearly based on race. One local example is when Detroit-based Marathon Oil expanded in the 48217 zip code area (the most polluted in the state); white homeowners were bought out while Black residents fought for a decade afterwards for compensation. (See <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>)

While uplifting community organizing, Táíwò fails to mention that in the United States there is another level of organizing that must take place. Asking the question of “who is at the table” is not about mere symbolic recognition.

In the racist United States of America those who are closer to the ideal of white, middle class and propertied are more likely to be recognized and compensated in material ways. Usually after victory is declared and the news cameras have left, Black and Brown folks must keep struggling.

Merely calling Flint an “incomplete victory” after the children have suffered from lead poisoning that can’t be undone fails to place the Flint water crisis in the appropriate

context of ongoing attacks on our well-being when we live in racialized/colonized communities.

Second, Táíwò writes of Flint: “The alliance of residents and scientists won” (106). Again another layer of organizing is missing from his brief picture. Scientists, public health workers, journalists, academics are in these struggles as related to their careers and chosen professions. They are often “playing a different game” than parents and family members who are seeing their neighbors and loved ones get sick and die.

This is not to say that there is not overlap. There are professionals who grow up, live and work in EJ communities. The reality, however, is that professionals have more opportunities to monetize their findings and build a “name” or career on the successes of these initiatives (and the sufferings of local communities). Professionals usually control the grant funding and resource generation connected to this work; professionals may even be prohibited by their employer from working on an issue if it conflicts with its institutional or corporate aims.

In EJ struggles I’ve witnessed people’s lives damaged from the stress of media coverage and having their personal lives become a symbol of a “social issue.” Yes, the resources that professionals like scientists bring can have positive results. But what it takes to make a successful and constructive politics must recognize that people come to the table with different vulnerabilities and incentives. In some ways this is further application of Táíwò’s elite capture — these professionals are vulnerable to specific forms of capture that can undermine the constructive politics Táíwò envisions.

In Environmental Justice organizing the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing are a tool that is used to bridge this gap in a principled way.

This short list of six transformative values has been used for organizing situations where differences of class, institutional access and profession threatens to derail or deform coalition organizing. With tools like the Jemez Principles, we can use the lens of identity politics to recognize potential fissures in a coalition and move towards possibilities of shared revolutionary principles. (See <https://www.ejnet.org/ej/jemez.pdf>)

### Concluding Thoughts

What do we lose when political discourse discusses race much more easily than class? Perhaps the way to constructive politics is obscured and a kind of “elite capture” takes place. Police shootings are seen as a “Black issue” but the way that racial capitalism functions in thousands of smaller, ubiquitous, still brutal ways remains hidden.

What about hunger, medical negligence,

continued on page 27

# George Floyd, A Life By Malik Miah

## His Name Is George Floyd: One Man's Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice

By Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa  
Viking, May 2022, 428 pages.

I PARTICIPATED IN the popular uprising for racial justice after George Floyd was murdered by a white Minneapolis cop on May 25, 2020. I thought I knew his story — how George Floyd died, where he came from and how he lived. The cold-blooded assassination of this typical Black man sparked a massive national and international response — the largest ever in this country.

But this new book goes much deeper into his early life and places him in the context of America's racial history, going back to slavery, emancipation and legal segregation, and the white backlash that persists.

Samuels and Olorunnipa begin with the well-known events of the case. In the opening pages titled "Flowers," they write:

*"As a young man, Perry, as his family called him, had outside aspirations — to become a Supreme Court justice, a pro athlete, or a rap star. By the time his world came crashing down in the months before his death, he had been chasing more modest ambitions — a little stability, a job driving trucks, health insurance. Still, in his dying seconds, as he suffocated under a white police officer's knee, Floyd manage to speak his love.*

*"Mama, I love you!" he screamed from the pavement where his cries of 'I can't breathe' were met with an indifference as deadly as hate.*

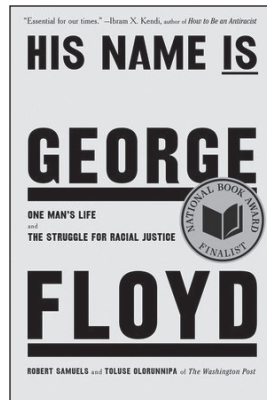
*"Reese, I love you!" he yelled, a reference to his friend Maurice Hall, who was with him when he was handcuffed that Memorial Day evening.*

*"Tell my kids I love them!"*

*"These words marked an end of life in which Floyd repeatedly found his dreams diminished, deferred, and derailed — in no small part because of the color of his skin."*

The fact: the death of a Black man in racist America at the hands of a cop occurs everywhere, every week some place in the country. The police officers — whether white, Black, Asian or Latino — follow the institutional rules.

All a cop must say to justify a shooting:



"it was self-defense." It didn't matter if the Black victim was unarmed, mentally ill or walking down the street. The "problem" is the color of his/her skin.

### Professionally Researched Narrative

Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa conducted over 400

interviews. They had access to the *Washington Post* extensive files on race and other journalists who covered the events of 2020 and since. Both reporters are Black men who know racism firsthand from their own life experiences.

Olorunnipa is the *Post*'s White House Bureau chief and of African (primarily Nigerian) descent. Samuels was born in the Bronx, New York, and is a national reporter who graduated from Northwestern University.

They interviewed friends and family of George Floyd. Nothing was left out — the good, bad and the scars of Perry's life.

They, like the country, learned of the murder when a young Black female bystander, Darnella Frazier, posted her live phone video online. It showed Derek Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes until he was dead. It showed three other cops standing by with one holding Floyd down.

The story is told in three parts. The first, "Perry," discusses who Floyd was up to his Memorial Day murder. Part Two talks about his life in Texas and family. Part Three, "Say His Name," is about the popular uprising that followed his death, and the push for justice in the courts and Congress.

Chapter One describes in detail what that May 25 was like for George Perry Floyd Jr. I had wondered why he was at that community store and did not drive away. It turns out he regularly shopped there and was known by the owner and employees.

So why were the police called by the store about an allegedly counterfeit \$20 bill? Why did Floyd stay outside the store, across the street, after he was asked by a store

employee to take back the bill and pay for his cigarettes again?

The four ex-cops (now serving time in prison) knew nothing about George Floyd or what he was up to. He was simply a Black man sitting in a car with a friend. They saw him, as the authors explain:

*"He was young, poor, and Black in America — a recipe for irrelevance in a society that tended to push lads like him to the outskirts.*

*"However, he told everyone around him that he would leave an indelible mark one day."*

The Minneapolis police blamed the victim for his death. It gave a false justification of the murder (as police always do). But the pressure of the immediate public protests forced the firing and prosecution of the cops and the jury conviction of Derek Chauvin.

The authors detail the testimonies at the trial using transcripts and firsthand reports. Floyd's background is important, they write, to understand how typical Black men are killed by police with few ever forced to pay a price.

### The Background

Floyd struggled with substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, and criminal activities as an adult. He served time in prison.

He first grew up in a trailer park in North Carolina, and as a teenager his mother moved the family to Houston's Third Ward seeking a better life. Segregation and racism followed the family. Their housing project was 99 percent Black. They continued to live in poverty.

"To help the world understand Perry as they saw him," the authors obtained haircuts from his barbers, visited the areas he called home, and spoke with his extended family, friends and associates as well as former lovers.

Floyd, 6'4," was a big man, a star football player in high school but not good enough to get into professional sports. He was a loving brother and son. He was respected by his community.

He was poor, had little access to health care, and started using drugs and became a trader. He was not the hardest worker.

He sought to get out of that life and improve himself. He had many friends to help him. It's why he moved to Minneapolis in 2014 where he had a relative.

Malik Miah is an ATC advisory editor.

The truth is that George Floyd, Jr. was a victim of the “War on Drugs” pushed by Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Clinton against the Black community. That racist war helps explain why police officers feel free to murder Black men or imprison them.

African Americans were the hardest hit by the Covid pandemic. Floyd suffered the same fate as millions of people during the coronavirus crisis: He was out of work and looking for a new job in 2020.

### Family and Community

As I read this personal story, I felt a certain joy in how the authors were able to show in a positive light how a poor family and community lived, breathed, and functioned as human beings.

My mother’s family grew up in Detroit’s “Black Bottom,” which no longer exists. Samuels and Olorunnipa show the warmth of the family and neighbors — not unusual for Black families living in large cities like Houston, Detroit, Chicago and elsewhere.

We all know the saying, “You can’t let the racism keep you down.” George Floyd, Jr. did that as best he could. He was a living, breathing human being with flaws and desires.

He was normal. More than a victim of police terror and death, he was real.

The authors tell the story of Floyd’s ancestry, looking back over 300 years of American history. What emerges is the *clearest possible case for the justice and urgency of reparations*.

Floyd’s great-great-grandfather had been born a slave. During Reconstruction in the late-1800s he owned 500 acres of land (only two percent of white farmers had the same amount of land) in North Carolina.

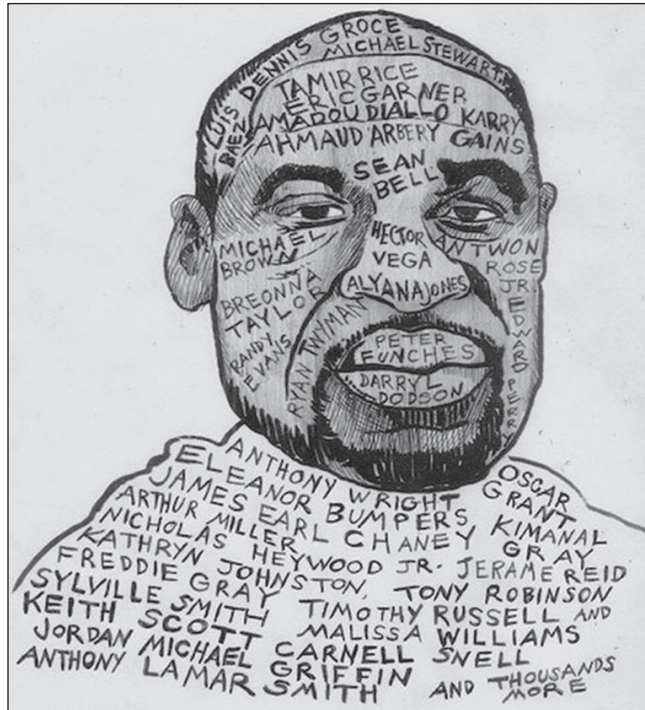
What should have been multigenerational Black wealth was stolen from him and his descendants in the white post-Reconstruction terror afterwards and the rise of Jim Crow segregation, when African Americans became third class citizens.

### The Movement for Black Lives

I see one major omission in the book: It does not adequately discuss the leadership role of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the fight for racial justice.

The Floyd family participated in the protests and their voices are strongly presented. Yet the key to arresting and prosecuting the four cops was the popular uprising in Minneapolis and nationally. This was the biggest protest movement ever in the country, both spontaneous and with new local and national leaders who remain active now.

Many of the movement leaders de-



Artist and activist Tom Keough memorialized George Floyd and the names of some other Black people recently murdered by police.

manded radical reforms of policing; some called for defunding and transferring those resources to community groups. Others called to abolish the police force as it exists and start over, combined with calls to end the prison industrial complex.

The authors describe the protests in Minneapolis and from around the world (from New Zealand and Australia to the United Kingdom and France). They note the power of that movement, but don’t indicate an opinion — either positive or critical — about what it represents beyond the moment.

They present the BLM largely as slogans: “Black Lives Matter! No Justice! No Peace! Say His Name!” — but don’t go into the movement’s longer-term potential. Could it become a powerful political challenge to the criminal system itself?

More is written about the leadership role of one of the lawyers for the family, particularly Ben Crump who represents many families around the country of slain Black men and women, and civil rights leaders such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. And of course, there’s the role of Keith Ellison, the first Black Minnesota Attorney General.

### Emerging Leadership

Who were the militant activists and leaders of the grassroots movement? The implication is that the diversity of protesters was only because of agreement on the demand “Justice for George Floyd,” not the broader criminality of the policing and carceral justice systems.

The BLM leaders, for the most part,

understood the link between the two — and how reliance on electoral politics could be a diversion or even undermine the protests, in the absence of an independent political party fighting for freedom and racial justice.

That’s what occurred — not for the first time — during the 2020 presidential election, when the main Black Democratic officeholders told activists to focus on the elections. While most Democratic presidential candidates expressed support for the protests and BLM, the eventual nominee, Joe Biden, did not. He made clear his call to “fund the police.”

As president, Biden has indeed pushed for massively increased police funding. It is not a surprise there is growing disillusionment with Biden and Democrats. In the 2022 midterm elections, Black voting went down in major urban areas — even though most Black

people continue to vote for Democrats — because the issue is seen as self-preservation in a racist country.

Trump Republicans are rightly seen as a threat to Black survival. The fundamental political problem: there is no independent political party for the nationally oppressed or the working class as a whole.

After the civil rights victory in the 1960s that won voting rights and ended legal segregation, there was some discussion about building an independent Black political party, but it didn’t take root.

The “most pro labor president” Biden also showed his pro-employer loyalties when he denied the rail unions the right to strike in December for paid sick days, even while claiming that he “supports” the idea.

It is no surprise that the mass protests after Floyd’s murder declined after Biden’s election with its promises of police reform. He met with members of the Floyd family, knowing that police reform legislation would never be passed by the Senate.

The Democrats did not pass a George Floyd Policing Act because of the archaic rules of the Senate that needs 60 votes. This allowed Biden off the hook and diverted energy to an electoral focus.

### Who’s Innocent and Who’s Guilty

The methodology of the authors is to use original sources, transcripts, and interviews. While Perry could not speak for himself, his family, his friends, and the police themselves made clear who was innocent and why the police officers were guilty.

The story of America's systemic racism does come through convincingly. As the authors write at the end of the book, the case of "George Floyd did not eliminate institutional racism in America." It did make the country *understand* it better.

The racist backlash by Republican and white supremacists defending the "Blue" was classic. They brought up lies about "Wokeness," Critical Race Theory, history of slavery, the 1619 Project, and demonized the BLM leaders and movement.

The rise of Trumpism, and the transformation by the far right of the Republican Party, show how quickly a white backlash can reverse gains and lead to setbacks. The struggle, as every Black person knows, is long and hard.

The main lesson of the Black Lives Matter movement is the potential of a powerful multi-racial and ethnic coalition to stand with Black people.

### Partial Justice Done

The life of George Floyd in one sense, as the authors document, was killed long before that May 25 day — a slow death from living in the United States. Some 300 years of racist practice made Derek Chauvin assume, as he had done before, he would get away with his brutality.

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Yet the authors decided not to put America on trial, even with the facts to do so. Maybe that's why the BLM and antiracist leaders are not given their proper due.

The authors hope that a new day on racial justice would come as a lesson of Floyd's death and Chauvin's conviction. Politicians including Vice President Kamala Harris and Black elected officials have the same expectation. They had hoped for that future end of racial injustice after the first Black president Barack Obama was elected in 2008.

Black men, however, continue to be

murdered by police — for mental illness, for walking down the street, for being Black.

Nevertheless, a certain victory was won in Minnesota. Derek Chauvin received 20 years in prison. The ruling class understood that someone had to pay to show the world that "bad" police are sometimes prosecuted.

The other former cops also received shorter prison time for not stopping Chauvin. J. Alexander Kueng was sentenced to three years, and Tou Thao to 3½ years. Thomas Lane, who held Floyd down, pled guilty to a charge of aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter in the killing, and was sentenced to three years.

Was justice done? No one really believes so. Perry is still dead. Few police ever face a jury. But it is important that four cops are in prison.

Finally, I urge readers to closely read the book's extensive pages of "Notes" (391-411). They include hyperlinks to articles with more detailed information.

*His Name Is George Floyd* is an important contribution to the story of African Americans. A typical Black man's life became a symbol of why the fightback epitomized by the Black Lives Matter movement is essential to learning the truth about police and state violence, and why popular uprisings are key to standing up to systemic racism. ■

## Movement Challenges — continued from page 24

housing insecurity and many other ways in which Táíwò's constructive politics points towards revolutionary politics?

Even the shorthand acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) can function as value capture for the settler state. It covers over the fact that both Indigenous Nations and Afrikan peoples are struggling for sovereignty as a part of liberation. This is different than racial oppression as "non-white peoples."

If we don't foreground this struggle, both the politics of deference and the author's constructive politics will ignore the operation of the settler state. Institutional patterns of control will not be swept away even if "radically transformed" or "liberated."

It's profound that the author's historical examples from Guinea and Cape Verde seek both liberation from a colonizing force and transformation of institutions and communities. But the present-day examples speak only to the institutional status quo and community transformation. Missing is the need to dismantle the settler USA along with the work to transform institutions, policies and our communities.

*Elite Capture* would also be a valuable engagement for feminist abolitionists. I think they would push his criticism and analysis forward. He quotes abolitionists such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Micah Herskind.

Yet very often abolitionism today looks to intersectional feminism and Black feminisms as a foundation.

I think stronger and more principled organizing would come from engaging with his criticisms of politics of deference and common uses of identity politics. I imagine that part of the problem is not found in abolitionist theory or practice itself. It's an example of elite capture — how power works — that any political ideology if popularized past the point of organizing infrastructure and political education will be vulnerable to assimilating into less powerful and less transformational versions.

*Elite Capture* is a valuable book to the extent that it can be discussed intergenerationally and in diverse organizing contexts. While elite capture takes place wherever there are power differentials, the prevalence of social media, the loss of the job economy and rise of the hustle economy, as well as the spread of non-profits as employers and social agents make Táíwò's cautions about "playing the game" extremely relevant.

Activists today must tune into how our reliance on corporate social media communications helps to popularize concepts and memes way past the capacity for political education. Engaging and discussing "elite capture" is urgent in today's globalized, vulnerable, violent world. ■

## Police Murder and State Coverup

THREE AND A half years after Louisiana state troopers beat Ronald Greene, 49, to death following a traffic stop, five officers have been charged with negligent homicide and malfeasance.

The December 16, 2022 *Los Angeles Times* reports:

*"These are the first criminal charges of any kind to emerge from Greene's bloody death on a roadside in rural northeast Louisiana. The case received little attention until an Associated Press investigation exposed a cover-up and prompted scrutiny of top Louisiana State Police officials, a sweeping U.S. Justice Department review of the agency, and a legislative inquiry looking at what Gov. John Bel Edwards knew and when he knew it."*

Master Trooper Kory York is seen on the body-cam dragging Greene by his ankles and holding him facedown in the dirt for nine minutes. Sound familiar?

The police had claimed Greene died in a car crash. What the Governor knew is that he had watched body-cam video footage of the brutal arrest, beating and torture of Greene "six months before state prosecutors say they knew it even existed." In fact, the AP reported that Edwards had been informed of the facts within hours after the arrest itself.

Time will tell if justice is finally done and who's held accountable. ■

## A Radical's Industrial Experience By David McCullough

MY ROOTS WERE in Texas but war and the New Deal took the family from Dallas to Washington, D.C. where I grew up as a liberal Democrat. My first political experience was getting punched in the nose for wearing a Truman button.

Our family was middle of the white middle class. High school sports were segregated until my last two years of high school, 1955-57. In 1960, Berkeley attracted me as an inexpensive place to get a doctorate in philosophy and pursue a teaching career.

I joined the Independent Socialist Club (ISC, founded 1964) in Berkeley in February, 1966. The Free Speech Movement (FSM) in 1964 radicalized me and got me into unionism as a founder of the first teaching assistants union, Local 1570 of the AFT.

Jumping between the student radical, civil rights, union, counter-cultural and antiwar movements in 1965 scattered my activist energy; joining an ongoing radical organization allowed me to concentrate it. But joining an independent socialist sect just moved the problem of scattered energy to the next level.

The ISC and then the International Socialists (IS, founded 1969) were valuable because they were movement organizations.<sup>1</sup> Our animus was to carry the movements we were involved in further and bring them into conscious confrontation with the "system." But it became clear from the system's violent reaction to challenges from the Black Liberation, antiwar and student movements in 1968-70 that none of them alone or in combination had the social power to win.<sup>2</sup>

Our own tiny energies had to be concentrated and rooted in the only force on the planet that could confront capitalism and win: the working classes.

I decided in 1969 to throw in my lot with the proletariat. I knew it meant tossing the social safety net enjoyed by the professional middle classes and unavailable to the working class — credentials, social networks, relative immunity from state brutality.

I went to work as a wireman at Western Electric in Oakland. I lasted two weeks short of the six months needed to have "seniority" and union protection. In that time I produced a newsletter, organized my work crew in a slowdown to force our steward (also our foreman) to quit and be replaced by one of us, planned the democratization of our local, and found allies in the same building among long-distance operators working for Ma Bell.

The CWA business agent sussed me out and fingered me to management. Union and management reps laughed as they walked me out of the building, fired for not mentioning an assault on a police officer conviction in my application.

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**B**y this time the IS committed to industrializing the organization.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not individual members took jobs in key industries,<sup>4</sup> the group committed itself to supporting and leading the work of those who did.

Jack Weinberg, of FSM fame, had worked out a detailed plan for getting IS members into UAW plants in Detroit. My work as a wireman at Western Electric and then at ITT<sup>5</sup> in 1969-70 was persuasive that there was a mood in the working class for moving beyond inherited norms of action on the job.

IS cadre had developed some useful skills in the '60s — writing, producing and distributing pamphlets; calling and chairing meetings with agendas and meaningful democratic participation; networking with radicals from other organizations; keeping information flowing among our collaborators; creating slogans and memes that crystalized dynamic ideas; analyzing balances of power so we could decide when to move and when to hold back.

We decided that we could take these skills, plus our commitment, to advanced sectors of the 1970s U.S. working class, and make them useful and welcome to our new co-workers. The advanced sectors in January 1971, when I moved with my family to Detroit, were steel, auto, Teamsters and other transport workers like railroad, communications, miners and government workers.

Some had militant early traditions, some were in motion at the moment, such as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) Black Power uprisings in the auto plants.

### Early 1970s Detroit

I worked in the blast furnace division of a steel mill while waiting for a UAW job to open in 1971. The coke oven was filthy work, but fun at times. I particularly liked driving the locomotive which caught molten coke as it spilled out of the ovens into my coal car to be quenched.

I flunked the Ford physical but made it into Chrysler's Warren Stamping Plant as a spot welder on an easy job, feeding door headers (where the windows wind into) on the door assembly line. An Appalachian worker hired in my cohort described the environment as "organized insanity." After a few weeks I understood the Maoist saying "a grain of rice is a bead of sweat is a drop of blood."

Everyone who worked in plants like that, or these days at Amazon and UPS, understood intuitively that the system was designed to drain every calorie of energy it could from you before releasing you to recover overnight. The highfalutin' Marxist word "exploitation" is experienced more simply as getting squeezed or wrung dry. So every worker's goal once they knew the score was to beat the system somehow.

My challenge was to find ways to beat the system collectively rather than individually. Most workers seek the personal way out, since it is the most obvious in their experience. Dog eat dog.

Fortunately, I had some ideas learned from conversations with Stan Weir, a longtime southern California labor organizer in the Independent Socialist League, who taught me to listen first, not preach.

Stan Weir was the model for the character Joe in Harvey Swados' novel, *Standing Fast*. Stan took organizing literally: he saw the workplace as an organic structure, where the first molecule was the informal work group. These are the people you are in constant contact with, just in order to do your job.

For example, a door assembly line had about eight people directly on the line: guys like me who welded the parts together; one who "married" the inside of the door to the outside panel; an inspector who checked each piece as it went by on the conveyor belt; and several guys who loaded the finished doors into racks for forklifts to pick up and drive to waiting railcars.

Our group intersected directly or tangentially with other work groups, joining one molecule to another. We depended on the forklift drivers to bring parts and carry away assemblies, on material handlers to make the parts handy, on pipe fitters to keep the sound deadener gunk and rust prevention sprays working, and on tool makers to adjust the spot welding machines.

Offline, but within sight, were metal finishers and torch welders who repaired doors damaged in the course of assembly. Each of these tangential workers had their own informal work groups.

Stan told me that my first job was to listen to and understand the people in my informal work group, then to identify the natural leader in that group. Later I would find the leaders in other work groups and try to link them. The company organized people and groups according to their functions and linked them by foremen. Stan's model was to see them instead as autonomous collectives linked by self-interest through their natural spokespeople. (See <https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/06/a-new-era-of-labor-revolt-1966/>)

## Gaming the System

Many of the spot welders and press operators in our plant spontaneously found a collective way to beat the system. They did it by working harder than necessary to get the job done, then taking turns to stop working ("go on break"). If there were four loaders filling racks with finished doors, three would work at a time while the fourth took a quarter hour break, then came back and relieved the next guy.

Similarly, entire lines worked extra hard to "make production" each hour and go on break prior to the contractually agreed five-minute hourly break. Every operation had a break-even point for the hour, say 250 doors, and a production quota, say 300 doors.

Meters on the line watched with eagle eye by the foremen kept count. The extra 50 doors produced were profit. Even though it was obvious that those extra doors, our surplus value, owed nothing to anyone except we who made them, they were whisked away for company's use any way it wished. We had zero say and Marxist economics stood naked in front of our eyeballs.<sup>6</sup>

Our spontaneous collective sought only to game the system

rather than beat it. Management obviously knew what we were doing but went along with it because it served their interest as well: meeting their quotas.

All that changed after Japanese engineers came to America in the mid-'70s to study our system as Chrysler engineers proudly showed them through the plant. In reality the visitors were doing detailed time and motion measurements, then went home determined to eliminate all of American management's missed

opportunities to collect every calorie of workers' energy.

Easy jobs, taking turns working, etc. were eliminated in Japan, their econocars wiping out Big Three models in the market. Detroit in turn by 1984 adopted Japanese methods, nicknamed "management by stress" by Mike Parker in his books. Auto work as a tolerable way of life disappeared.

But even before that transition, to beat the system we would have to be in a position to turn production on and off like a faucet. Instead of working harder to get a break, we would have to work slower to exert collective power and prioritize more distant goals over immediate work relief. We looked to the British shop stewards' movement as a model for using workers' control, but nobody came anywhere near to replicating that movement.

## Plant Dynamics

Race and ethnic dynamics determined everything in the plant. Your race was determined by how some other group looked at you, usually based simply on skin color. Ethnic dynamics were independent variables.

Thus, Black workers cohered sometimes as church and neighborhood members, sometimes as street people. So did whites, family and neighborhood largely determining promotion to better jobs. Then there were self-contained European clusters, most evidently the Polish workers, some of whom could barely speak English after 20 years at Chrysler.

There were few women in the plant, so women's issues beyond tokenism did not become political in the union hall or on the shop floor until Jane Slaughter (from the IS) hired in and started explaining blue collar feminism through the pages of the local union newspaper, where she rapidly became assistant editor.

When I arrived, union politics was defined into hard voting and service blocs. The misnamed Rank and File Slate was based in skilled trades and conspicuously racist. Skilled trades were the minority, so they depended on white production workers to control the union hall — President, VP, etc.

All were Administration Caucus (formed by Walter



Reuther in the late 1940s) loyalists. In the plant, stewards and committeemen posts were controlled by the Black opposition to the Rank and File Slate. The opposition had a minority of support among white production workers. Their leaders were also total Administration Caucus loyalists.

Our strategy was to unite Black and white production workers around shop-floor issues, at the expense of the UAW brass and their sycophants, who had long since abandoned class conflict on the shop floor in favor of the “gold-plated sweatshop.” Our newsletters and flyers came to the defense of oppressed groups — Blacks or women — who were being abused.

Prior to being awarded “seniority” at 18 months, thus prior to leaflets and openly organized agitation, I joined and eventually chaired the local union Fair Employment Practices Committee. I could investigate discrimination grievances like a steward, though stewards never did.

During this period, since I also showed up at union meetings and spoke, the Rank and File Slate tried to recruit me, sending me to Black Lake, the UAW leadership resort, for training. Training amounted to following top-down leadership from the Administration Caucus and liking it.

Eventually militants had to move beyond contract proposals, shop-floor reporting, and good ideas, to contend for power in order to implement our program. Program meant not a set of declarations, but the general idea that the union was the workers. We should act for ourselves to get what we needed, not depend on the company or union bureaucrats who wanted to “represent” us as a lawyer would, shutting us up because they knew better what was good for us.<sup>7</sup>

Although various workers were supporters and sometimes spokespeople for our caucuses and slates, the two figureheads that defined our politics in everyone’s eyes were the tool crib attendant George Brooks and myself — one Black, one white, both independent of the existing power structure and brazen in our stances.

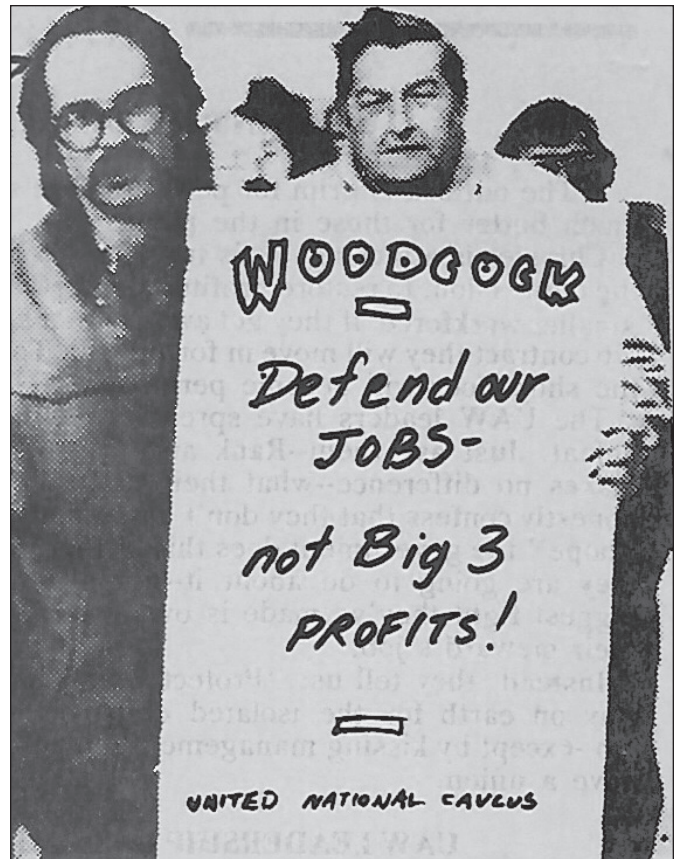
We re-divided the plant, replacing white vs. Black with rank and file workers vs. the company and its union handmaidens. We had slates of candidates for several union elections and convention delegations. George was elected steward and I wasn’t. In 1977, I was finally elected vice president, defeating the Rank and File Slate candidate by a solid margin, 1100 to 900, with support from the traditional Black slate. That was the beginning of the end of the Rank and File Slate and race-defined union politics at this factory.

A year later the traditional Black-led production slate won the local president spot and the traditional white-led slate started working with him. Their hope was to return to the careerist, class-collaboration union life they knew before. Racism no longer served them, so they ditched it in public. Their common enemy was us — the movement for class-struggle unionism.

## Bailout and Purge

The watershed decision for class struggle vs. class collaboration came in the Spring of 1979. Should the UAW and federal government bail out Chrysler by workers accepting concessions in return for government loans to the company?

We argued that if Chrysler could not make a profit it should be nationalized under workers’ control. Workers had the skills and interest to convert it to the manufacture of



David McCullough at 1975 March on Washington.

useful products.

I had chosen not to run again for VP and lost in my attempt to become chairman of the shop committee, the real center of power as opposed to the union hall, so George was isolated after winning the committeeman slot for his division.

We had lost some leverage and the newly united Black and white local union leadership were unanimous in preaching that the workers “must learn to eat crow” to save the “goose that laid the golden eggs,” Chrysler.

To make sure they won the battle for concessions, the union and company collaborated to fire three IS activists in Spring 1979 — first Jane Slaughter, then Mike Parker, then me.

Jane was fingered to management by a UAW committeeman as a leader of a wildcat strike previously at Cadillac Assembly. My guess is that the committeeman relied on the UAW research department for that information. She had a week or so to go to achieve 18 months seniority, which would have protected her.

For Mike, they had to eliminate his job title and lay him off. For years afterward, the Warren Stamping Plant had to operate without an electronics specialist of its own as they avoided calling him back.

In my case, UAW Pres. Doug Fraser wrote me that the union would not win my grievance (discharge for refusing a direct order) if taken to arbitration, therefore it was withdrawing my grievance. This despite a ruling by an administrative law judge in the Michigan Employment Security Commission that I was fired without cause, “no direct order having been given and none refused,” following a formal hearing with lawyers and witnesses on both sides.

None of us won our jobs back. Organized class-struggle

unionism faded away at Local 869 as some of our colleagues were co-opted as paid full-time union operatives. You could argue that I failed to build a caucus that could outlive my role in it, a democratic group rooted in its given level of collective consciousness and commitment. I prioritized forcing change in the system over spreading responsibility among our cohort.

The group was not prepared for the long defensive battle ahead. The offensive battle to win the UAW for class struggle unionism ran for eight years from 1971; the defensive battle that followed our defeat has lasted 40 years.

## Building Connections Across Lines

IS autoworkers collaborated across local union, company and industry lines. The epicenter of our inter-union auto work was the United National Caucus, whose citadels were the GM Tech Center where skilled workers designed cars, and Ford Local 600, the Dearborn facility that made its own steel and most everything else for cars and trucks that rolled off its assembly lines.

The UNC had organized in opposition to the Reuther Caucus in the 1960s and was well-entrenched when we arrived in the early '70s. UNC organized picket lines and press conferences at both GM headquarters and UAW Solidarity House. We went to regional and national conferences held every year and to regional picket lines.

One evergreen issue the UNC promoted was reducing work hours under the slogans “30 Hours Work for 40 Hours Pay” and “30 and Out.” These addressed cyclical layoffs/excessive overtime, early retirement and full employment.

When the Industrial Union Division of the AFL-CIO called a March on Washington for jobs in 1975, 60,000 showed up. IS had its own banner and contingent, although our autoworkers, steelworkers and teamsters marched with contingents led by reform movements in their own industries — the UNC in my case, Concerned Truckers for a Democratic Union, the CWA United Action Caucus, the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) and others.

All these and others cohered as the ad hoc Rank and File Coalition and included unemployed people as well. The coalition had its own section of the march from the Capitol building to RFK Stadium a couple of miles away and the UNC marched as part of the coalition. The marchers were a militant group, with signs like “Fuck Ford” as well as “30 for 40.”

By far the most fun part of that day was when we at the rear of the march reached the stadium and found that it only seated 40,000 and the gates were locked. The 20,000 workers locked out quickly tore down the fences and gates and flooded the field below the podium set up for union officials and Hubert Humphrey to give speeches.

When Humphrey tried to speak, he was drowned out by boos and chants from the crowd, most of whom were probably Vietnam vets. He had long lost any credibility and took down the rest of the speakers with him. The crowd broke up to march back, thinking it had done a good day's work by rejecting political-bureaucratic BS.

After the march, IS held a public meeting near the Capitol aimed at the Rank and File Coalition marchers. They had marched side by side from different industries, but we wanted to create a chance for them to talk together, swap literature and contact information, and think of coordinating their militancy. IS had a table to entice those who wanted to go even

further.

There were no national Black organizations to ally with the way we did with CLUW. By the mid-'70s the Panther Party had lost leadership of Black liberation struggles, with nothing to replace it on the street. That militancy had moved into the factories, where Black production workers were already in the lead of rank and file movements like DRUM. There was no separation of “identity” and class politics; the Black working class in Detroit already saw its class struggle as the road to Black liberation in the streets.

IS-led union caucuses went beyond the plant level to ally with progressive single-issue movements. Example: The Free Gary Tyler campaign started in 1974 on behalf of a Black youth framed for murder by Destrehan, Louisiana cops, reached into the plants — my local called for his freedom — and into the community.

The IS youth group Red Tide participated as well. I got a Red Tide militant invited to our local union meeting by the local leadership to make the pitch for freeing Gary Tyler. The local voted in favor. But Gary spent 40 years in Angola prison, several on death row. (Gary Tyler eventually won release on a plea deal. He visited in Detroit in Fall 2022 and met with some former IS members.)

## Seeds of the Future

Throughout the 1970s the IS organized conferences and network connections between rank and file caucuses, linking different industries. These planted the seeds of what later become *Labor Notes*. The soil they grew in, however, was not what we had planned for.

We understood that the wave of labor militancy in the '70s was not only an extension of '60s anti-establishment visions of a better life and resistance to everything that made life worse — war, racism, sexism. We also understood the specific economic dynamic that drove our bosses to try make their lives easier by making ours worse: the falling rate of profit.

Kim Moody, Anwar Shaikh and others analyzed the end of the postwar boom in America around 1970. During the previous 25 years, labor's share of surplus value in highly unionized sectors had kept pace with an annual 3% rise in productivity.

Following the 1930s Great Depression and World War II, there was persistent growing demand for automobiles that kicked the can of overcapitalization down the road. By 1970 the market was saturated with commodities in the advanced Western countries and no progress was in sight toward creating new markets in the third world or the Communist countries. Nor were big wars in sight as ways to reduce overcapitalization by blowing it up.

So the corporations were on the attack. Wages and benefits hadn't been on the chopping block in the early '70s. Periodic wage increases were part of the corporate business model as the price of labor peace, most particularly peace on the shop floor.

We called this status quo the “gold plated sweatshop” — the union did not challenge the company with direct action on the shop floor but the company, unable to cut wages and benefits, was free to extract more surplus value in two main ways: speedup and lengthening the work day.

Speedup and its culture of treating people as cogs in the machine had already led to years of Black-led rebellions. By the time the IS arrived in Detroit, working conditions,

including company racism, became the initial focus of our militancy. By the mid-'70s compulsory overtime coupled with layoffs was added to the mix and the two together triggered a sustained fightback. So we were able to make the first steps toward organizing that fightback that the UAW leaders refused to lead.

But the soil was shifting under our feet and we did not realize it. The automakers, like the American steel industry before it, moved to sustain their rate of profit by switching to a new business model: a preemptive class war on employees' wages and benefits.<sup>8</sup>

They stripped the gold plate off the sweatshop. Chrysler led the charge in cahoots with the UAW leadership, betting the farm that UAW members would take money out of their pockets and give it back to the company before they would fight to win. They were right (not that UAW members were ever asked.)

The IS ranks, along with many others in the class struggle union movement of the '70s, were not widely enough embedded or influential with the millions of workers at risk to head off concessions. We tried and we lost.<sup>9</sup>

A few years into the 1980s, concessions had spread across industry. Comrade Steve Kindred, an early organizer of TDU, said at a meeting in the early '80s "We're going to get our teeth kicked in for a few years." I thought he was exaggerating. On the contrary.

## Lessons for Today

Looking back, I think IS made the correct choice given the alternatives available. Committed to socialism, we picked the workplace as the arena and class struggle unionism as the tool to fight for it. We had a step-by-step roadmap to get there.

When that strategy crashed as militancy ceded to the false defensiveness of concessions, one part of the IS split off to focus on propaganda and concentration in universities and some white collar sectors, where the International Socialist Organization worked with some success for decades before dissolving.

Our own strategy became moot as the U.S. economy deindustrialized and the central industrial unions like auto and steel lost their strategic power. That vehicle to a labor party and anti-capitalist socialist combat for power choked and stalled and moved over to the slow lane.

One thing stayed the same: organizing on the job, from below. The International Socialists shifted their emphasis to linking rank and file organizers across the board. *Labor Notes* (launched in 1979) became the institutional form this took. It provided both theory and practice for the 40-year prolonged defensive movement, and at the same time cultivated organizational techniques for going on the offensive.

DSA labor committees today are trying to decide where to invest their energies. I think it makes more sense to organize among the people you spend a third of your working days with, rather than making cold calls door to door or hanging around the fringes of other people's organizing efforts.

It makes more sense to institutionalize whatever gains we

make by direct action than to pin our hopes on the General Strike. And finally, history and our own experiences have shown conclusively that it is not enough just to win electoral majorities in either government or unions.

The Marxist idea that the working class learns the ability to govern in the course of organizing itself to win power still applies. We can't just take over the capitalist machine.

Today's young workers and young socialists are discovering for themselves that the rank and file strategy is the way to go and that they don't have to wait for somebody else — in particular the traditional unions laden with bureaucracy or, like the SEIU, organizing from the top down.

The range of allies we are looking at today has broadened to reach unorganized workers, dispersed workers, unemployed and home employed workers, pink collar workers, service workers, and the public at large, as teachers' unions have discovered.

The Quiet Quitting movement, the critique developed in the book *Bullshit Jobs* and the like, have nurtured a shared realm of consciousness for manual and office and home workers: the job is not what's most important in our lives. Giving your best to the job is no longer a path to a good life at home.

The requisites of a decent life have to be applied on the job as well as off the job — such as air-conditioned trucks for UPS workers in an overheated world, or regular sleep patterns for pilots and flight attendants. Workers' demands, union demands and public demand, converge toward campaigns for human rights.

Health is a human right. So is life — including Medicare for All, guaranteed income, socialized child care, and canceling profit to save the environment. ■

## Notes

1. "Independent" was the key word for me in joining the socialist world. The ISC owed nothing to the safe havens many American 60s radicals posed as real world supports — Cuba, Maoism, the CPs and SPs, third-world liberation. We had to make our revolution ourselves, depending on nothing but each other.
2. DSA faces the same problem today. It wants to be for "all good things" like a political party but can't commit to an area where it could be decisive.
3. See Kim Moody for an overall picture of industrialization. [https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/07/origins-of-the-rank-and-file-strategy/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=origins-of-the-rank-and-file-strategy](https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/07/origins-of-the-rank-and-file-strategy/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=origins-of-the-rank-and-file-strategy)
4. Key in their ability to shut down the economy of the day.
5. At ITT we carefully organized a sitdown strike and won in two hours.
6. Sometimes called "wage slavery." I like Stephanie Coontz' pithy comment on slavery: "Slave owners responded to the global market by combining the ruthlessly impersonal profit calculations of mass production with the cruel intimidation required to extract maximum effort on exhausting tasks while forestalling resistance by enslaved people, who vastly out outnumbered overseers and owners." Stephanie Coontz, "American History is a Parade of Horrors — and Heroes," *Los Angeles Times* Op-ed, August 14, 2022. Impersonal profit, maximum effort, thwarting resistance — life in auto factories.
7. In 1975 my literature in a run for local president included "30 for 40 to end unemployment; smashing racism at work, in the union and community; no support to Democrats, Republicans, Wallaceites, or Kennedy, but a labor party instead; fighting the boss at the point of production; nationalizing Chrysler if it can't afford full employment....Equally important though were issues like the women's restrooms and union finances..." p. 3, *Workers' Power*, June 5-18, 1975.
8. The corresponding shift in capital strategy echoed steel captains' failure to invest in plant in the '60s and early '70s to insure long run competitiveness. When questioned about this in *Iron Age* magazine in 1971, an industry boss famously replied "In the long run we'll all be dead." The big three automakers never invested to produce small, efficient cars. They have been saved from the dustbin only by SUVs and trucks.
9. This summary is analyzed in great detail in the closing chapters of the *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s*, edited by Brenner, Brenner and Winslow, Verso, 2010.



Cartoon from *Warren Workers' Defender* when supervisors were required to "look sharp" by orders of new plant manager.

# REVIEW

## Out of the Two-Party Trap

By Marsha Rummel

### Breaking the Impasse.

Electoral Politics, Mass Action & The New Socialist Movement in the United States

By Kim Moody

Haymarket Books, 2022, 250 pages, \$19.95 paper.

IN THIS THOUGHT-PROVOKING book, Kim Moody offers new insights about the old debate on the left regarding the role of electoral politics and orientation to the Democratic Party. Moody traces U.S. history from the Progressive Era of the 1890s through today's increasing popular interest in socialism and the "spectacular growth of DSA" (2) since Bernie Sanders launched his 2016 presidential campaign.

*Breaking the Impasse* challenges the strategies proposed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and others who argue for socialists running on the Democratic Party ballot line. Moody analyzes the blindness to the structural and political limitations of this strategy and argues that the left needs to build class-based organizations that run independent electoral campaigns to build popular power.

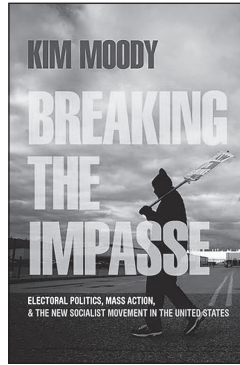
Moody was a founder and staff member of *Labor Notes*, a leading proponent of rank-and-file labor organizing and activism, and a veteran activist in the revolutionary socialist movement. The author of 10 books on labor and the class struggle, his analysis is informed by U.S. working-class history, the power of worker self-organization, and the recurrent crises and periodic restructuring of capitalism.

*Breaking the Impasse* "proposes an alternative analysis of the roots of today's electoral impasse." (3)

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Marsha Rummel served on the Madison City Council from 2007-2021, representing one of the city's most left-wing districts. Along with her Council allies in Progressive Dane, the independent party she helped found in 1992, she updated local Tax Incremental Financing rules to make the process more accountable, worked to increase funding for affordable housing projects and expanded the grant program to include nonprofit and coop developers. She helped review Madison's community policing model after a series of officer-involved shootings. This eventually led to the Council's adoption of an Independent Monitor and creation of a Civilian Oversight Review Board.

Rummel continues to be involved in neighborhood projects that focus on building community power. She is a member of Solidarity and an ATC advisory editor.



has been the global response to the crisis of capitalism.

*"This impasse is not unique to the U.S. It is found around the world where the traditional parties of the left have moved toward the center, while new forces on the right push politics toward more irrational, often authoritarian, frequently racist, but always deeply pro-capitalist policies and trends."* (7)

The result is described as "a clash between organized sectors of finance and production, new industries and old, corporate giants and upstart privateers, and the largely disorganized mass of the population and electorate that finds itself more and more removed from any influence over the political process." (7)

Neither U.S. capitalist party, in their neoliberal form, have been able to effectively deal with the crisis or the needs and demands of the majority. Today the left and social movements are faced with the deep instability of the ruling neoliberal institutions.

### Reform and Elite Dominance

Moody shows how the uneven conditions of political class struggle fought over 100 years ago continue to shape the current period.

Among the book's strengths is the analysis of the Progressive electoral reforms of the 1890s-1920s, responding to the threats to capital posed by the earlier successes of the Populist movement in the 1892 elections.

Elites in both parties "reformed" the party system — to reduce mass participation. They instituted anti-Black and anti-immigrant efforts to reduce voter turnout through registration, literacy and citizenship requirements. (17)

These reforms fundamentally changed the winner-take-all system in the United States, compared to other countries' multi-party

Moody traces how the blockage of the U.S. political system has deepened since the "stagflation" of the 1970s and the Reagan revolution of the 1980s, shifting bourgeois politics to the right. Since the 1980s, neoliberalism

models where dues-paying members select the party's candidates. Primary elections were presented by upper-class reformers as a form of direct democracy; Moody argues that the opposite was true.

The reforms of this Progressive period forged a barrier against dissident insurgencies using the primary system and distorted the voting base by overrepresenting wealthy, educated and older voters. Party memberships became meaningless as voters are only mobilized during elections, and membership control of nominations through state and local party assemblies has been eliminated in favor of the state-run primary election.

*"Between 1896 and 1924, by which time the 'reformed' electoral system was largely in place, voter turnout in presidential elections fell from 79 to 49 percent nationally, while only 31 percent of the electorate voted in mid-term congressional elections by 1926.... This marked the end of mass working-class and agrarian partisan participation that had characterized pre-1896 elections."* (18)

These reforms solidified the elite dominance of the two-party system, "composed ... of embedded layers of elected officials and party functionaries, while at the same time making third-party challenges more difficult." (24)

The electoral system has evolved further since the 1980s to benefit incumbents, early money, and the interests of party leaders. Elected office holders, party committees, party functionaries and party-connected consultants manage elections, not party members. Moody examines the difficulty of reforming or influencing the Democratic Party via primary challenges.

Since the 1980s, furthermore, the Democratic Party leadership has abandoned New Deal and Great Society type programs. The party has turned its back on its urban core.

Multi-racial and working-class voters living in gerrymandered 'single party' urban districts are taken for granted by the party establishment. The Democratic Party establishment prefers to focus on wooing moderate suburban Republicans. (70) The party increasingly relies on wealthy donors and represents the interests of the wealthiest voters in urban and suburban districts.

*"The self-styled 'Party of the People' has shifted to become increasingly the 'Party of the Prosperous.'" (39) The progressive wing of the Democratic Party downplays this reality.*

## Failures of Strategy

Moody challenges what he calls the backward-looking social democratic trend within the new socialist movement that fails to understand the bourgeois nature of the 1960s civil rights multi-class coalition politics of liberals, the labor bureaucracy, and African Americans promoted by Michael Harrington, Bayard Rustin and others.

The “lib-lab” strategy relied on broad, quasi-social-democratic economic policies and coalition politics to resolve racial injustice, instead of looking to the self-activity of the Black freedom struggle as manifested throughout U.S. history.

The strategy “... was a politics that downplayed the significance of race as a dividing line in working-class life and American society precisely in order to hold together a contradictory alliance in which many of the key actors did not see race or racism as a priority, feared alienating the white vote, accommodated racism in their own constituency, or believed simple economic improvements would deal with the problem.” (89-90)

This notion also involved a “realignment” strategy to work inside the Democratic Party to move it away from southern racist “Dixiecrats.” The details are too intricate to trace here, but Moody sees a present-day echo in the strategies proposed by some DSA activists who support creating a surrogate organization within the Democratic Party to facilitate a “dirty break.”

He reviews the argument made in Jared Abbot and Dustin Guastelli’s “A Socialist Party in Our Time?” (*Catalyst* 3, no. 2, Summer 2019) with its medium-term call for building a party-surrogate organization within the Democratic Party and rejection of third-party approaches.

One of the keen observations of the book is that DSA members who call for running openly socialist candidates on the Democratic Party ballot line fail to consider “how successful candidates of a party surrogate or ‘dirty break’ organization plan to get around the ‘outsized influence,’ pressures and obligations imposed by the party caucus and other aspects of the party’s total field of control.” (53)

Moody points out the contradictions of how successful candidates “who are elected would become accountable to two distinct political organizations representing different and opposing class interests.” As an example of how the party apparatus controls the legislative process, Moody shows how the proposal for the Green New Deal got buried by Nancy Pelosi and party leaders, and sent to eleven committees where it died. (41)

## What Kind of Break?

The analysis of the structural and political limitations posed for radical campaigns by the Democratic Party’s field of control poses

a serious challenge to the advocates of running socialists on the Democratic Party ballot line.

Moody distinguishes between those in DSA and the socialist left advocating for a “dirty break” and those seeking a workers’ party, a goal he supports. And he questions what we are breaking toward: “If there is not a workers’ party in formation, a serious effort in that direction, or at least a substantial number of successful independent candidates to show it is possible to run as independent and win sometimes,” there is not enough motivation to “break into the unknown.” (56)

He also argues that for a left politics that can reach working-class America, understanding the class and racial composition of rural voters is key. Pundits on the liberal left tend to assume that the “red” areas on electoral maps are predominantly rural and full of conservative mostly white voters angered by the disinvestment by capital and the federal government and who have responded to populist politics of the right.

But “completely rural” areas are a very small percentage of the U.S. population. “Mostly rural” areas vote Republican, but are composed of towns and small cities whose inner core tend to vote Democratic. Moody argues that Rural America looks “surprisingly proletarian,” and its racial diversity reflects that of the country. (78)

The book examines the existence of manufacturing, warehousing, and data center employment along major interstate corridors as well as the relatively high percentage of public sector workers in rural counties.

While Moody points out that there are more rural factory workers than farm workers, my experience in Wisconsin shows we should also focus on the multi-national character of agricultural workforce. (During the pandemic we saw the impacts of lack of personal safety equipment in meatpacking, and the impact of anti-immigrant policies on the dairy industry.)

The Democratic Party and the left ignore rural working-class voters, and without a presence in these communities neither can expect to develop progressive populist policies that would appeal to rural voters.

## Firsthand Experience

*Breaking the Impasse* illuminates the very contradictions I grappled with as a Wisconsin third party activist (Wisconsin Labor Farm Party, New Progressive Party of Wisconsin, and Wisconsin Green Party) and later as member of a local independent party, Progressive Dane.

Defending independent and third-party political action in the face of the two-party duopoly has often been a lonely place.

I served for 14 years as an elected member of the nonpartisan Madison City Council,

in one of the most left-wing districts in the state. Nonpartisan elections, where there is no Democratic Party ballot line, provide a vehicle in many major cities for independent political action.

Like thousands of other socialists, after Bernie Sanders’ launched his 2016 campaign, I joined the DSA. When faced with the opportunity to run for the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2020 with the retirement of the incumbent Democrat, I decided to run as a Democrat not as a Green.

The district included my aldermanic district and much of the urban core of Madison. It is a solidly high-turnout one-party district, so whoever won the Democratic primary in August would win the November general election. But whichever Democrat won in my district, the Republicans would control the State Assembly, since Wisconsin is one of the most gerrymandered states in the nation and will remain so for the next decade.

Early in the campaign, I got an inside look at how the Assembly Democratic caucus helped candidates. After the filing deadline passed, the Assembly caucus organized a Zoom meeting where small groups of candidates from across the state were put in virtual rooms to give our two-minute elevator speech to slews of lobbyists who rotated through in batches.

I naïvely thought I would meet individual donors, but instead I met the reps from the banking, grocery, building trades and realtors’ industry associations. I felt like I was in a Hollywood Squares meat market for corporate lobbyists.

It was clear that once elected, Assembly candidates would be expected to participate in the Democratic caucus. Candidates are supposed to contribute to the Assembly PAC (and other party PACs). Candidates in safe seats are expected to help other candidates around the state, not organize their districts.

Candidates are instructed to target likely voters and rely on professional consultants for data-crunching and digital campaign tools like targeted phone banking, text messaging and social media buys. Nonvoters are ignored.

When I read Moody’s description of the “party’s field of influence and control” (43), I understood it immediately. I did not win in August 2020, and I was relieved.

## Toward Independent Political Action

*Beyond the Impasse* urges us to seize opportunities to experiment by conducting independent working-class political action in one-party urban districts dominated by Democrats, especially ones that are key centers of logistic clusters; and in one-party rural districts dominated by Republicans, particularly where union organizing has been successful.

There are hundreds of these districts that could be a starting point. Running as independents means that candidates bypass the pitfalls of the party and caucus' pressure to conform to their norms, protocols, and discipline and instead focus on mobilizing the larger electorate. (170-171)

### Who Is This Larger Electorate?

*"The biggest missing working-class vote is unquestionably that of the 'party of nonvoters' ... nearly 77 million citizen voters eligible to vote did not do so in 2020. These are mostly lower-income working-class people, many single parents, younger, more urban, and more racially diverse than the population. Their numbers exceed the margins of victory or defeat in the major battleground states and their numbers surpass Trump's entire 2020 vote."* (83)

The recent midterm election identified a trend described in *Breaking the Impasse*: the relative decline of the Black vote, "both as a proportion of those voting and of those voting Democratic." (81) Moody also looks at the demographics of the Latinx vote, the majority composed of immigrants or former immigrants from Mexico and Central America and their children.

Given the centrist economic policies of the Democratic Party and the deference to business and rich people, it is not certain that these voters will show up for the Democratic Party.

### Ranked Choice Voting

In the Alaska special election held August 2022 to fill the Congressional seat vacated due to the death of the Republican incumbent of 49 years, Ranked Choice Voting was used for the first time since it was adopted in 2020.

It resulted in the unexpected victory of Democratic state representative and former tribal judge Mary Peltola, while the seeming heir apparent, former Governor and Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin came in second. Peltola also won re-election in November for a full two-year term, after the second round of counting gave her the majority.

Instead of a partisan primary, Ranked Choice Voting holds an open primary in which candidates from all parties participate. In Alaska, the top four vote-getters proceed to the general election where voters submit ranked votes and simulated runoffs continue until a winner receives more than 50% of the vote emerges.

The book doesn't raise the question whether the left should push for Ranked Choice Voting as a strategy, but I suggest that it should be tested further.

### Lessons and Future Prospects

During the 2022 midterm elections, we saw the general pattern that incumbents

have a huge institutional advantage upset, as far-right MAGA Republican primary candidates unseated traditional Republican incumbents.

Beyond the *Impasse* argues that the reactionary and increasingly fascist-like character of the Republican Party is not just a Trumpian phenomenon but has its roots starting in 1964 with Barry Goldwater's campaign for President. Today the Republican Party is a hard-right party that has built strong state party organizations and used gerrymandering to pick voters.

The possibility of violent opposition from the far right is very real, as evidenced by the violence demonstrated in January 2021.

If the left engages in new independent electoral strategies using the power of the working-class as derived from its economic position, Moody reminds us that it should be prepared for legal assaults regarding ballot access, state repression, a flood of dark money and media disinformation.

The book examines the historic record, from the 1930s labor movement and the movements and actions of the civil rights era to today's Black Lives Matter, women's rights and recent strike upsurges, to make the case that electoral campaigns should be connected to the self-activity and self-organization of the oppressed and exploited if we are to achieve meaningful reform.

*"(T)he best social legislation in the U.S., as limited as it has been, has followed the rhythm of mass social upheavals and movements far more closely than that of the ins and outs of the two major parties."* (128-129)

Moody argues that a mass working class based political organization or party built on the self-activity and power of workers is required to break the impasse. This involves

organizing the unorganized and will require a dynamic and democratic labor movement.

Moody points to the increased vulnerability of employers who rely on speedy and close connections between manufacturing, warehousing, and distribution sites in major urban and metropolitan areas (149, 161) and the upsurge in strike activity among teachers, health care providers, baristas, warehouse workers and others.

The outpouring of worker activity since 2020 was "truly an uprising of 'untrained' organizers, 'undeveloped' organic leaders, activists who skipped a structure test or two, and people who had never protested before." (150)

*"If there is to be a new working class-based political party of the left in the U.S., it will have to be much more than an electoral organization.... It should differ not only from conventional major-party campaigning in being an independent, permanent, democratic membership organization, but also from that of many third-party efforts, such as the Green Party, that have no real social base and rely on a limited issue constituency."* (168)

The impasse exists in a world of rising social turbulence and deep crisis. The solutions will require ruptures and transitions that are not linear, or simply events. If the left doesn't change the dominant electoral practice of using the Democratic Party and build a left-wing political alternative outside the party, it will take a step backwards and ignore the signs and promise of the upsurges from below.

Kim Moody provides us with a welcome roadmap to break the gridlock and new thinking on the kinds of organization and politics needed to build the organized power of the working class. ■

## Repression Continues to Grow in Nicaragua

William I. Robinson reports in *NACLA* online:

THREE WEEKS AFTER his arrest by the regime of President Daniel Ortega made international headlines, one of Nicaragua's most renowned intellectuals, Oscar René Vargas, has been indicted by the government with "conspiracy to undermine national integrity" and other trumped-up charges. Vargas is the latest high-profile prisoner of conscience in Nicaragua. He is being held at the notorious El Chipote prison outside of Managua, where he joins some 200 other political prisoners.

The 77-year-old Vargas had been living in exile in Costa Rica since 2018, where he was forced to flee after the regime issued an arrest warrant because he had criticized the government's repression of mass protests that year. After learning that his sister had become seriously infirm, Vargas

returned to Nicaragua on November 22.

Within minutes of arriving at his sister's house in the Bolonia neighborhood of Managua, several dozen police and state security agents raided the house, bursting in with machine guns and dragging him away. For the next 48 hours, the regime forcibly concealed Vargas until petitions by the family and the Center for Human Rights in Nicaragua (CENIDH), and international pressure forced the government to acknowledge his arrest.

From exile, Vargas had become an increasing thorn in the side of the Ortega regime for his perspicacious analyses of Nicaragua's social, economic and political crisis.... Vargas warned that the regime is planning a new round of neoliberal austerity measures in the face of an imminent contraction of the economy. (12/13/2022) (*Robinson's article on Ortega's rule, "Nicaragua Today," appears in ATC 221.*)

# REVIEW

## Feminists Tell Their Own Stories By Linda Loew

### Inside the Second Wave of Feminism

Boston Female Liberation, 1968-1972

An Account by Participants

by Nancy Rosenstock

Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022, 202 pages, hardback and paper.

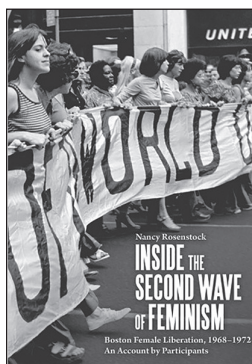
*INSIDE THE SECOND Wave of Feminism* is a small volume packed with big ideas and activities shared by a militant group of young feminists in Boston a half century ago. It was a time of explosive ferment, with millions of people protesting against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and on the heels of massive civil rights marches earlier in the decade. Women were part of those movements and beginning to organize around feminist issues.

Twelve of the 13 feminists interviewed in the book, including the author Nancy Rosenstock, were members of Boston Female Liberation (earlier known as Cell 16.) Their stories, woven together in interviews, read as a conversation over eight chapters. This rare account told in the words of actual participants, reveals how their consciousness raising led to collective action, and ultimately shaped history, and their own lives. The book is imbued with a sense of joy in the struggle that only such personal accounts can convey. Included are photographs, leaflets, articles, and position papers which document their broad range of activities from 1968 to 1972.

Taking us “inside” what became known as the “second wave of feminism,” we see these feminists build on the courage and commitment of the “first wave” suffragists, winning women’s right to vote 50 years earlier.

Feminists of all ages and supporters of women’s rights today should find something of compelling interest in this book. As Rosenstock states in the book’s introduction: “Being part of the women’s liberation movement during these momentous years forever changed our lives, as it did for millions of women. Understanding our history and learning from it — both successes and failures—is vital in confronting the challenges

*Linda Loew is a longtime socialist, feminist and union activist. She is retired from a staff position at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, where she served as recording secretary and solidarity chair of AFSCME Local 1989. Currently she is a member of Chicago for Abortion Rights, Jewish Voice for Peace-Chicago and Illinois Single Payer Coalition.*



females as second-class citizens, as commodities to be manipulated by individual males and institutions, objectifying females’ bodies and lives.

Rejecting the notion that “biology is destiny,” these feminists read voraciously and discussed a broad range of issues. They embraced the idea that “the personal is political,” that challenges they faced were not individual “problems,” that society was responsible for the discrimination and harassment they faced.

Discussion led to plans for collective action to remove barriers, end restrictions, change laws! They learned karate and Tae Kwon Do and organized self-defense classes, addressing violence against women long before the #MeToo movement. They published a multi-paged, hand-assembled newsletter, soon distributed weekly to over a thousand.

In 1968 they launched a trailblazing feminist magazine *No More Fun and Games*, featuring theoretical analysis, poems, and drawings. Seeking to address every aspect of women’s rights, they eventually became a poll of attraction nationally.

### A Turning Point

A turning point in second wave feminism was the Women’s Strike for Equality on August 26, 1970, the 50th anniversary of women’s suffrage. Fifty-thousand people joined a massive march down New York’s City’s Fifth Avenue, with simultaneous mobilizations in 90 other cities. Banners raised three basic demands: free abortion on demand — no forced sterilization; free community controlled, 24-hour child care centers; and equal opportunities in jobs and education.

Female Liberation members organized a march of 5000 in Boston and also sent a large contingent to New York. An interview

of today.” (3)

### “The Personal is Political!”

Coming from a variety of backgrounds, these feminists all grappled with the limited educational and employment opportunities open to girls and women in that era. Society treated

with Ruthann Miller, the coordinator of the New York March, is featured in the book. Miller points out that being a young mother as well as an activist brought her to a new level of self-confidence and belief that she could do anything she set her mind to. This experience was true for many participants.

Following August 26, 1970, these Boston Female Liberation members became convinced that a strong, mass-action oriented movement could be built. They got involved in several campus and community initiatives. They organized a presentation by diarist and writer Anais Nin, which drew an overflow crowd of over 1100 people. They joined with other feminist organizations including the New England Women’s Coalition. This led to a New England Congress to Unite Women in 1971, attended by 800.

Female Liberation’s *The Second Wave: a magazine of the new feminism*, was launched in 1971. Several articles appear in the book’s documents section.

Female Liberation members participated in the Cambridge Childcare Referendum Committee, which organized a major petition drive that put free, 24-hour community-controlled childcare centers on the ballot in a 1971 referendum. It won 76% of the vote in the then largely working-class community. The local government failed to fund the childcare and it was never implemented. But the campaign reinforced the idea that championing the needs of women of color and those with the lowest incomes is crucial to winning liberation for all.

Boston Female Liberation took an early and active position to add the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the federal constitution. They actively supported the gay and lesbian rights movement in its early days. These are just some of the activities they organized.

They were energized by possibilities to grow the movement, and bring about fundamental change! Working together night and day, they also knew how to have a good time, including dancing all night long to Aretha Franklin music.

### Central to Winning Liberation

The right to control one’s body is fundamental to winning full emancipation. With thousands of women dying every year from complications of illegal, back-alley abortions, and lives upended by carrying unwanted pregnancies to term, a national movement

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“Being part of the women’s liberation movement during these momentous years forever changed our lives, as it did for millions of women. Understanding our history and learning from it — both successes and failures—is vital in confronting the challenges of today.”

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was shaping up in the early ’70s to repeal all restrictive abortion laws.

Nancy Williamson states in “Abortion: A Feminist Perspective” (175) “We didn’t choose the abortion issue. It chose us.”

Female Liberation members helped plan the founding conference of the Women’s National Abortion Action Coalition (WONAAC,) held in New York City in July, 1971, attended by over 1000 people. The conference called for nationally coordinated activities and mass mobilizations, demanding the repeal of all anti-abortion laws, repeal of restrictive contraception laws, and an end to forced sterilization. (Women of color were often sterilized without their knowledge or consent.)

Plans promoted campus and community chapters, speak-outs, teach-ins, caravans, and a national demonstration in Washington, DC that November. The author joined the national staff of WONAAC in New York, spending three months in Washington, DC organizing the national march. This movement helped to forge ties with women fighting for abortion rights across the globe.

### Women of Color Were There!

A major misconception about second wave feminism is that it was entirely white, and “middle class.” Not true!

Female Liberation member Maryanne Weathers was also a member of the Black and Third World Women’s Alliance. Two of her several articles on Black Women’s Liberation appear in the documents section: “An Argument for Black Women’s Liberation as a Revolutionary Force,” from 1969, which has been widely circulated since, and “Black Women and Abortion,” from 1971.

Rosenstock also points to an excellent companion book to her own, Patricia Romney’s *We Were There: The Third World Women’s Alliance and the Second Wave* (Feminist Press, 2021,) which describes how women of color (Black, Latinas, Asian and Middle Eastern) were active in the same period, bringing their own powerful contingent to the August 26, 1970 march.

Other Black feminist leaders, then and since, have written extensively about the “triple jeopardy” faced by most women of color due to their sex, race, and class.

Later, passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976 dealt a crippling blow to poor women and women of color, eliminating federal funding for abortion. Currently only 17 states override the amendment by contributing state Medicaid funding for abortions.

### Feminism and Socialism

As their individual commitments deepened, these feminists concluded that only a society based on human need, not private/corporate profits, can enable the full liberation of women. Quite a few joined the Socialist Workers Party or the Young Socialist Alliance, its youth organization. Reinvigorated by these members, the SWP-YSA were among the first socialist organizations to embrace the women’s liberation movement as revolutionary, supporting the August 1970 women’s rights demonstrations, as well as the campaign to ratify the ERA.

For these feminists, socialism and feminism were totally compatible. However, tensions arose within the women’s movement as differences in strategy emerged. Some accused socialists of “taking over” feminist projects and organizations.

The book deals frankly with the pitfalls of attacking others when differences arise. Red-baiting is an example. The author explains how this led to major speakers withdrawing before the November 1971 march. Years later it became clear that FBI infiltration was responsible for much of the redbaiting (as in the civil rights, anti-war, and labor movements).

Rosenstock reinforces the point that second wave feminism as a whole was not a monolith. In contrast to many mainstream feminist groups of this era, the feminists in this book stand out for understanding the need to act in solidarity with other movements (the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Black Liberation struggle are two examples.)

They saw mass actions as the way to build coalitions and unite the greatest number of people around common goals, focusing on what we agree on now, even if we don’t share agreement on everything in the future.

### What Was Won?

Despite divergent strategies, a burgeoning feminist movement that included teach-ins, testimonies, class action suits, marches and rallies, along with the broader atmosphere of protest by millions during the 1960s and early ’70s, combined to win a major concession: the historic 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* ruling which legalized abortion through 24 weeks of pregnancy. Millions of lives were saved.

Following this victory other reforms were won, including affirmative action and women’s studies programs. Women, including the feminists in this book, made inroads into new occupations, trailblazing into factory and technical jobs not previously open to women.

Many of these feminists remained politically active, including marching for the ERA, in support of gay and lesbian rights, in labor struggles, against other U.S. imperialist wars, and for expanding abortion access. They participated in the historic Women’s March of millions in January 2017 after the election of the misogynist, racist and xenophobic Trump.

Within weeks of the 1973 *Roe* ruling and following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam, many in the broader movement were demobilized and demoralized. Most of the mainstream feminist organizations pursued a strategy of relying on elected officials and courts to defend what was gained. Meanwhile feminists in this book continued to advocate for relying on the power of a collective movement.

The electoral strategy has not advanced women’s rights. Years of mounting restrictions led us to today, dealing major blows to abortion rights and reproductive justice.

### Inspiration for Today!

*Inside the Second Wave of Feminism* arrives at a pivotal moment, when much that these feminists fought for is in peril. January 2023 should have been a celebration of 50 years of constitutionally protected legal abortion. Instead, the June 2022 U.S. Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision and overturn of *Roe* are part of intensifying assaults on women and all working people.

LGBTQ rights, the rights of Black, Indigenous and all people of color, are threatened in the context of deepening inequality in health care, education, housing, and the impact of environmental devastation. Young women today grew up expecting the right to choose if and when to have children and what a family should look like, not bound by new restrictions on bodily autonomy.

Young people are not giving up without a fight to restore what was lost and win more. We see evidence of their anger with the overwhelming turnout in favor of preserving abortion rights in the November 2022 elections, in Kansas last August, and with many also taking to the streets.

The feminists in *Inside the Second Wave* shook up the world AND their own lives. I was excited to read the book, reviving memories of my own participation in the second wave, and inspired by its rich lessons being shared with young activists today. We need a sustained and fighting movement that mirrors the dynamic energy, creativity, commitment, and comprehensive reach of the feminist voices in this book. ■

# REVIEW

## Working-Class Fault Lines in China

By Listen Chen

### The Urbanization of People:

The Politics of Development, Labor Markets, and Schooling in the Chinese City

By Eli Friedman

Columbia University Press, 2022, 352 pages, \$35 paperback.

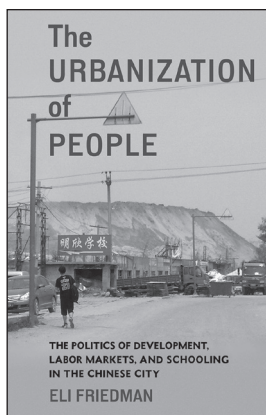
IN 2021 THERE were 293 million internal migrant workers in China.<sup>1</sup> Although they constitute 40% of the national workforce, migrants are largely barred from accessing social services like public housing, education and healthcare in the cities where they work. These exclusions are held in place by China's *hukou*, or household registration, system first put in place by the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1950s in an effort to control migration in service of central planning.

One of the most disruptive effects of the *hukou* system has been to keep migrant parents separated from their children. While by 2013 roughly 70% of all rural-to-urban migrants were living in families rather than solo (either as single people or separated from their spouse and/or children),<sup>2</sup> migrant workers continue to face profound difficulties accessing social services in cities. One of the chief motivations for obtaining urban *hukou*, for migrant workers with children, is in order to access education.

In *The Urbanization of People*, sociologist Eli Friedman explores how migrant workers have fared in China's recent urbanization, focusing on the precarity of their access to education. Education provides an ideal window into technocratic methods of population control that Friedman successfully argues produce migrant workers as a socially excluded, "surplus" population struggling to access basic social services.

The book's chief strength is the detailed picture it paints of migrant workers' lives in Beijing, and the uphill battle they climb in trying to provide education for their children. While it appears nationwide that the majority of migrant children are enrolled in public schools, Friedman homes in on migrant families in Beijing who are excluded from public education and forced to turn to private migrant schools.

These schools, in addition to relying



exclusively on tuition for funding and being severely under-resourced, regularly face arbitrary closures, demolitions and displacement, compounding the already insecure lives of migrant children and incredibly high rates of student turnover.

In addition to research on school closures and government policies that guard access to urban *hukou* and public education, Friedman quotes from interviews primarily with migrant parents, school administrators and teachers, which add a narrative texture to the book's findings.

A chapter on teachers in migrant schools, themselves often migrants who lack official teaching credentials and survive on low wages that necessitate they take on additional jobs in the summer, is particularly poignant in its portrayal of the intense affective bonds teachers form with students. I found myself wanting more of that ethnographic richness throughout the text.

Lay persons as well as academics will find Friedman's meticulous research valuable for their understanding of migrant workers' social positions in China. His exploration of the way *suzhi*, or "human quality" is deployed to manage urban populations will appeal to any reader interested in understanding China's turn away from being the world's sweatshop toward high-tech and value-added industries.

Indeed, migrant workers appear in Friedman's study as glaring casualties of the effort to launch China out of developing country status via the well-trodden pathway of capitalist modernization.

### Political versus Economic?

Where the book faltered, for me, was in Friedman's interpretations of his findings and broader theoretical framework. His thinking-through of the production of migrant workers as "surplus" is heavily inflected by a conceptual division between the "political" and "economic" that, while having a commonsense appeal, elides a more dialectical understanding of what Marxists refer to as the relationship between base and super-

structure.

Despite naming throughout the text the puzzling contradiction between the economic necessity of migrant workers' labor and the processes, often carried out by the state, that threaten their survival, the book does far more to explicate *how* migrant workers are excluded than *why*.

For Friedman, migrant workers are expelled from hegemonic urban centers because "they do not provide a kind of labor that comports with the state's vision for economic upgrading." (107) While this necessarily engages with China's concerted effort to transition its economy toward higher value added industries, readers not already familiar with modern Chinese history will likely fail to grasp the extent to which post-Mao ideology positions certain subjects as anachronistic threats to Chinese modernity through various processes of market-assisted depoliticization.

Thus the peasant, figured as a deeply political agent and protagonist during the Cultural Revolution, now comes to signify the excesses and backwardness of the Maoist revolutionary project.

That Friedman never explicitly engages with how the migrant worker is coded by urban classes as a peasant (or former peasant) struck me as a peculiar omission. Mapping the shift of China's rural-urban divide is a clear and parsimonious way of historicizing the subaltern status of the migrant worker. It immediately brings into relief the broader, semi-core-periphery relationship between the city and the countryside that persists across China's post-revolutionary and post-socialist eras.

For readers intrigued with the question of why contemporary capitalist ideology treats the figure of the migrant worker repellent while at the same time relying on their labor power, the answer lies outside of Friedman's book.

I also found myself wanting Friedman to provide more context on the class shadings both within migrant workers, and between them and middle-class urbanites and the urban working poor.

Of the migrant parents Friedman interviewed in the chapter on parents' experiences, the four whose employment background was included in the book were small business owners. This gives the impression that petty-bourgeois migrant workers are those most likely to be able to bring their

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Construction project in Chenzhou, Hujman province. Over building has led to a real estate bust, impacting the Chinese workforce.

children to live with them in the city. (A 2011 study found that the longer migrant workers reside in a single city, the more likely they are to be self-employed, suggesting that self-employment is either an outcome or condition of geographic stability.<sup>3</sup>)

In particular, I wonder how non-self-employed migrants with children still living in their place of *hukou* registration thought about education — does it hold for them the promise of class uplift, as it appeared to for the migrants Friedman interviewed? Additionally, how do migrants' experiences of social exclusion and surplusness compare with the urban unemployed, many of whom were laid off from secure state-sector jobs as a result of liberalization?

Having a sense of the broader field of class-based exclusion could have buttressed Friedman's argument that in the Chinese context, surplus-ness has more to do with political imperatives than a formally economic relationship to wage labor, as some Marxist theories of the lumpenproletariat suggest.

**AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION** on the importance of solidarity with protests and democratic struggles in China by Promise Li is posted online at <https://solidarity-us.org/socialists-should-support-the-popular-resistance-in-china/>.

He observes: "International solidarity is a cornerstone of the socialist movement, and those in the Global North with resources have a unique responsibility.... Popular resistance to capitalism and authoritarianism is growing in one of the most strategically important countries in the world. As ever, our solidarity and active support belong with that progressive and popular movement." ■

### Modes of Population Management

*The Urbanization of People* concludes with an attempt to situate its findings in China in a global context by way of comparing and contrasting other moments and spaces of "capitalist population management," for example, settler colonialism and slave labor. I found this section to be the most analytically jarring, particularly Friedman's choice to engage with race, if only to argue it's not relevant in China while at the same time appearing to naturalize it as a category:

*"In the absences of a demographically abundant and politically available racialized other that could be sourced externally and incorporated into capitalist production, the Chinese state inserted a social break within the Han race."* (235)

Again, it seems to me that locating the social status of migrants within the framework of China's urban-rural divide, one which follows determinate economic processes of accumulation and exploitation, makes more sense that introducing race without adequately explicating what its contingencies are in the Chinese context.

Friedman's suggestion that the state is the actor that created a division between urban and rural Han workers pivots away from divisions *within* the working class that emerge from short-term and limited but nonetheless antagonistic class interests — such as those between a relatively new middle class and sectors of the working class left behind by the push to ascend the ranks of global capitalism. This would ostensibly include not only migrant workers but those ejected from the state sector and, along a different political fault line, nationally-oppressed peoples.

By pivoting quickly to a global compar-

ison, Friedman misses an opportunity to dwell in the historical arc of modern China and contribute to crucial discussions of how divisions reinforced by state policies play out within the working class. Are these social breaks not also reproduced by, for example, the tight relationship between the urban middle class and the state?<sup>4</sup>

I'd recommend that readers keen to develop a more historicized understanding of migrant workers supplement Friedman's research with books that more clearly identify the repercussions of China's capitalist turn on peasants and, in particular, rural women. (Although Friedman relies heavily on access to state-subsidized social reproduction as a delineator of surplus-ness, I was surprised to find that the book largely treats migrants as a gender-less population.)

Two books that I found helpful in thinking through the consequences of Friedman's findings are Yan Hairong's *New Masters, New Servants*, an ethnographic study on women migrant domestic workers, and Alexander Day's *The Peasant in Postsocialist China*.

One could argue that the eclecticism in Friedman's use of sources and borrowing of conceptual tools from other thinkers reflects the interdisciplinary nature of his subject of study. For me it felt chaotic and at times obfuscating, performing, perhaps, the fraught relationship between academic productions of knowledge and anti-capitalist political praxis. I couldn't help but read a social-democratic longing for a benevolent state that invests in the social reproduction of all workers thus filling in the gaps and elisions created by Friedman's lack of theoretical precision.

*The Urbanization of People* offers excellent raw material on a profoundly subaltern working class social group in China. Many readers will appreciate Friedman's eclectic use of conceptual tools from a wide range of thinkers and disciplines. I, however, was left with more questions than answers from his theoretical scaffolding, which, in contrast to the depth of his qualitative research, felt underdeveloped and hastily swept across too much ground to be useful.

Nevertheless, the book supplies crucial evidence in support of a working-class movement that must, as a foundational strategy, bridge subaltern class interests within and beyond China. ■

### Notes

1. <https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>
2. Wang, C., Zhang, C., Ni, J., Zhang, H., & Zhang, J. (2019). "Family migration in China: Do migrant children affect parental settlement intention?" *Journal of Comparative Economics*.
3. Connelly, R., Roberts, K., & Zheng, Z. (2011). "The settlement of rural migrants in urban China — some of China's migrants are not 'floating' anymore." *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, 9(3), 283-300.
4. Goodman, D. S. (2016). "Locating China's Middle Classes: social intermediaries and the Party-state." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25(97), 1-13.

## Teller of Tales, Historian of the Future, Socialist Seer: Mike Davis, 1946-2022

By Bryan D. Palmer

*"He was, as they say, an 'incompressible algorithm,' one of the most complex people that I've ever known. One of the kindest, one of the most tempestuous; one of the wryest, one of the most serious. So I loved him even if I didn't fully know him. His death is simply a hole in the world."*<sup>1</sup>

TIME SPENT WITH with Mike Davis was always memorable. My first encounter with Mike was in 1981. He was working, and to all appearances squatting, at the London Meard Street offices of Verso/New Left Review. I dropped in unannounced, peddling a small book on E.P. Thompson that Toronto's New Hogtown Press had just published. Mike was affability itself.

We went out to lunch "on the firm." Pizza and beers turned into an afternoon of imbibing and telling tall tales. Mike's were more elevated than mine. We ended up dropping in on Brigid Loughran, whom Mike met in Belfast in the late 1970s and married. The two were then separated, but on good terms.

With an impish look, Mike introduced me as the *enfant terrible* of Canadian labor history. (I have no idea how he came up with such an outrageous assessment!) There was much talk of "The Troubles," and Brigid's active role in the civil rights struggles that dominated politics in the Northern Ireland of the time. At some point Mike reached into a terrarium — the small London flat contained a number of them, which Brigid was temporarily looking after — and lifted a greenish translucent serpent lovingly out of the container. I gaped in wonder as he began affectionately stroking the snake's head, its tongue flickering in and out, seemingly in adoring appreciation. Welcome to Mike's world.

All of Mike Davis' celebrated writing, justly-deserved fame, and ideologically-constructed notoriety lay ahead of him. I knew him only from his articles in *Radical America* and in *Review*, the journal of the State University of New York at Binghamton's Braudel Center.<sup>2</sup> The latter essay, a 60+ page critical excursion through Michel

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The early Mike Davis.

Aglietta's regulation school of capitalist crisis in the United States, caught the eye of Perry Anderson. Vouched for by comrades in the International Marxist Group with whom Mike was fraternizing in Belfast and Glasgow, Anderson offered Davis a \$1000 advance for a yet-to-be-written book that would become *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (1986). The sweetener was employment in the office of England's premier New Left publisher.<sup>3</sup>

### Early Life

Born in 1946, Mike was raised in the grit of working-class southern California. Fontana, birthplace of the Hell's Angels, and El Cajon, adjacent to San Diego, were Mike's home turf. His parents were an unlikely coming together of a unionized, Democratic Party voting, meat-cutting, father of Welsh heritage and a tougher-than-nails Irish Catholic mother who only had political eyes for Republican icon, Calvin Coolidge. "Unlike many of my contemporaries in the 1960s New Left, I never wore red diapers," Mike noted with some pride.<sup>4</sup>

His mother and father, by all accounts, provided an immediate environment of nurturing love, but this was an isolated oasis hovering uncertainly above a backwater of bigotry. A racist frontier, composed equally of the culture of white cowboys, militarism, and socio-economic chanciness, the environs in which this Davis family domesticity was suspended exuded an evil yearning to erupt

in violence that often punctured personal relations. "I actually believe that I have seen the devil or his moral equivalent in El Cajon," Davis told an interviewer in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

What was a boy brought up in this milieu to do? Early drawn to a contradictory mix of interests that included natural science, the desert environment his father encouraged him to investigate, and the Devil Pups, a Marine Corps' sponsored Youth Program for America, Davis soon outgrew conventional, if red-necked, wholesomeness. Devouring dragster pulp fiction — Henry Gregor Felson's *Street Rod* (1953) being his antidote to the family reading material of choice, the *Bible* and *Reader's Digest* collections in patented faux leather bindings — Mike flirted with the fast track of 1950s juvenile delinquency. Beer guzzling nights of joy riding culminated in a 1964 Valentine's Day massacre in which the main victim was a powder-blue Chevy Davis ploughed into a wall, street racing with friends. His mother thought his night escapades best curbed by a stint in juvie, or perhaps even some hard time at San Quentin, but his dad brought him a copy of Ray Ginger's biography of Eugene Debs as Mike recovered in hospital.

What really saved Davis from his nihilistic inclinations, however, was a Black activist in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). A cousin's husband, he introduced Mike to the civil rights movement at a 1962 protest targeting the lily-white Bank of America in downtown San Diego. This was the "burning bush" moment that brought Mike Davis into the fold of the revolutionary left.<sup>6</sup>

### SDS Years

Two years later, after a disastrous few weeks enrolled at Reed College in Portland, Oregon — in which he was expelled for violating the school's ban on men frequenting women's dorms — Davis hopped a Greyhound bus to New York City, intent on working for the fledgling Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). He crossed paths in 1964-1965 with future luminaries of the New Left, Tom Hayden, Carl Oglesby, and Todd Gitlin, helping to organize a major protest at the Wall Street headquarters of Chase Manhattan Bank, then a material prop of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

By 1965, and the Watts Rebellion, Davis

was back in California. He lived off the meagre avails of selling SDS pamphlets, journals, and newsletters, furnishing the movement's Los Angeles office with typewriters and fixtures courtesy of some market-minded looters.

Davis made a pilgrimage to the house of Jackie Robinson's mother, eager to help the Black community thwart the construction of a Pasadena freeway bisecting a historic African American district. The matriarch of the neighborhood patted Mike on the knee. "I think it would be better for you to go organize some white kids against racism," she advised, adding, "This community can take care of itself."<sup>7</sup>

Race ushered Mike into the eclectic radicalism of the 1960s. Class moved him into the struggles of the 1970s. The anti-war movement that, by 1968, placed SDS in the radicalizing limelight of the decade was the bridge traversing these two mobilizing initiatives.

Davis, like many 1960s radicals, was in motion towards Marxism. He may have been attracted to Maoism. Influenced by California's Communist First Lady, Dorothy Healey, Mike joined the Party and worked for a time in its Progressive Bookstore. He befriended Angela Davis. But he was too much the dissident to last long in the CP.

Whether he was given the heave-ho as part of a pro-Chinese Cultural Revolution element, or because, along with an ex-Navy buddy, he physically tossed a Soviet attaché to the curb, is an open question. Mike preferred to present his departure from the Communist Party as a consequence of him man-handling the suspiciously well-dressed man who was lingering in discontent over bookshelves that Davis stacked with suspect subject matter, authored by Bukharin and Trotsky, Mao and Marcuse. Davis thought the Russian an FBI agent.

Davis' 1960s came to an arresting end. He was taken into police custody, along with 286 others, in an SDS-sponsored protest at what is now known as California State University-Northridge. A peaceful November 1969 campus sit-in, where 3,000 students challenged the college administration's banning of all demonstrations, rallies, and meetings, led to the largest mass arrest of the turbulent decade.<sup>8</sup>

### LA Tour Guide

No longer an SDS organizer or employed by the Communist Party, Mike kicked around Los Angeles, living a marginal existence and trading stories with Black militants, down-and-outers, grifters, and small-time gamblers. An International Brotherhood of Teamsters program schooled him in the artistry of driving an 18-wheel tractor trailer. Securing and losing jobs, he eventually landed a gig as a tour bus guide.

Mike enlivened the standard patter on

the fantasy sites of Disneyland and Hollywood by Night with an alternative rap on the underside of Los Angeles, rerouting tours so that he could talk about sites where white mobs massacred scores of Chinese in the 1870s or the McNamara brothers bombed the *L.A. Times* building in 1910. Reading the city's history for the first time — drawing especially on Louis Adamic and Carey McWilliams — the seeds of Mike Davis' Tartarean view of the City of Flowers and Sunshine lay in these years.<sup>9</sup>

His tour bus days came to a crashing halt with a 1973 strike. The coach drivers, whose crisply-pressed uniforms and conventional banter pandering to the mostly mainstream clientele Davis recoiled from, seemed to Mike a hopelessly conventional lot. Yet they managed to make the transition, not only to militancy, but to murderous conspiracy.

When an organized phalanx of strike breakers descended on the conflict, the mood of the drivers turned ugly. They convened a secret meeting of the brotherhood and voted to ante-up \$400 each to hire two hit men to kill the leader of the scabs. Davis pleaded with his counterparts to build solidarity with other Los Angeles trade unionists, strengthen secondary picket lines, and shut the blacklegs and bosses down.

He was outvoted 39-1. "We've just got to kill the motherfucker," his "namby-pamby" tour guide operators insisted. Only the incompetence of the hired killers, who were arrested for drunk driving before they could carry out their assignment, saved Davis and others from serious jail time.

Mike, arrested during the strike for ostensibly assaulting a scab with a picket sign, became part of the collateral damage of the eventual settlement: he was fired and court charges against him dropped. Or at least Mike claimed, his story-telling premised on the axiom that truth alone should never quite get in the way of a "fabulist" anecdote.<sup>10</sup>

The strike introduced Mike to some radical University of California-Los Angeles professors, among them Robert Brenner. Davis decided to join an exodus of former west coast SDSers into seminars discussing Marx's *Das Kapital* and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. At 28, Mike began putting together his own eclectic agenda of intellectual interests. These included political economy, labor history, and urban ecology, the conceptual arsenal of his essays of the mid-to-late 1970s and a part of the foundation on which publications of the 1980s and 1990s would build.

### Becoming A Writer

Sustained by a year-long scholarship from his father's union, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North

America, Mike made his way to Scotland in 1978. He gravitated to Belfast, however, developing a deep fondness for the city, before finding himself, finally, in the 6 Meard Street digs of the *New Left Review*, an address not far removed from the alley-way-like thoroughfare's bygone days of brothels and the traffic in transvestite sex.

How to characterize Mike's oeuvre? Put simply, he was *sui generis*. His prodigious appetite for research, amazing capacity to recall everything that he read, extensive reach across centuries and continents, and a uniquely pugnacious style that combined metaphorical flourish, predictive intuitions, and relentless refusal to concede the least ground to capitalism's destructive essence, resulted in a cavalcade of imaginative books that have no equal. In later writings, moreover, Davis encapsulated precisely the kind of synthetic sweep across the empirical and conceptual terrain of the natural, social, and human sciences demanded in an age of tragically synchronized climactic and capitalist crises.<sup>11</sup>

*Prisoners of the American Dream*, the first installment of this amazing output, was

an unconventional study steeped in conventionality. It chronicled the political immolation of a working class captive of the ideology of democracy's promise, whose most effective prison-house was the Democratic Party and its legion of ideologies.

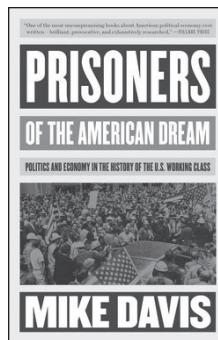
Davis resituated the age-old questioning of American labor's failure to

develop socialist consciousness and establish a labor party. Writing against the background of Reaganism's successful assault on trade unionism in the 1980s, Davis outlined how the U.S. working class had been structured into political cul-de-sacs.

The exhilarating wave of Debsian socialism that Davis insisted derived from an immigrant proletariat exploited economically and disenfranchised politically was absorbed in the Fordist "Americanization" of the 1940s and 1950s. It, in turn, destroyed the social and cultural basis of actually-existing forms of socialism and communism.

Only a new wave of radical protest could resuscitate a left-wing labor movement, bringing back to life the enervated trade unions. This would only happen if they took an internationalist and anti-racist turn, making common cause with liberation movements in the developing world and aligning unequivocally with the Black and Latino communities that were the newly-consolidating natural mass constituencies of the trade unions.<sup>12</sup>

Something of a cold shower thrown



on the then-dominant social histories of United States workers written by labor historians such as Herbert G. Gutman and David Montgomery, *Prisoners of the American Dream* foreshadowed Davis's future books. It refused to sugar-coat the bleak actualities of capitalism's hegemony and contained invaluable intimations into what the future might hold and how it should unfold if socialism and human betterment were to advance.

## Debunking LA Mythology

This rigorously anti-sentimental study was followed by two books that catapulted Davis into prominence within mainstream circles, where they became best sellers.

In debunking the mythology of Los Angeles as a coastal nirvana, presenting it instead as a metropolitan mirage resting hazily atop the scorched earth of capital, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (1990) and *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998) elevated Mike Davis to "everyone's favorite Rosetta Stone for translating the civic unrest." Davis became canonized, however much he resisted the labeling, as a "prophet of doom."

In outlining L.A.'s carceral, over-policed, fortress-like, racialized making and its rolling of the dice with respect to the potentially devastating consequences of environmental payback, Davis became associated with a particular catastrophic view of Los Angeles. But there was always much more to his commentary than this. *City of Quartz* managed to suggest, before they erupted, just why the Rodney King riots of 1992 were inevitable.

*Ecology of Fear* exposed an ecosystem of profit, with its blatant class inequalities and cavalier disregard of the price inevitably paid when nature and geology were overridden by acquisitive individualism and its penchant for accumulation. Now courted by commercial publishers and the recipient of prestigious awards and grants, Davis's star was clearly on the rise.

The signature chapter in *Ecology of Fear*, "The Case for Letting Malibu Burn," brilliantly outlined the class-differentiated political economy of fire in Los Angeles, juxtaposing two quite distinct districts. Posh mansions built in hills overlooking manicured beaches and impeccably-outfitted cappuccino bars were destined to burn, the high-rent district being situated within a natural wildfire ecology. Slumlord owned welfare lodgings and sweat shops in the dilapidated buildings of downtown L.A. were allowed to go up in flames, however, because it was profitable.

The tongue-in-cheek contention that Malibu should be allowed to burn, rather

than being rebuilt again and again, was premised on an undeniable material logic: it made no sense to "develop" a place that nature periodically ravaged.

This environmentally responsible perspective rankled powerful interests, as did Davis' accusation that inner city fire could be contained if only precautions were taken. This meant developing infrastructure rather than letting it lapse; enforcing regulations instead of ignoring them; enhancing welfare as opposed to chiseling away at it; and ending the practice of stacking immigrants atop one another in dilapidated and crowded hotels reconverted to housing, forcing *recien llegados* to work in dangerously abysmal fly-by-night "factories." This cost money neither capital nor the state were willing to expend. Inner-city buildings burned because it paid the rich to allow them to do so, killing and displacing the poor in the process.

None of this went over well with those whose expense accounts, sales commissions, and extravagant living derived from the City of Angels's sunny imaginary. They real estate magnates fought back. Davis found himself denounced as a fraud, his critically-acclaimed books reduced to nothing more than "fake, phoney, made-up, crackpot, bullshit."

None of this helped Mike in the academic employment market which he did his best to snub his maverick nose at. For a time, he couldn't buy a job in California, although his publication record was clearly extraordinary.<sup>13</sup>

## "Political Ecology" Dramas

A flair for the dramatic statement became a signature feature of Mike's enthralling narratives. Over the course of the 1980s Davis worked rigorously at the craft of writing, insisting that it was the most difficult thing he ever undertook.

*Ecology of Fear's* unforgettable first line, for instance, takes the reader directly into the substance of the study: "Once or twice each decade, Hawaii sends Los Angeles a big wet kiss." That this puckering up brought destruction in its wake did not have to be said.

Shoring up the panache of this prelude was Davis' embrace of what he would subsequently, in *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (2000), dub "political ecology," an innovative and timely bringing together of environmental history and Marxist political economy. For Davis' metaphor conveyed how irregular, but routine, storm systems swept warm, water-laden air from the Hawaiian archipelago south, hurling massive rainfalls, the equivalent of half of Los Angeles' annual precipitation, on the Sunshine City. The ferocity of the consequent deluge set the stage for a depic-

tion of L.A. as a city of potential calamity, an environment that inspired alarm.<sup>14</sup>

*City of Quartz* detailed capitalism's making of the catastrophic and deformed social relations of everyday life, while *Ecology of Fear* chronicled just how the profit system rolled the dice, racking up big payouts as it gambled on environmental retribution not coming up snake eyes.

In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Davis extended such insights globally, his text fusing the destructive agency of capital and its capacity to not only feed off ecological disaster but foment it. The book, which Perry Anderson regarded as "Mike's masterpiece," explored and exposed how imperialism, drought, and famine unfolded in India, northern China, and northeastern Brazil, filling the coffers of colonialism and decimating local populations.

Davis' justifiably angry conclusion was that "imperial policies toward starving 'subjects' were often the exact moral equivalent of bombs dropped from 18,000 feet." Capitalism had much to atone for.<sup>15</sup>

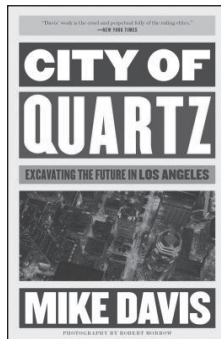
This deformed making of the third world was always pivotal in Mike's understanding of the need for the revolutionary left to function in truly internationalist ways. Davis' writing in the first decade of the 21st century pioneered transnational, global histories.

They offered wide-ranging commentaries on population movement from the impoverished global south to the job-rich American city, transforming, in the process, United States urban life; the immiseration of the slums of Africa, Asia, and Latin America that helped drive this process; and the desperate forms of refusal and resistance that evolved, pitting themselves against Western imperialism.

First and Third Worlds were indisputably linked in a cycle of imperial-induced violence. "Night after night," concluded Davis with typical élan in *Planet of Slums* (2006), "hornetlike helicopter gunships stalk enigmatic enemies in the narrow streets of slum districts, pouring hellfire into shanties or fleeing cars. Every morning the slums reply with suicide bombers and eloquent explosions. If the empire can deploy Orwellian technologies of repression, its outcasts have the gods of chaos on their side."

As more inhabitants of economies stunted by the world's partition into spheres of influence ceded to a small number of capitalist states found themselves ground down, the dialectic of repression proved a two-way street. The car bomb raced fast and furious, chasing the fumes of forcible confinements and the bullets of brutish coercions, leaving no nation state immune from the fallout.

In *Budda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (2007), Davis concluded: "[E]very laser-guided missile falling on an apartment house in southern Beirut or a mud-walled compound in Kandahar is a future suicide



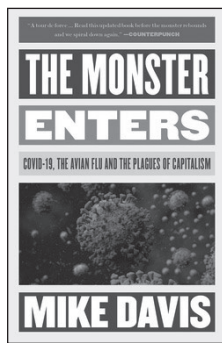
truck bomb headed for the center of Tel Aviv or perhaps downtown Los Angeles. Buda's wagon truly has become the hot rod of the apocalypse."<sup>16</sup>

## Pandemic Prophecies

Three other books revived Davis' stature as a seer, confirmed and deepened his place within the socialist tradition, and bid us farewell with a love letter to the romance of the 1960s, co-authored with his friend Jon Wiener.

*The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu* (2005) essentially predicted the Covid-19 pandemic. It shot a warning flare into the obviously compromised night vision of the World Health Organization.

Davis pointed an accusatory finger at the for-profit pharmaceutical industry. He exposed the roadblocks it was cavalierly placing on science's ability to eradicate deadly pandemics, unleashed by the capitalist destruction of biodiversity. The resulting inter-species viral transmissions were now able to race at globalization's enhanced, supply-chain, speed, leap-frogging from continent to continent in ways unfathomable during previous centuries.



In *Old Gods, New Enigmas*, Davis confirmed his commitments to old-time socialism's values and material concerns, showing how they resonated with the accelerating doomsday warnings of threats to the Anthropocene. Like Trotsky, Davis was adamant that, "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones." He was convinced that Marxists must "ignite our imaginations by rediscovering those extraordinary discussions — and in some cases concrete experiments — in utopian urbanism that shaped socialist and anarchist thinking between the 1880s and 1930s. The alter mode that we believe is the only possible alternative to the new Dark Ages requires us to dream old dreams anew."

In this spirit, Davis and Wiener took the title of their book on the radicalism of Los Angeles in this turbulent decade from the city's quintessential rock band, The Doors, and their 1967 anthem to a moment of struggle and upheaval: "The time to hesitate is through/No time to wallow in the mire.../Try to set the night on fire." For Mike, the 1960s contained tragedies aplenty, but also "social miracles and innumerable instances of unheralded courage and defiance."<sup>17</sup>

Defiance was Mike's métier. As he told one journalist in the summer of 2022, his one regret was that he would not go out "in battle or at a barricade as I've always romantically imagined — you know, fighting."<sup>18</sup>

## Final Struggle

Mike always fought best on the page, writing in ways meant to enlighten and enliven the revolutionary spirit. This demanded not only an indomitable will, but a physical robustness. But his strength to tell us his stories, historicize the future, and serve as our socialist seer — all accomplished through his prolific, prophetic, and powerful writing — was compromised in 2016.

Mike was diagnosed with a rare lymphoma, Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, and for the next six years he battled various cancers and lived with the debilitating side effects of interminable treatments. His wife of almost 25 years, Alessandra Moctezuma, a Latina artist, activist, and curator of considerable accomplishment, and his children — Róisín and Jack from previous marriages and the twins he co-parented with Alessandra, Cassandra and James Connolly — as well as countless friends, sustained him.

His resilience was extraordinary, his good humor admirable, his aspirations irrepressible. If he understood that he would never complete one of the studies he lovingly researched for decades, *The "Heroes from Hell": An Anthology of Revolutionary Outlaws and Anarchist Saints*, Mike remained secretly at work on an ambitious project he insisted was "the perfect diversion from poor health": *Star Spangled Leviathan: An Economic History of American Nationalism*. When the writing finally stopped definitively on 25 October 2002, the music Mike played for all of us died.<sup>19</sup>

It had been a long and exhilarating festival, a Woodstock for a post-1960s left that hung on Mike's every note. Preoccupied in his last years with the dilemma of what was needed in the struggle against capitalism, Mike returned to the need for an "organization of organizers."

As enthralled as he was with each fresh round of struggle, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, he nonetheless always paused to ask, "what's the next link in the chain (in Lenin's sense) that needs to be grasped." Only an organized movement could fulfill the promise of resistance, and in his last days Mike bemoaned its absence. "The biggest political problem in the United States right now," he concluded, "has been the demoralization of tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of young activists." They needed the discipline and direction of an organized socialist movement, not "solicitations from Democrats to support candidates."

Mike's last want was for "more noise in the street," but for this bedlam to be buttressed by socialist mobilization sustained by the structure of an ongoing, evolving apparatus of revolutionaries.<sup>20</sup>

As we stare into the gaping hole that

Mike Davis's absence leaves, like a crater opening up before our long march along future anti-capitalist roads, we can pause to mourn, but need not be overtaken by despair. He left us as his legacy a library of thought, reflection and resolute dedication. Militants and mavericks, radicals, rebels, and revolutionaries, will be reading Mike Davis for decades to come. Honor him with acts of defiant dissent, determined demonstrations for social justice, resolute stands of class struggle and international solidarity, and by carrying high the standard of a fighting socialist movement. ■

## Notes

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## A New Day for UAW Members? By Dianne Feeley

THE RECENT ELECTION in the United Auto Workers union (UAW) has produced a stunning overturn of the long-ruling Administration Caucus (AC) monopoly of power. Previous ATC articles have traced the history of the Administration Caucus' control over the union apparatus and various caucuses through the years that have challenged the growing partnership between UAW officials and the corporations.

Even activists fighting for internal democracy and contracts that improved conditions were shocked by the level of corruption that has been uncovered. More than a dozen officers, including two UAW presidents, were convicted of stealing from the UAW treasury, taking kickbacks or demanding a cut from various enterprises.

Forced to work out a deal with the federal government to avoid having the union in receivership, the AC hoped to continue business as usual. However the federal mediator mandated that the UAW hold a membership referendum on how the International Executive Board (IEB) should be elected.

Last year Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), a caucus formed to replace the delegated system of electing the UAW's International Executive Board with one member, one vote, was able to win that referendum vote. However fewer than 15% of all members returned their ballots.

Many of us who campaigned for the one member, one vote position felt we knew why the turnout was so low: the leadership didn't take the trouble to inform the membership. Those of us leafleting plant gates or speaking up at local union meetings did our best to get out the vote, but many workers have been discouraged over the years from thinking that anything they could do might change the direction or composition of the union.

Nonetheless the Administration Caucus still held power and controlled the union's

infrastructure. This was the message the AC delivered at the UAW Constitutional Convention last summer when they waited out delegate enthusiasm that raised strike pay to \$500 a week early on. As delegates began to depart, the AC forced a revote and succeeded in reducing the amount to \$400. Although one might wonder why they would want to be identified with lowering strike pay after raising officer salaries, this maneuver demonstrated who was still in charge.

The election campaign this fall had two caucuses running along with several individuals. The AC caucus, the Curry Solidarity Team, was headed up by Ray Curry. He had been appointed president by the IEB when President Gary Jones was indicted. For its part, UAWD built a UAW Members United slate for half of the 14 elected offices.

The federal mediator set out the election process. This included a special issue of the UAW magazine, *Solidarity*, that contained information on every candidate and outlined the election procedure. Just as for the referendum vote, an outside firm was hired to mail out a ballot to every active and retired UAW member and conduct the voting.

The federal mediator also held debates for the top offices. Stephen Greenhouse, a nationally known labor reporter, chaired and asked questions. These are available on the mediator website.

This fall, as a UAWD member, I leafleted throughout the Detroit area at membership meetings and plant gates. My pitch was to elect the "anti-concessions, anti-corruption" slate. But many workers weren't aware of the election time-table until they received their ballots in the mail.

However, I confess I wasn't sure how well we could successfully challenge a caucus that has been in power since 1947. Since the concessions era, only one has been elected — Jerry Tucker — and that more than a

quarter century ago!

Yet as the votes were counted and announced, of the seven candidates we ran, five were elected and were sworn into office December 12. Another important militant, Dave Green, was elected.

Two others on our slate, including our presidential candidate Shawn Fain, face a runoff in early 2023. With five candidates running for president, Fain trailed Curry by fewer than 600 votes.

Fain is an electrician who served five terms as a skilled trades committee person and shop chair and has served over the past decade as an international representative.

He opposed the "alternative work schedule" when it was rolled out in 2003 and opposed the introduction of tiered contracts at Chrysler in 2007. When Chrysler threatened to close a number of plants in 2009, Fain worked to organize protests at Chrysler headquarters.

Key to winning the 2023 election runoff will be demonstrating that transforming the UAW is achievable. Especially for UAW members in the auto sector, where even when workers went out on strike, the resulting contracts did not end tiered wages, return cost-of-living wages or restore health care and pension benefits.

UAWD candidates will need to carry out several campaigns at once: administer the union effectively, encourage members to participate, get ready for the 2023 contract negotiations in the auto industry, roll out plans to take on the non-union auto parts industry, support UAW nurses, state workers and graduate students in their fight for better wages and working conditions and reach out to international campaigns that mirror our own struggles. It's a project that means winning the last two races for UAW top offices, and mapping out a strategy that puts corporations on notice. ■

reproductive rights Michigan state constitutional amendment (Proposal 3). It won handily, as did the three women holding the top state offices — governor, attorney general and secretary of state — aided by the circumstance that the Republican challengers were rabid anti-choice, election-denial MAGA fanatics. All three incumbents (Gretchen Whitmer, Dana Nessel and Jocelyn Benson) ran on pro-choice platforms, including the governor's court challenge to the state's (now-dead) 1931 abortion ban and attorney-general Nessel's vow not to enforce it.

Michigan voters also adopted proposals to ensure expanded voter access and candidate financial disclosures. For the first time in decades, thanks to nonpartisan redistricting, Republicans lost control of both houses of the state legislature. Rightwing gerrymandering had enabled all kinds of rightwing malicious mischief, including the noxious Emergency Manager laws that imposed bankruptcy on majority-Black Detroit and poisoned the water of Flint.

The national picture, as always, was a mixed pattern as the two U.S. parties of corporate capital battle for domination. The uninspiring Joe Biden did not drag down the Democratic vote, nor did the malignant magnetism of Donald Trump elevate the Republicans in critical battleground races. And it's refreshing to note that money doesn't rule everything: For example, the targeted assault on Summer Lee (in Pennsylvania District 12) by AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) failed spectacularly.

On the whole, the vaguely-defined "progressive" Democratic party wing appears to have held its own. Contrary to some left illusions, however, it represents no challenge to the firm control of the corporate-loyal party establishment. Regrettably, the independent left was not a factor in this election except for some on-the-ground presence — as in the exemplary case of Michigan in activist canvassing for ballot access signatures and then voter turnout for Proposal 3.

## **Clouded Prospects**

That a feared wave of reactionary legislative onslaughts now seems less likely is the most positive and hopeful outcome of this nasty, brutish and long electoral cycle.

After the powerful pro-choice voter turnout, we'll have to see whether anti-abortion state legislatures seek to criminalize women's travel to states where abortion can be legally obtained, whether prosecutors will pursue doctors providing abortion medications, and other atrocities that will further inflame the national crisis of women's access to abortion.

Deeper issues remain, and here are a few of them:

1) Factors long regarded as pillars of guaranteed "stability" — such as the domination of two capitalist parties rhythmically and routinely alternating in power, the decentralization of much authority to the states, and the Supreme Court as a check on legislative "extremism" — have now become agents of destabilization. With or without Trump, the dominant wing of the formerly traditional-conservative Republican Party is now an essentially far-right purveyor of unrestrained plutocracy, Christian nationalism and white supremacy with a stranglehold on highly gerrymandered state legislatures.

2) As for the Supreme Court, even though its atrocious

ruling on abortion has been slapped in the face by voters, its majority remains firmly a far-right White Supremacy Court of the United States (WSCOTUS). It will not necessarily sacrifice what remains of its legitimacy by protecting Donald Trump, precisely because it has bigger fish to fry. It has already destroyed the Voting Rights Act, is poised in this term to wipe out affirmative action, and will seriously consider an incredible doctrine enabling "independent state legislatures" to overturn future election results.

3) The stagflation recession (economic downturn coupled with persistent inflation, last seen in the mid-1970s) that is possible in 2023 will only exacerbate the profound ongoing dysfunctions in the United States, from health care and labor rights to housing, the social safety net and gun violence. Neither party has a serious response to the economic situation — since the Republican policy consists of tax cuts for the rich and vicious budget cuts for everyone else, while Democrats can't confront corporate price-gouging or take other measures against the wishes of their own mega-donor base.

4) The authoritarian and racist trend in U.S. politics is very much part of an international one. We can cite not only Viktor Orban in Hungary, the darling of U.S. white nationalists, and the now mercifully defeated Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, but also the new Israeli coalition government including parties that explicitly advocate ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and stripping their citizenship rights. There's also a pro-Putin wing of the U.S. Republican Party that's likely to become increasingly vocal as the war in Ukraine drags into a bitter winter.

In this connection we should note sadly that in this as in every U.S. election, and in every international upheaval — right now, the war resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its consequences for the global economy and food supplies — Palestine and its people are collateral damage. Even as the likes of AIPAC strive to crush any Congressional voices for Palestinian rights, Israel's daily raids and murders in occupied Palestine barely register in U.S. media. This can change only with a critical upsurge in grassroots pro-Palestinian activism.

5) Speaking of thickening smoke and rising floodwaters — the environmental collapse hangs over the future not only of U.S. politics but humanity. We don't know who will be running for president in 2024, or what the economy will look like, or whether the war in Ukraine will be over, or many other things — but we do know that wildfires, floods and droughts, species extinctions and habitat collapses will be even worse than they already are now.

6) Another sure thing: the estimated seventeen billion dollar expenditure on this election sets an all-time high, which will last all the way until the next one. Campaign spending records in U.S. politics fall faster than home-run marks during baseball's steroid era. That's both a symptom and a cause of systemic dysfunction.

The partial defeat of far-right misogynist and racist politics in the 2022 election is a reason for some relief, but not reassurance about the depths of the USA's political, social and racial crises. The biggest missing element is an independent left capable of addressing them at the roots. That issue requires urgent and collaborative discussion and action. ■

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