

# AGAINST THE **CURRENT**

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



## Women in Struggle

♦ JHEMUM ROY, L.M. BONATO, JEX BLACKMORE, NINA SILVER

## Review Essay: The Emergence of Memory Culture

♦ ALAN WALD

## Reviews: Palestine, Zionism & Oil

♦ BILL V. MULLEN, DON GREENSPON, DIANNE FEELEY, FRANN MICHEL



# A Letter from the Editors

## Genocide and Beyond

THE SADISTIC SAVAGERY of the U.S.-enabled Israeli genocide, and Donald Trump's executive coup-in-progress in the United States, intersect at Trump's proclamation of intent to take over, "develop" and ethnically cleanse Gaza of its two million Palestinian residents.

Such pronouncements may have been previously unimaginable, but no longer. As divorced from reality as Trump's Gaza fantasy is, we must not see that corner of the world as a mere local crime scene: It epitomizes what's become the normalized collapse of what was thought to be a secure, "rule-based" global system, along with a looming explosion in U.S. domestic politics. We will attempt here to explore the interconnections.

The colossal scale of Gaza's destruction, the reality of perhaps ten thousand unrecovered bodies under the debris, the annihilation of the health care system, the targeted killings of 200 or more Gaza journalists — all these are only pieces of the picture of the Israeli state's attempt to pulverize an entire society beyond hope of reconstruction.

*And yet, despite everything* — January 27 saw hundreds of thousands of Palestinians returning to northern Gaza, seeking to rebuild shattered homes, families and communities out of almost nothing. It's criminal for anyone to fantasize that Gaza or Palestine have "won" this hideous war, but the mass return to the area that the Netanyahu government openly intended to depopulate shows that Israel hasn't "won" either.

The people of Gaza, even amidst the rubble, have *reclaimed their agency* to make clear that no Arab regime, no matter how corrupt or servile to U.S. imperialism, could afford to indulge Israel's ultimate ethnic-cleansing fantasy.

During Phase One of the fragile ceasefire that may never see Phase Two, the release of some of the Israeli captives held hostage by the military wing of Hamas or other factions, and freedom for a few hundred among tens of thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, was of course welcome. This can't hide the magnitude of the Gaza horror, or the fact that an unknown number of the hostages have died in Israeli air strikes or building demolitions. Nor are we justifying the fact that on an incomparably smaller scale, the Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023 committed murderous crimes against civilians.

Right now, might the European Union be prepared to punish Israel over its blatant ceasefire violations and threat to renew the assault on Gaza that Netanyahu promised, with all its catastrophic consequences? And will Israeli society — despite the revenge lust that has consumed much of it since the October 7 attack — continue to support a government that would sacrifice the remaining hostages' lives to satisfy its ambitions of conquest?

Without knowing any of that, it is possible to reflect on some lessons of the past and present. How could what passes for "the international community" allow the annihilation of Gaza to happen in broad daylight? A stunning juxtaposition of events on January 27 may help to highlight this tragic question.

### Then and Now

The march of half a million Palestinians returning to what remains of northern Gaza happened to coincide with the ceremonies on the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp complex in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Watching these events side by side was overpowering, not least as Auschwitz survivors in their 90s spoke of their fears that "it could happen again" in a world of rising nationalist and racist hatreds. It's an invitation, even a commandment, to face *why* it is indeed happening again when it's *so much more visible and preventable*.

Regarding the Nazi holocaust, historian Arno J. Mayer wrote his book *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?* to explore the world's relative indifference to the genocide as it became known. What about today? It's not that genocidal crimes should be measured against each other in terms of their scale, or the meaningless question of which is "worse" — but one can compare how global powers responded or failed to respond in their respective times.

The Nazi holocaust occurred in the context of an all-consuming world war that for many countries posed the question of physical survival. Second and related, as the Verso Books publisher's summary observes:

*"Mayer demonstrates that, while the Nazis' anti-Semitism was always virulent, it did not become genocidal until well into the Second World War, when the failure of their massive, all-or-nothing campaign against Russia triggered the Final Solution."*

The real extent of the Nazi exterminationist campaign had begun to emerge around late 1942, and only by 1943 was it becoming widely known. (The early mass slaughters in Nazi-occupied eastern territories were mostly under the radar.) Furthermore, whatever the Allied powers knew and when, there was effectively no way to stop it — despite some wishful thinking, for example, that they "could have bombed the rail lines to the death camps," which were at the outer limit of the air capacity of the time — except by defeating Nazi Germany in the war.

Antisemitism of course played a role in why there was not great wartime concern over the fate of the Jews of Europe. But this would become a much bigger factor *after* the war, when the great Western democracies mostly closed their doors to desperate holocaust survivors, leaving masses of Jewish refugees nowhere to go — except to Palestine where the Zionist movement needed them to come, setting the stage for what became the 76-year, and continuing, Palestinian catastrophe.

Unlike the World War II Nazi genocide, the Israeli-U.S. Gaza assault has happened in the open, "the first live-streamed genocide" as it's been accurately described. The only way not to see it is by deliberately choosing not to look.

Further, halting this genocide could not have been simpler: *Only with the massive continuous supply of U.S. weapons could the Israeli military sustain the pace of the war beyond a few weeks.* A "Stop" order from Washington at any time would have suspended the slaughter.

It's not that this would have resolved the fundamental issues of occupation and ethnic cleansing that preceded and led to October 7 — issues that the war in any case has only made worse — but tens of thousands of Palestinian lives and

continued on the inside back cover



# AGAINST THE CURRENT

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[https://gulag.online/articles/povstani\\_vorkuta?locale=en](https://gulag.online/articles/povstani_vorkuta?locale=en)

The Vorkuta special labor prison camp in 1945. The Gulag, a system of prisons that existed in the Soviet Union from the 1920s through the 1950s built much of its infrastructure and produced its raw materials.

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Cover: Oksana Briukhovetska, *In Solidarity with Ukraine*, fragment. An homage to Faith Ringgold's work *Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles*. Textile collage, 2022.

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## #StopFuelingGenocide: Boycott Chevron! By Ted Franklin

DURING THE SECOND weekend of Trump's second term, demonstrators in more than 20 U.S. cities staged lively protests outside Chevron gas stations, plants, and offices. Their demand: an end to the oil giant's lucrative partnership with the apartheid State of Israel.

In Oakland and Alameda, California, scores of protesters braved an atmospheric river to successfully halt patronage at Chevron-owned gas stations. In Washington, D.C., demonstrators gathered outside Chevron's lobbying office calling for Chevron to "Stop Fueling Genocide."

Other spirited actions took place in Birmingham, Alabama; Bellingham, Tacoma, Wenatchee, and Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; San Jose, Silicon Valley, Berkeley, Sacramento, Chino Hills, and Los Angeles California; Plano, Texas; Tampa, Florida; and Golden, Colorado.

Many of the demonstrators have confronted Chevron before. The corporation has long been a world-class villain in the eyes of climate and environmental activists for its ecological depredations around the world.

Now it has become one of the prime targets of global BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) organizing in support of the Palestinian people. With a huge public presence of more than 7,000 gas stations in the United States and a direct role in empowering Israel's atrocities, Chevron is a prime candidate for an organized consumer boycott.

Chevron earned its billing as a top-tier target of the Palestinian-led BDS Movement by pumping gas — lots of it. Israel's war machine couldn't run without the gas supplied by Chevron. Off the coast of Palestine in the eastern Mediterranean Sea there are vast reserves of fossil gas. Since 2020 Chevron has operated the two major Israeli-claimed fossil gas fields, Tamar and Leviathan.

As Israel bombed hospitals, homes, universities, and UN schools in Gaza, Chevron pumped gas from the depths of the sea to

feed Israel's onshore power generation plants. The plants produce most of Israel's electricity. Without Chevron's ongoing contribution the lights would go out on Israel's military, police stations, and illegal settlements. Chevron also pumps billions of dollars in revenue to Israeli government coffers.

### Demanding an End to Complicity

The Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) — the largest coalition in Palestinian civil society — launched the escalating global boycott campaign targeting Chevron in January 2024. The BDS movement had first called for divestment from Chevron in 2020 when Chevron took over from Noble Energy as the primary owner and operator of Israel's gas fields. The campaign is now expanding to engage with the broader public by mounting a consumer boycott of Chevron gas stations, including those operating under the brand names Texaco and Caltex.

"Chevron has been a divestment target, but we added it as a boycott target after Israel's Gaza genocide began, and we've already seen campaigns and actions around the world at Chevron gas stations, refineries, and corporate offices as well as Chevron's university partnerships and event sponsorships," says Olivia Katbi, BNC North American coordinator.

"We are not asking for charity, but for solidarity," explains Omar Barghouti, cofounder of the BNC in 2005 and recipient of the Gandhi Peace Award in 2017. "We're demanding an end to complicity. As the struggle that ended apartheid in South Africa has shown, ending state, corporate, and institutional complicity in Israel's regime of oppression, especially through the nonviolent tactics of BDS, is the most effective form of solidarity with our liberation struggle."

The BDS movement based its targeting of Chevron on a strategic analysis of how a boycott can have a meaningful impact on corporations complicit in suffering.

### Opportunity for a Win

"The BDS movement uses the historically successful method of targeted boycotts inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the US Civil Rights movement, and the Indian anti-colonial struggle, among others worldwide," says Katbi. "We strate-

gically focus on a relatively smaller number of carefully selected companies that play a clear and direct role in Israel's crimes — and where there is a real potential for winning."

Katbi further explains, "Chevron entered the Israeli market in 2020; it can just as easily exit. Therefore, we see this as a winnable campaign. The Chevron campaign has an easy way for consumers to be involved and apply pressure, by boycotting, picketing, and engaging with local gas stations. This tactic is inspired by the Shell boycott during the South African anti-apartheid movement.

Other complicit companies with gas stations, like Valero, are on the divestment list. But to be successful in our boycott campaign against Chevron, we need to focus on one company at a time."

While expressing appreciation for those who feel compelled to boycott all products and services of companies tied in any way to Israel, the BDS movement argues for more focus on fewer targets. Spontaneous campaigns aimed at Starbucks and McDonald's have attracted popular support, but they don't make the BNC's list of priority targets. Apartheid can thrive without Ventis and Big Macs, they say, but it can't run without gas. Going after every complicit company runs the risk of making no impression on any of them.

### Cross-Movement Synergy: Apartheid and Environmental Devastation

The BDS Movement also sees in the Chevron boycott a strategic opportunity to build an alliance between Palestine solidarity and environmental activists based on a shared understanding and abhorrence of the human, ecological, and climate impacts of Israel's assault on Gaza.

Chevron holds the "distinction" of being the world's leading historical producer of greenhouse gas emissions among investor-owned oil companies. An exhaustive 2021 report on Chevron's global record of ecocide, genocide, and corruption exposed Chevron's "severe abuse of Indigenous people, as well as massive destruction of local environments while forcing the world into a crisis from fossil fuel-induced climate change." Israel's war, like all wars, contributes directly to destroying the climate and adding fuel to the fossil fuel industry's effort to burn up the planet.

"We're building a global intersectional

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*Ted Franklin is an organizer and retired union attorney who serves on the coordinating committee and editorial board of System Change Not Climate Change. He is a founding member of the Labor Rise Climate Jobs Action Group and No Coal in Oakland, and is active in efforts to unite the climate justice and labor movements on common goals.*



Rainy day boycott protest outside an Oakland, California Chevron Station. February 1, 2025. Photo: Leon Kunstenaar

Boycott Chevron campaign in partnership with the climate justice movement and Indigenous peoples around the world, including in Ecuador, who are exposing and resisting the colonial violence of Chevron's extractivism, environmental destruction, and grave human rights violations," says BNC's Barghouti.

"In Gaza, Israel is not only committing a genocide against 2.3 million Palestinians," Barghouti avers.

"It is also committing what international law experts call domicile — the mass destruction of homes and living conditions to make our territory uninhabitable — and ecocide. Though the full extent of the damage caused to the environment by Israel's relentless bombardment and destruction in Gaza has not yet been documented, satellite imagery already showed the destruction of

about 38 to 48 percent of tree cover and farmland."

As the Guardian reported nearly a year ago, "Palestinian olive groves and farms have been reduced to packed earth. Soil and groundwater have been contaminated by munitions and toxins. The sea is choked with sewage and waste, the air polluted by smoke and particulate matter."

"Palestinians living under Israel's colonial rule, with no control over our land or natural resources, are highly vulnerable to the climate crisis," Barghouti stresses.

"With Israel monopolizing resources,

destroying our agricultural land, denying access to water, rising temperatures are exacerbating desertification as well as water and land scarcity, entrenching climate apartheid."

#### #BoycottChevron Strengthens Solidarity

U.S. organizations ranging from the Quaker action group American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and US Campaign for Palestinian Rights (USCPR) to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have taken up the BNC's call to organize around the Chevron Boycott. AFSC has provided an extensive toolkit for organizers, including designs for stickers, banners, and flyers that can be adapted by local campaigns and an excellent Fact Sheet: Chevron Fuels Israeli Apartheid and War Crimes.

Since the launch of the boycott, the BNC reports that "tens of thousands of consumers have taken the pledge to boycott Chevron gas stations, dozens of groups around the world have led pickets . . . and at least three cities have divested from Chevron."

In February 2024 hundreds of protesters staged a "Chevron Out of Palestine" rally outside the gates of Chevron's Richmond refinery, one of the largest refineries in California. Participants and endorsers included such diverse groups as the Oil & Gas Action Network, East Bay DSA, Idle No More, Bay Area Palestine Solidarity, Labor Rise Climate Jobs Action Group, Jewish Voice for Peace, Common Humanity Collective, Sunrise Movement, 1000 Grandmothers, Rich City Rays, Rising Tide, Coalition Against Chevron in Myanmar, San Francisco Committee for Human Rights in the Philippines, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Palestinian Feminist Collective, Bay Area Health Workers for

Palestine, Muslim Writers Collective, Amazon Watch, and California Trade Justice Coalition.

In August 2024, a similarly broad coalition of organizations in Los Angeles, dedicated to Palestinian human rights and to addressing the global climate crisis, demonstrated at the Chevron Refinery in El Segundo, just south of the LA airport.

The LA coalition included Black Lives Matter, Code Pink, Extinction Rebellion, Veterans for Peace, White People 4 Black Lives, Queers 4 Palestine, Youth Climate Strike, SoCal 350 Climate Action, and local chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine.

Demonstrations at the refinery gates have served a useful purpose in uniting different social movements in common cause, but the isolated locations of the refineries means that the actions reached few members of the public directly. That is changing as the emphasis shifts to gas station pickets reaching out to Chevron's customers.

Operating under the brand names Chevron, Texaco, and Caltex, Chevron stations are scattered across 21 states, with the largest concentrations in California, Texas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Washington, Louisiana, Arizona, Oregon, and Nevada.

Hundreds are corporate-owned, but the majority are owned by franchisees who are locked into long-term relationships with the behemoth. Boycott organizers are asking these franchise owners to communicate directly with Chevron urging termination of its contracts with Israel.

In September 2024 #BoycottChevron climate justice groups and human rights activists staged 15 public events around the world as part of a week of action targeting Chevron. Protesters decorated Chevron's headquarters in San Ramon, California, with a large banner declaring Chevron "the genocide energy company."

Demonstrators at gas stations asked vehicle owners to fill up elsewhere and sign the boycott pledge. Chevron franchise owners were asked to sign a letter asking the corporation to divest from Israel and to post a notice in their window that they have done so. Franchisees who sign on are not picketed.

As part of the September week of action the Democratic Socialists of America International Committee launched DSA's own #StopFuelingGenocide campaign, calling on DSA chapters across the country to help build the boycott. In recent months California DSA members organized demonstrations at gas stations in Oakland, Silicon Valley, and San Diego, and Texas DSAers staged actions in Houston and Austin.

Chevron seeks to curry local favor by investing a small portion of its PR budget in the nonprofit community. When local governments seek to regulate Chevron's activities the beneficiaries of Chevron's "charity" are expected to show up at public hearings and

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## Resources

**Fact Sheet: Chevron Fuels Israeli Apartheid and War Crimes, Action Center for Corporate Accountability:** <https://afsc.org/chevron-fuels-israeli-apartheid-and-war-crimes>

**AFSC Boycott Chevron campaign info:** <https://afsc.org/BoycottChevron>

**BDS Movement's Call for a Consumer Boycott of Chevron-Branded Gas Stations:** <https://bdsmovement.net/news/bds-movement-calls-for-consumer-boycott-chevron-branded-gas-stations>

**Report on Chevron's Global Destruction: Ecocide, Genocide, and Corruption:** <https://letsownchevron.org/chevrons-global-record> ■



# The Lesser-evil Election Trap: Capitalism Is the Disaster

By Peter Solenberger

DURING THE 2024 election cycle, liberals, social democrats, post-Stalinists, and even some revolutionary socialists argued that workers should support Joe Biden and then Kamala Harris to prevent the disaster of a second Trump presidency.

They made the familiar “lesser evil” argument: Biden/Harris are the lesser evil to Trump; therefore, progressives should support them. Biden/Harris were indeed the lesser evil to Trump, but the “therefore” doesn’t follow.

While I’m not of the Hal Draper tradition, I like his elegant rejoinder to the “lesser evil” argument in a 1967 article “Who’s going to be the lesser evil in 1968?”

Looking back at the 1964 race between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater, he asks and answers:

*“So who was really the Lesser Evil in 1964? The point is that it is the question which is a disaster, not the answer. In setups where the choice is between one capitalist politician and another, the defeat comes in accepting the limitation to this choice.”*

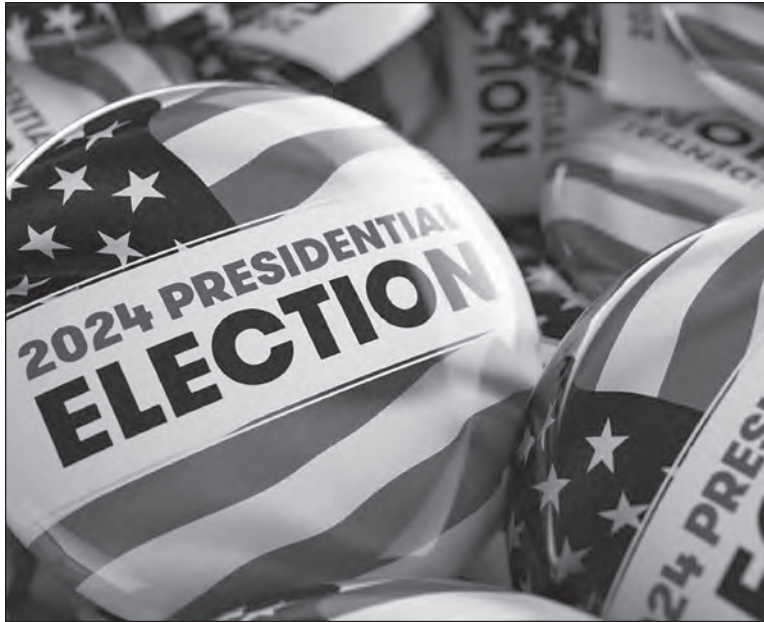
In the 2016, 2020 and 2024 presidential elections, leftwing advocates of supporting Democrats buttressed their argument with the claim that Trump represents something fundamentally new in U.S. politics, a threat to democracy. The old rules, if they ever applied, no longer do so.

The purpose of this article is to reaffirm the revolutionary Marxist critique of lesser-evil electoralism and to argue that the advent of Trump does not invalidate the critique.

## What Happened in November

Kim Moody’s excellent article “Pothole in the Middle of the Road: The Democrats’ Path to Defeat” in the January-February 2025 issue of *Against the Current* analyzes the 2024 U.S.

*Peter Solenberger is a Solidarity member and activist in Michigan.*



*You get to vote, but do you get what you vote for?*

elections in detail. I won’t go into such detail, but here are some numbers particularly relevant to this article:

- Turnout was high by U.S. standards, 156.3 million voters out of 244.7 million voting-eligible people, 63.9%, up from 60.1% in 2016 and down from 66.4% in 2020.
- The popular vote for president was close, with Donald Trump getting 77.3 million votes (49.9% of those who voted for president) and Kamala Harris getting 75.0 million (48.4%), a margin of 1.5%.
- Trump’s vote was up 3.1 million from his 74.2 million in 2020; Harris’s vote was down 6.3 million from Biden’s 81.3 million in 2020.
- Third-party candidates on the left got 1.1 million votes, with Jill Stein of the Greens getting 861,143 votes as of December 22, 2024, Claudia De la Cruz of the Party for Socialism and Liberation and the Peace and Freedom Party getting 166,176 votes, and independent Black radical Cornel West getting 82,681 votes.
- The Republicans gained four Senate seats, giving them a 53 to 47 majority. They lost two House seats, giving them a 220 to 215 majority.
- No governorships changed hands.
- Abortion rights won in seven referenda and lost in only two, of which one was a

Florida measure that got 57% of the vote but needed 60% to pass.

Trump and the Republicans have no big mandate. They won because of a small shift in voting patterns. In the presidential vote, the Republicans turned out 3.1 million votes more than they did in 2020, while the Democrats turned out 6.3 million fewer votes.

The Republicans and Democrats have hard-core supporters, but most of their votes come from voters who see their candidate as the lesser evil.

Whites and men disproportionately vote Republican, while Blacks, Latinos, other people of color and women disproportionately vote Democratic. Workers vote for both parties. Lower-income and younger

workers disproportionately don’t vote.

The third of voters, mostly workers, who saw Trump as the lesser evil — not the racists, xenophobes, misogynists or other “deplorables” — did so because they thought his program of tariffs and border controls would protect their jobs and living standards.

The third of voters who saw Harris as the lesser evil did so because they thought she would do more to protect abortion rights, civil rights, and the environment. The final third didn’t vote because they thought all politicians are liars.

The marginal shift in voting patterns is interesting, and its consequences may be far-reaching. We’ll discuss this below. But a much bigger problem is the political impasse shown by the continuing reality that roughly a third of voters — and a third of the working class — see the Democrats as the lesser evil, another third see the Republicans as the lesser evil, and another third see no reason to vote.

## Deliberate Dysfunction

In the section on the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*, Marx describes universal suffrage under capitalism as “deciding once in three or six years which member of the

ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament.”

This is quite evident in the U.S. political system. The government is deliberately dysfunctional.

The separation of powers, checks and balances, Electoral College, Senate, filibuster, lifetime appointment of Supreme Court justices, states’ rights, local autonomy, the corrupting influence of money in politics, the revolving door between government and business, corporate media, the government bureaucracy and military command, and all the other undemocratic aspects of the U.S. political system mean that the government can do only what the ruling class wants it to do.

Overlaid on this structure is the two-party system. The Democrats and Republicans are both capitalist parties. They depend on donations from capitalists and recognition from the capitalist media. Their top politicians move back and forth between government, the military, business, and academia. If they aren’t wealthy when they enter politics, they can quickly become so.

The Democrats traditionally favor more government intervention to promote employment, reduce poverty, extend civil rights, and protect the environment. They favor multilateralism in foreign policy.

The Republicans traditionally favor lower taxes, less government regulation, leaving economic matters to the market, and leaving political matters to the states. They project a law-and-order image and assert the virtues of marriage, nuclear families and religion. A wing of the party favors multilateralism, while another wing openly proclaims “America first.”

The deliberate dysfunction of the government and the two-party system reduce most of these differences to rhetoric. Immigration is an example.

Barack Obama professed sympathy for immigrants, but his administration deported immigrants at a higher rate than that of his predecessor George W. Bush, or his successor Trump. He adopted the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, but only after Dreamers began to occupy his campaign offices in 2012 and made clear that they would sink his presidency if he didn’t act.

Trump expressed hostility to immigrants, but his administration maintained DACA and deported immigrants at a lower rate than that of his predecessor, Obama, or his successor Biden.

Biden expressed sympathy for immigrants, but his administration deported immigrants at a higher rate than that of Trump. In June 2024, Biden went full-Trump by adopting his predecessor’s policy of refusing to accept asylum applicants who crossed the border without prior approval. Vice-president Harris was the administration’s point person on immigration throughout.

The result of all this is a governmental

alternation at the federal level between the two capitalist parties, generally every eight years. One party makes promises, energizes its base, gets elected, fails to carry out its promises, discourages its base, and gets voted out, giving the other party its turn. The alternation traps workers into endlessly chasing the lesser evil.

The disaster is the *limitation of choice to the two capitalist parties*, which leaves the workers forever cheated and wanting to “throw the bums out,” one set after the other, while capitalism spirals downward.

### Does Trump Invalidate the Critique?

In a sense, events have answered this question. Electing Biden in 2020 didn’t stop Trump. It just postponed his second term. But let’s dig more deeply. What might a second Trump administration do?

We can’t know for sure, since much depends on the level of resistance workers and the oppressed put up. The title of the editorial in the January-February 2025 issue of *Against the Current* is fitting: “The Chaos Known and Unknown.”

But we can examine the distinctive points in Trump’s announced agenda — leaving aside basic bipartisan policies around private property, neoliberalism, economic bailouts, the military, police and prisons, Israel, most other foreign policy, Social Security, Medicare, etc. — and consider what his administration could really do on each point.

Legislatively, the Republicans have a brief window of opportunity. They have slim majorities in the House and Senate and will probably lose one or both in the 2026 mid-term elections. Now is their moment to act.

**Taxes.** The second Trump administration will presumably move to extend the tax cuts for the wealthy enacted by the first Trump administration and set to expire next year. The tax cuts were the only major legislative victory of Trump’s first term, and they’re dear to him.

It seems likely that he can get the cuts renewed, since that would only continue the status quo. But the revolt of congressional Republicans against his demand to suspend the federal debt limit for two years shows the limits of his control.

**Tariffs.** Trump has said that his administration will impose an additional 10% tariff on imports from China and a 25% tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico, unless they act immediately to stop the smuggling of drugs and people across the U.S. border.

The additional tariff on Chinese goods is part of the U.S. economic war against China and, in itself, will have little effect.

The Canadian government has objected that few drugs or people are smuggled into the United States from Canada. Trump’s real goal may be to reduce the \$50 billion per year trade deficit with Canada, but the deficit

is due mainly to oil imports that the U.S. can’t make up with domestic production. Will the pro-hydrocarbon Trump administration really reduce oil imports and raise gas prices?

Immigration is the main issue with Mexico. Drug trafficking is too profitable on both sides of the border to restrict, and the administration needs imports from Mexico to help replace imports from China. The Mexican government is already doing everything the U.S. government asks around immigration, but the tariff dance lets Trump posture and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum claim that she’s acting under duress.

**Abortion.** The Supreme Court has ruled that states may determine the status of abortion rights. The main fight now is at the state level. A majority of states protect abortion rights, including the seven that voted to do so in November.

Trump has said that he opposes a federal ban on abortions and would veto one, if it got to his desk, which seems unlikely, given the balance in Congress. But Trump could interfere with interstate shipment of mifepristone and misoprostol for medicinal abortions.

**Immigration.** The Trump administration will make border enforcement more cruel, but the Biden administration had already reverted to the Trump policy of keeping asylum-seekers out.

Trump talks of rounding up and deporting undocumented immigrants, but the U.S. economy needs them, particularly in agriculture, construction, food-processing, restaurants and hotels. Trump himself makes millions from undocumented workers. This will limit what he can do.

The optimal policy for the capitalists — or so they see it at cynical moments — is to keep undocumented workers terrorized and vulnerable to abuse. (Free-market guru Milton Friedman openly proclaimed that illegal immigration is beneficial for the economy, as long as it remains illegal.)

**Transgender rights.** The Trump Justice Department will likely revert to its 2017 position that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, does not apply to gender identity. In more progressive states, trans people will still be protected by state law, but their rights will be under constant attack.

**Environment.** The Trump administration will try to roll back government regulations intended to limit emissions, curtail drilling and fracking for oil and gas, and promote electric vehicles. The rollbacks will be harmful, but the government was doing nowhere near enough to begin with. And the administration has its own internal conflicts: Trump’s biggest booster is Elon Musk, who makes billions selling electric vehicles.

**Democracy.** Trump will pardon even the most violent of the January 6 rioters and has already attained immunity from federal

prosecution for himself. He will resurrect the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover and have the FBI investigate his opponents. But Democratic Party administrators and officials are already repressing Palestine solidarity activists and other dissidents, with no need for Trump's help.

In short, Trump is loud, vain and vile, but his second administration is unlikely to be much different from his first one. He aspires to do more than he can. Chasing the lesser evil doesn't work. The critique holds.

### Our Tasks Ahead

The immediate task for workers and the oppressed is to *resist*. When the Republican-led Congress went after immigrants in 2006, millions of Latinos struck in protest, and Congress was forced to back down. When Democrats wavered on DACA in 2012, Dreamers began occupying their campaign offices, and Obama was forced to act.

When police murdered George Floyd in 2020, millions of Black people took to the streets, millions of whites and Latinos joined their protests, and local and state governments were forced to make concessions.

When the Supreme Court reversed *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, millions of women organized pro-choice state referenda and networks to help circumvent anti-abortion laws. Millions of men joined them. The number of abortions is higher in 2024 than before the reversal, mainly because of the from-below effort to make them more available.

Union strikes, although not yet political, have broad support in the rest of the working class. UAW President Shawn Fain proposed that unions coordinate their contract expiration dates for May 2028. Whatever Fain's intentions, a general strike then would be a fitting end to the Trump administration. A strike at Stellantis over jobs and working conditions now would be a promising start.

Individual acts of violence by MAGA fanatics and fascists against people of color, Jews, LGBTQ+ people, and leftists may increase. Unions, communities of the oppressed, and the left need to organize defense.

### Strategic Goals

Militant mass action could break the political impasse by creating a situation in which the capitalists had to choose between abandoning democracy — “the best possible shell for capitalism,” as Lenin put it in *The State and Revolution* — and implementing electoral and other reforms that would allow a workers' party to compete effectively.

The capitalists wouldn't like this and might try authoritarian measures first. But in all other advanced capitalist countries, the bosses long ago learned to live with “bourgeois workers' parties” as Lenin called them, parties with a working-class base and the politics of trying to reform capitalism through government regulation.

Even a reformist workers' party would be a step forward for the U.S. working class. Just running workers' candidates against candi-

dates of the capitalist parties would be a step forward. But revolutionary socialists shouldn't assume that a reformist party is the limit.

We should propose an anticapitalist transitional program — a program for jobs, healthcare, education, abolition of police and prisons, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, drastic cuts in military spending, peace, and a just transition to clean energy, industry, transportation, construction, and agriculture — a program that only a workers' government could implement.

In Britain, Canada and many other countries, the level of class struggle at which the working class gained political representation was too low for the workers' party to be revolutionary from birth. Should that prove to be the case in the U.S. case, revolutionaries will be on our familiar ground of combating reformism.

In short, the tasks of revolutionary Marxists in the United States fundamentally remain what they were under Biden and would have been under Harris: to help build unions and other mass organization and to promote democracy and militance there; to lead struggles for jobs, wages, working conditions, democratic rights and equality; to expose capitalism, imperialism and the two-party system, to resist militarism and war, to build solidarity with Palestine and all other anti-colonial struggles; to build a workers' party, and — with an eye to a socialist future — to build a revolutionary party and International. ■

## #StopFuelingGenocide: Boycott Chevron — *continued from page 3*

put a community face on Chevron's talking points. DSA is encouraging its chapters to pressure nonprofits and organizers of charity events to turn down fossil-fuel money this year.

Chevron is in the process of moving its global headquarters from California to Houston, Texas, where it is the main sponsor of the annual Houston Marathon. This year, Houston DSA was on hand to explain that Chevron's generosity in Houston is funded in part by its profiteering in the Eastern Mediterranean.

### It's Only a Short-Term Business

Boycott organizers recognize that it will take a massive global movement to persuade Chevron to end its business in Israel, much less to end its production of fossil fuels, as the future of a human-habitable planet requires.

Despite the challenges, #BoycottChevron activists believe victory is possible. Besides the boycott campaign, there are many other factors at play.

Chevron's assets off the coast of Palestine face risks beyond the very real reputational



Boycott protest outside a Chevron station in Tampa, Florida, February 2, 2025.  
Photo: Tampa, FL DSA

injury and economic pressure the international movement brings to bear. Chevron CEO Mike Wirth acknowledged in a sit-down interview sponsored by the Atlantic Council, a ruling-class think tank, that Chevron's gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean face physical peril operating in a war zone. (Watch the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbWwERY9jK5c>)

As the 2021 report shows, with hundreds of lawsuits on every continent against the corporation for spills, blowouts, and other violations of numerous laws including those against violent crimes, Chevron was already liable for tens of billions of dollars in fines and compensation before it began its activities connected to the Palestinian genocide. (Find the report at <https://chevronglobaldestruction.com/>.)

“Chevron only began investments in Israeli apartheid markets in 2020,” DSA campaign leaders explain in their orientation for boycott organizers.

“Our task is to make it easier and more profitable for Chevron to divest from its assets in Israel than to continue holding on to them. Chevron can choose to sell off this investment at any time. We can win.”

You can join the #BoycottChevron campaign by sending a message to CEO Mike Wirth via [bit.ly/boycottchevron](https://bit.ly/boycottchevron) ■



## Rank-and-File Power & Seattle's Labor for Black Lives Collective: A Fight for Our Unions

By Anna Hackman

IN THE MIDDLE of a global pandemic, Black youth across the country were at the forefront of one of the largest uprisings in modern U.S. history. It spanned all 50 states and over 20 different countries. The uprisings are a powerful reminder of what working-class people can do with political clarity and solidarity from below.

In Seattle, where we are based, the 2020 uprisings — led by Black youth in the Movement for Black Lives — erupted at a time when we were fighting for the soul of our union. The movement's clear demands and organized, direct action opened a door for rank-and-file workers to organize in solidarity with the movement, and with each other.

I am a Black, queer labor and community organizer, and an educator at a local community college. In the spring of 2020, along with teaching virtually during the quarantine, I worked with a small group of colleagues to make important shifts in our union. As contract negotiations approached, and our working conditions radically shifted, we became increasingly frustrated with the bureaucratic structures of our union.

Major decisions about our contract were made through closed negotiations and backroom deals. Aside from the occasional, performative membership meeting, or a short survey, there was no real input from the rank and file. We were tired of the secrecy, the lack of democratic procedures, and the lack of rank-and-file power in the union. We began organizing.

One of the most important, grounding principles of our organizing was a commitment to organizing as rank-and-file workers. First, the issues we encountered with our union were part of a larger problem in the labor movement. Many unions had the same, inaccessible bureaucracies that ground service



*SPOGOut! Rally in Capitol Hill Occupied Protest Zone (CHOP), June 2020.*

industry unionism. Second, rank-and-file workers have leeway that labor “leaders” cannot do on their own. It is easier for us to take bold, direct action. Finally, and more importantly, we wanted to redefine what union power meant.

In the eyes of high-ranking union officials, we were nobodies. We had no special title, no special status, and therefore had nothing to offer but our dues. We understood that in order to win the contract we deserved, and improve our working conditions in the long-term, we needed to build power from below. Being a nobody was our strength. When the rank and file is strong, the union is strong.

### **SPOGOut!: Seattle's Rank-and-File Answer the Call for Solidarity**

As we organized our colleagues, George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis. In Seattle, the uprisings that followed were just a block away from our college, where the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest Zone (CHOP) was formed. Many of the youth being brutalized by police were our students. We followed the movement closely and looked for openings to organize rank-and-file faculty to support the struggle. That opening came in the call for the Martin Luther King, Jr. County Labor Council (MLKCLC) to expel the Seattle Police Officer's Guild (SPOG).

Everything we accomplished that year was

because of Seattle's Black youth and the formation of CHOP. Their political vision and organization opened doors for everyone to envision our collective liberation. In June of 2020, in response to the murder of George Floyd and violent repression against protestors by Seattle police days earlier, hundreds of people demonstrated in the streets of Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Demonstrators returned, day after day, in the face of police

violence, with a vision of a world without police. It was a powerful and inspiring display of working-class solidarity.

CHOP formed after Carmen Best, Chief of the Seattle Police Department, shut down the 12th precinct. One of the calls of the Movement for Black Lives was to reimagine what safety and security can mean. It did not have to mean policing and surveillance. “Safety and security” could mean collective care, a world where people had their basic needs met, a world where they could live free from state-sanctioned violence.

CHOP, which spanned several blocks of the Capitol neighborhood, was a literal imagining of this world. Anyone who entered its gates would find free food, celebration, art, a community garden, and consciousness raising spaces. It was a powerful site to celebrate struggle. As community college faculty, we wanted to make visible the links between our exploitation and police violence to our colleagues.

We went into quarantine in March of 2020. At our college, we had to shift all of our courses online. With minimal time to prepare, and minimal support from the college, we had to rapidly transition our courses. The pandemic both revealed and intensified our working conditions. We wanted to politicize the pandemic, our working conditions,

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and tie them to the Movement for Black Lives. And it was important for us to do so as rank-and-file workers.

We wrote a position paper, outlining the links between the pandemic and our working conditions, which we asked our colleagues to sign in support. This gave us an organizing foundation to mobilize colleagues to articulate the connection between our working conditions and mass incarceration when the uprising began months later.

Our paper was a call for our colleagues to organize as rank-and-file workers, and to stand in solidarity with social movements. In the following years, we organized teach-ins and rallies to mobilize our colleagues towards open negotiations and a member-led union.

The harmful patterns we encountered in our union were also present in the MLKCLC. The MLKCLC is a centralized body of labor organizations based in King County, Washington. The labor council formed in 1888 as a coalition of labor organizations committed to building worker power. Over 100 years later, the council had fallen into the same pitfalls of service industry unionism that we found in our unions. While each union had delegates, many of us did not know who our delegates were (some union members weren't aware of the labor council at all).

Moreover, the labor council had a reputation for bureaucratic, convoluted decision-making procedures that were difficult to navigate. In their inaccessibility, the MLKCLC sent a similar message as our union: if you didn't have a special position in the labor council, you had nothing. You were nobody. As a result, the labor council often made decisions that went against working-class interests.

In 2014, for example, the MLKCLC admitted the Seattle Police Officers' Guild (SPOG) into its ranks. In the middle of a mass movement against police violence, the labor council helped SPOG implement vague accountability processes that undermined the movement's demands. To allow SPOG into the labor council was a slap in the face to the working-class organizers who were beaten and killed at their hands. They should never have been allowed into the MLKCLC, and they certainly should never have had so much support from labor in their contract negotiations.

Well before the quarantine, the Highline Education Association (HEA) put forward a proposal to expel SPOG from the labor council. The vote was tabled. The 2020 uprisings provided an opportunity to reintroduce SPOG's expulsion and HEA issued a call for all unions to support the vote to expel.

We went to meetings with small groups of labor council delegates who supported the vote to expel. What we saw was a lot of backroom dealing and confusing, heavily bureaucratic procedures. Since we were not

delegates, was no space for us and our work. We were nobodies. We had no say.

Around this time at CHOP, I ran into a comrade active in the Seattle Education Association (SEA), who wanted to support the effort to expel SPOG. They were also struggling to understand the bureaucratic procedures of the labor council. We were frustrated that a labor body that was supposed to represent our interests was so closed off to us. It was part of a larger pattern of undemocratic decision-making in labor.

We decided that we could put pressure on that decision by organizing a rally on the evening of the vote, and hold it in CHOP. The Movement for Black Lives opened this door for us, and holding the action in CHOP was an important show of solidarity for the demand to defund the Seattle Police Department.

We put out a call to all union workers to speak out against racist police violence and call on the labor council to expel the police. There would be no more secrecy. If the MLKCLC did not vote to expel SPOG, they would do it in front of the rank and file.

We scheduled a planning meeting at CHOP less than 72 hours before the MLKCLC vote. The turnout exceeded our expectations and we agreed to hold the rally. We organized an outreach plan, a strong list of speakers, and got to work.

Despite very little time and no money, we worked nonstop for three days to mobilize workers, fundraise, and set up a professional sound stage in Cal Anderson Park. Over 600 people came to hear educators, construction workers, and performers make the links between our exploitation and a violent, racist police force.

Many labor council delegates attended in a show of solidarity. They told us that some

members of the labor council's executive board had expressed concerns about our rally. They knew the rank and file was watching.

At around 9pm, we danced and cheered in Cal Anderson Park — the heart of CHOP — as the MLKCLC, in a 55 to 45 decision, voted to expel the Seattle Police Officers' Guild from its ranks. This was a historic victory and a powerful show of rank-and-file solidarity.

We didn't have formal positions or any institutional power. What we did have was clear politics that were antiracist, feminist, anticapitalist, and grounded in solidarity. And with that, we created a collective push from below that helped make history. Our fundraising also exceeded our expectations and we donated the leftover money to Decriminalize Seattle.

### **Rank-and-File Power from Below: The Labor for Black Lives Collective**

The SPOGOut rally brought rank-and-file workers together in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives. It was a demonstration of solidarity from labor that went beyond the typical, benign rally organized by labor "leaders." It also brought workers together that, otherwise, would not often cross paths. We were educators, electricians, carpenters, longshore workers, grocery workers, and healthcare workers. We showed up in the ways that movement really needed us, and we did it with no real political power beyond our commitment to rank-and-file solidarity. We had to continue this momentum.

We continued to meet as rank-and-file union members. We would gather and talk about the need to democratize our unions and to build an antiracist, feminist, queer, and anticapitalist labor movement. We formed a labor contingent and showed up at the actions that followed the SPOGOut! Rally.



*Labor for Black Lives at Nakba 73, #SaveSheikhJarrah Rally, Global Day of Action, May 2021.*



Many organizers in the movement heard about our victory, and we were invited to speak at rallies and panels.

We wanted a way to demonstrate our solidarity in rank-and-file politics. One of my colleagues had the idea of developing a banner with the slogan “Labor for Black Lives.” They and their partner designed it, and had it printed at a local, Black-owned print shop. We brought this banner to every action we attended. Very quickly, community members called us “Labor for Black Lives.”

We decided to run with it, calling ourselves the Labor for Black Lives Collective. The name came from the community; it was a sign that our presence as labor was important. We released a short statement in support of local demands to defund the Seattle Police Department, and committed to supporting both the Movement for Black Lives, but also each other.

The formation of the Labor for Black Lives Collective allowed us to establish important links between labor exploitation and abolition. We organized teach-ins on police abolition with a labor lens. We also used nonhierarchical, democratic decision-making processes that were more aligned with the politics of local community organizers. In practice we wanted to challenge the top-down structures of our unions.

One of our first major actions as a collective was in support of a local abolitionist organization, supporting a group of formerly incarcerated workers at the Bishop Lewis work release site in Seattle. The site retaliated against workers for whistleblowing about a COVID-19 outbreak in the facility.

Originally the organization asked the labor council to take this matter on as a labor issue. Members of the labor council's executive board gave them the runaround, sending them to person after person with no guidance. Frustrated and confused, they reached out to us to help them navigate the process.

We drafted a proposal and mobilized members of the collective to push their union delegates to get the labor council to sign onto a letter to the governor. The labor council approved the resolution and released a public statement recognizing COVID-19 in DOC facilities as a labor issue.

The abolitionist organizers we worked with later told us that they were able to leverage the labor council's statement in a future action. The Bishop Lewis solidarity action reaffirmed our commitment to nonhierarchical, democratic structures. Organized as rank-and-file workers, we were difficult to contain. Even working within the labor council structure in this case — as nobodies within the council bureaucracy — we demonstrated collective power from below.

It was important to us that local abolitionist organizers reached out to us di-



*Labor for Black Lives Collective organized a labor contingent to door knock for Nikkita Oliver's campaign, May 2021.*

rectly. It signaled that our work was having an impact and spoke to the need to democratize our unions and labor council. We continued to organize rank-and-file workers in support of the movement. We organized a labor contingent to go door knocking for Nikkita Oliver's — an abolitionist organizer, attorney, and key leader in the Movement for Black Lives — primary campaign for City Council. While we had some political questions around electoral politics, we decided it was important to show up in the ways that the movement needed us.

We continued to form relationships with other groups that had a labor and abolitionist focus. In August of 2021, we worked with other labor organizations to host a national, virtual abolitionist labor conference. Labor for Black Lives, SEIU Drop the Cops, Cop-Free AFSCME, IATSE Members for Racial Justice, and others, put together a day-long series of workshops linking the issues of mass incarceration, policing, racism and exploitation in our workplaces. Our opening keynote speakers were two currently incarcerated workers at a Washington State prison. They opened the conference with stories of their own exploitation inside, and a call to labor to join the movement to abolish prisons.

One of our greatest successes is what Collective members have been able to accomplish in our unions. My local, after years of rank-and-file organizing, is currently in our first open negotiations process. Many of our members are also members of Seattle Education Association (SEA). With the rank-and-file politics and organizing skills they developed in Labor for Black Lives, they were key to organizing the Seattle teachers' strikes in September 2022. As we all started to focus on our union work, the Labor for Black Lives Collective became inactive. But in our three years as a collective, we showed what rank-and-file workers can accomplish together.

### Lessons Learned

We are in another important political moment with the re-election of Donald Trump. He has wasted no time in sending this country straight into fascism. The working

class must be vigilant and organized. The formation of the Labor for Black Lives Collective taught us the necessity of a vibrant labor movement that stands in solidarity with social movements.

*A vibrant labor movement is a democratic labor movement. Our organizing created spaces where you don't have to be "somebody" to be part of the union. You just had to be a dues-paying member. Our work empowered others to join the work with us. And as rank-and-file members became stronger, so did our union. Labor will need to be organized in the upcoming years. The longstanding traditions of top-down, undemocratic bureaucracy will not move us forward. A strong rank and file will.*

The U.S. labor movement has a long history of being closed off to BIPOC, women, and LGBTQ workers. They have reproduced the very systems that Trump leveraged for a second term in office. We must stand in solidarity with undocumented, BIPOC, and transgender workers, and everyone else Trump will target in the next four years. Labor cannot do this until we confront these issues at home. *We need an antiracist, feminist, queer, and socialist labor movement led by the rank and file.*

Labor for Black Lives was able to make an impact because we worked in coalition with each other. We worked in very different industries and trades, but our experiences of exploitation were similar we understood that the forces exploiting our labor were the same ones killing us in the streets.

Labor can have an impact in the upcoming years, but we cannot do it alone. *We need to be in solidarity with our communities.*

Most of all, labor needs to commit to organizing from below. Throughout our organizing, labor leaders constantly reminded us of our “place.” We didn't know the rules like they did. We had no formal position or special status. We had no special connections. There was no real place for us in the labor movement. We were political nobodies and without their leadership, we were nothing.

It was true that we did not have the material resources that a top-down, service industry unionism values. But we had what mattered. We had clear, consistent politics. We had a commitment to organizing from below. We agreed that in a top-down union structure, we were political nobodies; we embraced that wholeheartedly. We understood that a union is nothing without a strong rank and file.

As I think about the upcoming years, this is what I am reminded of. As the Democrats scrambled to find that single leader to “save” us from Trump, our work in 2020 is an important reminder that we have the capacity to save ourselves. Our strength will be to organize as political nobodies, collectively from below. ■

Fighting for Bread, and Roses too...

## India: Mass Struggle vs. Rape Culture By Jhelum Roy

ON AUGUST 14, 2024 at 11:55 pm, the streets of Bengal, usually deserted by this hour, were packed with Indian women claiming their half of the sky. At the approach of the country's 77th "Independence Day" celebration they made the night their own by demanding an end to the rape culture that undercuts any notion of independence.

### The Struggle Erupts

Almost every nook and corner was occupied by women — working women from different sectors facing sexual harassment in their workplace; students across schools, colleges and universities who have to fight for every inch of space to assert themselves on their campuses; women who are otherwise shackled by the everyday drudgery of housework; doctors, nurses, teachers and domestic workers all taking to the streets in protest.

Five nights earlier a resident doctor had been raped and murdered in a seminar room during her night shift. Her parents were informed that she had "committed suicide" and were made to wait for three hours before being allowed inside the room.

Rumors were spread questioning her psychological health. In fact, the principal of RG Kar Medical College made a reckless remark, asking "what was the girl doing so late" in the seminar room. Yet the autopsy report revealed that she had been raped and sexually assaulted before being strangled.

The principal's comment sparked a mass outrage. A call for a Take Back the Night event on the eve of "Independence Day" in India spread like wildfire, igniting a huge mass movement that the country had not seen in a decade. In West Bengal alone there were around 250 protest sites across cities, district towns and villages as women, trans and queer people defied societal curfews to occupy streets clamoring for justice.

The night of August 14 turned out to be historic. This was not the first time that the Take Back the Night Campaign was being organized to protest sexual harassment in the country. This was also not the first time that women in India were coming out in such massive numbers in solidarity and rage

to claim justice against rape, against sexual harassment.

This was also not the first time that such a brutal crime had been committed in India. In the India of today, where the powers that be nurture rape culture regime after regime, what happened at RG Kar is not an exception. In the India of today, headed by a fascist rightwing regime whose leaders have been openly misogynist, who have used rape as a political weapon to curb dissent and silence women, the murder at RG Kar and the gross miscarriage of justice attempted by officials has become rather the norm.

Yet what was so historic about the protest was the spontaneous outburst of women. In different parts of West Bengal women had organized protests to claim the night, to demand justice for the victim, to demand safe public transport for women, to demand public toilets, to demand a functional Internal Complaints Committee in every workplace, to claim basic labor rights for women in organized and unorganized sectors.

For many of these women this was their first protest. For many this was also their first night under the sky. For many this was their first time raising slogans.

For many this was also their first experience in political organizing. There were women gig workers in their work uniforms sharing experiences of harassment faced at work. There were women nurses from private and public hospitals speaking about not having the infrastructural support to safely perform their duties at night. There were theater performers speaking about the harassment they faced in their work.

There were women, queer and trans people who had travelled two-to-three hours in order to reach protest sites. When they found public transportation lacking, women formed groups to organize their own transport and travelled together.

There were women from nearby slums sharing experiences of harassment, violence at home or at work. Mothers came with their daughters. Sisters came together. At the rallies old friends connected. It was a carnival of resistance.

Strangers opened up their homes all night to let protesters use their washrooms. Market cooperatives in the area kept their places

open for women. Students from nearby public University campuses negotiated with their authorities to keep the campus gates and women's hostels unlocked. There were women who had ventured out of their house, unaccompanied by men at night, determined to lay claim to a public space of their own, to organize protests in their neighborhoods.

### "Azaadi"

Shouting "Azaadi" ("Freedom"), women claimed freedom from rape, from domestic violence, from workplace harassment, from moral policing, from the drudgery of housework, from discriminatory wages at work, from the patronizing remarks of fathers and brothers, from this brahmanical patriarchal capitalist system. There were women waving the red flag high in the air, while queer and trans people came with rainbow flags.

Women carried pictures of women revolutionaries, reminding people of the legacy of female resistance. A huge red flag with a portrait of the martyred Indian revolutionary Pritilata Waddadar\* flew high, watching over people who saw themselves as her comrades.

There were handmade posters written by unpracticed hands, slogans raised by those who were conditioned to never raise their voices. There were songs, performances, sharing of experiences as women spent the night under the sky chatting, shouting, listening, leaning on each other.

Yet as the night unfolded, news began pouring in about an attack on the strike doctors were carrying out at RG Kar. A group of goons had entered the premises of the ongoing sit-in demonstration, dismantled the site, beat up protesting doctors, and attempted to destroy the crime scene. It was clear that their intent was to tamper with evidence and threaten the protestors. Meanwhile on-duty police officers were ordered to look away.

What had begun as a protest event was transformed into a full-fledged movement that witnessed the participation of people who had so far been indifferent to blood on the streets. It was a movement that understood the dignity of women's safety was connected to the right to a system of public health that provides care for ordinary people. Instead the system had been crumbling as corruption took over, even endangering the lives of patients.

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Mass march to end the culture of rape.

Photo: Nilanjan Majumder

### Culture of Impunity, Privatization and the Neoliberal State

The impunity and blatant display of power, deliberately showcased to send a message through the vandalizing of the protest site at RG Kar, broke the dams of a rage that had been simmering in the country over the past decade. Those of us who had been students during the 2012 Delhi rape case — where a young middle-class woman who was brutally gang raped and tortured later died — had witnessed thousands of women students and middle-class women occupying the streets to claim justice.

The protests then had initiated heated discussions on gender violence. Later a judicial committee reported that inadequate infrastructure and failures on the part of the government and police were the root cause behind crimes against women. This outcry led to a change in rape laws in India. Yet a decade later, as we take to the streets again, we are still challenged by a culture of impunity.

Almost every political party — from the parliamentary left to the centrists to the right — has time and again shielded rapists and nurtured rape culture to cement their hold in electoral politics. The rise of Hindutva fascism has followed with an explosion in gruesome gender violence. Rape has often been used as a political weapon to suppress protests and assert authority over minorities.

This culture of impunity, nurtured through coddling rapists, tampering with evidence and blatantly using state machinery to shield them, had set precedents that every ruling party could follow. That the ruling party in West Bengal used all its machinery to stand

guard over the perpetrators in the RG Kar crime, therefore, was hardly surprising. Yet this time it fuelled the rage of people who seemed to have had enough.

Perhaps the RG Kar rape and murder triggered such widespread outrage because the victim was a doctor, a woman in an “honorable” white-collar job, assaulted while she was on duty in a public hospital. *It meant women were nowhere safe.* It also exposed how unequal our work spaces are, how they are designed to make working women, trans and queer people vulnerable. Working women from organized and unorganized sectors flocked to the rallies.

There were rallies organized by *anganwadi* (rural childcare) workers, midday meal workers, ICDS (child health) workers, domestic workers, IT workers, gig workers. The clamor for justice and dignity also made its way to workplaces. They demanded employer accountability to ensure the safety of women, trans, and queer workers, establishing just who would address gender violence.

While such outrage had been missing in previous cases of gender violence — where rape has been used as part of state repression to suppress movements in the hinterlands, where gender violence has been used to perpetuate caste atrocity, or to intensify occupation — the protests around the RG Kar incident opened up possibilities for conversations around the implications of all these silences.

The “reclaim the night” movement initiated a conversation on gender justice, exposing the failure of institutional mechanisms to ensure safety and dignity of women in their workplaces and in public spaces. This fight against impunity also strengthened the voices of healthcare workers raising their concerns over the corruption infesting public hospitals.

Narratives from different public hospitals began to pour out, exposing a larger system that was designed to make healthcare more inaccessible for the marginalized. These

narratives laid bare a frail system with over-worked workers gasping for breath, a system deliberately made to be dysfunctional through syndicates pushing the healthcare system towards privatization.

The deplorable condition of the public healthcare system in India was already exposed during the pandemic. These sparked conversations around structural adjustment policies imposed as debt conditions at the behest of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund during the 1980s. This paved the way for privatization, thereby relieving the government of its duty as the primary guarantor and enabler of health services.

The rape and murder of the resident doctor in a public hospital exposed the state’s indifference to public healthcare workers. They are expected to work more intensely as the system rapidly collapses around them. Indeed, the murder has sparked a larger movement, headed by junior doctors in the 22 medical colleges throughout Bengal, to demand a better and safer public healthcare system.

Protesting doctors called for an indefinite strike and began a sit-in-demonstration at the Health Ministry. While the government attempted to douse the fire by promising to ensure safety in public hospitals through deploying security forces within hospital premises, protestors rejected the idea. They responded that their safety would only be ensured through democratizing the workspace and through building infrastructure to end corruption and help repair the deteriorating system.

The demands of the movement resonated particularly with middle-class and working-class people who are the primary beneficiaries of the public healthcare system. They have borne firsthand the costs of the privatized health sector.

Opposition political parties tried their best to hijack the movement for their electoral benefits, but were rejected by the larger protesting masses who had by now seen almost every parliamentary political party working to maintain the status quo. In the face of huge public outrage, the government was forced to transfer the Commissioner of Police who had looked the other way and facilitated the tampering of evidence in the RG Kar case.

The protesting doctors lifted their strike, only to be forced to begin a hunger strike in the face of a government that refused to budge on their other demands. However, following a meeting with the Chief Minister who promised to consider their demands the strike was called off.

### A Verdict and the Battle Onwards...

The trial court verdict has sentenced a civic volunteer working for the Kolkata Police to a life sentence for the rape and brutal murder of the 31-year-old resident doctor

\*Pritilata Waddadar (1911–1932), a member of the Indian Republican Army, led 15 others in an armed attack on a European club. Shot in the leg, she took cyanide poisoning to avoid being captured by the colonial police. Anticipating possible death, she carried a letter in her pocket, “Inquilab Zindebad” (Long Live Revolution), which has inspired other women ever since. Pritilata is Bengal’s first woman martyr and is considered a revolutionary icon.

at the RG Kar Medical College and Hospital. The verdict has further fuelled protests as the entire trial seemed to hide the complicity of the state in protecting the murderer and absolving hospital authorities of their responsibility to safeguard the dignity and safety of their employees.

As Bengal gears up to put another fight challenging the loopholes in the verdict, the state clamors for capital punishment of the perpetrator. Yet it has been the ruling party that first shielded the accused and is known to be hand-in-glove with syndicates running various corruption rackets.

Interestingly, though, the demand for capital punishment had not emerged from the junior doctors' movement nor from the reclaim-the-night movements. The struggle for gender justice in India had historically campaigned against capital punishment, exposing it to be a tool of state repression that bestowed the state with a monopoly on violence. The state seeks to purge an individual while abdicating its responsibility for initiating any systemic change.

The verdict came out just a few days after the death of a pregnant *adivasi* (Indigenous tribal) woman in another public hospital in a

district town in Bengal.

She died after being administered a toxic saline that had been banned in other states. Yet pressured by a pharmaceutical company, Bengal's public hospitals, with little concern for the lives of marginalized women, still use it. Once again, her death has exposed the fault lines of the public healthcare system as the state-and-capital nexus spares little thought for the lives of women or marginalized people.

### The Role of a Mass Feminist Movement

It is significant that the feminist movement in India around workplace sexual harassment began with the gang rape of a grassroots community worker who was running an state awareness program in her village against child marriage.

That movement in the early 1990s fought to make the state accountable as an employer. It was able to legally assert that sexism and sexual harassment at the workplace makes for a hostile work environment. It is the duty of the employer to ensure the safety and dignity of their workers.

Thirty years later, our work spaces still remain designed to make women, trans, queer

people vulnerable as workers whose labor is supposed to come cheap. Furthermore, the percentage of female workforce participation is declining in the organized sector as the informalization of women's labor grows.

Yet in the informal sector employers are neither held responsible for providing safe working conditions nor have any duty to abide by any regulations protecting workers' rights. In fact, we can say that the battle for workplace dignity is not only about asserting women's identity as workers, but also about the valuation of the work itself.

At a time when the neoliberal policies enable the state to wash its hands of public services, when labor codes are rewritten to criminalize unionization and extend working hours to fill the coffers of the owners, when factory closures and privatizing of public service units are enabling the informalization of labor, when the rightwing fascist state is normalizing violence with each passing day, the battle for bread and roses seems likely to be a long haul. That battle would require further organizing of working people in fields and factories, in homes and hospitals, in schools and streets, to claim every inch of safe space, every night, every day. ■

## The Gaza Genocide: Women's Lives in the Crosshairs

A POWERFUL REPORT has been issued by the Mezan Centre for Human Rights ([www.mezan.org](http://www.mezan.org)), "Reproductive Health Under Genocide: The Struggle of Palestinian Women in Gaza." It summarizes Israel's 16-month war on Gaza as it assaulted the 50,000 pregnant women and details the impact on their health and lives.

The report carefully "examines the near-total disruption of maternal healthcare directly caused by Israel's destruction of hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies, compounded by the lack of medical supplies, equipment, and electricity... Topics include the catastrophic effects of malnutrition on pregnant and postpartum women, the rise in premature births, and the challenges of giving birth during a genocide."

Details come from firsthand accounts, expert observations, interviews, and "the lived experiences of Al Mezan's female staff in Gaza, who have both endured and documented these conditions."

The accounts include Tahani Abdel Rahman, age 40 and a mother from the now-destroyed Jabaliya refugee camp, who experienced a molar pregnancy (a tumor that develops in the uterus as a result of a nonviable pregnancy) resulting in intense pain "worse than labor" and surgery at al-Awda hospital "in a room with shattered windows.

When the condition recurred, she required additional emergency surgery, without anesthesia. Despite chemotherapy and lacking access to nutritional supplements and an

urgently needed MRI, "I suffer from dizziness, anemia, and weakness," she says. "My health continues to decline, and I don't know what the future holds."

### Brutal Conditions

The report documents women giving birth in life-threatening conditions, undergoing C-sections without anesthesia, and giving birth in set-up tents lacking "essential medical equipment, sanitary conditions, hygiene products, and privacy."

Dr. Taghreed Al-Emawi, an obstetrician and gynecologist at Kemal Adwan Hospital — whose director Hussam Abu-Safiyeh was kidnapped by Israeli troops when they destroyed it — reports:

*"I provided medical care to pregnant women in the school in which I had sought refuge after my home was destroyed," relying "on the few basic tools I had managed to carry with me... Many pregnant women had to walk to the medical point to give birth, as ambulance movement was prohibited after 7:00 pm. Some women were injured on the way."*

What's amazing is both the indescribable conditions facing women in conditions of destroyed medical infrastructure, and the determination of medical staff to continue working without regard for their own well-being — another indication of Israel's failure to destroy a society's will to survive.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, as of January 2025, approximately 46,300 pregnant women in Gaza are enduring

severe hunger, while UN Women ([www.unwomen.org](http://www.unwomen.org)) estimated that 557,000 women are experiencing extreme food insecurity.

"Malnutrition is causing more women to lose weight during pregnancy, posing serious risks to the health and survival of both mothers and their unborn babies. Many newborns are being delivered weighing less than 2.5 kilograms (six pounds —ed.)... These indicators highlight the severe impact of malnutrition on maternal and infant health in Gaza."

The report demands international intervention toward the following goals:

- End the Hostilities and Lift the Siege on Gaza, restore freedom of movement and access to humanitarian aid.
- Protect Healthcare Facilities and ensure that they can provide care without interference or targeting.
- Ensure Humanitarian Access for medical supplies and other essential resources for women and their newborns.
- Restore Basic Services of electricity, fuel and water for hospitals and clinics.
- Enforce International Law as advised by the International Court of Justice to end Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory.
- Expand Advocacy and Monitoring by UN bodies and international organizations to document violations.
- Support Long-Term Recovery for Gaza's healthcare infrastructure, sustained support for maternal and reproductive care, and programs to address the psychological trauma that women in Gaza face. ■



## How Bill PL 190424 Revictimizes Survivors: Betrayed by the System in Brazil

By L.M. Bonato

WHILE VARIOUS HUMAN rights reports show that annually between one and four million Brazilian women have abortions, the right to women's bodily autonomy remains a major battle. Currently the law allows abortion only in the case of rape or to save the woman's life. This means millions of women are forced to seek underground abortions.

Given the rise of conservative parties following Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, far-right politicians are seeking to roll back legal abortion even in the case of rape. Congressman Sóstenes Cavalcante has introduced Bill PL 190424, which would criminalize abortion under all circumstances after 22 weeks of pregnancy.

If passed, this legislation would subject rape survivors to unbearable psychological burdens, forcing them to carry pregnancies to term. Meanwhile their aggressors face much lighter penalties.

### Impact on Survivors

Due to his role in spreading disinformation, Jair Bolsonaro is currently ineligible for public office. However his influence is felt with the introduction of Bill PL 190424. Largely supported by members of the Congressional evangelical caucus, the bill is an affront to the secular state established in Brazil's constitution.

Brazil is a predominantly Christian country, a slight majority Catholic but with evangelical congregations growing rapidly. In the face of social inequality they project a deeply conservative "prosperity gospel."

While many may support the bill from a deeply religious and moralistic viewpoint, it is criminalizing the victims of abuse, not their



São Paulo: Women holding a green scarf saying "obstetricians for the decriminalization and legalization of abortion" during the march against PL 190424 on June 15, 2024.

CC-BY-SA-40

abusers. Moreover, religious beliefs have no place in public health and policy. Abortion is a human right, recognized by the UN and World Health Organization.

The bill was marked "urgent" through a symbolic vote lasting just 23 seconds. Although this designation has since been revoked due to significant public pressure, the bill remains under congressional review and could still be passed.

This congressional proposal starkly reflects a state that not only fails to protect its citizens but also exacerbates the trauma endured by victims, further penalizing them by forcing them to carry the physical embodiment of their trauma for the rest of their lives.

The bill's proponents argue that adoption after birth is "an option." Yet this completely disregards the will and psychological needs of the person, who may face gestational depres-

sion, the dangers of younger victims to safely give birth, as well as the bureaucratic inefficiencies of Brazil's adoption system. Societal prejudices hinder adoption and as a result, post-adoption support is inadequate. Brazil's adoption system is already overwhelmed.

Judicial delays can take up to 10 years, often leaving children eligible for adoption only in adolescence while most prospective parents, aiming for easier familial integration, prefer infants or toddlers under three.

### The "Child Pregnancy Bill"

Those most affected by Bill PL 190424 would be underage girls, and it's already being referred to as the "Child Pregnancy Bill."

Children, especially those from marginalized communities, take longer to recognize abuse and seek legal support. The psychological toll of processing the trauma and overcoming the stigma, even from medical and legal professionals, further delays access to legal abortion, often pushing the pregnancy beyond the 22-week limit.

According to a 2022 study by the Brazilian Public Security Forum, the country recorded the highest number of rapes in its history, with 74,930 victims, 75.8% of whom were cases of statutory rape. This alarming figure highlights Brazil's culture of rape and pedophilia, which the state fails to dismantle — instead, it institutionalizes the crimes through patriarchal structures.

Under this bill, women and girls who terminate pregnancies resulting from rape could face up to 20 years in prison. They would be convicted as murderers and detained in juvenile facilities until they could be transferred to the adult prison system — punishment that is not only cruel but also disproportionate, as rapists themselves face sentences ranging from six to 12 years, almost half the penalty imposed on the victims. Indeed, how many abusers are ever held accountable?

This dangerous inversion of roles discourages abuse reports, as victims, understandably opting for illegal abortions, would avoid formal complaints to escape such harsh

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## Autonomous for Abortion Care By Jex Blackmore

### Abortion Beyond the Law:

Building a Global Feminist Movement for Self-Managed Abortion

By Naomi Braine

Verso Books, 2023, 240 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

IN THE FACE of escalating restrictions and criminalization of abortion, Naomi Braine's *Abortion Beyond the Law* highlights the transformative power of mutual aid and solidarity in ensuring access to abortion, despite oppressive laws.

Through interviews with activists around the world, Braine explores how informal, autonomous health networks have stepped in to provide abortion care, bypassing restrictive legal frameworks. Rooted in a harm-reduction framework, the book underscores the resilience of grassroots efforts that challenge the long history of abortion criminalization and its barriers.

This book serves as a powerful testament to the effectiveness of activism, demonstrating that collective action, community care, and self-determination are key to reclaiming reproductive autonomy in the face of systemic oppression.

Naomi Braine, Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College, combines academic rigor with activist insight. With her background in reproductive justice, gender studies and public health, as well as experience in the non-profit sector focusing on drug use, HIV, and community-based organizations, Braine brings a deep understanding of how laws and policies disproportionately impact marginalized communities, particularly around taboo and often misunderstood issues.

*Abortion Beyond the Law* draws on global case studies, interviews and historical analysis. The author combines qualitative data with insights from grassroots movements and her own fieldwork to offer a comprehensive examination of abortion networks. This evidence-driven approach places self-managed abortion within broader so-

Jex Blackmore (they/them) is an organizer, writer, and artist whose work explores the intersection of moral religious rhetoric, sexuality, and political policy. They currently serve as the Organizing Director of Shout Your Abortion, a national advocacy organization, and are a founding member of the Hydra Fund, a mutual aid initiative dedicated to expanding abortion access in Michigan. [www.jexblackmore.com](http://www.jexblackmore.com).



*Self-managed abortion is a personal and political act that defies those who seek to control decisions about reproductive autonomy.*

cio-political and cultural contexts, making it a vital resource for both theoretical understanding and actionable insights.

### The Power of Accompaniment

Braine places particular emphasis on accompaniment — a practice central to the success of self-managed abortion (SMA) movements.

Accompaniment refers to the act of providing physical, emotional and logistical support to individuals seeking abortion care, particularly in environments where it is criminalized or heavily restricted. Braine defines accompaniment as “a strategy and practice [that] embodies solidarity... It is a practice of witness and physical and emotional presence.”

This model goes beyond offering basic logistical help; it involves standing with individuals through the process, ensuring they are not alone when obtaining medication or terminating their pregnancy.

The self-managed abortion model, where individuals use medication like mifepristone and misoprostol to perform an abortion outside formal healthcare systems, has flourished in these accompaniment networks, with activists helping people to access abortion care safely and autonomously.

Braine demonstrates that accompaniment has become a cornerstone of global feminist movements, providing crucial solidarity and support to those in need, especially in regions where state systems actively undermine abortion access.

At the heart of the book lies the idea that “reproductive justice and bodily autonomy cannot be maintained through systems whose structures were designed to further margin-

alize people by framing their actions through the lens of potential criminality.”

Braine critiques how legal frameworks that regulate abortion often focus on criminalizing the act of terminating a pregnancy rather than ensuring the safety and autonomy of the individual. She argues that self-managed abortion, in this context, serves as both a practical and political act, defying laws that seek to control women's bodies and reinforcing the right to make decisions about their own reproductive health.

### Grassroots Knowledge and Medical Information

Braine underscores how the movement for self-managed abortion demonstrates, day after day, that “women can effectively combine medical information with knowledge of their own bodies to safely care for themselves and each other.”

This combination of grassroots knowledge and medical information is key to the success of SMA networks worldwide. Far from undermining the medical field, Braine argues that these networks provide critical knowledge and practical resources that directly inform the global medical community.

Notably, activist knowledge has influenced medical protocols and World Health Organization recommendations, proving that real-world experience often surpasses conventional medical understanding. As Braine puts it, “activist knowledge... is crucial — both to the broader community and to the scientific and medical world.”

In this way, grassroots activism not only fills the gaps left by the medical establishment but also shapes the direction of global health practices related to abortion care.

The global scope of the self-managed abortion movement is brought to life through Braine's detailed case studies, including those from Argentina, Mexico, Kenya and Poland. In these countries, feminist activists have created networks to provide abortion pills and counseling, reaching those who are otherwise excluded from formal healthcare systems.

Such networks, often organized by feminist activist groups, have become vital lifelines for those in need. Braine's exploration of these grassroots efforts demonstrates how self-managed abortion is not just a survival strategy but a form of resistance — a

rejection of state control over reproductive bodies.

Braine argues that these movements are reshaping the conversation about abortion. Instead of focusing on legal reform, activists are creating an alternative framework where empowerment and community care are prioritized. In shifting the focus from the state to the individual and their community, self-managed abortion becomes an act of agency, one that centers the ability of people to make decisions about their bodies outside of legal or medical constraints.

As Braine eloquently puts it, self-managed abortion is “not just a medical procedure; it is a political act of resistance against a world that continually seeks to regulate and control women’s bodies.”

### Feminist Solidarity

Central to Braine’s analysis is the concept of feminist solidarity, which has been pivotal to the success of global self-managed abortion networks. Feminists worldwide have built the infrastructure for self-managed abortion by providing not only resources and support, but also overcoming cultural and language barriers to share crucial information.

Networks fueled by mutual aid have become essential in regions where abortion is criminalized. Braine emphasizes that “the



Naomi Braine

struggle for abortion rights must be viewed not only as a national issue but as part of a larger global movement,” illustrating how reproductive health is shaped by interconnected global inequalities.

The self-managed abortion movement, rooted in autonomous health networks and accompaniment, demonstrates how grass-roots care can thrive even in hostile political climates. These networks offer valuable lessons for other movements seeking to build care outside state-controlled systems — whether in migrant justice, healthcare access, or other struggles — showing that collective action and mutual solidarity are powerful tools for resistance.

*Abortion Beyond the Law* is not just a book

about abortion — it’s a call to reimagine activism and care under oppressive conditions. Naomi Braine’s work is a critical intervention, offering a nuanced, intersectional framework that challenges not only the legal and medical systems that limit reproductive autonomy but also the assumptions about what activism can and should be.

Through in-depth exploration of accompaniment networks, she shows how grass-roots movements and mutual aid networks, built on solidarity and collective action, have defied legal and institutional barriers to create a new form of healthcare. Braine underscores that reproductive justice is not just about access to abortion, but about the ability to live outside the reach of oppressive systems.

While the book doesn’t provide a step-by-step guide to implementing accompaniment work, it serves as a powerful reminder for a U.S. audience that we must create our own networks and actively engage with the global movement to strengthen abortion access.

It is a compelling testament to the power of organized communities to care for one another in defiance of the state — and a powerful reminder that the fight for bodily autonomy and justice is as much about collective action and solidarity as it is about building a world where those values are lived, not just legislated. ■

## Betrayed by the System in Brazil — *continued from page 13*

consequences. Considering that most child sexual abuse in Brazil is perpetrated by family members, this is even more concerning. Victims, often coerced by their families into silence, would be denied legal support.

### Criminalization and Trauma

For those who experience sexual violence, the trauma does not end with the act itself. Forensic examinations are frequently insensitively handled, meaning that survivors can be exposed to immediate post-trauma humiliation. They not only face the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy, but the questioning of what they may have done to cause their own victimization.

Yet “pro-life” advocates argue that the “unborn child” should not be punished, claiming that one crime does not justify another.

This means they prioritize the “rights” potential life over the rights of the pregnant person. How can one justify coercing a person to risk their health and well-being in order to bring a fetus to term?

The dominant Christianized notion in Brazil posits that “life begins at conception,” as the soul supposedly enters the body, making it sacred before birth. Debates on the nature of life vary. *But the right to abortion cannot be restricted to one’s religious belief. It is a public health issue.*

Denying this right strips affected women

of ownership over their own bodies. Undermining female autonomy insults human dignity, placing a wide range of reproductive rights under the control of the church and state.

Where abortion is a legal right, no person with a uterus should be forced to continue a pregnancy or to undergo an abortion. The far right maintains that abortion, a safe and legal procedure in many countries, is coercive. But that stands the reality on its head — without access to abortion one is condemned to continuing a pregnancy despite the dangers and problems that may entail. By forcing women to carry unwanted pregnancies, the state turns their bodies into sanctuaries for abuse, where trauma solidifies and renews daily.

Criminalizing abortion does not reduce abortion rates — it only makes the procedure less safe. An estimated 70% of abortions in Brazil are performed clandestinely.

### The Fight Against Oppression

Women who choose to terminate pregnancies, even when it’s legally prohibited, have resorted to unsafe methods that can result in irreversible consequences. Annually around 200,000 hospitalizations are due to unsafe abortions, predominantly among young and impoverished women.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Brazil’s rate of maternal mortality stood at 45.8 per 100,000, with unsafe abortions the fourth

leading cause of death.

Protestors across Brazil have taken to the streets in hundreds of peaceful demonstrations against Bill PL 190424 — the largest being 10,000 marching in São Paulo — and forcing national media coverage. Feminist organizations, social movements, and human rights collectives are mobilizing to resist this proposal and demanding that the government respect women’s rights. Thus the feminist movement is not just demonstrating against this reactionary bill, but confronting the entire dismal state of reproductive rights.

Only five years ago Brazil and Argentina had similar restrictive abortion laws, although Argentinian feminists were able to work more openly. At the end of 2020 Argentina’s congress passed a law that made abortion available upon request for the first 14 weeks of pregnancy and guarantees access to abortion services *free of charge* in both public and private health care facilities. This was the result of a sustained movement that involved massive demonstrations.

Clearly the fight for female freedom and autonomy must be a collective effort, extending to all women confronting patriarchal systems worldwide and opposing every form of gender oppression and restriction of women’s rights. International solidarity can play a crucial role in amplifying resistance beyond South America’s borders. ■





## Remembering Barbara Dane

By Nina Silber

DURING MUCH OF Barbara Dane's lifetime, I seldom thought of her as a musical giant. She was, after all, my stepmother and that relationship, as it so often is, could be complicated. Yet in the last few years of her life, I came to understand what I had so long failed to see: how tremendous her musical gifts were and how much her deeply-held political commitments guided her musical career.

Named Barbara Jean Stillman at her birth on May 12, 1927, she died October 20, 2024 in her home in Oakland, California, having chosen to end her life under California's End of Life Option Act. She was 97, clear and lucid to the end.

She is survived by her children Jesse Cahn, Pablo Menendez, and Nina Menendez, a grandson and three great-grandchildren, and her step-children Josh Silber, Fred Silber and myself, Nina Silber.

A deeply committed left-wing activist, Barbara fought tirelessly — throughout her long career — for peace and racial justice. Indeed, she was never shy or hesitant when it came to explicitly drawing out the political message in her music. I can remember times when she and my father, Irwin Silber, a committed leftist and folk music editor who was married to Barbara until his death in 2010, debated how much she should talk politics at her concerts.

*Nina Silber is the Jan Westling Professor of History at Boston University. She has written extensively on the U.S. Civil War and its memory in American culture. She is currently writing a book on her family and the mid-20th century folk revival.*

My father tended to urge a more measured political message, which might be surprising to anyone familiar with his own fiercely radical tendencies. "People are there to hear you sing," he would say, or something along those lines. But Barbara wanted to be sure audiences, unequivocally, got the messages in her songs. I have no doubt they did.

None of this diminished Barbara's tremendous musical accomplishments, especially her enormous range across multiple genres — folk, jazz and blues — and her strong and vibrant rendering of songs like "Trouble in Mind" and "I Hate the Capitalist System," a song written in the 1930s by the Kentucky-born Sara Ogan Gunning.

My father wrote the liner notes for Barbara's album of the same name: "Barbara Dane says she has hated the capitalist system ever since she was a teen-ager helping out in the little drug store her father operated in a Detroit working-class community during the depression years."<sup>1</sup>

That Detroit drugstore shaped Barbara's political beliefs in other ways. When she was nine, she once served a coke to a Black man at the drug store counter only to be harshly scolded by her father while the Black customer was hounded out of the store.

"My father had refused a thirsty man a drink," Barbara wrote in her 2022 memoir, *This Bell Still Rings*, "and had humiliated a grown man before a child. That Black man and I had both been humiliated... Unknowingly, I took him inside my heart and bonded with his hurt, identified with the denial of his

personhood."<sup>2</sup>

### People's Songs

During her high school and college years, including a short stint at Detroit's Wayne State University, she became increasingly interested in Marxism and left-wing causes while she also honed her singing abilities.

Those interests inevitably brought her in touch with an early manifestation of the folk revival. At 18 she organized the Detroit chapter of People's Songs, an organization founded by Pete Seeger in 1945.

Building on the Popular Front efforts of performers like Woody Guthrie and Lee Hays in the 1930s, People's Songs aimed to write and disseminate songs "of labor and the American people." They published a *Bulletin* and dispensed singers to perform at union meetings and on picket lines.

[IN DETROIT IN 1945] I was singing songs like, [sings] "We're gonna roll, we're gonna roll the union on."

There was a great song about this Southern senator Bilbo who was one of the most notorious racist senators. [sings]

"So listen Mr. Bilbo, listen to me. I'll give you a lesson in history. Listen and I'll show you that the foreigners you hate are the very same folks that made America great. You don't like Negroes, and you don't like Jews. If there's anybody you do like it sure is news."

—from 2018 interview, [www.barbara-dane.net](http://www.barbara-dane.net) ■

Although they never created the “singing labor movement” that Pete Seeger envisioned, they did maintain links with some unions, singing at meetings of the National Maritime Union, at UAW locals, and on picket lines of striking workers in the film industry. At the same time, many labor connections were starting to fray as postwar anti-communism ramped up in the labor movement.

In 1947 my father became the executive secretary of People’s Songs and was the coordinator for a national convention in Chicago where Barbara was an attendee. Although they didn’t yet know each other, my father and Barbara were essentially following a similar path that linked radical politics with folk singing.

By this time both had also become Communist Party members, a not unusual path given the prominence of the CPUSA in left-wing cultural activities going back to the 1930s. Still, Irwin Silber always insisted that the CP maintained a kind of laissez faire attitude about folk music. Pete Seeger agreed: “People’s Songs related to the left although no one ever ordered us what to do.”<sup>3</sup>

Barbara did, however, provoke the ire of someone in the CP’s upper echelon, leading to her and her first husband Rolf Cahn’s expulsion from the party in the late 1940s for a list of arbitrary infractions. Despite this, she remained in the Party’s orbit for many years and later in life moved into other sectors of the non-CP left.

## A Dynamic Presence

While living in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1950s with Byron Menendez, her second husband, and three children, Barbara’s singing became more professional and wide-ranging, embracing the rising popularity of both jazz and blues.

Throughout her career she was often on the cusp of “making it big”: she appeared on radio and television specials; recorded with Capitol Records; ran Sugar Hill, a well-established blues club in San Francisco; and performed and sometimes toured with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden, Lenny Bruce, even a rising comic named Bob Newhart.

She was praised by prominent jazz and blues critics. “Did you get that chick?” Louis Armstrong was quoted in a *Time* magazine article in 1958. “She’s a gasser.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1959 she was spotlighted in *Ebony*, the first white woman to be profiled by that magazine. Barbara earned *Ebony*’s respect not only for her musical talent, but also for her persistent efforts to promote and work with Black performers including Muddy Waters, Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon. “Through this pale-faced young lady,” they wrote, “a lot of dark-skinned people hope to keep the

blues alive and the royalties flowing.”<sup>5</sup>

Barbara remained a dynamic presence on the folk music scene, especially as the late 1950s witnessed a renewed “folk revival” which brought her into folk clubs, even folk music TV programs, as well as collaborations with younger folk artists like Bob Dylan.



While it has never been possible to isolate Barbara into one musical genre, it was mainly as a folk performer that she became a vital part of the civil rights and peace activism of this era. She divided her time in the summer of ’64 between singing at voter registration events in Mississippi and performing at the Free Speech protests in Berkeley, California.

Her outspokenness and activism on these issues ultimately made her unappealing to the power brokers of commercial music. Albert Grossman, the top folk music manager of the era, expressed an interest in bringing Barbara into his “stable” but only if she could get her “priorities straight.”

This was a clarifying moment for Barbara, perhaps giving her a renewed commitment to her political convictions and certainly solidifying her decision to keep her distance from the commercial music scene.<sup>6</sup>

## Deep Commitment

When I first came to know Barbara, when she and my father got together in 1964, no one could doubt the depth of her political commitment. With LBJ escalating the war in Vietnam, she and my father organized a “Sing-in For Peace” at Carnegie Hall in September, 1965.

It was a moment that signaled a firm link between folk performers like Joan Baez, Len Chandler, Tom Paxton and dozens of others to the movement against the war in Vietnam. It also signaled, again, the constraints of the commercial music industry.

Many of the performers managed by Albert Grossman, including Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary, declined to participate, apparently because Grossman feared that an association with antiwar politics would hurt their popularity.

Barbara pursued her antiwar activities by appearing repeatedly at rallies across the country and eventually helping to organize an anti-war entertainment troupe — a kind of alternative to the USO — for American GIs opposed to the Vietnam War.

Although I was too young to fully comprehend her efforts, I knew that Barbara often traveled around the globe to spread her music. Her travels to Spain, Italy, the Philippines, Vietnam, and to Cuba brought her in contact with a host of musicians pursuing their own struggles against fascism and for national liberation.

Her visit to Cuba in 1966 also opened a door not only for her own son to live and study music there but also for my brother to study art. Those contacts expanded her awareness of the international music scene, encouraging her, along with my father, to launch their own record label, Paredon records, started in 1970.

Now part of Smithsonian Folkways, Paredon recorded and promoted the music of national liberation and anti-repression movements across the globe, including anti-Pinochet Chileans, Asian Americans fighting oppression in the United States, and Palestinian activists.

“The very writing of a poem or a speech or the raising of a song,” Barbara wrote in her memoir, “was a kind of victory in itself, a triumph over censorship or marginalization, disparagement or even death.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the last times I saw Barbara perform in a public setting was at a concert celebrating her 90th birthday at the Miner Theater in San Francisco. She was joined by two of the Chambers Brothers, a Black gospel and soul group with whom she had performed and cut an album in the early 1960s.

She was also accompanied by one of her sons, Pablo (previously Paul) Menendez, who had forged a life and a musical career in Havana. One number was the Civil Rights era staple, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round.” Performing in the first year of the first Trump administration, Barbara added this lyric: “Ain’t gonna let no pussy-grabbing liar turn me round.”

Rest in Power, Barbara Dane. ■

## Notes

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2. Barbara Dane, *This Bell Still Rings: My Life of Defiance and Song* (Heyday Press: Berkeley, CA), 9.
3. Interview transcript, David Dunaway interview with Pete Seeger, Box 1, Folder 8, David Dunaway Collection, American Folklife Center.
4. Armstrong quoted in “Nightclubs: A Gasser,” *Time* magazine (November 24, 1958).
5. “White Blues Singer: Blonde Keeps Blues Alive,” *Ebony* magazine (November 1959).
6. *This Bell Still Rings: My Life of Defiance and Song*, 182.
7. *This Bell Still Rings: My Life of Defiance and Song*, 355.

# Communist Women Writers: The Emergence of Memory Culture

By Alan Wald

## **In the Company of Radical Women Writers**

By Rosemary Hennessy

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023, 304 pages, \$24.95, paper.

## **Dorothy Parker in Hollywood**

By Gail Crowther

New York: Gallery Books, 2024, 304 pages, \$29.99, hardback.

## **Riding Like the Wind:**

The Life of Sanora Babb

By Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024, 416 pages, \$27.95, hardback.

### **1. In League with the Future**

FOR MANY SOCIALISTS, the cultural work of Old Left has been the inspirational jewel in the crown of our collective effort to reclaim the multi-dimensional history of U.S. radicalism from what British Marxist E. P. Thompson called the “enormous condescension of posterity.”<sup>1</sup> We look back on earlier generations because, in one way or another, they, too, sought to live lives in league with the future.

Yet the various components of this endeavor have advanced unevenly. While it is now well-established that the interwar work of the Communist Party (CP-USA) among African Americans qualitatively enhanced the Marxist understanding of “race” beyond the “colorblind” approach of the Socialist Party of Eugene V. Debs, the scholarly and journalistic examination of writing and lives of women cultural activists is perhaps nearer to a work in progress.<sup>2</sup>

What we have witnessed to date are chiefly revelations of prefigurative feminist thinking (among women who would have disdained the term “feminist”), along with resonant biographical reconstructions of resistance to patriarchy in and out of the Left. In-depth political scrutiny and interpretation seem to advance and then recede. That’s part of the challenge we all face when telling this kind of story through the prism of lives lived against the grain in the dark times of the Great Depression, World War II, and post-war anti-radical witch-hunt.

Much of the historical context (European fascism, high Stalinism) in which pro-Communist women incubated and produced their often-fascinating fiction, poetry, plays, film scripts, literary criticism, and journalism was essentially over by the mid-20th century.

Moreover, the twilight of pro-Soviet political influence during the long Cold War (especially the USSR’s atrocious interventions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan) left a bad taste in the mouths of subsequent radicals.

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Nonetheless, even as so many beliefs and illusions have gone by the wayside, there remains a robust afterlife to certain Marxist projects of Communist women cultural workers. That’s partly for the reason that capitalism and imperialism continue to inflict their attendant miseries; but it’s also because one readily finds in the experiences and writings of the predecessor activists a remarkable pre-echo of the concerns of women in the ensuing radical upsurges that came first with the 1960s New Left and then with post-2008 millennial socialism.

### **2. A Communal Retention**

During the last five decades, this beguiling memory culture of Communist women writers emerged, bit by bit, to allow younger activists to revisit older writings through reprints as well as new interpretative books and essays, mostly carried out at the hands of academic feminists.

This ongoing archive can be understood as the communal retention of experiences and imaginative work of women with a shared if personally tailored ideological commitment to the pro-Soviet rendition of Marxism. Nevertheless, while its conservancy has been sustained through a growing assemblage of texts by and about them, the framing of this material varies considerably. That’s because there are diverse ways in which aspects of memory culture might be deployed according to the priorities and allegiances of the editors and scholars figuring out this past in the present.

Among the noteworthy moments in this late 20th century emergence were the founding of the Feminist Press in 1970 and its publications such as the novel *Daughter of Earth* (originally 1929, reprinted in 1973) by Agnes Smedley, and *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-40* (1993, reprinted by Haymarket Books in 2022) edited by Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz.<sup>3</sup> The current state of affairs may be appreciably registered through the recent appearance of *In the Company of Radical Women Writers* by Rosemary Hennessy, *Dorothy Parker in Hollywood* by Gail Crowther, and *Riding Like the Wind: The Life of Sanora Babb* by Iris Jamahl Dunkle.

These are three very different books bound together by suggestive points of contact among the nine female writers who are showcased, four of whom are African American and two Jewish American.<sup>4</sup> First, all were pro-Communist for most if not all their careers. Second, there were parallel tensions in their lives among creative work, emotions, and revolutionary commitment. Third, the governing themes of their writing are implicitly feminist: control over one’s body and sexuality, the experience of gender discrimination, and a recognition of intersectionality with other identities such as class and race.

These and further connections account for the signature focus of this triad of books, which is not just on writings and



activism but equally on the intimate lives of the women.

### 3. Private Needs and Public Activism

Radical lives and creative work can be ill-served by strict labels and typologies, and the way we tell our stories has a way of telling on us. In this review essay, I must acknowledge a particular slant: My chosen emphasis on “Communist Memory Culture,” and exploration of the writers as *Communist*, reflect certain priorities as a socialist activist as well as academic areas of expertise. This probing the strengths and weaknesses of a pro-Soviet Communist commitment will not be the main concern of every reader and reviewer.

Moreover, such a political characterization of the nine women is by no means intended to pigeonhole the subjects or to specify what should be the central point of the books. Of the three well-established authors of the books under review, only Rice University Professor Hennessy, who has published several works on materialist feminism, identifies as a Marxist. Crowther is a self-described “feminist vegan” who wrote studies of poets Sylvia Path and Ann Sexton, and Dunkle is a poet and biographer of the writer Charmian Kittredge London.

As I see it, an ideological choice of Communism both complements and complicates the outlook and experiences of the nine subjects and is in many respects a badge of honor considering the time and circumstances in which they lived. Moreover, in harmony with the three authors, the goal here is not to socio-politically decode art and people; one must first step back and try to inhabit a writer’s experiences in historical context before attempting to appraise a political mindset. What I find attractive in the memory culture of Left commitment is a very human effort to reconcile private needs with public activism and literary expression to extirpate a system of institutionalized oppression by class, gender and race.

At the same time, in the well-known academic dispute between the “lumpers” and the “splitters” in the discipline of History, I fall closer to the latter in the sense that the CP-USA was not merely “Left” or “radical” but had a prevailing specificity to it. The documented record of its controversial party functioning and doctrinal positions reveals acute differences between it and other Marxist currents that are more distinctive than similar, even when all profess anticapitalism and socialism.

Nonetheless, this hardly translates into a homogeneous way of liaising with the CP-USA’s organizational and political history to which the nine women held allegiance. In this regard, I should make known that I am not exactly a detached observer: During late 20th century, I personally interviewed nearly half the nine subjects in these books, and a recollection of their sparkling intelligence, fierce independence, and self-possession remains with me to this day.<sup>5</sup>

### 4. Feminism’s “Lost Generation”

Rosemary Hennessy’s study of the “life making” and “life writing” of her group of seven Communist women releases a startlingly fresh perspective on the memory culture that has been recovered to date. These two critical terms are standard in feminist theory, in this case referring (in simple sum-ups) to “a web of dependencies that humans have a responsibility to maintain” and “provoking a heightened awareness of one’s place in history” (2, 22) Unlike the other two books under review, Hennessy’s is a relatively dense and theoretically-informed

academic volume; perhaps challenging for the faint-hearted neophyte reader but definitely worth the effort.



Hennessy’s angle of approach is that these writers comprise “a lost generation in the history of feminism” as well as “an absence in my own family” (resulting in a number of her brief autobiographical references appearing throughout). (17) Moreover, Hennessy felt compelled to research this subject because of stark parallels she saw between the “world in crisis” induced by capitalism’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-23 and that of the “global crisis” of the 1930s. (3)

In her pithy and eloquent 28-page “Introduction” to *In the Company of Radical Women Writers*, Hennessy makes the following case for the contributions to the CP-USA understanding of the Great Depression by journalist Marvel Cooke (1903-2000), social activist Louise Thompson Patterson (1901-1999), journalist Claudia Jones (1915-64), playwright and novelist Alice Childress (1912-94), novelist and journalist Josephine Herbst (1892-1969), proletarian writer Meridel Le Sueur (1900-96), and poet and biographer Muriel Rukeyser (1913-80):

“These writers amplified the scope of that [Communist] explanation. They confronted a Left dominated by men, and they foregrounded women’s lives in their writing, raising issues that American Communism had marginalized. They made visible the fact that Black women’s domestic labor was worth less because it was women’s work and racialized. They exposed the persistence of racist violence, confronted the social advantage offered by settler heritage and whiteness, and probed the structures of U.S. imperialism and colonial context.” (9-10) What’s not to like?

### 5. Rethinking Prior Scholarship

The pages that come next are divided into three units around main themes — “Labor,” “Land,” and “Love”— that are in turn comprised of two or three chapters each. These are then introduced by an elaboration on each of Hennessy’s trio of motifs, after which the focus can be on several writers or just one. For example, “Labor” begins with a discussion of Black women’s domestic work in the 1930s and then moves to a discussion of how the Harlem-based Cooke, Patterson, Jones, and Childress found their way to the CP-USA and the manners in which their political activism inflected their writings about this variety of labor.

The middle component at first takes notice of “Land” as a vital fount of “life making” for Herbst and Le Sueur, each of whom then receives her own chapter. Here the spotlight shifts to the midwest and capitalism’s imposition on rural areas, where Hennessy has her personal roots. Moreover, the chapters also move forward to examine writings of the 1950s when the two writers addressed regional history in relation to a dispossession of Indigenous peoples that implicated their own families’ legacies.

The concluding third section (“Love”) is about eros, with an inventive approach to Rukeyser. This starts with the poet’s 446-page biography of the Willard Gibbs (1809-1933), the by-then forgotten father of physical chemistry. *Willard Gibbs: American Genius* (1942), according to Hennessy, presents an interpretation of erotic energy that developed into a model of

“ecology — the study of the interrelationship of living things and their environment’ where ‘particles of intense life’ circulate across multiple intimate environments.” (26)

Linking Rukeyser’s thinking to the then-neglected writings of Bolshevik theorist Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), Hennessy revisits Rukeyser’s writings on the 1931 Scottsboro Case (when nine Black youth were falsely accused of rape by two white women), as well as her 1938 poem “The Book of the Dead” and collaboration with photographer Nancy Naumberg (1911-98) — both of which addressed the 1930-31 Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster in West Virginia.<sup>6</sup>

This tightly argued yet wide-ranging interdisciplinary study can hardly be summarized in just a few paragraphs. To be sure, much of the material, biographical and literary, will be familiar to those who have already read broadly on Communist women. The real achievement of Hennessy is not in so much in startling new primary research as in re-thinking prior scholarship in a more contemporary theoretical context as well as foregrounding issues dramatized by the recent depredations of capitalist exploitation. The work of theorists like Nahum Chandler (*The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, 2014), Sharon Holland (*The Erotic Life of Racism*, 2012), and Timothy Bewes (*The Event of Postcolonial Shame*, 2010), are just a few that provide insights that Hennessy applies.

Hennessy is most convincing when showing how the Black women writers shifted the conversation on the Left about Black domestic workers to address labor beyond the factory floor. They not only disclosed links back to the early slave trade, but also demonstrated how domestic labor was moving in the 1930s from homes to street corners (becoming a new “Bronx slave market” from which wealthier women recruited maids and housekeepers). Hennessy’s focus on white settler history and the treatment of the land, labor, and community nexus are also lucid and powerful. And her original treatment of biographies by both Rukeyser and Herbst (*New Green World*, 1954, about botanist John Bartram, 1699-1777) is spectacular.

## 6. “Bad Girl” on the Left

Dorothy Parker (née Rothschild, 1893-1967) was famous for her “bad girl” transgressions, acerbically humorous light verse and epigrams, deliciously clever short fiction and plays, snarky brief reviews, and witty film dialogue. She was also a pro-Communist political sympathizer for at least a quarter of a century, with a record of activism widely misunderstood and underappreciated. At her death her estate and all royalties were willed to Martin Luther King, Jr., and then the NAACP. Nevertheless, it is her over-the-top but whip-smart personality that most people recall — daring and sarcastic, brainy and spicy, and abiding by her own rules without apologies.

Here is a sampling of Parker’s characteristic and widely cited quips: “Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses,” “You can lead a horticulture, but you can’t make her think,” “I don’t care what is written about me so long as it isn’t true,” and this verse:

*I like to have a martini,  
Two at the very most.  
After three I’m under the table,  
After four I’m under my host.*<sup>7</sup>

This has made her catnip for humorous depictions in novels, plays and films, as well in a popular one-woman theatrical performance. She also appeared on a U.S. postage stamp in 1992,

and was impersonated on television in 2018 by drag queen Miz Cracker in season ten of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.



Almost all the crucial facts about Parker are available in numerous book-length biographies, such as Marion Meade’s *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?* (1989). (The title comes from Parker’s typical reaction to anyone knocking on her door.)

Nevertheless, Crowther’s narrower focus in *Dorothy Parker in Hollywood* affords a more telescoped examination of her political commitments without diminishing a candid account of the many contradictions

in her life. The latter include lavish living, the occasional use of homophobic and even racist language, her shockingly cruel behavior under the influence of alcohol, and the likelihood that she read almost no Marx or Lenin.

The Hollywood spotlight of this volume operates effectively to bring politics to center stage because Parker’s socialist convictions only became evident during the last days of her association with New York’s Algonquin Round Table — the group chiefly of writers who were known as “The Vicious Circle” and who gathered at the Algonquin Hotel for lunch each day between 1919 and 1929. At that time her concerns seemed mainly to be about the victimization of the poor and opposition to the death penalty.

For example, in 1927, shortly after a trip to Europe, Parker gained national notoriety by joining a Boston protest in her stylish clothes against the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the Italian American anarchists accused of robbery and murder. After her arrest there for “loitering,” she continued to fundraise for the cause in New York, then published a piece called “A Socialist Looks at Literature” in the *New Yorker*. This was followed by a review of radical Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) where she decried racism and white privilege. (43-45)

Parker’s vague Leftism of the time next morphed into an attraction to the CP-USA and the USSR in the early 1930s. This was on the eve of her relocation to Hollywood, where she was based for most of the next 35 years. The first indication came during a 1932 ocean voyage to Paris, where she encountered Mary Mooney, the mother of socialist and IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) member Tom Mooney, who had been framed for a 1916 bombing. Mary Mooney was part of a delegation of Communists en route to the USSR, and Parker attended their political discussions on board.

That same year Parker, divorced from her first husband (stockbroker Edwin Pond Parker), met the actor and writer Alan Campbell (1904-1963). Following their marriage, the couple moved to California to launch Hollywood careers together that included writing the screenplay for *A Star is Born* (1937) and dialogue for *The Little Foxes* (1941), both major successes.

Parker and Campbell would live in a Beverly Hills mansion with a butler and cook, while they additionally purchased a home in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Campbell, also half-Jewish, was ultra-handsome, 10 years younger, and a doting and adoring partner who shared Parker’s Left-wing views as well as her acute addiction to alcohol and sleeping pills.

## 7. Complicated Legacies

The challenge in centering just one period in a writer's life means that the biographer is required to insert chunks of the subject's backstory to provide context, circumventing a repetition of too many by-now well-known anecdotes.

Crowther accomplishes this commendably, infusing the familiar narrative of Parker's childhood and rise in New York magazine circles, as well as her denouement into reclusiveness and alcoholism in the same city at the end of her life, with new energy and plot emphases. Overall, while many more absorbing details can be found in the work of Meade and earlier biographers, Crowther's book ends up being a very accessible synoptic survey, with a plethora of rich vignettes and notable episodes in a succession of vivid short chapters.

It's also full of useful observations for a less monolithic view of the Left, partly because Crowther is not driven to make Communist ideology the core narrative of her book as the principal explanatory factor for Parker's life choices.

For example, in reviewing the contradictory claims others have made about Parker's Jewish identity, Crowther concludes: "All evidence suggests that although she was ambivalent about her own Jewishness ('just a little Jewish girl trying to be cute'), when she saw the creeping fascism and treatment of Jews in Europe, she was both appalled and frightened. She took action." (123)

Parker's priorities, then, weren't determined by a diktat from John Howard Lawson, leader of the Hollywood branch of the CP-USA. She became an obsessive activist due to her own emotional needs and view of the world. What happened next, however, probably crystalized a life commitment to refracting her world view through a broad pro-Communist framework championed by her Hollywood colleagues.

In 1933, Parker had already taken a step significantly to the Left as one of the 10 founders of the Screen Writers Guild, along with Communists Lawson and Dashiell Hammett. In 1936, she heard a talk about fascism by the captivating Soviet agent Otto Katz (a.k.a. André Simone, 1895-1952), generally assumed to be the model for the anti-Nazi protagonist in the films *Casablanca* (1942) and *Watch on the Rhine* (1943). Immediately Parker and six others organized the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, building it into an organization of 4000 members over the next two years.

From Crowther's angle, we see that Parker's motivations in both instances stemmed from her idiosyncratically rebellious background and an identification with the underdog and persecuted — not an ideological belief in building a Leninist party to seize power and forge a Soviet America. It seems most likely that it was the Hollywood Left itself that was her political community, and not the organized CP-USA.

Thus the details of Marxist strategy, the machinations and changing tactics proposed by the CP-USA and Comintern, were for Parker dwarfed by the larger currents of world history swirling around her — the rise of fascism and brutality of capitalism. More than some other studies that address pro-Communist women, Crowther depicts Parker appropriately, from the inside out, as complex and impassioned, very much flesh and blood, and sometimes even rather vile beneath the sophisticated veneer.

That Parker was and remained pro-Communist in rough ideological terms is not in doubt, as can be seen by the scores

of activities that ensued along with statements that she signed, and articles that she published in the Communist press. There is a consistency in her embrace of pro-Soviet positions regarding Spain (to which she traveled in support of the Republican cause), the Moscow Trials, the Hitler-Stalin-Pact, the flip-flopping stance on World War II, and post-World War II CP-USA projects such as the 1949 Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace, the Civil Rights Congress, her pleading the Fifth Amendment before a subversive investigating committee (the approach preferred by the CP-USA), and much more.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, Parker diminished her own finances considerably through generous donations and then suffered job loss from blacklisting during the McCarthy era. This was a time when she behaved with considerable bravery, despite Campbell's pressure on her to pull back and the strain of the ultimate collapse of her marriage followed by his suicide. Yet exactly what made Parker tick was quite different from the equally courageous activists who are treated by Hennessy.

In truth, most women on the Left have bequeathed complicated legacies that defy reduction to a political label, but their commitment can seem a simple matter to those critics and biographers who themselves have a simple perspective. This is especially true with the familiar hobby-horse obsession of those biographers who seek out and over-emphasize signs of their CP-USA associations to reduce the narrative to a concentrated essence of Stalinism. Some may be captive to an ultra-orthodox "Trotskyist" mentality, long past its shelf date; others are not committed to building a stronger socialist movement but only out to brand anti-capitalist rebels in a defamatory manner.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, for those who don't understand how the creative process works, artistic work can be drastically misread through a political prism. That is, if a writer has a known Communist allegiance, then some sort of coherent Marxist message can be presupposed about their novel or poem in advance of accurately reading them.

Fortunately, this type of over-simplification should be rendered impossible by Parker's career because her writing style and sensibility were clearly forged long before her radicalization. Yet it would be an equivalent mistake to dismiss the political writing that she did produce because it lacks putatively Communist traits. As Crowther accurately emphasizes, Parker wrote several stories expressly about racism and class oppression.

What is more, some of her film scripts carry subversive messages and there can be serious concerns under her poetry and quips. The 1947 film *Smash-Up, the Story of a Woman*, for example, co-authored with Lawson and others, is a well-known *noir* about a woman who sacrifices her career for a man. Even the much earlier classic story "Big Blond," which won the O. Henry Prize in 1929, has a feminist subtext in its manner of portraying the drunken loneliness, male dependence, and swelling despondency of an ageing "kept woman." These are far from her only works that highlight, with forceful and gloomy intimacy, the lack of options faced by many women.

Especially valuable in a micro-biography such as Crowther's is the way the case of Parker vividly reminds us that the collective pro-Communist "Left" is a political designation forged from numerous contrasting genealogies. This includes a political amalgamation at points with strands of liberalism as well



as a harnessing of simple rebellion against the powers of the privileged and a somewhat arms-length identification with the "oppressed." By depicting an activist who was with the CP-USA while not in it, *Dorothy Parker in Hollywood* illustrates a very different form of commitment from what appear in the two other book under consideration.

## 8. Rooted in the Personal

*Riding Like the Wind: The Life of Sanora Babb* is the accomplishment of a fluent and vivid author who weaves a compelling tapestry of family history, the story of a complicated marriage, the repeated frustration of artistic aspirations, and a multi-decade devotion to the Communist movement.

Marked by an adept command of language and a desire to probe intimate biographical matters with depth and sensitivity, Dunkle's engaging account blends archival and literary material in a well-spun narrative tuned to a general audience.

What I've always admired about Babb (1907-2005) in her Communist years (mainly from the early 1930s to mid-1950s) is that so much of her work can be rooted in the personal while implying universal human connections.

This is evident in the short fiction and journalism now collected in *The Dark Earth and Other Stories from the Great Depression* (1987) and *The Cry of the Tinamou: Stories* (1997). Above all, the quality can be found in her award-winning epic of proletarian literature and radical regionalism, *Whose Names are Unknown* (written in the 1930s but published in 2004). This last evokes the color and texture of the era as it follows the travails of the fictionalized Dunne family in its escape from the Western Oklahoma Dust Bowl to the migrant camps in California.

Yet Babb is a writer who worked in many emotional registers, including quiet reflections that can be seen in her poetry. Many of the ones collected in her career retrospective *Told in the Seed* (1998) are attuned to the natural world's minute developments — the veins of leaves, the meeting of sea and stars. This is not even to mention the gendered tensions that run throughout her writing, fully on display in the father-daughter relationship of Des Tannehill and Robin at the center of fictionalized autobiographical material in *The Lost Traveler* (1970).

Babb is just one among scores of writers on the pro-Communist Left whose record, seen in context and complexity, evidences a belief that a writer's first responsibility is to the art. Dunkle puts it well: "While Babb didn't bother to adhere to the gender norms of the era when writing about women, she wrote the way she did not as a political statement but simply because that's how she saw the world." (137) But I would add that a Marxist sensibility was without doubt part of the picture. For Babb, it became a crucial lens on the injustices faced by vulnerable populations in the Great Depression.

Just because one may be writing to change the way people see the world, and perhaps even to induce action, it doesn't follow that the object of one's literary calling can't nonetheless be to ensure that one's sentences are well-chosen and apposite. Writers on the pro-Communist Left like Babb, frequently members of writing workshops and classes, certainly recognized power in language in the political sense, but the most astute acknowledged that the reader is also compelled at emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic levels. The success achieved in all these areas was undeniably uneven, but at root in the case of Babb and others was a commitment to being honest and

truthful to the language of the art.

## 9. A Self-Disciplined Cadre

Up until now, Babb's has been a story somewhat tangled and hard to reconstruct. A breezy foray into the topic would never do; a meticulous cross-referencing of life and work is required. The organized thread of Dunkle's 19 chapters (plus an "Introduction" and "Epilogue") begins by taking Babb step by step from her birth in Otoe (Native American) territory in Oklahoma, to Lamar, Colorado, and next to Kansas and back to Oklahoma, before returning to Kansas once more. There Babb spent a year at the University of Kansas and then a junior college, as her father continued a peripatetic career that alternated between gambling and farming.

By Chapter 7 it is 1929, and, with some novice experience in journalism, Babb leaves her troubled family to start a new life in Los Angeles. When the stock market crash ended her first job at the *Los Angeles Times*, Babb found herself homeless for a period before turning to Hollywood where she discovered secretarial work and was able to write some radio scripts. In these years she joined the pro-Communist John Reed Club, traveled to the Soviet Union, spent time in England working for Communist Claude Cockburn's *The Week*, and returned to the United States to become a formal member of the CP-USA at the suggestion of screenwriter John Howard Lawson.

Her subsequent political activism was as fervid as that of Dorothy Parker, but much more on the inside as a self-disciplined cadre and rank-and-filer. For example, after attending the founding conference of the Communist-initiated League of American Writers (LAW) in 1935 as a delegate just prior to the announcement of the Popular Front, Babb went on to serve as a member of its executive committee in 1937 and then became its executive secretary in 1938. She also served as the secretary-treasurer of the Hollywood LAW chapter for four years (from 1939 to 1942, when it dissolved).

When Babb volunteered to collaborate with Tom Collins, manager at the Arvin Sanitary Camp for agricultural workers (known as "Weedpatch"), it was as a CP-USA assignment and she hoped to recruit Collins. She also volunteered as an office worker for the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and raised funds for the Spanish Republic. These are all demanding and time-consuming assignments given to serious political activists, not vague fellow travelers.

Babb's literary work in CP-USA circles was also substantial. In the ambience of the Hollywood chapter of the LAW there were two connected journals, *Black & White* (1939-40) and *The Clipper: A Western Review* (1940-41), the latter identified as under the organization's sponsorship. Almost all the other editors were CP-USA members, and their meetings were often held in Babb's apartment. Contributors included John Steinbeck and Theodore Dreiser as well as many now-forgotten figures of the Hollywood literary Left.

Even more significant was her central role as an editor of the *California Quarterly* from 1951 to 1956. This was at the height of the Cold War, and the publication was also headed by CP-USA members, most notably the blacklisted screenwriter and novelist Philip Stevenson (aka "Lars Lawrence," 1896-1965) and the blacklisted poet and college professor Thomas McGrath (1916-1990). Two of McGrath's radical students then founded a well-known successor journal, *Coastlines*, in 1956, in which Babb herself would publish.

Dunkle does not deny or even obscure Babb's CP-USA connections, but details are mostly sketchy compared to information about her amply involved personal life. We are provided with much more intriguing intelligence about her love affairs, quarrels about infidelity with her famous Chinese American cinematographer husband (James Wong Howe, 1899-1976), struggles with her psychologically distraught sister (Dorothy Babb, 1909-96), and numerous friendships with famous writers such as William Saroyan, Carlos Bulosan, and Ray Bradbury.



On the other hand, we get no specifics about her role in meetings of the John Reed Club or LAW (apart from her romantic encounter with a young Ralph Ellison in New York), nor about the Anti-Nazi League, and not even one reference to attendance at a CP-USA meeting or a cultural unit (or Lawson's "Writers Clinic," to which her work was submitted).

Even her participation in the notorious controversy between novelist Albert Maltz and the CP-USA's *New Masses*, about the evaluation of art according to the author's personal politics, goes unmentioned, although there is readily available documentation for this online.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to tracing and explaining Babb's eventual departure from the CP-USA and subsequent political thinking — in the high Cold War, a time of reinvention for many pro-Communist writers — readers may feel as if they are tracking a vapor trail.

It's not that Dunkle keeps Babb's politics wholly on the margin like a phantom presence, but she doesn't seem invested in going very deep into the emotional meaning of this commitment — and even just the daily life experiences of being in the CP-USA. A person is significantly known by company they keep, but a good many of Babb's deeply committed Communist associates in this book are not identified as such, often said simply to be a "friend." To take just one example, Martha Dodd (1908-1990) is identified as a "journalist and novelist," the first sentence of her Wikipedia entry. If one reads the entry a bit further, it states that Dodd, the daughter of the U.S. Ambassador to Nazi Germany whose political life has been documented in many books, was for years engaged in Soviet espionage, fled the United States after a subpoena in 1956, and spent the rest of her life in Cuba and Czechoslovakia. Close Communist literary associates of Babb simply go unmentioned.

Of course, Babb experienced McCarthyism intensely and even decamped Hollywood for periods by spending time in Mexico. Probably, like John Steinbeck and others, she destroyed much of her correspondence and documents from the 1930s and 1940s, leaving a limited record on paper. She also chose not to directly address the CP-USA in her fiction. But the gaps of deleted history might have been acknowledged, and remaining clues and threads might have been pursued a bit more.

In pointing out this limitation, I'm hardly suggesting that Dunkle's biography is anemic in other ways. Above all, Babb's rough and tumble upbringing, with its poverty and violence, can make or break a person so that the detailed attention to it in this book is essential. And Dunkle has a brighter flashlight than many of us for understanding how writing about this past was

for Babb a means of taming it. Babb was so dependent on giving her lived experience shape and meaning to the point where almost all her work would become a kind of balance between fiction and autobiography.

Dunkle is also strong in treating the facts about how Babb got a second chance in establishing a literary reputation in the late 20th century. Her career was brought back to life mainly through republications and especially the success of *Whose Names Are Unknown*. *Riding Like the Wind* chronicles the history of the book manuscript's unexpected rejection by Random House editor Bennett Cerf on the grounds that Steinbeck's best-selling *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) had already saturated the market on the topic. That decision, based purely on market considerations trumping literary quality, was surely an outrage, compounded by the fact that Weedpatch manager Collins had shown Steinbeck some of Babb's research notes.

Scholars cited by Dunkel have shown that parallel incidents and episodes exist between the two novels. Nevertheless, any claims that Steinbeck substantially plagiarized from Babb seem unconvincing, recalling the overblown allegations that Jean-Paul Sartre stole the ideas in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) from Simone de Beauvoir since they were intimates and shared ideas.<sup>11</sup> Some of the reviews of Dunkel focusing on the Steinbeck aspect run the risk of turning a full-bodied and varied career into a headline-grabbing victimization story.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, there is the history of Babb's marriage to the genius Howe, exploring the promise and perils of sexual freedom in a patriarchal society. The account is a marvel in balancing Babb's painful mixture of resilience and vulnerability as a wife, lover, and creative artist, not to mention its documentation of the anti-Chinese racism faced by the couple for decades. These aspects of Dunkel's research are unparalleled and likely to remain so.

## 10. A Curious Lacuna

For those of us who still see socialism as a moral compass for how to live, the memory culture of the Left has a unique role to play. In our war against the forgotten, obscured and falsified past, scholars and journalists tunnel backwards into the caves of yesteryear to change the way it is remembered so that it deepens our understanding of how (and how not) to change the world. The humanizing portrayals in all three of these books expand our view, providing fresh and pertinent insights into how women Communist writers linked gender, class, and race in their creative work and activism.

What is to be embraced, methodologically, is that the authors start by discerning what the writers did — the observable facts — and not by initially positing value-laden assumptions about the nature and impact of Communism as the determinant of their choices. What we get are different facets of the same experience of participation in a movement formally marked by specific policies of theory and practice.

But this last point brings us to a shadow side of all these books: The authors mostly put a frame around the disconcerting and unpardonable dimensions of the domestic experience of U.S. Communism — ones that directly affected the lives and works of the nine protagonists. Hennessey and Dunkle are inclined to focus on certain aspects of Communist memory culture while neglecting others, while Crowther is inclined to report disturbing actions without analyzing.

What is inspiring is that the political community with which the women bonded — whether it was the CP-USA itself, or the Harlem or Hollywood Left — provided a common purpose, a collective enterprise of strength and support, even a new kind of identity distinct from the ones in which capitalist institutions had tried to embed them. We need this, too.

On the other hand, it was a community that managed to inculcate the women with a moral certitude that the USSR was a progressive state with the CP-USA providing an honest and accurate guide to political action over the decades. In the supportive world of the CP-USA community, everything was intertwined and enmeshed just as it is likely to be in radical communities being forged in our 21st-century anti-capitalist struggles.

This paradoxical mix is a facet of the experience we need to confront full-on if we are to draw critically on the Communist past to forge a radical culture of engagement in the present and future. What good is a culture of solidarity if it is misleading about potential pitfalls? To simply extract what we like and barely glance at the rest can be naïve and disempowering.

How and why did individuals become blind to obviously mistaken views (such as fascism described as “a matter of taste,” according to Soviet diplomat Molotov in justification of the Hitler-Stalin Pact); expulsions, shunning, demonization of rivals, and self-righteous certitudes so that the CP-USA leadership became something of a team of sycophants; and the overnight reversal of views by fiat (such as Roosevelt turning from a fascist to an anti-fascist in the mid-1930s, then from a war-monger to an anti-fascist again in 1939-41)?

If the women were not actually blind, what stopped them from acting to correct the movement? It's likely that there are as many scrupulous answers to these questions as there are individuals featured in these books; and the familiar sweeping characterizations (that they were duped, ignorant, too trusting, or even authoritarian by nature) are so vague as to be applicable to just any social, religious, or other movement.

Still, the slightness of thought-provoking commentary on this subject in any of these books is puzzling, and must be related to different priorities. What is the cause of this curious lacuna?

The issue here is not just the appalling record of the Stalinist Soviet Union, for the beats of this history are well-known to educated socialists today. And the authors all indicate a general awareness and abhorrence of this record. For the most part, however, it is compartmentalized, unconnected to matters of socialist organization, education, strategy and tactics with which the women were surely engaged. The names Earl Browder, William Z. Foster, V. I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin appear only once or twice, adding nothing of substance.

Hennessy, for example, the most politically attentive of the three, takes a clear distance from the USSR early in her volume: “In the 1920s, a ruling bureaucracy was solidifying a governing power bloc in the newly formed Soviet Union. Led by Stalin, that bloc would rule by terror, exiling and executing dissenters and undermining the revolution's ideal of a workers' state and the potential to build international socialist transformation.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet this is followed by a curious claim that the CP-USA was neither “monolithic nor ineffective” due to the role of Trotskyists in the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters-led strike (she cites Bryan D. Palmer's *Revolutionary Teamsters* [2014]). She

then concludes that “many who aligned with the Party did not do so dogmatically; in fact, quite a few, like these writers, actually developed and augmented its ideals.”

Of course, *In the Company of Radical Women Writers* is entirely convincing that the seven subjects went beyond the thinking of the CP-USA on race and gender, but Hennessy never presents evidence that they objected to the major political features of Stalinism — such as the one-party state rule (by terror). More important, they acquiesced and likely gave enthusiastic support to the policies and practices of the CP-USA that directly compromised the very anti-racist and anti-colonialist ideas that its members professed.

The approach here is similar in the other two books, except for Crowther in one instance. She simply states (citing no source) that, at news of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, “Parker must have been horrified.” And yet “did not publicly speak out against the agreement” or express any dissent when the Hollywood Anti-Nazi league “quietly changed its name” and “focused its campaigning against anything that seemed to be leading America into war” against the fascists.<sup>14</sup> No such reaction is reported in the other books.

## 11. Haunted by Lost Futures

Much of the problem might stem from a misunderstanding of the downside of the Popular Front in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Only Hennessy attempts to define this 1935 political turn at the behest of the Comintern: “a coalition of alliances that would bring together a diverse range of left-leaning organizations in order to fight the rise of fascism,” but one that had a limitation in that it involved “a new phase of co-operation with the federal government, [failing] to reckon with the state's role as a handmaiden of the wealthy few.”

Unfortunately, the only instance of a “limitation” that she mentions comes after World War II, when “The shifting geopolitics...became a justification for state repression...” Hennessy's subsequent treatment of Popular Front politics in the body of her book, mainly regarding Louise Thompson Patterson, reproduces this gap-filled trajectory. At first, she describes Thompson-Patterson's coalition building in the 1930s, then she skips to her ordeal with state repression in the 1950s.

What is missing here is a clearer description of the price paid for the coalition, which was principally with the Left *liberals* of Roosevelt's New Deal (except for the 18 months of the Hitler-Stalin Pact). This alliance segued into an extreme devotion to Roosevelt's capitalist war-time policies, followed by the early Truman administration.

What requires tart clarity is that the Popular Front policy was not about a *tactical* unity with liberalism, not objectionable in the pursuit of common goals. Instead, on a deeper level it was a dramatic *subordination* of socialist internationalism to pro-capitalist and even colonialist politics. Although the general approach came top-down from the USSR, the excessive version demanded of CP-USA members came from the over-zealous leadership of Earl Browder — reversed only on orders from Moscow after the war.

For activists in the recent Black Lives Matter movement and the current Palestine Solidarity Campaign, the most alarming example of the Popular Front's practice would be the *dramatic de-alignment* of the CP-USA from existing anti-racist struggles and anti-colonial movements of the 1940s. To remain spellbound by the extraordinary anti-racist accomplishments of the CP-USA in the early 1930s, without mentioning the next stage, is throwing sand in the eyes of history. Whatever the personal ideals of the membership, one cannot ignore, or rationalize, the way that the CP-USA's pledge of anti-racism and anticolonialism was spectacularly broken under its version of the Popular Front.



One wonders, what did Thompson Patterson et al think when the CP-USA denounced the “Double V” campaign (for victory against both international fascism and domestic racism) of the African American Community? Or when it characterized the 1943 rebellions against bigotry in Harlem and other cities as Hitler-inspired? Or when it urged its members not to protest racism in the segregated military?

What did Sanora Babb, outraged at anti-Asian racism against her husband, think when her own party expelled its Japanese American members and endorsed internment of the Japanese American population? And when the *Daily Worker* celebrated the incineration of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?<sup>16</sup>

What did any of the nine say or think when the CP-USA switched its support of a democratic Palestine in 1948 to an ethno-state where a Jewish minority would control the majority territory of the former British Mandate? And then raised money and blood donations for the Haganah, falsely accusing the Palestinians of baby-killing and using poison gas? And opposing the right of return for Palestinians at the UN after the Israeli state was formed?<sup>17</sup>

It is entirely possible that the nine had questions and apprehensions, but any sign of such material is absent from the books. Simply put, the kind of political questions that ought to be of concern to the present generation are sidelined, even as we need to develop political antibodies to prevent parallel behavior. Why is this material of so little interest to the authors, who only have the best of motives? Why did their curiosity stay so limited, why did they not want to know?

Another instance of strange indifference is the absence of a discussion of the ultimate political evolution of those who came into conflict with the official Communist movement. Herbst, for example, parted thoroughly with the CP-USA in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but kept overtly quiet on the matter even as she changed her friendships to rather hard-core opponents of the CP-USA such as *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips and high modernist art critic Hilton Kramer.<sup>18</sup>

So far as I can tell, Claudia Jones was en route to expulsion from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) for Maoist “anti-revisionism,” which was the fate of her partner one year after her death.<sup>19</sup> There are ways in which the experience of women committed to the CP-USA must be understood as a cautionary tale, not merely as a model of commitment; but that cannot be intelligently appraised unless one sees their trajectories unabridged.

Perhaps the memory culture of 1930s generation must next move to a more balanced relationship between the different dimensions of collective restoration; more nesting doll narratives of the type pioneered in books such as Elinor Langer’s *Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell* (1984) and Ruth Price’s *The Lives of Agnes Smedley* (2004).

These new books compellingly showcase nine protagonists marked by an admirable empathy for certain causes and populations, far ahead of most of their fellow citizens. Yet things changed when it came to select matters — Soviet victims of Stalin, Japanese Americans, African Americans protesting racism during World War II, the Palestinian majority in 1948. In these instances, they seemed to have sangfroid to spare.

Dunkle correctly quotes Babb in 1989 (in an interview with

myself) saying she was “brainwashed” about socialism, but basing one’s explanation on this alone is thin gruel. (135) One wonders what exactly what Babb meant by this brainwashing (she still seems to believe that the USSR equaled socialism) and how it happened, considering her intelligence and own first-hand experiences with oppression and her outrage at those who failed to take notice. These were not writers living in an ivory tower; they read, traveled, interacted with individuals from many nations.

Until we come to terms with the memory culture of Women Communist writers holistically, we will continue to be haunted by the possibility of lost futures. And a socialist tradition, marked by so many moments of admirable achievements and heroic self-sacrifice, is a terrible thing to waste. ■

## Notes

1. The famous expression is from E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 12.
2. For a consideration of some of the scholarship demonstrating this new paradigm, see Wald, “African Americans, Culture and Communism, Part I,” *Against the Current* 84 (January-February 2000): <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc084/p928/> and “African Americans, Culture and Communism, Part II,” *Against the Current* 86 (May-June 2001): <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc086/p945/>.
3. The topic is worth a book, but I did my best to summarize some of this history in “Interview with Alan M. Wald,” William J. Maxwell, “Special Issue on ‘Sexing the Left,’” *English Language Notes* 53.1 (Spring Summer 2015): 33-43.
4. Actually, Dorothy Parker was only half-Jewish but referred to herself as Jewish and is mostly treated as a Jewish writer.
5. Those personally interviewed were Marvel Cooke, Meridel Le Sueur, Muriel Rukeyser, and Sanora Babb. In the case of Babb, I went on to collaborate with her in the publication of a chapter from the manuscript of “Whose Names Are Unknown” in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, no. 3 (1990) and she requested that I write “Soft Focus: The Short Fiction of Sanora Babb,” Introduction to *Cry of the Tinamou: Stories by Sanora Babb* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), ix-xvi. Later, I wrote in more detail on her biography in “Sanora Babb in Her Time and Ours,” in Joanne Dearcopp and Christine Hill Smith, eds., *Unknown No More: Recovering Sanora Babb* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 14-26. Among other places, I have discussed LeSueur in “The Many Lives of Meridel Le Sueur,” *Monthly Review* (September 1997): 23-31, and Muriel Rukeyser in *Exiles From a Future Time: The Forging of the Literary Left* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: 2007), 299-306.
6. A large-scale incident of occupational lung disease involving exposure to silica dust.
7. These are collected on several websites such as: <https://www.thoughtco.com/dorothy-parker-quotes-3530066>
8. Even though Crowther’s study gives a good summary of such activities, there seem to be several hundred references to Parker in the pages of the *Daily Worker* that are not directly cited.
9. As an example, see the poorly documented claim by Stephen Koch that Parker was likely a secret CP-USA member as well as a dupe of behind-the-scenes Soviet machinations in *Double Lives: Stalin, Willi Münzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals* (1994).
10. See Sanora Babb, “Another Viewpoint,” *New Masses* (12 March 1946): 10, available online: <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/1946-1956/maltz/babb-another-viewpoint.pdf>
11. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/26/books/beauvoir-emerges-from-sartre-s-shadow-some-even-dare-to-call-her-a-philosopher.html>
12. See She Shared Her Notes with John Steinbeck. It was Her Novel’s Undoing: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/18/books/bookupdate/iris-jamahl-dunkle-sanora-babb.html>
13. Hennessy, 14. This is footnoted to an excellent essay by the orthodox Trotskyist historian Bryan D. Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 139-74.
14. Crowther, 162. This is exactly the same as Meade states in her biography.
15. For a thoughtful, non-sectarian, and creative approach to understanding the Popular Front, see Charles Post, “The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History,” *Against the Current* 63 (July-August 1996): <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc063/p2363/>
16. Here are just a few places where the CP-USA’s wartime policies regarding African Americans and Japanese Americans are discussed: Alan M. Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Anti-Fascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Howard Eugene Johnson and Wendy Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution: Stretch Johnson, Harlem Communist at the Cotton Club* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), and Robert W. Cherny, *San Francisco Reds: Communists in the Bay Area, 1919-1958* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2024). Two days after the devastation of Hiroshima, a columnist for the CP-USA organ wrote: “So let us not greet our atomic device with a shudder, but with the elation and admiration which the genius of man deserves,” 8 August 1945, *Daily Worker*.
17. Among other places, documentation for the change of position on Palestine can be found in Dorothy M. Zellner, “What We Did: The American Jewish Communist Left and the Establishment of the State of Israel,” available at: <https://jewishcurrents.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/What-We-Did-by-Dorothy-Zellner.pdf>
18. See Elinor Langer, *Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), passim.
19. In England, Jones’ personal and political partner was Abhimanyu Manchanda (1919-1985), an Indian-born Communist strongly devoted to Maoism and Stalinism. Expelled from the CPGB for his “anti-revisionist” views, Manchanda eventually formed the Revolutionary Marxist-Leninist League.

# REVIEW

## A Revolution's Fateful Passages By Steve Downs

### Truth Behind Bars

Reflections on the Fate of the Russian Revolution

By Paul Kellogg

AU Press, 2021, 440 pages, \$37.99.

*"THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION brought tremendous exaltation to vast sections of the Russian people. After eight months of frustrated expectations, there was now a profound sense of relief... The deepest sensation which October aroused in the people was joy. In city, village, and Army people rejoiced in the fullness of their liberation, in the limitless freedom that now summoned their creative efforts." (Truth Behind Bars, 7)*

So wrote Isaac Steinberg in 1953. Steinberg had been a leader of the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries in Russia, and served as People's Commissar of Justice in early 1918 during the short-lived coalition government between the Bolsheviks and the Left SRs.<sup>1</sup>

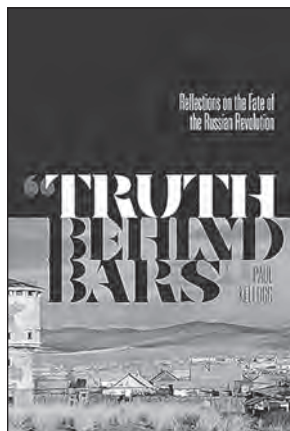
It was not just Russian workers and peasants who rejoiced in the limitless vision of freedom opened by the October Revolution. Throughout the world workers, peasants, poor farmers and fighters against national oppression took inspiration from it. And several generations of revolutionaries looked to October, and the Soviet Union, for guidance.

Yet just 20 years after October, during the Great Terror of 1936-1938, almost 700,000 prisoners were executed in the prisons and labor camps that made up "the Gulag." (TBB, 27) The gulf between October and the Great Terror has confronted supporters of the October Revolution for 90 years.

Many, especially before 1956, simply denied the oppression and lack of democracy that were evident to others. Some made excuses, asserting that "Stalin did what had to be done." Others highlighted the lack of democracy and spoke of the Revolution's "degeneration," while insisting it was still necessary to "defend the gains of the Revolution." Some took that criticism further and, arguing that a new exploiting class had come to power in the Soviet Union, denied that it was worthy of defense.

Despite the fact that the Soviet Union no longer exists, the revolutions of 1917, the fights of the young Soviet state to survive civil war and foreign intervention and to build an alternative to capitalism still inspire. They not only inspire; they continue to inform current assumptions and debates about revolutionary strategies and struggles, the exercise of working-class power, and the relationship between ends and means.

These current debates make Paul Kellogg's book all the more valuable. The author is a professor of interdisciplinary studies at Athabasca University in Canada.



### The Gulag & the Russian Revolution

A few years after the Great Terror, replying to the allegation that Stalinism was the natural and necessary result of Leninism, Victor Serge, an anarchist supporter of the October revolution, wrote, "The Bolshevik party saw in the perils it confronted the excuse for its Jacobin methods. I think it's undeniable that its Jacobinism contained in germ Stalinist totalitarianism, but Bolshevism also contained other seeds, other possibilities of evolution."<sup>2</sup>

*Truth Behind Bars: Reflections on the Fate of the Russian Revolution* is an effort by Paul Kellogg to account for how the limitless freedom of October transmuted into the Great Terror<sup>3</sup> — and the repression that continued for decades afterward. He examines which of Bolshevism's seeds took root and flourished.

Kellogg sets the stage for his reflections by discussing the Gulag. He considers its place as site(s) of political repression, and its role in Soviet economic development in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. He also argues that it was where a new working class was forged in the years after the Civil War.

He then goes on to consider and contrast the politics of "self-emancipation" and "substitutionism." In the process, he tries to retrieve Julius Martov and the Menshevik-Internationalists (or Left Mensheviks) from the "dustbin of history" to which Trotsky consigned them in October 1917.

### Vorkuta: Anvil of the Working Class

The title of the book comes from the name of an oral "newsletter" in the Gulag. In Part 1, Kellogg underlines the roots of the Gulag as the place political prisoners were sent, but he also argues that this sprawling network of prisons and forced labor camps served as a key site of class formation of a post-revolutionary working class.

The working class that existed in the early 20th century had been decimated by the slaughter of the First World War, the violence and destruction of the civil war, famine, and the Soviet government's suppression of political opponents. While the Gulag played an important part in the last of these, Kellogg argues, it also became the place where a new working class was formed. This was because of, first, the inmates' role in building the infrastructure of the Soviet economy and, second, the struggles the imprisoned workers waged to improve their conditions.

From the late 1920s to the mid-30s, hundreds of thousands of revolutionaries, many of them anti-Stalin socialists, were sent to the camps. Kellogg's descriptions of conditions in the camps, and the repression that filled them, are heartbreaking.

The Gulag was not just prisons, but also forced labor camps. The inmates dug coal, felled trees, dug canals, mined for gold, etc. They performed much of the labor needed to build the infrastructure and provide raw materials for the Soviet econo-

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my from the 1930s to 1950s. This economic role, the Gulag's role in "primary accumulation," in turn drove its need for more inmates/laborers.

The political prisoners of the 1930s were replaced by striking workers; workers accused of sabotage for falling asleep at work; soldiers who had been taken prisoner during the Second World War and returned to the Soviet Union after surviving German prison camps; ethnic minorities who were removed from their lands; peasants who had resisted collectivization, and hundreds of thousands of others deemed "enemies" by the Soviet state.

For Kellogg, the Gulag was not a site of class formation just because lots of people worked there. An additional necessary element was that workers organized and fought to improve their situation through collective action.

First came hunger strikes in the mid-1930s. Kellogg discusses a large strike at the Vorkuta camp in 1936. This strike was for better conditions and also to protest the show trials featuring the former Bolshevik leaders, Kamenev and Zinoviev.

This strike lasted four months and ended only after NKVD (the new name for the secret police) headquarters sent a message stating, "Inform the hunger strikers held in the Vorkuta mines that all their demands will be satisfied." (TBB, 39)

Kellogg mentions strikes at other camps that also ended in victory for the strikers. However, these victories were pyrrhic — within two years, almost all of the strikers had been executed. Kellogg describes the elimination of political prisoners using the accounts of several former prisoners, as well as independent researchers.

## Striking Against the Gulag

In this chapter, Kellogg describes 1) how the Gulag became central to Soviet industrialization and 2) how prisoners built the solidarity and organization necessary to wage a mass strike against the forced labor system.

The remarkable story of how the prisoners organized deserves to be widely known. Kellogg writes about the rebirth of an anti-Stalinist left following the Second World War.

This left was repressed and many of its supporters sent to the camps. There they worked to overcome divisions between "criminals" and "politicals," and among the different nationalities. They also had to overcome the deep anti-communism of many of the national minorities who had suffered oppression at the hands of the Stalinist state.

In the telling, Kellogg relates several incidents in the late 1940s and early 1950s where prisoners rose up, killed their guards, took their weapons and marched on nearby towns in the hope of sparking a more widespread rebellion. Kellogg compares these rebellions to that of Spartacus and the enslaved in Rome and, like Spartacus and his followers, these were brutally put down.

Then, following the death of Stalin in March, 1953, and inspired by the little they heard about the workers' uprising in East Germany, imprisoned workers in the camps around Vorkuta began what became a mass strike. On July 21, 1953, "six thousand forced laborers at mine Pits no. 1 and no. 7, where ITL students (left-wing socialists and Leninists —SD) and anarchists were particularly influential on the strike committees, refused to go to work." (TBB, 68)

The strike spread and, "within ten days, twenty big pits inside the city and its environs were shut down tight." (69)

Strike committees took control of large sections of the camps, ensuring gas did not build up in the shut mines, running bakeries, infirmaries and laundries.

On August 1, 1953 the armed response began. The strike was broken at one small camp, but others held out for weeks or even months, according to Kellogg, with some pits not returning to work until November.

The strikes were not isolated to the Vorkuta area nor did they end in 1953. "New strikes kept breaking out through 1954 and 1955 until finally a general amnesty of political prisoners was granted and the camp system partly dismantled." (TBB, 73)

Why were the strikes in the early 1950s more effective than those in the 1930s? Kellogg argues:

*"By using the strike — the classic tactic of the international workers' movement — the Vorkuta workers indicated that they were a new force to be reckoned with. In the 1930s, the Vorkuta inmates had only moral power on their side. ...By the 1950s, however, the forced labour inmates of Vorkuta had, in addition to moral power, economic power."*

In addition: "By the 1950s, the conditions that made forced labor economically "rational" for the Russian economy were disappearing....Forced labour was less suited to the next stage of industrial development than it had been to the stage of 'primary accumulation.'" (73)

For Kellogg, "(T)he events of 1953 represented an economic transformation. Most importantly, however, those events represented the transformation of the mass of forced labourers into a collectivity of proletarians." (74)

## Toward Independent Organization

The final strike wave Kellogg draws our attention to was from 1989 to 1991. These were significant not only because of the numbers involved but also because the striking miners, no longer inmates in the Gulag, no longer facing the level of repression of the 1930s and 1950s, sought to build independent workers' organizations.

The first sets of strikes, involving half a million strikers and centered in the coal mines of Ukraine's Donbass, broke out in July, 1989. The initial demands were economic. The strikers sought, "more soap, detergent, toothpaste, sausage, shoes and underwear, more sugar, tea, and bread," according to David Remnick. (TBB, 79)

But something new happened once the strikers won some of their demands and returned to work. "With the end of the strike," according to historian David Mandel, "the strike committees did not disband but transformed themselves into workers' committees, whose main task was to monitor the execution of the agreements."

Kellogg goes on to write, "For the first time in seventy years, organizations based in the working-class, independent of the state and powerful enough to avoid instant repression from the regime, were operating in the Soviet Union. A silence of more than three generations was ending." (80)

Beginning in October, miners and other workers engaged in a series of strikes that combined economic and explicitly political demands. Reporting on a warning strike that took place on November 1, 1989, Michael Dobbs of the *Washington Post* writes, "In addition to routine economic demands, the strikers in the Donetsk in the Ukraine, called for abolition of the leading role of the Communist Party and direct election of the Soviet President. Similar political demands have been made



by miners in the northern city of Vorkuta.” (Quoted in *TBB*, 81)

A strike of miners in the Donbass, Vorkuta and Siberia in July 1990, raised the demand, “...for the nationalization of all Communist Party property and the elimination of all party political cells in the government, the army and the KGB.” (82)

Asked in 1989 why the Vorkuta miners were the most militant and politicized, Boris Kagarlitsky, then a young Marxist sociologist (currently imprisoned in Russia for his opposition to Putin’s war in Ukraine), had this to say:

“It’s important to know that these miners are the sons and daughters of Stalin’s victims. No one other than those in the labour camps ever worked in the mines.” Kagarlitsky said today’s miners were aware of the Trotskyists who were forced to work in the Vorkuta labour camps during Stalin’s purges. “They are their sons and daughters. No one ever moves there, so these are the second and third generation.” (88)

The year 1991 proved to be the high point for this wave of increasingly political strikes. Kellogg discusses how decades of authoritarianism, compounded by physical isolation, could not be overcome in just a few years.

The miners (and other workers) were not in a position to put forward their own solutions to the political and economic crisis. Instead, they looked to Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his pro-market reforms as an alternative to Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika. By 1993, economic crisis had become economic catastrophe.

## Self-Emancipation versus Substitutionism

In his second section of *Truth Behind Bars*, Kellogg develops the central political argument of the book: that while drives toward both self-emancipation and substitutionism were present in the Bolshevik Party and the Russian Revolution, substitutionism came to dominate very early in the course of the revolution.

As Kellogg writes in the Preface:

*“The concept of self-emancipation has at its core the idea that liberation from oppression can be achieved only by the self-activity of the oppressed, who must become the agents of their own emancipation. By contrast, substitutionism refers to attempts to substitute the actions of others for the agency of the oppressed.”* (*TBB*, xxi)

He further defines substitutionism as, “acting in a ‘revolutionary’ manner even in the absence of any real prospect of mass support and self-emancipation” (94)

To illustrate substitutionism and its effects, Kellogg discusses concrete events from the Russian Revolutions and the early years of the new Soviet state. He discusses the role played by “peasants in uniforms” in the events of October (see accompanying review of *World Bolshevism*); the Bolsheviks’ analysis of the class structure of the countryside; and, the use of the Red Army to export social revolution. He concludes the section by looking at the efforts of party vanguards to force the pace of revolutions.

### A. The Agrarian Question:

In this chapter, Kellogg argues that Lenin’s analysis of the class structure of the Russian countryside was so badly flawed that it led the Bolsheviks and the Soviet government to enact policies — such as forced confiscation of grains and farm animals that resulted in a *de facto* war on the countryside that

divided workers from peasants.

This undermined support among the peasants for the new Soviet government, leading some to support the White (counterrevolutionary) armies. The loss of support in the countryside, combined with the occupation of major agricultural areas, first by the Germans and then the counter revolutionary armies, plus the destruction of transportation infrastructure, added to the disastrous fall in agricultural production that led to mass hunger in the cities in the early years of the revolution.

In brief, Kellogg contends that Lenin was mistaken about there being a significant market-oriented, petit-bourgeois layer in the countryside. (He includes a discussion of the implications of Lenin and the Bolsheviks using “petit-bourgeois” or “petty bourgeois” in their discussions.)

He places his arguments about this supposed rich layer, kulaks, within a discussion of the role of the village commune — the *mir* — and the development of the reforms fostered by the czar’s minister Stolypin at the end of the 19th century. These reforms, according to Kellogg, had led to a slow growth of a market-oriented layer in the countryside based on an “American-style” sector of family farms, rather than a “Prussian-style” sector of large estates employing landless agricultural workers.

By carrying out the long-sought land reform, the Soviet government at first won broad support among the peasantry. This reform also had the result of strengthening the *mir*, an institution based upon and maintaining subsistence farming, as opposed to farming to produce a surplus for the market.

But just a few months after the large estates and smaller family farms were broken up and placed under the control of the *mir*, the first food requisitioning detachments appeared in the villages. Peasants felt betrayed by the government they had supported. The result was several years of conflict between the cities and countryside, taking place within the broader war against the counter-revolutionary armies and the invasions by the armies of several other nations.

The war with the countryside ended only with the defeat of the counter-revolutionary armies and the introduction of the market reforms of the New Economic Policy in 1921. But then, just a few years later, came Stalinist forced collectivization and the “war on the kulaks” — and another period of famine (most brutally in Ukraine where millions died of starvation).

### B. Bank Robberies:

Following the defeat of the 1905 revolution, the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks engaged in bank robberies — “expropriations” — to raise funds for their work and in anticipation of an imminent renewal of the revolutionary upsurge. Kellogg writes that this practice was very controversial and was opposed by the majority of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, of which the Bolsheviks were still a faction. He states that at the 1906 Stockholm Congress, the RSDLP voted against armed terrorism, which included “expropriations.” Lenin and the Bolsheviks disregarded this. (*TBB*, 211)

He argues that the Bolsheviks, especially Lenin, were particularly open to this practice because of the large number of “professional revolutionaries” the faction supported. They needed money to maintain their organizers, as well as to pay for printing and other organizational costs. Other factions that did not rely as much on full-time staff tended to oppose the “expropriations.”

Kellogg gives special attention to a robbery in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia in 1907. A Bolshevik squad attacked a government stagecoach passing through the center of the city. Using bombs and pistols, they successfully made off with the equivalent (in 2015) of \$10 million. They also killed approximately 40 bystanders and injured many more.

According to Kellogg, this took place “three weeks after the closing of the Fifth Congress of the RSDLP, held in London, where the delegates had voted unanimously to disband all fighting squads associated with the party.” (212)

Why did a majority of the RSDLP (and, according to Trotsky, “the majority of the Bolshevik faction”) oppose the actions of the fighting squads? (216) Kellogg suggests that the main reason was concern that these actions led to increasing criminality and indiscipline by party members. This in turn would discredit the party in the eyes of the workers they sought to organize and the wider democratic movement.

Differences over whether to engage in “criminal” activities to fund revolutionary organizations certainly didn’t end after the bombs were thrown in Tiflis. We need only look at decisions by armed opposition groups/liberation organizations, from Northern Ireland to Colombia, to involve themselves in drug trafficking to bring the matter closer to home and to weigh the effects of this activity on the revolutionaries themselves.

### C. Probing with Bayonets:

In April 1920, the new government of Poland (which had only regained independence in 1918 after over 100 years of partition — occupation — by Russia, Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) invaded Soviet Ukraine. The Red Army was able to push the Polish troops back. The Russian Communist leadership chose not to stop at the border but to invade Poland and “probe with bayonets” the readiness of Polish workers and peasants for revolution.

The Red Army advanced until it almost reached Warsaw, where this effort to force the pace of revolution from the outside suffered a massive defeat. Lenin supported the push into Poland. In a rare instance of agreement, both the Menshevik Martov and Trotsky opposed it. Lenin and the rest of the Soviet leadership totally misread how an invasion by Russian forces — the historic oppressor of Poland — would stoke nationalist sentiment among Polish workers and peasants (just as Poland’s invasion of Ukraine had stoked nationalist sentiment among Russian workers and peasants.)

The decision to substitute the Red Army for the self-activity of the Polish workers, or as Lenin put it, “to assist the sovietization of Poland,” (143) not only produced a significant military defeat for the Red Army (which lost over 100,000 dead, wounded or interned), but, according to Trotsky, “the development of the Polish revolution received a crushing blow.” (TBB, 151)

The Red Army was more successful in its invasion and occupation of Georgia in 1921. This invasion was not because



Isaac Steinberg.

Georgia posed any military threat to Soviet Russia, as Poland had. It was seen by some in the Russian leadership, though, as a political threat. Georgia was an independent republic where the Mensheviks, not the Bolsheviks, were the dominant party.

Whatever the faults of the Mensheviks as a governing party, the Russians chose to use the Red Army, not organizing among Georgian workers and farmers, to “win” power in Georgia and put an effective end to Georgian independence for decades.

The case of Georgia shows how firmly established substitutionism had become — neither Lenin nor Trotsky supported the invasion of Georgia, but with Trotsky (the Commissar for Military Affairs) away from Moscow, Stalin and others in the leadership ordered troops to move. The government gave its support only after units of the Red Army had already been ordered into Georgia from Armenia, ostensibly in support of a popular uprising.

### D. Hungary 1919 and Germany 1921:

In March, 1919, following a period of heightened class struggle in 1918 and 1919, the Communists and Social Democrats in Hungary agreed to proclaim a soviet republic. According to Kellogg, the Social Democrats were willing to make a deal with the Communists out of hope for military aid from revolutionary Russia as the Austro-Hungarian empire broke up.

Kellogg describes a series of measures to impose a social revolution from the top down taken by a government with a very small base in the country. He quotes from a remarkable exchange between two leading members of the Communist International, Karl Radek and Paul Levi.

Radek, a longtime member of socialist groups in Poland and Germany and a member of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, recognizing the weakness of the new government, observed that “the Communists should have maintained the gallows next to government buildings in order, if necessary, to demonstrate to their dear allies the concrete meaning of proletarian dictatorship.” In response, Levi, a German communist from the Luxemburg wing of the German party, wrote:

*“To propose the gallows, at the moment of the establishment of soviet-power, as the method of unifying and amalgamating the proletariat; to undertake the organization and consolidation of the proletariat not on the basis of the ‘clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletariat,’ its conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of struggle’ of the Communists (according to Rosa Luxemburg), but on the basis of mutual hangings, all this strikes me — I do not want to use strong words — as a very unfortunate method for the unification of the proletariat.” (TBB, 177-8)*

The Soviet government in Hungary was overthrown after 133 days. It was followed by years of right-wing dictatorship.

Two years later, the German Communist Party (KPD — an actual mass party with over 400,000 members, but still a minority within the German working class) called for a mass strike to try to force the issue of power. This became known as the March Action.

In the event, only about 200,000 workers struck. The strike failed and the KPD suffered severe repression and significant loss of membership. While the leadership of the Comintern had supported the March Action, Paul Levi and Clara Zetkin (both Luxemburgists) had been “absolutely clear that the German Left was in no position to challenge state power.” (TBB, 168, 169)



Prisoners in the Vorkuta prison camp in the early 1950s. GULAG\*ONLINE

## Seeds of the Gulag and Stalinism

Each section of *Truth Behind Bars* is worth reading in its own right. Following his third section “In the Rear-View Mirror,” Kellogg ties them together in a valuable concluding discussion of “Ends and Means.” Specifically, he argues that the means used to achieve political ends shape the ends that are achieved. This is not a novel opinion but, drawing on the experience of the Russian Revolution, Kellogg argues it forcefully.

He discusses the early decision by Lenin and the new government to reinstitute the death penalty (supported by Lenin, opposed by Martov and Luxemburg and, initially, Trotsky) and to launch political terror against their supposed political enemies. He places the establishment of the Cheka — the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (the secret police) — in December, 1917, and highlights its role in breaking strikes, many of which had been called to force the Bolsheviks to agree to a multi-party, socialist coalition government. The use of the means of terror and repression to support the end of a workers’ government worked against the achievement of that end. In Kellogg’s telling, there is a clear link between the embrace of “political terror” by the Bolsheviks and the Gulag.

### *The Constituent Assembly Controversy:*

A Constituent Assembly had been seen by a generation of Russian revolutionaries and reformers as a means to the end of building a broad-based democratic political order. Elections to one were finally held in November 1917, just a few weeks after the overthrow of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

The Bolsheviks received about 24% of the vote (Kellogg argues that, with the support of allies in the Left SRs and other parties, a Bolshevik-led bloc would have had well over 30%.) The Constituent Assembly convened in January, 1918. After just one session, it was dispersed and never met again. Demonstrations in support were suppressed by the government. Workers were killed when Red Guards dispersed the demonstrators with live ammunition.

The Bolsheviks argued that the Assembly did not accurately reflect the support held by the different parties because the candidates were nominated before the Provisional government was overthrown and before the Left SRs formally broke with the right-wing of their party and formed their own party.

This seems a fair point. So why not, as Rosa Luxemburg suggested, hold new elections? (291) What effect did the suppression of this *means* have on the *end* of a democratic,

working-class led state?<sup>4</sup>

## On Ends and Means

For Kellogg, this discussion of ends and means is, ultimately, a discussion of ethics, which he argues “is deeply related to the tension between self-emancipation and substitutionism.” Clearly, Kellogg believes that the means used shape, alter or distort the ends achieved. He goes as far as stating that, “the ends we achieve are *completely* shaped by the means we employ.” (295)

To make the counter-argument, that the ends do justify the means employed to achieve them, he turns to Trotsky who, in his book, *Their Morals and Ours*, attempted to do just that.

In brief Trotsky argues that, yes, the ends justify the means; but the ends must also be justified. He writes, “From the Marxist point of view, which expresses the historical interests of the proletariat, the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another.” (TBB, 295)

Kellogg responds that “the historical interests of the proletariat” were “...not served by mass internment in the Gulag. They were not served by the mass depopulation of Leningrad in 1934 and 1935, nor by the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938. The historical interests of the German proletariat were ill-served by the instrument created by the Russian Revolution, the Communist International.”

Arguing that we cannot justify an action in the present by results that will become visible only in the future, he makes what seems to me to be the central point of this discussion of ends and means:

“(W)e do not and cannot know the long-term, or even immediate term, consequences of our actions. The very nature of ethics is to provide guidance as to what actions to take in the present, precisely when we are not aware of how things will work out in the future.” (296)

In *Truth Behind Bars*, Paul Kellogg has traced the germination of the seed that became dominant back to the earliest days of the revolution. His arguments, and those of Julius Martov, are bound to be controversial among defenders of the Russian Revolution, even those who do so critically.

Nevertheless, his book should be of interest to those defenders. It should also be of interest to those who are working toward future revolutions, as they weigh issues of ends and means as they decide on their strategies and tactics. ■

## Notes

1. Steinberg resigned his position in March, 1918, in protest over the signing of the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany. He did not participate in the uprising by some Left SRs against the Bolsheviks later in 1918. Arrested by the Cheka (early Soviet secret police) in early 1919, he was imprisoned for several months. He left the Soviet Union and went into exile in 1923.
2. *Lenin's Heir* (1945), from *Carnets* (1936-1947), Agone, Marseilles, 2012. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1945/05/lenins-heir.htm>
3. State terror refers to extreme physical coercion of suspected opponents of the state — in this case, the Soviet state. The means of terror included the taking of hostages to ensure good conduct by opponents, as well as the summary execution of hostages, prisoners, strikers and peasants. The “Red Terror” was declared in the fall of 1918, following the assassination of some leading Communists and the attempted assassination of Lenin. While the Red Terror and the Great Terror refer to specific periods of repression, Kellogg argues that the practice of political terror occurred outside of those specific periods. It was preceded by the closing of opposition newspapers and the suppression of opposition parties, and it pre-dated the Red Terror launched in 1918.
4. In the fall of 1918, the Mensheviks dropped their call for a Constituent Assembly. They explained this by arguing the Constituent Assembly had become “a screen behind which the party that won the elections (was) compromising ... with counterrevolutionary forces of capitalism and militarism...” from Martov’s letter of October 16, 1918, quoted in *The Mensheviks*, edited by Leopold H. Haimson, University of Chicago Press, 1974, 183.



# REVIEW

## Martov and the October Revolution

By Steve Downs

### World Bolshevism

By Julius Martov

Introduction by Paul Kellogg

Translated by Paul Kellogg and Mariya

Melentyeva

AU Press, 2019, U.S. Distribution by University of Chicago Press, 192 pages, \$30.99 paperback.<sup>1</sup>

VICTOR SERGE, IN the article cited in the previous review of *Truth Behind Bars*, noted:

*"In order to be fair I add that the Mensheviks, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, the anarchists, and some opposition communists, like Sapronov and Vladimir Smirnov demonstrated a clairvoyance in this regard (predicting prior to 1927 what Stalin would make of the revolution —SD) that must be recognized today as admirable and that served only to render them unpopular, since they went against the general sentiment and the sincerity of the party."*<sup>2</sup>

One of the most clear-sighted of those clairvoyants was Julius Martov of the Left Mensheviks. In *Truth Behind Bars*, Paul Kellogg introduced us to Martov and some of his writings on the October Revolution. Like Lenin and Trotsky, Martov was a party organizer, a Marxist theoretician, and a propagandist. Very few of his writings are available in English, however.

As a small step toward remedying that, Kellogg has (with Mariya Melentyeva) translated a 1919 work of Martov's, titled *World Bolshevism*. In this booklet Martov presents a critique of Bolshevism and, in the process, sketches out an argument about the social forces involved in the October Revolution.

At the start of the 20th century Martov had been, alongside Lenin, an editor of *Iskra*, the newspaper that tried to provide a political and organizing center for the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. When the split in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks occurred in 1903, Martov became a leader of the Mensheviks.

When World War I began, like the Bolsheviks, he opposed the war and was a key leader of the anti-war Menshevik-Internationalists, or Left Mensheviks. The Internationalists did not split from the Mensheviks but, instead, worked to win the party over to their position.

In the course of their political agitation against the war and czarism, the Mensheviks built a strong base in the small Russian proletariat. But Martov is probably best remembered, to the extent he's remembered

at all, for walking out of the meeting of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets on the day the Bolsheviks led the overthrow of the Russian government.

### The Peasant in Uniform

Kellogg highlights Martov's argument that the primary social force supporting the Bolsheviks in seizing power in October was "the peasant-in-uniform," not the working class. For Martov the "peasant-in-uniform" was a new, but temporary, social class that had been created by the war.

In the course of WWI, millions of peasants (and a far smaller number of industrial workers) had become severed from the process of production. The roots of this new class, according to Martov, were found in that separation from production and their experiences of several years in the trenches.

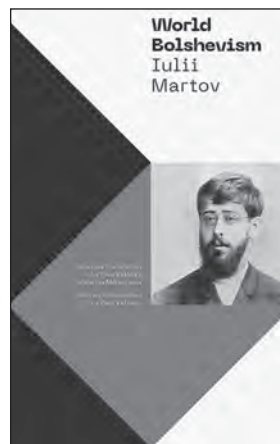
Martov described the politics of these peasants-in-uniform as "the communism of consumers." In addition, he describes the soldiers as "anti-parliamentarian," which he says was "quite understandable in a social environment not shaped, as in the past, through the school of collective defense of its interests, but in the present drawing its strength and influence exclusively from the possession of weapons."

He applies this analysis to movements of soldiers in England and Germany as well, concluding that "in both cases it is a question of a particular corporate consciousness nourished by the certainty that possession of weapons and the ability to use them makes it possible to control the destinies of the state." (*World Bolshevism*, 43)

He then concludes that "this view comes into fatal and irreconcilable conflict with the ideas of democracy and with parliamentary forms of government." (44)

### Martov In His Own Words

Martov's *World Bolshevism* is remarkable. Written in 1919 and only 80 pages long, it presents not only the theory of a temporary new class to explain the nature and trajectory of the October revolution, but also attempts to explain the spread of "Bolshevik" ideas to Western Europe, which had a more



developed working class and more limited peasantry than Russia did.

Martov underlines the effects of the war on working-class organization and politics — not just in Russia — and the consequent maximalism, hostility to parliamentarism, and readiness to resolve differences through force of arms.

If this was all that Martov did in this book, it would still be worth a read. However, he also discusses the Marxist theory of the state in the transition to communism.

This includes observations, at times sarcastic, on soviets and how they are treated, by *World Bolshevism*, as the model form of organization of political power almost regardless of the level of political and economic development of the society.

In this section, in words that are reminiscent of Trotsky's 1904 warning,\* Martov writes:

*"The transitional revolutionary state, according to theory, in contrast to the bourgeois state, should be an organ for the 'coercion of the minority by the majority' — an organ of majority rule [vlast]. In reality, it turned out to be the same organ of minority rule [vlast] (of a different minority, of course).*

*"Realization of this fact leads to an open or covert replacement of the power of the soviets [councils] with the power of a particular party. Little by little, the party becomes the principal state institution, the core of the entire system of the 'republic of soviets [councils].'"*

Martov then provides a succinct statement of the "substitutionism" that is central to Kellogg's book:

*"The 'soviet system' turns out to be a means of putting in place and maintaining in power a revolutionary minority that seeks to defend those interests of the majority that the latter either has not recognized as its own or has not recognized as its own sufficiently so as to defend them with maximum energy and determination."* (*World Bolshevism*, 68)

It's important to note that Martov's conviction that a temporary new class was the main social force backing the Bolsheviks does not mean that he thought the Russian

\*"In the internal politics of the Party these methods lead, as we shall see below, to the Party organization 'substituting' itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party organization, and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee." from Trotsky's *Our Political Tasks*.

working class didn't support the overturn. He makes this clear in *World Bolshevism*, when he writes:

*"In the specific conditions of contemporary Russia, this party dictatorship primarily reflects the interests and sentiments of the proletarian sections of the population. ... After 3 July 1917, we saw that Lenin envisaged the direct dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party, thereby bypassing the Soviets. We see now that in some places such a dictatorship is fully realized through the channels of revolutionary committees and party cells. All of this does not prevent it from retaining the strongest connection with the proletariat, in class terms reflecting above all the interests and aspirations of the urban working class."* (WB, 70)

This recognition of working-class support for the Bolsheviks presented an enormous dilemma and challenge to Martov. Just a few weeks after the overthrow of the provisional government, in a letter to Axelrod, another leading Menshevik, Martov wrote,

*"The time has come when conscience forbids us Marxists to do what seems to be our duty — stand by the proletariat even when it is wrong. After tormenting hesitations and doubts I have decided that the better course in the present situation is to 'wash one's hands' and temporarily step aside rather than play the role of opposition in the camp where Lenin and Trotsky determine the fate of the revolution."*

*"This is the situation. It is tragic. For, after all, what is going on is a victorious uprising of the proletariat; that is, almost the entire proletariat stands behind Lenin and expects the overturn to result in social emancipation — realizing all the while that it has challenged all the anti-proletarian forces. Under these conditions it is almost unbearable not to stand in the ranks of the proletariat, even if only in the role of opposition."*<sup>3</sup>

### What Were the Options?

In *The Bolsheviks Come To Power*, Alexander Rabinowitch describes the situation when the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets convened in Petrograd on the evening of October 25, 1917.

He writes that Martov called "for the creation of a united, democratic government acceptable to the entire democracy." Toward that end, "he recommended selection of a special delegation to initiate discussions with other political parties and organizations aimed at bringing to an immediate end the clash which had erupted in the streets." (BCTP, 292)

Lunacharsky (speaking for the Bolsh-

viks) stated that "the Bolshevik fraction has absolutely nothing against the proposal made by Martov." And "the congress documents indicate as well that Martov's proposal was quickly passed by unanimous vote." (BCTP, 293)



Police photo of Martov after his arrest in 1896.

Almost immediately after approval of Martov's proposal, speakers from the majority blocs of the SRs and the Mensheviks got up to denounce the Bolsheviks and walked out of the meeting.

This highlighted the problem Martov and the Menshevik-Internationalists had faced for months: They had pushed their comrades (from other Menshevik factions) in government to demand that the capitalist parties

end the war and begin land redistribution.

When the government would not do so, the Menshevik-Internationalists had pushed their comrades to break with the capitalist parties altogether and leave government. Now, when the question of forming a broad government of parties in the Soviet, a government of socialist parties, was put on the table — and broadly endorsed within the Soviet — the moderate socialists walked out of the Soviet.

Ultimately, the Menshevik-Internationalists also walked out of the Soviet that night. This was the occasion for Trotsky's famous remark, "You are miserable bankrupts, your role is played out; go where you ought to go: into the dustbin of history." (Quoted in BCTP, 296)

Martov's faction returned and took their seats in the congress the next day. Martov — along with other Mensheviks and members of the Left SRs — were expelled from the Central Executive Committee in June, 1918.

### Before October

Kellogg's reintroduction of Martov is welcome and thought-provoking, but I wish he had given more information on what the Menshevik-Internationalists were arguing for in the months leading up to October. To what extent do they represent the road not taken for the Russian Revolution? What did Martov call for in the summer and fall of 1917?

In czarist Russia, Martov and the Mensheviks, along with the Marxist movement more generally, held that the coming revolution would be a "bourgeois revolution," which they believed was necessary to create the conditions for the development of a modern industrial economy that would, in turn, create the conditions upon which a future work-

ing-class movement could build socialism.

For Marxists of all stripes, the overthrow of czarism in February, 1917 presented the opportunity to realize the necessary bourgeois revolution.

Martov and the Menshevik-Internationalists opposed participation in the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Other Menshevik factions did not, however, and there were Menshevik ministers in the government from April, 1917. Martov's faction, from their base in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets, tried to push the PRG to carry out two basic steps of a bourgeois revolution — initiate land reform and end the war.

After elements of the Kadets (the main capitalist party) supported General Kornilov's counter-revolutionary uprising in August, Martov opposed their further participation in government and called for a government accountable to the "revolutionary democracy" — that is, the working class, the peasantry and the urban and rural petit bourgeoisie.

For Martov, one of the main arguments against the Bolshevik plans for an insurrection was that this would cause the urban and rural petit bourgeoisie to abandon the revolution and side with the big capitalists and landowners and the counter-revolution.

In mid-September, the Mensheviks adopted resolutions opposing Kadet participation in the government cabinet. Nevertheless, the cabinet established on September 25 included both Mensheviks and Kadets. Less than a month later, the Bolsheviks led the overthrow of the PRG and established a government based upon the Soviets.<sup>4</sup>

Although I have sympathy for Martov's criticisms of the new Soviet government, I find myself asking about the real options in the fall of 1917.

In a situation where the PRG was unable/unwilling to address the fundamental tasks of land redistribution and ending the war; when the threat of counter-revolutionary action by big capitalists, landowners and much of the army's officer corps was very real; and with the German army threatening Petrograd, Martov and the Menshevik-Internationalists continued banking on the Constituent Assembly — which would not convene until January, 1918 — providing the basis for a government of "the revolutionary democracy."

Was this a viable strategy? Could the revolution hold out until then?<sup>5</sup> That was the "almost unbearable" fateful question that Martov, in his own words, could not resolve. ■

### Notes

1. AU Press offers online and PDF versions of *Truth Behind Bars* and *World Bolshevism* for free at their website. <https://www.aupress.ca/books/120285-truth-behind-bars/> and <https://www.aupress.ca/books/120288-world-bolshevism/>
2. *Lenin's Heir* (1945), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1945/05/lenins-heir.htm>
3. Letter to Axelrod quoted in the *The Mensheviks*, 103.
4. From *The Mensheviks* in 1917, Leo Lande's contribution to *The Mensheviks*, edited by L. Haimson.
5. See David Mandel. *The October Revolution: Its Necessity & Meaning*. <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc192/p5181/>

# REVIEW

## A Genocide in Its Context By Bill V. Mullen

### Gaza Faces History

By Enzo Traverso

Other Press, 2024, 127 pages, \$15.99 paperback.

JAMES BALDWIN ONCE wrote that the state of Israel was created out of “Western interests” and that Palestinians had long paid the price for Europe’s “guilty Christian conscience.”

Baldwin was referring both to the realpolitik support given by Europe to Zionism as a political project, and to Europe’s tawdry history of antisemitism that was an inducement to that support. The ruling classes of countries like England supported the creation of Israel, Baldwin knew, in part because they hoped it would relieve them of their own Jews.

It is significant and important then that a leading historian of modern Europe would write a book about how Europe and European history might be used to assess the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people.

Italian-born Enzo Traverso is the author of many books, including *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War 1914-1945*, and *The Origins of Nazi Violence*. More recently, he has written on the rise of new authoritarian states in the world, among which Israel might be counted as one.

In his new short book *Gaza Faces History*, Traverso offers what he calls “a critical meditation on the present and the ways that history has been summoned to interpret it.” It is a book unabashedly critical of Israel’s genocide, and strong in support of Palestinian self-determination.

It is also a bracing effort to wrest analysis of the genocide away from a narrow, American-centric perspective reflective of the fact that the United States stands today as the primary financial and political enabler of Israel and its genocidal war.

By way of a framework of European history, Traverso makes a number of important political and historical arguments helpful to radicals and activists attempting to see both the darkness and potential light at the end of the genocidal tunnel.

### Perpetrator as Victim

Traverso’s first chapter argues that Israel has successfully turned itself into a “victim” of October 7 for much of the Western world, despite perpetrating what by international legal definition is clearly a genocide.

European history is his ironic guide to fleshing out this double standard. Traverso notes that the International Criminal Court that has declared Israel’s genocide “plausible” is the “direct descendant of the Nuremberg courts; its initiatives are praised as long as they target the West’s enemies, such as Russia or Serbia, or the barbarians of the global South, as the butchers of Kigali [Rwanda]; they provoke an outcry when they are directed at Israeli leaders.”

Here Traverso introduces a running theme of this book, namely that since the state’s founding in 1948 Israel has successfully assimilated itself into becoming one of the Western powers.

This argument leads logically into the next chapter, “Orientalism,” recalling indirectly Edward Said’s famous argument that the Western world “creates” the non-Western world as a savage “Other.”

Traverso argues that Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims today remain outside of the West’s definition of “civilization.” Israel’s genocidal war embodies this fact.

Traverso cites Max Weber’s concept of “instrumental rationality”—a utilitarian form of reasoning upheld by the “Enlightenment” West—to describe an Israel Defense Force officer’s calculus for murdering Palestinians: “You don’t want to waste expensive bombs on unimportant people.”

Such “rationality,” Traverso argues, has now achieved the level of statecraft across Europe. He focuses in particular on Germany, where guilt and responsibility

for the Nazi holocaust have resulted in “unconditional support of Israel” articulated by Chancellors Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz as “reason of state” (Staatsraison), a term for “justifying illegal and immoral actions that are in fact a hidden face of the law.”

Thus, Germany’s repression of all opposition to the present genocide—including denying visas to former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and British surgeon Ghassan Abu-Sittah—are examples of antidemocratic censorship done in the name of “democracy.”

As Traverso puts it, “What’s wrong with discriminating against immigrants and Muslim, if it’s to defend the Jews?”

### Antisemitism Morphs to Islamophobia

Announcing another major theme of his book, Traverso shows how Europe’s histories of anti-Semitism have come home to roost as fanatical Islamophobia.

Traverso turns to Europe’s long history of war to contextualize the “false news” or “fake news” phenomenon that has accompanied the Palestinian genocide. Unproven media stories of Hamas baby beheadings and mass rape are analogized by Traverso to World War I stories in German newspapers about Belgians as “bloodthirsty beasts.”

Again, Traverso notes an ironic turn in histories of Western racism: “Whereas early-modern anti-Semitic mythology is intolerable, contemporary Islamophobic allegations have become banal: they have been integrated into our zeitgeist and belong to the natural order of things.”

Building out from this insight, Traverso’s chapter “Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism” examines the ways in which antisemitism has been “weaponized” mainly by right-wing and right-leaning governments both in the United States and Europe. Here too, history provides ironies.

Referring to a 1930s “transfer agreement” (allowing German Jewish emigration to Palestine) that undercut a global boycott movement against Nazi Germany, Traverso notes that “Whereas anti-fascists tried to create a mass move-

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*Bill V. Mullen is a member of the US Campaign for Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel collective. He is the author of We Charge Genocide! American Fascism and the Rule of Law (Fordham University Press) and, with Jeanette K. Hope, The Black Antifascist Tradition: Fighting Back from Anti-Lynching to Abolition (Haymarket Books).*





Gazans trekking north to their homes, mostly now reduced to rubble.

ment against Nazism, Zionists made an agreement with Hitler.”

Today the Meloni government, directly descended from Italian fascism, “can simultaneously affirm her support for Israel and their membership in the Western camp, stigmatize the Left, and pursue xenophobic policies toward migrants.”

Traverso notes an important, pernicious effect of this conjuncture: “Fighting anti-Semitism will become increasingly difficult given the distortion and misappropriation of the term.”

### Roots of Violent Resistance

Traverso’s chapter “Violence, Terrorism, Resistance” was for this reader the most complex and innovative one in the book. Traverso begins by arguing that Hamas’s October 7, 2023 attack on Israel “must be analyzed, not simply deplored.” Traverso recalls that “Killing

civilians, as deplorable as it may be, has always been the weapon of the weak in asymmetric wars.”

He notes that not just Hamas but Nelson Mandela’s ANC, the PLO before Oslo, and Vietnam’s NLF all killed civilians as part of their wars against colonial or imperial aggression. In the European context, Traverso reminds us

that Auschwitz inmates used violence against their oppressors in order to affirm their humanity.

For Traverso the political lesson to be drawn is this: “Decades of memory politics, focused almost exclusively on the suffering of the victims, aiming to present the cause of the oppressed as the triumph of innocence, have obscured a reality that has seemed obvious at other times. The oppressed rebel by resorting to violence, and this violence is neither pretty nor idyllic, and is sometimes even horrifying.”

Traverso’s argument here recalls an analogous one made in his 2016 book *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. Writing nearly 30 years after the collapse of “official” Soviet Communism, he wrote that the receding distance of the 20th century’s great revolutions had made it easier to remember defeat rather than victory, especially for Socialists.

Traverso’s meditation on liberatory revolutionary violence in *Gaza Faces History* makes a similar point about our memory and evaluation of past national liberation struggles.

Philosopher and activist Alberto Toscano has written since the genocide began of the prospects for describing the contemporary state of Israel as fascist (“The War on Gaza and Israel’s Fascism Debate,” [versobooks.com](https://versobooks.com), October 19, 2023)

Traverso wades into this territory, focusing in on what he calls “Jewish supremacy” thought in Israel. Traverso argues that Israeli state leaders’ descriptions of Palestinians as “human animals” and “roaches in a bottle” has blurred the boundaries between tactics used in the Nazi holocaust against Jews and Israel’s genocidal war.

The destruction of Gaza by the IDF, he writes, recalls the razing of the Warsaw ghet-

to by General Stroop in 1943. “Netanyahu is not Hitler, and his government is not a Nazi regime, that is obvious,” he writes. And yet, “it looks as though Israel is doing everything it can to erase the difference.”

### Toward Resolution

Traverso leans most fully — and optimistically — into European history in his final chapter, “From the River to the Sea.” Here, he openly endorses what the early PLO, a branch of the Israeli left (Matzpen) and many Palestinians themselves have called for, namely a binational state with equal rights for all citizens.

Pushing back against Zionist claims for total control of the region “from the river to the sea,” Traverso forcefully argues that “the idea of a binational state is no way anti-Semitic, and it certainly doesn’t equate with wanting to expel Jews from Palestine.” He continues:

*“Why would a binational Israeli-Palestinian state be impossible or irrational? In the throes of World War II, the idea of building a European federation combining Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands would have seemed strange and naïve. But ten years later, the process of building Europe had started... Why would the same not be true in the Middle East?... Sometimes tragedies serve to open up new horizons.”*

Traverso’s “optimism of the will” may strike some readers as discordant given the daily, ongoing human horror of the current genocide. He also admits at the start and end of his book that there are limits to analogy, and that European history and Middle East history have their own contours.

Yet other writers, like Ali Abunimah, have also offered up South Africa, and northern Ireland, as potential templates for what could become a post-colonized, post-apartheid Palestine.

While much of what Traverso argues in his book will be familiar to readers heavily versed in histories of Zionism, Israel and the Palestinians, he does offer a silent demand, I believe, that it will require a breaking apart of Europe’s hegemonic support for Israel — in combination with a loosening of the U.S. imperial death grip on the region -- to break the shackles and stay the bombs in Palestine.

Indeed, elsewhere in his work on authoritarian states, Traverso has made the argument that the Arabs and Muslims of our time are like the Jews of prior centuries — the most heavily targeted and violently expelled peoples from “Fortress Europe.”

In this context, *Gaza Faces History* is a powerful appendix and coda to very long epoch in Western histories of racism, imperialism and empire that can only be re-routed, one concludes, when Palestinians themselves are emancipated. The task of making this happen, Traverso clearly suggests, belongs to all of us. ■

### Books by Enzo Traverso

ENZO TRAVERSO’S PREVIOUS books cover topics in European history and leftwing thought, including the lessons of fascism and the Nazi holocaust which he sees as essential to understanding the 20th and 21st centuries. He contributed an article “Inside the European Cataclysm” in *Against the Current* 176 (May-June 2015). His works include: *Singular Pasts: The “I” in Historiography* (2022) *Revolution: An Intellectual History* (2021) *The New Faces of Fascism. Populism and the New Right* (2019) *Left-Wing Melancholia. Marxism, History, and Memory* (2016) *The End of Jewish Modernity* (2013) *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945* (2007) *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (2003) *Understanding the Nazi Genocide* (1990) *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate, 1843-1943* (1990)

# REVIEW

## The Zionist Lobby: A Chronicle By Don Greenspon

### Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic

By Ilan Pappé

Oneworld Publications, 2024. xviii +521 pages plus bibliography and index, \$40 hardcover.

*"At the end of the day, many people in the twenty-first century cannot continue to accept a colonization project requiring military occupation and discriminatory laws to sustain itself. There is a point at which the lobby cannot endorse this brutal reality and continue to be seen as moral in the eyes of the world. I believe and hope this point will be reached within our lifetimes."* (521)

THIS IS THE hopeful conclusion of Ilan Pappé's book. At the outset, this anti-Zionist Israeli historian poses a rhetorical question: "Why does this Jewish state still crave recognition of its legitimacy in the West?" (xi)

In other words, why are the State of Israel and its lobby so intent on opposing "delegitimization" 75 years after its establishment? Given Israel's enormous political and economic power, why do Israel and its Christian and Jewish lobbies on both sides of the Atlantic invest so many resources in trying to establish its legitimacy?

According to Pappé, a key to resolving the apparent riddle is that those who led the Zionist movement and later Israel were inherently aware of the injustice of the Zionist project. In contrast to some diplomatic studies, Pappé's narrative never lets the reader forget the underlying reality of Palestinian dispossession, ethnic cleansing and suffering.

He also emphasizes that "Palestinians are not just victims of Israel; they are also agents of their own destiny" whose struggles for their rights "mean that Zionists need to actively erase and deny the past in order to brush over the ethical and moral problems associated with the founding of the state of Israel." (xiii)

Pappé observes how Israel differs from other settler-colonial states such as the United States and Australia, which crushed the Native Americans and Australian Aborigines to the point that they no longer pose any threat, while the Palestinians remain a living people still resisting their oppression. Pappé maintains that Israel's consciousness of its origins partly underpins the necessity of its constant advocacy.

*Don Greenspon is an attorney and member of Jewish Voice for Peace-Detroit.*

Ilan Pappé is the author of important previous books including *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*; *Out of the Frame: The Struggle for Academic Freedom in Israel*; *A Modern History of Palestine*; and *The Forgotten Palestinians. A History of the Palestinians in Israel*.

Pappé's new work, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic*, is a comprehensive account of the Zionist movement's and Israel's lobbying efforts, unusual in discussing both Britain and the United States as arenas for the work. While it's not possible to cover it all in this review, we'll survey some of the book's important themes.

The book is detailed but highly readable, including sidelights where the author indulges his obvious love of architectural history, describing historic buildings in Britain and America where elite meetings, conferences or mass public events took place.

### Christian Zionism Predates Political Zionism

Pappé's opening chapter "The Christian Harbingers of Zionism" points out how the concept of an organized Jewish "return to the Holy Land," began as a Christian discourse before becoming a Jewish political movement in the late 19th century. Christian Zionist beliefs posit that the Jews were and remain God's "chosen people," that God gave Palestine to the Jews, and so Jews should be in Palestine.

Jewish return to Palestine is seen particularly by Christian evangelicals as a precondition for an eventual Armageddon to rain down on earth — exterminating Jews and other non-converts to evangelism in the process — while bringing the return of Christ in the apocalyptic Second Coming anticipated in Revelation, the final book of the Bible.

Until then, the Jews as the chosen people would enjoy God's protection (and the unconditional support of evangelicals), especially in returning to Palestine. Most conveniently, for colonialist thinkers their presence was also conceived as "closely associated with the expansion of British influence in the Arab world as a whole and in Palestine in particular." (11)

Pappé demonstrates the impact that Christian Zionism had on political Zionism,



inspiring Jewish intellectuals such as Theodore Herzl seeking a remedy for anti-Semitism, especially in Eastern Europe.

In the UK, support for Zionism progressed through elite figures from Lord Balfour and David Lloyd-George to Harold Wilson, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, all of whom had an evangelical Christian background. This same influence occurred in the United States where Presidents such as Harry Truman and Bill Clinton seem to be influenced in their support for the Israel lobby by their Baptist upbringings.

In Truman's case it is widely believed that being a devout Baptist and inspired by the Bible caused Truman to immediately recognize Israel on May 15, 1948, against the advice of many of his trusted advisers.

In 2017 the Israeli government initiated an annual Christian Media Summit to enhance communications with Christian figures, including far-right preachers. In a 2019 state visit to Brazil, then and Israel's current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, heaped praise on both Brazilian evangelicals and the authoritarian Bolsonaro government, declaring: "We have no better friends in the world than the Evangelical community."

Just recently President elect Donald Trump has nominated Mike Huckabee as Ambassador to Israel and the notorious Pete Hegseth as Secretary of Defense. Both have strong Christian Zionist beliefs. Speaking to reporters in 2017, Huckabee said the following:

*"There are certain words I refuse to use. There is no such thing as a West Bank. It's Judea and Samaria. There's no such thing as a settlement. They're communities. They're neighborhoods. They're cities. There is no such thing as an occupation."*

And Hegseth speaking in Jerusalem a few years ago made the following inflammatory comment:

*"There's no reason why the miracle of the reestablishment of the temple on the Temple Mount is not possible."*

Indeed, in recent years AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), the central pillar of the Zionist lobby, turned to the U.S. Christian evangelical movement as its most trusted supporter. It has also long abandoned its onetime bipartisan stance in both U.S. and Israeli politics, aligning itself with the Republican Party and hard-right Israeli forces.



## Antisemitic Motivations

Pappe describes the ways that much support for Zionism was animated by anti-Semitism. The 67-word Balfour Declaration from Lord Arthur Balfour, then the British Foreign Secretary, which announced that the British government would support establishing a national home for the Jewish people, would change the course of history in the Middle East “once it was incorporated into the [League of Nations] Mandate charter in 1922.” (54)

Despite his iconic support for Zionism, Balfour was hardly a friend to the Jews. In the late 19th century, pogroms targeting Jews in Eastern Europe led to waves of Jewish refugees to England and the United States. This influx led to an increase in anti-immigrant racism in general and antisemitism in particular.

As English public sentiment grew for keeping Jews out, the public found a sympathetic ear in Balfour. While serving as Britain's Prime Minister in 1905, Balfour presided over the passage of the Aliens Act which restricted immigration, primarily Jewish immigration. According to the historical record, Balfour gave passionate speeches about the necessity of restricting waves of Jewish refugees fleeing the Russian Empire from entering Britain.

Edwin Montagu, a Jewish cabinet member, waged war against the Balfour Declaration. He recognized that much support for Zionism was motivated by the desire to get rid of the Jews, and the establishment of the Zionist project would in turn fuel further anti-Semitism.

Pappe quotes Montagu in this regard:

*“When the Jews are told that Palestine is their national home, every country will immediately desire to get rid of its Jewish citizens, and you will find a population in Palestine driving out its current inhabitants.”*

Montagu continued:

*“If Palestine will be the National Home of the Jews—all the voters in my constituency will tell me: Go Home.” (47)*

In the early 1900s Louis Brandeis, who later became an esteemed justice of the United States Supreme Court, was tasked with rallying support for Zionism in America.

Previously a true believer in America being a “melting pot,” Brandeis had to deal with the phenomenon later referred to as the “dual loyalty problem.” He was forced to shift gears from viewing American Jews as members of society who happened to belong to a religion, to seeing them as members of a national group entitled to their own homeland.

To accomplish this sleight of hand, Brandeis invented bizarre aphorisms such as: “To be good Americans we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews we must become Zionists.” (109) Such verbal gymnastics notwithstanding, Brandeis did very little to solve



Refugee camp from 1948 Nakba.

this conundrum.

In Britain the Labour Party, contrary to conventional wisdom, was and has been a stronger supporter of Zionism than the Conservative Party. Until 1914, the socialist Second International took an assimilationist perspective on the “Jewish question:” Jews were part of the working class, who despite having a different language and distinct customs, were not a nation.

In 1919 the reconstituted Socialist International reconsidered Zionism. It passed a resolution sponsored by Poale Zion (antecedent to the Jewish Labor Movement) recognizing the right of the Jewish people to a national homeland in historical Palestine.

The justification for this change in position was twofold. First, the Zionist project was lauded as bringing superior civilization to the Arabs. Second, Zionism was supposedly solving the plight of Jewish workers by creating a “socialist society” which would play a lead role in economic development.

## Accusations of Antisemitism

In discussing the use of “antisemitism” accusations for the lobby's advocacy, Pappe highlights its false charges targeting J. William Fulbright and Jeremy Corbyn in the United States and Britain respectively.

From 1962-1974 J. William Fulbright was one of America's most principled and powerful Senators. He had a record of being on the right side of history, he rejected McCarthyism, criticized Kennedy's adventurism in Cuba, sought détente with Russia, advocated for the disarmament of nuclear weapons, and eventually became a critic of the Vietnam War.

He became a critic of AIPAC because of Israel's repressive policy towards the Palestinians, his feeling that U.S. policy was abandoning the Arab world, and he especially questioned AIPAC's domestic operations.

As Chair of the Senate's powerful Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright was concerned how foreign countries and

their lobbies (especially Israel and AIPAC) influenced foreign policy.

He alleged that AIPAC was in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act and held hearings that produced damning evidence which made him the lobby's arch nemesis who had to be deposed by any means necessary. Campaign money poured into the coffers of his rival, Arkansas Governor Dale Bumpers, who defeated Fulbright in the May 1974 Democratic primary election.

A young Senator from Delaware, Joe Biden, was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at this time. The campaign against Fulbright became an AIPAC model for the future, which has used its vast resources to defeat progressive candidates such as Andy Levin, Jamal Bowman and Cori Bush in recent elections.

In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 election to lead the Labour Party antagonized the pro-Israel lobby, which worked to depose him from day one. The lobby tried to scrape the bottom of the barrel with numerous false accusations to tar Corbyn as an antisemite.

The specific examples of Corbyn's alleged antisemitism were fabrications: he never said Jews don't understand “English irony,” he did not lay a wreath to terrorists, and he did not approve of an antisemitic mural.

The lobby's attacks on Corbyn occurred even though his views on Israel/Palestine were objectively moderate, virtually identical to those expressed by most British diplomats and senior politicians.

Pappe reasonably asks: “Why did the lobby see him as such a threat?” He answers: “They suspected, correctly, that he sincerely believed in a just two-state solution and wouldn't swallow Israel's excuses for obstructing it.” (471)

What also must be said is that these intentionally false charges helped derail Corbyn's Labour Party's real and popular economic case for reversing austerity, and Britain

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# REVIEW

## Oil Dollars at Work

By Dianne Feeley

### Crude Capitalism

Oil, Corporate Power, and  
the Making of the World Market

By Adam Hanieh

Verso Books, 2024. 336 pages, \$29.95 hardcover.

*CRUDE CAPITALISM* IS a concise and fast-paced history of oil's political and economic significance in facilitating and expanding a world capitalist market over the past 150 years. Its author warns us, however, against seeing oil as the driving force: "it is simply a sticky black goo."

The resource becomes a valuable commodity in the capitalist logic of accumulation. Indeed, over the last third of the book Adam Hanieh explains that this dense energy resource has become even more than a commodity, but transformed into a financial derivative.

Beginning with Chapter 1, the author frames the history of oil as a commodity whose dominance now threatens human life:

*"Oil, in other words, remains at the core of our economy and our energy systems; without dislodging it from this position there is no possibility of ensuring a future for humanity."* (3)

In 13 chapters Hanieh shows how the drivers of the capitalist economy recognized the superiority of oil over other fossil sources because of its density and portability. By 1950, oil supplied the majority of U.S. industry and energy; within a decade Europe and Japan also switched to oil.

Transforming oil into a commodity and getting it to consumers required considerable infrastructure. The most successful and profitable industrial model became the vertically-integrated firm controlling upstream (extraction) as well as downstream (pipelines, shipping, refining, storage, marketing, and developing new products).

Non-integrated and smaller firms owned the majority of the wells, and bore the risk of maintaining production and exploring new fields. Yet they were forced to sell their crude oil to firms that moved, refined and marketed their resource.

Although the power of the largest and wealthiest U.S. firms was challenged with passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890), their lawyers and lobbyists were able to find various ways to circumvent the law.

Eventually a firm that coordinated upstream and downstream operations was transformed into a network of subsidiaries.

*Dianne Feeley is an editor of ATC.*

This enhanced their capacity to set prices, block competitors and move their money internally to minimize taxes and royalty payments.

### The Changes War Brings

U.S. oil firms got a head start in the early 20th century as oil fed the growing auto industry. It was also crucial in building the U.S. arms industry, fueling ships, submarines, airplanes, trucks, motorcycles, even the manufacture of explosives. Eighty percent of the oil used by the Allies in World War I came from the United States.

By 1918 a joint board of federal officials and the largest U.S. firms worked together to strategize the country's energy policies. Part of the planning meant tax breaks including depletion allowances specific to the oil industry. Later most of these mechanisms were extended to the firms' overseas operations and continue today.

Although the United States came out of World War I an ascending power, European countries had investments in oil-producing countries in the Middle East. Indeed, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire enlarged their control. But one important oil field, on the coast of the Caspian Sea, slipped from Swedish and British control by the Russian Revolution and subsequent nationalization of the Baku fields. This separate development demonstrated a possible alternative path for subsequent anti-colonial struggles.

On the eve of World War II, the U.S. market was dominated by a core of 20 vertically-integrated firms with thousands of small producers and retailers working with them. Hanieh notes that the bifurcation of the U.S. domestic market was a mirror of the international one, which was dominated by European firms.

### After World War II

World War II provided a unique opportunity for U.S. firms to extend their infrastructure and supply the Allied forces. With the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement, the international oil market was priced in the U.S. dollar and pegged to the gold standard. As the clear victor, Washington imposed conditions on defeated Germany and Japan, banning them from using coal to produce synthetic fuels. Although the orders were reversed several years later, by then coal-to-fuel plants had been closed or converted.

Further, between 1948-52 Washington's passage of the Marshall Plan provided \$13

billion in reconstruction aid to Europe. This enabled European countries to purchase U.S. goods and services, specifically requiring at least one-tenth to be spent on U.S. oil.

As Walter Levy, head of the Marshall Plan's oil division and former economist for Mobil, later remarked, without the plan "the American oil industry in Europe would have been shot to pieces." (102)

As early as 1947, Saudi Arabia's Aramco, which became the world's largest oil producer, came under the control of four U.S. firms.

While before the war U.S. firms held 10% of the Middle East's oil, by the early 1950s they held the majority. oil in the Middle East was cheaper to extract and bring to market than in the United States. In fact, Hanieh reports, four-fifths of the price of a barrel of crude oil was pure profit. (113)

Over the next decade and aided by generous tax benefits, U.S. firms supplied 60% of the world's manufacturing output and slightly more than a quarter of the world's GDP. This golden moment of U.S. capitalism was bolstered by the range of downstream operations. Five U.S. oil firms along with Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum, known as the Seven Sisters, dominated the world market.

With the most developed chemical industry in the world, Germany saw an estimated \$700 billion of its patents seized by Washington and sold well below value to U.S. firms — DuPont, Union Carbide & Carbon Corporation, Dow Chemical and Monsanto to name a few. As Hanieh explains the expansion of the market this meant:

*"Today it is almost impossible to identify an area of life that has not been radically transformed by the presence of petrochemicals. Whether as feedstocks for manufacture and agriculture; the primary ingredients of construction materials, cleaning products, and clothing; or the packaging that makes transport, storage and retail possible — our social being is bound to a seemingly unlimited supply of cheap and disposable petrochemicals."* (154)

The petrochemical industry transformed industrial production, sparked automation and drove mass consumption.

### Anti-Colonial Victories and Setbacks

As Europe was being rebuilt in the aftermath of World War II, countries still controlled by these imperialist powers were demanding their independence and then nationalizing their oil industry.

Britain was able to remain a major player

through its oil interests in Iran, Iraq and Kuwait while begrudgingly accepting that its firms might need to compromise on royalty fees and taxes to prevent nationalization. It sought, above all, to keep its financial advantage through maintaining London as a financial center.

When Iran nationalized its oil industry under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1951, Britain imposed an international boycott. But the 1953 British-U.S. coup that restored Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi did not restore the British monopoly nor reverse the nationalization. Instead, Washington maneuvered to win a favored financial and political relationship with the Shah, which lasted until his overthrow in 1979.

In summarizing the anti-colonial struggle that erupted in the post-World War II period, Hanieh focuses on the Middle East but mentions struggles in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Seeking collaboration, these newly independent countries came together in a series of conferences during the latter half of the 1950s. Although these discussed a wide range of cultural, political and economic issues, above all they sought to control the pricing of their crude oil and expand their infrastructure to capture more of its value.

By 1960 five major oil-producing countries — Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Venezuela — established the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). At that time, these five produced 37% of the world's crude oil.

The promise of OPEC would be cut short by counter-revolutionary events in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Hanieh summarizes how the radical anti-colonial movements that underpinned OPEC were overwhelmed by the repression these events unleashed.

OPEC did break the power of the Seven Sisters, who no longer controlled the growing share of oil reserves. However, in the new environment a huge portion of the oil wealth remained in the oil-producing countries, particularly through the sale of military weapons and technical oversight.

Even the “petrodollars” that were soaked up by the ruling elite ended up as secure investments in Western banks, properties and bonds. Further reinforcing their control, autocratic leaders in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states expanded their production by importing a working class without citizenship rights, whose protests over working conditions can lead to deportations.

### Moving to Neoliberalism

In opposition to the theory that OPEC produced the oil crisis of the 1970s, Hanieh examines how several factors bookended the economic crises.

In 1971 the U.S. Nixon administration stopped pegging the dollar to the gold stan-



dard. This sudden decrease in the value of their oil reserves led the OPEC countries to revolt, launching what would be a five-month partial embargo. Insisting that oil be priced at the point of extraction, they successfully increased the price sixfold over four years.

While dominant U.S. and British firms used the moment to lobby their governments for “energy independence” as a way to bypass environmental regulations and obtain a green light on their projects, they no longer had the power to mount a strangling oil boycott as they had on Mossadegh's Iran.

To expand into more distant and costly oil fields, U.S. firms used the more deregulated Euromarkets to obtain cheap credit. As these capital flows moved across borders, the poorer, non-exporting countries also signed up for cheap credit, using commercial banks with variable interest rates.

When the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank's director, Paul Volcker, decided to halt U.S. inflation in 1980 by raising interest rates to a crippling 20%, oil prices collapsed. This decision came as oil supplies were expanding and were being purchased in a quick cash “spot” market. Debtor nations found that the “easy” credit disappeared, replaced by hefty debt service payments.

As Hanieh explains:

*“Dominated by Anglo-American financial institutions, this new architecture of global finance would help re-embed the primacy of the American state and the U.S. dollar at a time of major political and economic uncertainty. It would also enable the appearance of new modes of wealth extraction and dependency across much of the globe, expressed most particularly through the chains of debt that emerged following the oil shocks [of 1973-74 and 1979-80].” (181)*

### Financialization

In the aftermath of the 1979-83 crisis, the oil market continued its sluggish performance as many European countries sold off their state-owned oil firms. Privatizations and mega-mergers altered not only the firms' ownership but their structure, operation and practices. By 1988, oil emerged as a financial

derivative traded on the International Currency Exchange (ICE) and New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX). Instead of relying on banks for loans, oil firms seek issuance of equity or debt securities on the stock market.

This financialization demands short-term maximization of the stock price, not longer-term goals. Share buybacks is one strategy for increasing shareholder returns, another is cost cutting.

Hanieh cites one U.S. government survey showing that the top 25 U.S. companies halved employment between 1985-95. In-house work was often outsourced, including drilling and well maintenance, marine transportation and information technology. Worldwide between 1980-97, fully 60% of the oil industry's work force was laid off.

The new model also meant decentralization in each sector, turning the vertically-integrated industry into a modular structure. Those elements deemed to be underperforming were closed down or sold off. When the firm needed to expand, it was cheaper to invest in a company than build a facility.

Once acquired, the new company's “excess” capacity would be eliminated. In 1980 there were 24 top vertically-integrated U.S. oil firms, by 1990 there were 19; a decade later only nine, today just four.

Although their primary business is oil, these supermajors rebranded themselves as “energy” companies supplying natural gas, wind, solar and renewables. But their major commodity is oil.

### The Russian Model

Having introduced the separate path of oil production taken by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution, Hanieh develops a fascinating chapter on the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the creation — within less than a decade — of a capitalist class. As early as 1997, *Forbes* listed five Russians among the world's top billionaires; by 2003 there were 17. Capital flight was moving about three billion a month abroad.

To end the instability that this breakneck transition caused, Russian President

Boris Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin prime minister in 1999. His task was to reverse the economic, political and social crisis.

Putin made the decision to target Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who owned Yukos, the country's largest vertically-integrated firm. Accused of economic crimes, Khodorkovsky and his partner were sentenced to prison for nine years. By disciplining one of the country's wealthiest industrialists, Putin established his authority over the capitalist class.

He also projected Russian power internationally by merging Yukos' assets into state-owned Rosneft. Hanieh cautions the reader: "(I)t is a mistake to counterpose the state and the market as two separate and antithetical spheres of economic activity. Oil remains the nexus that mutually binds the growth of Russia's billionaire class and the repressive, authoritarian state that Putin has built." (226)

This transition occurred during a decade-long oil boom on the international market. Given that Putin prioritized developing a global market for its resources, countries previously in the Soviet orbit, including in Eastern Europe and Cuba, no longer had access to deeply discounted oil prices.

### How to Prevent Disaster

As oil prices rebounded in the 21st century, significant investments were made in areas where extraction was more expensive. This included producing oil and gas through offshore deep-water drilling, fracking, and extraction in the Alberta tar sands. These methods are not only more expensive, but more ecologically destructive.

This is also evident in Western oil companies' expansion into Africa, particularly Angola and Nigeria. Having negotiated profitable contracts with state-owned companies, these firms have little concern for the ecological or social devastation wrought by their activities. The cost of a barrel of African oil is a third to a half less than that of other countries.

With foreign investments and commercial firms flocking to China in the 1990s, the country mobilized its rural workers and transformed itself into "the workshop of the world."

Today a manufacturing network has transformed not only China but East Asia. Consuming almost one-third of the world's oil and expanding its infrastructure, this area has become the global center of petrochemical production and consumption.

As the result of this dynamic interplay, Middle Eastern and North African oil is increasingly shipped eastward. While the same 15 Western firms and national oil companies (NOCs) control half of the world's oil resources, the Western firms have slipped from top place.

Today only one Western firm, ExxonMobil, is in the top four. The other three are Saudi and Chinese NOCs, with Saudi Arabia's

Aramco the most valuable company in the world. These NOCs are vertically integrated firms with many privately owned downstream activities.

Hanieh sees two dominant parts of the oil industry: the national oil companies and the Western firms that he describes as supermajors. Both are huge and diversified corporations controlled by their shareholders, although for the NOCs, the principal shareholder is the government.

At this point, the two work primarily in regional, but occasionally overlapping, areas. The North American market is largely self-contained, while the rest of the world needs imports to meet its needs.

Until Putin's war on Ukraine, Russia shipped half of its oil to Europe. With the EU imposing restrictions, Russian oil has been rerouted to India and China.

This dynamic East-East hydrocarbon axis reveals the weakening of U.S. global power and threatens the continuation of oil prices being set in U.S. dollars. While this explains Washington's interest in controlling Middle East oil production even while the United States remains in control of the world's oil resources, Hanieh projects a future, circling back to his introduction.

*Crude Capitalism* not only outlines the changing dynamics of the oil industry, but also show how that has produced immense profit for those who have captured fossil resources and used their governments to ensure continued profits.

## The Palestine Wars on Campus

ATTACKS ON CAMPUS activism continue as a leading wedge of the Trump-Musk administration's full-frontal assault on education, race and gender equality, basic government services, and the U.S. Constitution. This is the context for news that breaks daily.

On February 4, reports Jennifer Ruth on Academe Blog, "the Department of Education announced investigations into Columbia University, Northwestern University, Portland State University, the University of California Berkeley, and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, explaining that 'widespread antisemitic harassment has been reported' at these five institutions."

In reality, an official from Portland State explains, these are "directed investigations" ordered by the new administration — not responding to any specific complaint from an individual.

Among the five universities named, at least two — Columbia and Northwestern — have themselves been attacking pro-Palestinian activism by students and faculty, including the suspension or firing of tenured professors.

At the University of Michigan, the

In his concluding chapter, the author outlines the false solutions to the disaster of carbon emissions. He concludes that the technical fixes offered are totally inadequate. So too is the idea that adding green energy to the mix will reverse the planet's warming. Instead Hanieh sketches out an alternative to the various technical proposals, demanding:

*"We must confront the multiple logics of a social system that has served to centre oil throughout all aspects of our lives. And we cannot extricate ourselves from oil's pervasiveness — certainly not at the pace necessary to halt runaway climate change — while remaining within this social system."* (310-11)

The only way to break with an increasingly destructive consumer world is to prioritize humanity's social needs and repair the world in which we must live. *Crude Capitalism* concludes with briefly outlining an eco-socialist perspective. This means expanding social needs (access for all to housing, health, education), an immediate limit on destructive forms of production/consumption, and massive reparations to the vulnerable who have been forced to live in abject poverty.

This wide-ranging history of oil ends with a vision of a democratic and egalitarian society where people, not the market, make the decisions. Hanieh concludes:

*"As the history of oil over the last century confirms, capitalist states exist to support and facilitate the accumulation of capital, and this cannot be changed without a root-and-branch transformation of society."* (313) ■

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan and the Sugar Law Center have "filed a federal lawsuit (February 3) on behalf of people whom the University of Michigan has banned from its Ann Arbor campus after they participated in pro-Palestine protests on campus..."

"Along with blocking their participation in future campus protests — whether about Palestine or any other issue of public concern — the bans can keep students from attending class, stop others from performing work-related duties on school property, and prevent communities from stepping foot on a vast campus that is generally open to the public."

The bans were imposed at hearings where "no evidence was presented" and "no explanation was offered," claims the ACLU of Michigan.

Meanwhile Donald Trump announces that he'll revoke the visas and deport "alien students" who "support jihad," meaning any advocacy for Palestinian people's rights.

None of this is separate, of course, from giving Trump's attack-Doggie Elon Musk access to the Treasury Department with the personal information of every U.S. taxpayer. Resistance must engage on multiple fronts. ■



# REVIEW

## All Eyes on Palestine! By Frann Michel

### **The Palestine Exception** (2024)

dir. Jan Haaken and Jennifer Ruth  
prod. Marlene Eid

### **The Night Won't End: Biden's War on Gaza** (2024)

dir. & prod. Kavitha Chekuru  
Al Jazeera's Fault Lines

### **Where Olive Trees Weep** (2024)

dir. Maurizio Benazzo and Zaya Benazzo  
prod. Science and NonDuality

### **Israelism** (2023)

dir. Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen  
prod. Daniel J. Chalfen, Nadia Saah, Erin Axelman

### **Tantura** (2022)

dir. Alon Schwartz  
dist. Journeyman Pictures

### **Occupation of the American Mind** (2016; 2023)

dir. Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp,  
prod. Media Education Foundation

### **Roadmap to Apartheid** (2012)

dir. and prod. Eron Davidson and Ana Nogueira

"PEOPLE SEE PALESTINIAN violence but they don't see Israeli violence," says Israeli journalist and daughter of Holocaust survivors Amira Hass in *Where Olive Trees Weep*, one of the many documentaries seeking to change that pattern.

But that pattern is changing, too, as Israeli violence has become more visible with the genocidal assault on Gaza since October 2023. As Palestinian-American scholar Saree Makdisi says in *The Palestine Exception*, the knowledge is out there, the genie is out of the bottle, the bottle is broken, and the question now is whether people can be "pummeled into silence."

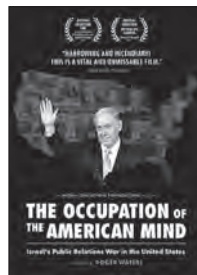
The pattern of silencing and suppression, in turn, has long been carefully cultivated both within and beyond Israel by government officials, advocacy organizations, public relations firms and think tanks seeking to suppress awareness and criticism of Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Such suppression has also itself been the subject of recent documentary films. Of the many films about Palestine and the conflicts over Palestinian advocacy, I comment here chiefly on the political import of some of the more accessible, recent, and compelling feature-length documentaries.

Frann Michel is a writer and activist in Portland, Oregon.

We see Israeli violence and the suffering of Palestinians in the occupied territories in *Where Olive Trees Weep*, *Roadmap to Apartheid*, and, with particular attention to events of the past year, *The Night Won't End*.

Israel's repressive self-mythologizing is addressed in *Tantura*, while *Occupation of the American Mind* and *Israelism* also explore the maintenance and enforcement of those myths by Israel's advocates in the USA.



### **Free Speech Abolished?**

*The Palestine Exception* focuses on the suppression of the movement for justice in Palestine on U.S. campuses. (Disclosure: I have worked with Jan Haaken on past projects and am listed as a supporter of *The Palestine Exception*.)

The "Palestine exception to free speech" (or "the Palestine exception to academic freedom") refers to the failure of free speech protections to accommodate criticism of Israel in various Western countries (or on academic campuses).

The phrase gained currency with the 2015 report by the Center for Constitutional Rights and Palestine Legal, *The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the US*, documenting the "widespread and growing suppression of Palestinian human rights advocacy in the United States."

At this writing the U.S. Senate has not passed the proposed federal legislation that would codify criticism of the state of Israel as a form of antisemitism. But as Alan Wald has discussed ("The Antisemitism Scare: Guide for the Perplexed," ATC 234), legislators and university administrators are already interpreting Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as though anti-Zionism were the same as antisemitism.

In brief, we can say that anti-Zionism means political objections to the policies of the settler colonial ethnostate of Israel, while antisemitism refers to the hatred, fear, harassment, or persecution of people because they are Jewish.

Wald's essay, along with films including *Israelism* and *The Palestine Exception*, points out that disproportionately many of those involved in these U.S. movements — for Palestine and against genocide — are themselves Jewish. The failure of university administra-

tors to defend anti-Zionist Jews highlights that, contrary to administrator claims, cracking down on these movements is not about protecting Jews but about protecting Israel's reputation.

Moreover, as noted by Wald, as well as in *The Palestine Exception* and *Occupation of the American Mind*, many of the most vocal Zionists in the U.S. are Christian. Insofar as Christian Zionism looks toward the second coming and the conversion of the Jews, it is arguably an antisemitic Zionism.

Indeed, Zionist groups have at times allied with right-wing groups that have also been explicitly antisemitic. There were Proud Boys, for instance, in Charlottesville in 2017 chanting "Jews will not replace us" and, as Makdisi relates, at UCLA in 2024 attacking pro-Palestinian activists.

Campus activists have faced violence, administrative sanctions, job loss, and legal persecution including threats of deportation, now magnified by Trump. As *The Palestine Exception* reminds us, that toll pales in comparison to the experience in Gaza, where all 12 universities have been destroyed and hundreds of faculty, staff and students have been killed.

### **Struggles Over Visibility**

Media have long been a part of this



political struggle over the visibility of violence. *Tantura* includes footage excised from 1948 newsreels, for instance. (The village of Tantura was the site of an Israeli massacre of civilians in 1948. The documentation by an Israeli researcher, Teddy

Katz, of this mass murder and the coverup by Israeli government and academic censorship is detailed in Ilan Pappé's memoir *Out of the Frame* —ed.)

*Occupation of the American Mind* explores propaganda playbooks published by the Israeli government and related advocacy groups. *The Palestine Exception* considers attempts to stop *Israelism* from screening on campuses, and includes clips from the 1960 movie *Exodus*, the celebrated liberal Hollywood mythologizing of the founding of Israel.

Indeed, the power of some of these documentaries is recognized in attempts to counter them: the Israel Emergency Alliance, which does business as Stand With Us, has

prepared an array of “Reviews and Rebuttals” attempting to refute the messages of films including *Israelism*, *Occupation of the American Mind*, and *Roadmap to Apartheid*.

If it comes to be as widely seen as it deserves, Haaken and Ruth’s *The Palestine Exception* is likely to be added to that list. The film addresses key misreadings and distortions of the discourse and draws on interviews with thoughtful activists and recognized experts from diverse Jewish, Palestinian-American, and South African backgrounds.

The documentary emphasizes the ways that charges of antisemitism are used to undermine universities, and argues that higher education is under attack because of its potential as a space for people to draw connections among various histories of oppression and resistance and to develop critical views and practice in opposition to current power relations.

Historian Ellen Schrecker comments on parallels with McCarthyism and the ways university administrators capitulated to pressures from trustees and government to crack down on campus movements.

Philosopher Judith Butler, a longtime supporter of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, deconstructs several Zionist claims. For instance, the claim that the call for Palestinian freedom, “from the river to the sea,” is a call for genocide looks like a matter of projection once we know that Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies use the phrase to call for Israel’s absolute control over the territory.

*The Palestine Exception* also makes striking use of archival clips: we see Harry Truman discussing the difficulties of moving five million people out of a territory and five million different people into it. (It was not, as the Zionist slogan claimed, “a land without people.”) There’s a young Joe Biden insisting that if there were no Israel the United States would have had to invent it to protect U.S. interests in the region.

We also see more recent clips, including from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case brought by South Africa against Israel.

As Butler explains, the definition of genocide is not simply a matter of numbers killed, but includes the targeted destruction of the infrastructure of life. *The Palestine Exception* includes footage sent by an academic from Jenin, showing the destruction of water, power, and roads there.

The ICJ has already ruled, we are reminded, that Israel should end its illegal occupations, leave its settlements in the occupied territories, and provide reparations to Palestinians. The ICJ has also ruled that all states and institutions are obliged not to recognize the occupations as legal nor to render aid

or assistance toward maintaining the illegal occupations — points of international law that, obviously, the United States as well as Israel has continued to violate.



## Repression and Resistance

Recent clips also include some of the more outrageous moments of the congressional grilling of university presidents, including interrogators repeatedly citing the Bible as though it were an American governing document. We see Elise Stefanik later gloating about having put university presidents out of their jobs.

There’s Mike Johnson suggesting calling out the National Guard to end campus protests, juxtaposed with footage of Kent State officials in May 1970 discussing what the National Guard might do (that month was when the Guard killed four nonviolent student protesters at Kent State and police killed two at Jackson State).

In this and other ways, the film highlights connections between the movement for justice in Palestine and past movements, including campus antiwar and anti-apartheid campaigns; the use of sit-ins during the civil rights movement and the sit-down strikes of the 1930s; and parallels with violent campus repression in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s.

Several interviewees stress that ordinary people can bring about change, and that change can happen surprisingly. The gains of the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements would once have looked unlikely. Student organizers comment on the profound experience of connecting with fellow activists across the country and across the ocean, learning from each other, and creating in their protests liberated zones that were spaces of caring, and not about profit.

Many of the speakers in this, as in other films under review here, including *Israelism* and *Roadmap to Apartheid*, emphasize that a peaceful and safe resolution to these conflicts will require an egalitarian state in which Palestinians have the same rights as Israeli Jews.

## The Fault Lines Series

Haaken and Ruth’s feature documentary should not be confused with the short film of similar title from Al Jazeera’s *Fault Lines* documentary series.

*The Palestine Exception: The crackdown on Israel criticism at Columbia and other US campuses*, at 25 minutes long, examines some of the same issues more briefly. Chiefly profiling the attacks on activists with Students for Justice in Palestine at Columbia, it also touches on the Congressional testimony of university presidents at the hearings on purported antisemitism, and universities’ concern with the wishes of donors.

It considers how Stand With Us weap-

onized Title VI to attack psychologist Lara Sheehi, and it mentions that pro-Israel talking points are part of a plan for shutting down Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs, and more broadly controlling what can be taught.

A fuller entry from Al Jazeera’s *Fault Lines* series is *The Night Won’t End: Biden’s War on Gaza*, focusing as the title suggests on U.S. support for the Israeli assault on Gaza since October 2023.

It centers three families suffering the effects of the Israeli attacks, including the story of Hind Rajab, the six-year-old girl trapped with her dead family members after Israeli forces attacked their car, and for whom Columbia University protesters renamed a building.



We hear from the Red Crescent workers who stayed on the phone with Hind for hours while seeking Israeli permission to send an ambulance, and after an Israeli tank destroyed the ambulance, despite the granted permission.

We also hear from forensic analysts and monitors tracking the details of attacks on children and other civilians, and from legal and humanitarian experts decrying the USA’s repeated vetoing of UN ceasefire resolutions, the violation of the U.S.’s Leahy law that forbids the funding of war crimes, and the consequent undermining of international law more generally.

## The Trees Weep

Filmed in 2022 in the West Bank, *Where Olive Trees Weep* also addresses the traumatic experiences of life under occupation, stressing that, as one of the humanitarian workers in the film notes, people in Palestine are not dealing with PTSD, since the trauma is not *past* and not a *disorder*, but an ongoing traumatic situation.

A project of the Science and Non-Duality (SAND) nonprofit with Dr. Gabor Mate, the film emphasizes the emotional as well as physical impact of occupation, and the “indomitability of the human spirit” rather than analysis of the political situation or strategies for resistance.

Journalist and therapist Ashira Darwish calls on the viewer to stop funding weapons used to kill Palestinian children, but the film is not about how we might go about making that happen. It does, however, have an extensive resource page on its website, with links to information about BDS campaigns, solidarity organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights, humanitarian aid organizations, and books, movies and other resources for learning, as

well as poems, prayers and intergenerational trauma healing resources.



*Roadmap to Apartheid* presents some of the structures generating that trauma: it explores the parallels between South African apartheid and Israel's policy toward Palestinians, opening with a split-screen

sequence of parallel scenes: children throwing stones at tanks, mothers weeping over wounded children, massive protest marches and funerals, soldiers checking papers, beating civilians, holding up a hand to block the camera lens.

The film makes an irrefutable case that Israel is practicing apartheid, the legal and physical separation of a population for the control of land and resources. In both the South African and Israeli cases, the ruling minority understood itself to have been oppressed victims in the past, and believed itself to have a divinely-given right to the land.

Both have used pass laws or permits to control movement of the subjugated populations; both have used house demolitions to confiscate land; both have denied the oppressed peoples due process, with Israel's "administrative detention" or apartheid South Africa's "detention without trial."

We see texts of explicit comments from leaders of both states calling attention to the similarities of their situations, and we learn that Israel violated UN sanctions to provide military support to the apartheid regime.

Both Israelis and South Africans interviewed suggest that the Israeli system is harsher. South Africa did not have separate "sterile" roads reserved for the ruling group, as Israel does. Bantustans were provided resources, infrastructure, and education. They were not surrounded by militarized walls nor subjected to aerial bombardment.

South Africa's apartheid system, which depended on black labor, ended after international boycotts and pressure combined with internal resistance, and the film ends with the hope of a similar possibility of freeing both Palestinians and Israelis, as white South Africans discuss feeling freed by the end of apartheid.

### The Public Relations Playbook

The Media Education Foundation's *Occupation of the American Mind* illuminates the need for such explanations of Israeli policy, giving a clear overview of the development of Israel's public relations playbook and its dominance in U.S. media.

The film juxtaposes U.S. media with more critical European reporting, touches on key

moments and documents like the 1984 Hasbara conference and the 2009 Luntz report that provided public relations playbooks for Israeli media policy, and considers the millions of dollars Israeli lobbying groups funnel to U.S. politicians.

The film ends with attention to the shifting of perspective among younger Americans, a shift attributed to the rise of social media, the availability of more diverse news sources, and documentaries by both Israeli and Palestinian filmmakers — films like *The Gatekeepers* (2012, interviewing former heads of the Shin Bet security agency), *The Law In These Parts* (2011, interviewing the architects of the legal system that Israel put in place to control Palestinians in the occupied territories), and *Five Broken Cameras* (2011, documenting attempts to film the construction of a separation barrier on Palestinian land, and the violence of Israeli repression).

*Occupation of the American Mind* also notes the rise of the BDS movement on campus and the explicit connections between Ferguson, Missouri and Palestine made by those in the Black Lives Matter movement.

While these films all offer some background on the founding of Israel, *Tantura* focuses most on that history and its retellings. This Israeli documentary investigates one Israeli historian's discovery of evidence of war crimes in the destruction of a Palestinian village in 1948, and the subsequent attacks on him and suppression of his research.

*Tantura* illustrates the lengths to which Israeli institutions will go to hide and deny information that challenges what another Israeli historian in the film calls "the founding myth of Israeliness" as distinctively moral.

The film stops short of calling for the return of Palestinian land, and does not make explicit connections with contemporary events. But its tale of Jewish Israeli scholars vilified, harassed, physically threatened and legally persecuted for exposing difficult truths confirms the extent to which ideological policing of information about Israel/Palestine occurs within as well as beyond Israeli borders.

Attention to that cross-border ideological policing comes in *Israelism*, focusing on the experience of young Jewish Americans. The film recounts its subjects learning — and then unlearning — narratives about Israel meant to cement the false equivalence between Judaism and Zionism.

Through Jewish day schools, camps, youth groups, clubs and other institutions, young Jewish Americans are recruited to the Israeli military and to advocacy for Israeli policy. The Birthright movement makes trips to

Israel available to any Jewish young person; the yearly AIPAC conference is a community event welcoming young people; Hillel has a presence on almost every college campus.

(It's worth noting that this state-worship of Israeli power became prevalent in American Jewish institutions after the 1967 war. Before that, Jewish community sympathy for Israel never implied that the Israeli state should be seen as the center of Jewish life. —ed.)

*Israelism* profiles the journey of Simone Zimmerman, cofounder of the IfNotNow movement of American Jews to end U.S. support for Israeli apartheid, and stresses the potential power of the American Jewish community to shift U.S. policy on the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Zimmerman describes her initial dissatisfaction with the answers she was fed about Palestinian criticism of Israel, her curiosity about life in the Palestinian territories, and the criticism she faced — as a "self-hating Jew," for instance — for becoming an activist opponent of U.S. support for Israel's apartheid system.

The film highlights the irony of the rise in actual antisemitism — we see scenes of the aftermath of a synagogue shooting, chants of "Jews will not replace us," burning swastikas — even as the focus on "antisemitism" has shifted to protecting Israel even when that means attacking Jews.

The visceral impact of visual evidence means that documentary films can be a powerful educational tool, and shared screenings or post-film discussions can make them also a tool for organizing. In the face of attempts at control and manipulation of political narrative, engaged documentaries are part of the work of movements fighting to change the story. ■



### Patrick Quinn (1945-2025)

PATRICK QUINN, A founding member of Solidarity and a revolutionary socialist activist for six decades, died in his hometown Lake Geneva, Wisconsin on January 4, 2025 at the age of 83. A memorial tribute is forthcoming.

Alan Wald, a longtime friend and political comrade, says of Patrick that "he always seemed to have a larger-than-life personality.

"He was extroverted, gregarious, approachable, and often affable and even playful — with amazing raconteurial gifts and a more retentive memory than a herd of elephants. In public discussions, he had passion and presence, usually asking the right questions, paying attention to what other people were saying, and mostly responding in affirmative if critical ways."

Patrick Quinn, presente!



# REVIEW

## A People's History, Retold in Graphics By Hank Kennedy

### Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States:

A Graphic Interpretation

Adapted by Paul Peart-Smith, edited by Paul Buhle  
Beacon Press, 2024, \$22.95 cloth.

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ'S *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* was first released in 2015 as part of Beacon Press's Revisioning History series. Other books in the series include the histories of queer and disabled people.

From the beginning, Dunbar-Ortiz's book met with broad approval from the political left. Prominent radicals like Bill Ayers and Robin D. G. Kelley praised it.

At *Counterpunch* the late Louis Proyect stated the title "will be of great value to those first learning about the Indigenous perspective," and that the publisher should "be commended for initiating the Revisioning Series and especially for publishing this stirring counter-history for a country that Karl Marx must have been envisioning when he wrote that 'capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.'"

Not everyone was so appreciative. An anonymous reviewer for *Kirkus* took umbrage with Ortiz's use of "ideological" language. They thought it unfair for her to write that "indigenous peoples were overwhelmed by a 'colonialist settler-state' the very language broadly applied to Israelis vis-à-vis the Palestinians today."

Doubtless any member of Moms for Liberty or any other group looking to white-wash history would have similarly negative reactions. The celluloid Indian-killer John Wayne also could fit in that category considering he said: "I don't feel we did wrong in taking this great country away from the Indians. Our so-called stealing of this country from them was just a matter of survival."

Surprisingly, the reviewer did not also take issue with Dunbar-Ortiz's description of the policies of Andrew Jackson as auguring a "final solution" for the Indigenous people. Heaven help us if writers are no longer expected to call things what they are! She uses

similar language because the situations are similar.

### The Comics Adaptation

Paul Peart-Smith, a comics artist with a background at U.K. comics mainstay 2000 AD, has adapted *An Indigenous Peoples History of the United States* to comics form, with the help of editor Paul Buhle, himself no stranger to nonfiction comics.

Buhle and Peart-Smith previously collaborated on last year's comic adaptation of *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois, published by Rutgers University Press. The same craft and attention that went into that volume can be found here.

The book begins *in media res* at the 1973 Wounded Knee Occupation when the American Indian Movement occupied the site of an 1890 massacre of 120 Lakota by U.S. Cavalry. The Occupation meant to draw attention to the repeated violations of treaties between the U.S. government and Native tribes.

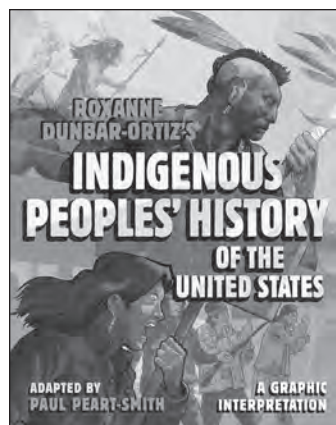
Beginning the story at this point has important symbolic value, as Peart-Smith knows. The 1973 Occupation birthed a new era of indigenous activism and opened a space for historians and scholars to think more critically about the conquest of the Americas.

Dunbar-Ortiz appears throughout as our guide, reminiscent of Howard Zinn's similar appearances in the 2008 comic *A Peoples' History of the American Empire*, illustrated by Mike Konopacki, also edited by Buhle. Other historians appear as talking heads.

The effect is something like an informative documentary, but given the comics form, readers can pore over the images in a way impossible with film.

Returning to the outraged *Kirkus* reviewer, a commonality that gives the present volume urgency is the similarity between the arguments made in favor of European colonization and those of Zionist ideologues, as in Joan Peters' notorious academic fraud *From Time Immemorial*, which posited there was no such thing as a Palestinian people and that Zionists had entered an empty land to "make the desert bloom."

Peart-Smith makes the connection explicit in a panel about settler colonialism that



shows a Palestinian flag on top of an Israeli tank.

Nor were the Americas a "land without a people," as Ortiz and Peart-Smith aptly demonstrate. "Contrary to the American origin myth," they write, "European explorers and invaders developed an inhabited land."

Prior to colonization, Native tribal nations had their own governments, some of which had progressive elements.

In some tribes "certain female lineages controlled the choice of male representatives for their clans in their governing councils." Nationally, U.S. women wouldn't get the right to vote until 1920.

### Historical Images and Symbolic Monsters

Peart-Smith's artwork does excellent work at reproducing historical images. At one point, he shows readers the logo of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, depicting a native man with a "harmless, flimsy-looking bow and arrow." The text says "Come over and help us," an indication of the so-called civilizing mission that white Europeans thought they were undertaking.

A connection is drawn to the imperial conquests of Cuba and the Philippines centuries later. President McKinley (Trump's hero) argued that the occupation of the Philippines (Cost: Over 200,000 dead Filipinos) was necessary in order to "uplift and civilize and Christianize them."

Peart-Smith's experience with 2000 AD aids him in drawing symbolic monsters that exemplify some of the book's themes. He draws a Scots-Irish frontiersman as a gigantic grotesque, astride a Native village. Later on, Uncle Sam is shown as a killer cyborg, resisted by Native protestors.

Terror was a valuable weapon in the conquest. Scalping, first employed in the British conquest of Ireland, was a key part of these terror attacks.

Taking scalps was not just a way to terrify one's opponents, it was also needed to claim the bounties of those killed. No scalp, no bounty. Scalping, then, was not something inherent in so-called "savages," rather it was something introduced by their oppressors.

Terror tactics also came in the form of mercenaries used when the military wanted plausible deniability. The goals and methods

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Hank Kennedy is a Detroit-area educator and writer whose work has appeared in the *Comics Journal*, *Logos*, *New Politics*, and *The Progressive*. He writes on a variety of topics but particularly focuses on the connection between comic books, culture and politics.

were the same; the difference was the lack of uniforms.

The effect is something similar to that engendered by the death squads in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia. Not coincidentally, those death squads were also used primarily against poor peasants of Native descent.

### The Killer Terrorists

The authors write that the “Father of Our Country,” George Washington, “resigned himself to the necessity of using what were essentially vicious killers to terrorize the region, annexing land that could be sold to settlers.” There were some things even the U.S. Army would balk at.

One of those vicious killers was John Sevier. Sevier launched an unprovoked attack on the Chickamauga in western North Carolina. He then used scorched earth tactics and employed starvation as a weapon.

This was no obstacle to Sevier serving as governor of Tennessee. His statue, still on display in the National Statuary Hall Collection in the U.S. capitol, appears in this book. Arms crossed, he looks smug, if it's possible for a statue to do so.

The statue's prominence is indicative of the kind of men elevated as heroes worthy of emulation in the United States. Unfortunately it wasn't removed during the taking down of statues honoring prominent racists.

The comparisons that can be made to modern politics don't stop there. In 1754 a leader of the Catawba asked authorities in North Carolina to stop selling liquor to the Indigenous people:

*“You sell it to our young men many times...I heartily wish you would do something to prevent your people from daring to sell or give them any of that strong drink...”*

Of course, the colonists had no intention of doing so. Alcohol sales meant profits, and if it weakened the Native people, so much the better. Peart-Smith draws Catawba King Hagler (1700-1763) as a proud man, even though he had been forced to beg.

The use of alcohol as a weapon against the Native people reminds one of the allegations made by writers Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair, Alfred McCoy and others of CIA complicity in drug trafficking in order to finance covert wars. Addiction to hard drugs, like alcoholism, was an acceptable loss, especially when their victims could be dismissed as members of a despised minority.

As another Indigenous Peoples' Day passes by, it's important that radicals remember that we live in a “state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.”

Not only is it important for us to remember; this is a history that must be taught, especially at a time when the Ron DeSantis of the world are trying to teach children such

transvesties as a beneficial side of the African slave trade.

Despite what countless films, novels, textbooks and even comics would tell you, the “winning of the west” was no heroic affair. Peart-Smith has done a great job of adapting Dunbar-Ortiz's peoples history in an

## The Zionist Lobby: A Chronicle — continued from page 36

*“Global Palestine” consists of a coalition of social movements around the world, oppressed minorities and some countries in the global South.*

was denied the opportunity to reverse the neoliberal policies that had begun in 1979.

Among much material that can't be adequately covered here, activists might find the chapters “Lobbying for Israel in Twentieth Century America,” “Lobbying for Israel in Twenty-First Century America,” and “The War Against American Civil Society” especially useful.

Pappe provides incisive analyses of the evolution of U.S. policy, the premises behind the U.S.-orchestrated “peace process” that doomed it from the outset, the points where the pro-Israel lobby played important roles — and those where it was of marginal relevance and operated mainly to preserve its own institutional status.

### Conclusion and “Global Palestine”

Pappe concludes this book by discussing how well Israel has done in fulfilling its struggle for legitimacy. According to Pappe, Israel's future viability depends on two pillars of support: material and moral.

As a high-tech country with a strong military and a civil industries exporter, Israel stands on strong material grounds. However, ever since the First Intifada in 1987 and continuing with the many attacks on Gaza since 2006, Israel's moral standing in the world has been drastically eroded.

The “Jewish state” has failed to convince the world that Palestine was given to the Jews by God, that Palestine was empty at the outset of Jewish colonization, and that Palestinian resistance is driven by hatred of Jews.

Pappe ends his conclusion with a discussion of Israel's November 2022 election when the most right-wing and messianic government coalition in its history came to power. This government believes it has God on its side and enjoys the huge support of right-wing nationalist and authoritarian movements around the world including America's Trump, Hungary's Orban, and India's Modi.

Perhaps, then, “This means they do not need a lobby. Time will tell if without it, Zionism can prevail. It might well signal the end of Zionism.” (517)

accessible way. It's educational and disturbing, but never boring.

The comic ends with words from Acoma poet Simon Ortiz: “Eyes will become kind and deep, and the bones of the nation will mend after the revolution.” I hope he is right. ■

The earth-shattering events of October 7, 2023, and Israel's genocidal war, however, showed that the lobby remains important in the struggles to come.

In “Afterword: 7 October and the Future,” Pappe discusses October 7, its immediate aftermath, and the prospects for the future. Given the “war crimes and atrocities carried out by Hamas and others” in southern Israel, “Israel was the recipient of almost universal sympathy and support from governments worldwide.” (518)

This changed dramatically with Israel's brutal attacks which generated condemnation and mass protests globally. This has resulted in two different orientations which Pappe labels “Global Israel” and “Global Palestine.”

According to “Global Israel,” October 7 was “yet another chapter in the history of modern anti-Semitism, this time accomplished with brutality comparable to or even worse than the Nazis and ISIS.” (519) And this narrative claims this attack was planned by evil Iran, even though it is well established that Tehran was not aware of nor involved in the October 7 attack.

“Global Palestine” consists of a coalition of social movements around the world, oppressed minorities and some countries in the global South. “Broadly, although not without contention, this coalition supports BDS, the one state solution, and the right of return for refugees,” a position that also “puts it at odds with the liberal Left within Israel.” (520)

“Global Israel” currently has the upper hand, particularly in the global North. However, worldwide support for the Palestinians is much larger and organized than ever before. There are now “cracks in the international shield” that the lobby forged to protect Israel from accountability, “and they might grow in the years to come.” (521)

In addition, Pappe argues, Israeli society is disintegrating. The public has much less faith in the military to defend them, the economy is weakened, there is escalating conflict between religious and secular Jews, and Israel's standing in the world has significantly deteriorated.

While “so far, Israel continues to be able to act with impunity” and the situation in Israel/Palestine is in its darkest hour, Pappe is hopeful of a future for Palestinians and Israelis free from the chains of an apartheid-like state, the vision that has motivated his entire scholarly work. ■

hundreds of thousands gravely wounded, several hundred Israeli soldiers, and dozens of hostages, would not have been needlessly lost.

Keep in mind too that unlike the 1940s when there was general unconcern (with heroic exceptions) for the fate of Jews, today there is overwhelming global popular sympathy for Palestinian lives and freedom.

By and large the world's elites either don't care, or align with what the critical historian Ilan Pappé calls "Global Israel" — spearheaded by U.S. imperial power and Christian Zionism — but among the people the tide is with "Global Palestine." (Professor Pappé's new book on *Lobbying for Zionism* in the United States and Britain is reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*.)

All this is why we must continue to insist that *the Gaza genocide is the permanent record of Joe Biden's presidency*. Nothing else comes close, and nothing is more pathetic than the question of whether Gaza "tarnishes his legacy." Gaza is Biden's legacy, and nothing can "tarnish" or varnish it — including the lunatic acts of his successor in the White House, who promised to end the disaster and instead is expanding it. What was Biden's war is now Trump's.

As for the most ominous comparison, go back to the observation from Arno Mayer that the Nazis' vicious antisemitism became fully genocidal with "the failure of their massive, all-or-nothing campaign against Russia." The comparison is not exact, but we see today the *failure* of a "massive, all-or-nothing campaign" by the Israeli state against Palestinian society, whose people refuse to capitulate despite the indescribable destruction inflicted on them.

That points to the chilling potential for Israel's endless war against Palestine to become literally exterminationist in the coming period. Equally, it shows how much is at stake for the movement globally and especially for that in the United States in defense of Palestinian rights and freedom. We must also fight for the defense of basic rights of speech, dissent and organizing here in the United States, which the Trump gang and the Zionist lobby intend to destroy.

## **Irreparable Harms**

The irreparable harm that's been done in Gaza only begins with the "official" documented 47,000 deaths — grotesquely undercounted — close to half of whom are children. The loss of limbs, the profound psychological and physical trauma, the destruction of education and health care, and more, will affect the next two generations at a minimum. And the rampage of military and settler pogroms are sweeping through the occupied West Bank shows what the entire Palestinian population is confronting.

The particularly brutal impact on women in Gaza is a huge story in itself, which we briefly discuss elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*. As for the effects on Israeli society, it suffices here to point out how soldiers have filmed themselves, and posted on social media, committing war crimes for their own and friends' amusement. Add to this the evidence of mass execution sites in Gaza, about which we'll be learning more in coming months.

Even as Israel has become an international human rights blot, Israeli soldiers' open glee in displaying their crimes is an indicator of where much of that society is heading, and the poison that will feed back into its polarized politics. Antiwar activists in Israel concede that progressive forces there are

unable to bring change from within, and that international action is required to prevent the resumption of all-out — and as we've suggested, potentially exterminationist — war.

## **The Home Front**

If Gaza shows us what "the rule-based international order" ultimately amounted to, it really can't be seen separately from the wreckage of what were supposedly impregnable safeguards in the U.S. political structure.

Donald Trump and Elon Musk's intentions to destroy constitutional protections and institutional barriers against presidential dictatorship and the destruction of labor, racial justice, gender rights and any other obstacles to unrestrained corporate greed, show as little concern for the "security" of people's lives in the United States as they have for Gaza.

Trump's promises to bring down grocery costs won't be kept anytime soon, or ever. (Have you checked the price of eggs lately?) For the lives of U.S. working-class families and communities, the rhetoric about the "new golden age of prosperity" will be soon enough be shown for the fraud it is.

Two points stand out about the Trump-Musk agenda and the blizzard of overreaching executive orders. First, it's a war against the majority of the U.S. population, even though most folks don't yet recognize that reality. It's about more than arbitrarily slashing the federal work force, as damaging as those cuts will be for essential services, freezing Congressionally-approved spending on programs, denying transgender medical care, or targeting prosecutors for doing their jobs investigating the January 6 Capitol riot. These are chaotic, but systematic elements of an emerging program of austerity along with authoritarian presidential rule.

Second, the transactional and corrupt character of this administration is amazingly open. New York mayor Eric Adams is being shielded from prosecution, in exchange for his collaboration with Trump's mass-deportation program. Ukraine is about to be thrown under Putin's tanks, with U.S. aid to depend on the supply of Ukraine's vital minerals to the United States. Private prisons, the Trump family and cronies, and uber-billionaire Musk himself will be gorging at the trough of contracts while basic government services are gutted.

Why much of the U.S. capitalist class is opting for Trump's virulent economic nationalism, trade wars against allies as much as against strategic adversaries (China), and destruction of basic government functions, requires a deeper analysis than is possible here. How far the rampage will go, the effects on the global and U.S. economy, the outcome of rulings in the courts and whether Trump might defy them, and what happens in Congressional budget battles — all are also open questions.

We do know that our movements, above all the struggles for immigrant communities, gender rights and justice for Palestine, are in the crosshairs. The bits of good news include the rapid-response networks forming in cities across the country against deportations, and the beginning of the fightback by federal workers and their unions.

The current U.S. administration is both a center of the anti-democratic global white-nationalist far right and an Amen Corner for Israel's more extreme factions. It's clear that domestic as well international popular pressure on our own imperialist government is now even more urgent, not just for the survival of Palestine but ultimately for our own.



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AS THE GENOCIDE in Gaza continues and displacement increases in the West Bank, Chevron is a central target of the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions movement for Palestinian rights against Israel's occupation and colonial-apartheid rule. Read about the campaign in this issue of *AGAINST THE CURRENT*, stay informed with your subscription, and follow us on <https://againstthecurrent.org>, [www.facebook.com/AgainstTheCurrentmag](https://www.facebook.com/AgainstTheCurrentmag) and <https://solidarity-us.org>.



September 26, 2024: Boycott Chevron demonstration at Chevron Headquarters, San Ramon, California.

Photo: Brooke Anderson, <https://www.movementphotographer.com/>