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Notes from the Editors

The essays in this issue are of two sorts. The one we present first focuses on grassroots actions of the you-are-the-leaders-you’ve-been-looking-for persuasion. Mostly. Their focus tends to be on doings in the US: the black community, bingo workers, teachers and unions, meritocracy (an analytic counterpoise dealing with the wealthy), a grassroots organization for and working class communities, and a newbie in office who bucked the system (unlike a president who didn’t). The essays in the second set are analytical, providing frameworks for examining US foreign relations and international matters: one on US-Russia relations, two on Venezuela—looking at Venezuela and US foreign policy through two different lenses — followed by an essay on what is at stake in the confrontation between the US and Iran, and then one on global capitalism.

(continued on page 53)
A Love Letter for the People

RICHARD STEVENS

I was born and raised in East Germantown, which is a poor community filled with crime and drug dealing...and also love. Love for your neighbor. Love for their kids. Love for yourself. I was filled with self-love, but I didn't understand how to spread this love to other cultures to create unity. Because I was all about “if it’s not black...it’s not right.” In the school system, I was taught only one half of Malcom’s life; I learned nothing about his views post-Mecca. I was also taught that the Black Panther Party was a gun-toting, white-people-hating, cop-killing black nationalist group...and Dr. King...well, he’s one of the “good ones.”

In my early adulthood, I began to learn more about my culture through arts and literature. I began to understand the complexities of our leaders in the Black Culture. I learned that every freedom fighter’s boot doesn’t fit every freedom fighter’s foot.

Music is revolutionary. From music like Soul, Hip Hop, Jazz and R&B, I learned about the nuances of the issues that the Black Community faces every day.

KRS ONE (considered by some “the Teacher of Rap”), a prolific emcee from the Bronx, educated me about the over-policing that was happening in our neighborhood (with his records Black Cop and The Sound of The Police).

The record The Ghetto by Long Island emcee Rakim (considered by some “the God of Rap”) taught me that I could be a strong black man in the ghetto, that I was more than my circumstances, and that I came from a line of beautiful Africans who were Scientists, Philosophers, Doctors, Kings and Queens.

I discovered my love for Fred Hampton while participating in an Iron Age project called “The Howard Zinn's Project: Voices Of The People’s History.” That was where I first heard his revolutionary monologue referring to the masses being poor. This monologue made me want to explore more about Fred Hampton. And what I discovered was that he was one the most infectious, motivating orators within the Black Panther Chicago Chapter. John Doyle, the Artistic Director of Iron Age Theatre, and I agreed that Iron Age needed a Black revolutionary as part of our one-person show stable. We both loved Fred’s monologue in the Howard Zinn project because it really captured the spirit of solidarity and activation towards change. So, we decided that Fred Hampton was the perfect Revolutionary to write about.

When I first started writing and researching, I was surprised about how Fred's life and work was often unknown to people. I mean, even some of my Black pride comrades didn’t know of him. I kept thinking, “how? How can this man's life be so unknown to others?”

As I continued to research, I started to find my answer. Because he was dangerous. His talk about class struggle...dangerous. His speech called “Unify
or Die”...dangerous. He radical love for teaching, feeding and clothing Black children...dangerous. His success in unifying the gangs in Chicago underneath the umbrella group, The Rainbow Coalition...dangerous. His love for his culture, his blackness and proclaiming Black power, while at the same time expressing Yellow power to Yellow people, Brown power to Brown people and White power to White people...extremely dangerous. We felt that it was our duty as artists to bring these dangerous ideas to the present day, where necessary radical change is needed.

I began writing Fred Hampton’s story about two-and-a-half years ago. At that time, I really didn’t know how I would link his world to ours. Like I previously stated, I am a big lover of music. Tupac is one of my favorite artists, so I usually have his music playing in the background as I write or research. As I was researching Fred Hampton’s life, one of Tupac’s songs, called To My Unborn Child, got stuck in my head. In this song, Tupac writes a letter to his unborn son, explaining his ideas about the world and speaking his truth as he sees it. Tupac’s and Fred’s lives are similar in ways. They both spoke about revolution. They both had a connection with Black Panther ideas and values. They both spoke about changing the world for children. And they both were murdered at a young age.

Fred’s radical love for children resonated inside of me. I felt sadness at the thought of him having this profound love for children, but was robbed of ever loving his own because an evil, hateful, terroristic event took his life. He was murdered by the Cook County Police/FBI at 21, while he was lying in bed next to his pregnant girlfriend. With that in mind, I proceeded to create a love letter from him to his son. In the letter, he tells his son stories about his life, gives him life lessons, and commissions us, the people, to be agents of change.

Since that time, the show has been through many rewrites and workshops, and the conversations it has started are priceless. There are countless reasons why Fred’s message is needed now: healthcare costs a fortune and has become a luxury expense; education comes with a heavy price-tag; housing is unaffordable and displacement is on rise, as gentrification spreads; prisons are privatized and black and poor people are being fed into these prisons for profit; police brutality is rampant. There is evidence, at least monthly, of this brutality. We see it when we turn on the television and see Black folks murdered in the streets by “civil servants” who are there to “serve and protect.” We can feel the powerful stranglehold of Capitalism around our necks squeezing ever tighter.

Fred’s life moved with the “urgency of now.” His words are needed now more than ever.

I say peace be unto you... That’s if you’re willing to fight for it—Fred Hampton

Richard is the Assistant Artistic Director for Iron Age Theatre, a Company member with Theatre in the X as well as Curio Theatre in Philadelphia. He tries to be a social justice warrior for the oppressed by way of theatre and protest.
Reproductive Rights Are About Everyone

SAKURA SHINJO

Abortion. The word with which no male need associate, and the medical procedure over which every female is shamed. Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio this year alone have passed what many of us have heard as “fetal heartbeat bills.” But why be up in arms? They don’t explicitly ban abortion, right?

In one way, females should feel shaken to the core by new restrictions on bodily rights. A “fetal heartbeat bill” prohibits abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected. This generally occurs starting at six weeks of pregnancy, or, in other words, before the individual knows they’re pregnant. Put plainly, how can I receive a medical treatment unless I first know that I need the medical treatment? These “fetal heartbeat bills” are a measure to flat out prevent female bodies from asking for and receiving the medical procedures they need by tightening the window of opportunity for detection and action on unplanned pregnancy to a space so small that very few could successfully do so.

In another way, these restrictions are nothing new. Since Roe v. Wade (1973), states across the country have passed impediments to abortion rights through imposing necessary mental health counseling prior to receiving the procedure, subjecting the woman to degrading mental health evaluation for her desire not to care for a child. Another method, such as waiting periods that force women to come to clinics multiple times in a short period, causes risk to her job and income, as well as personal obligations, as she struggles to find time and resources to access distant clinics to receive a procedure.

While we do not have the space here to discuss women’s history or the trajectory of abortion rights, the purpose of this note is to answer two key questions on the “abortion issue”, which will hopefully be expanded in coming issues of Left Turn:

Why do women choose abortion?

Logically, abortion is not the preferred method of birth control. It’s time consuming, humiliating, scary when women are not educated on it, and shameful. Society shames women for the accident of becoming pregnant and not being “responsible” enough to prevent it. Society then shames women for not wanting to bear an unexpected child. Society shames women from seeking an abortion even after rape or incest. Society simply shames women for making any autonomous decisions about their body that does not agree with what women’s bodies can do: bear children.

So why choose it? Abortion is most often the last-minute resort—the “Oh shit, the birth control didn’t work, I’m not ready for a child” option. Abortion can also be the “I’m fifteen years old and no one taught me about birth control.
I only had sex for the first time, and now look what happened” option. Or, abortion in the worst cases is the “A man raped me and now I have to deal with the consequences of someone else’s crime” option. Women choose abortion because they have to choose it. Because the alternative is to have a lifetime commitment for even fifteen minutes of love, pleasure, fun, and/or to live with outcomes of mistakes or the crimes of someone else.

Who does abortion affect?

It affects everyone—female and male bodies alike. Maybe one may say, “well, if a woman doesn’t want to face an unplanned pregnancy, she shouldn’t have sex.” Let me pose, what seems to be the necessary hypothetical trope, to try to elicit an empathetic response from men who do not have strong opinions on the issue: A straight couple lives in a state that has passed the fetal heart-beat bill. They have lived together for two years. She takes the pill, but it fails and she gets pregnant. She doesn’t know until eight weeks into the pregnancy. The state effectively forces her to carry the child to term. She feels guilt at the thought of submitting her child to the foster care system, rife with child abuse, and chooses to raise the child herself. He does not want a child and leaves the relationship. She becomes a single mother, forced by state regulation to care for a child that may otherwise be abused and traumatized in foster care, and he must pay child support.

In the above situation, everyone involved is affected. While women’s bodies, psyches, bank accounts, personal lives, and careers are disproportionately affected by being barred from abortion, the male in this story must still “pay” for his actions, quite literally, through child support. While perhaps in a long-term and monogamous relationship, she will be forced to “pay” for the “crime” of having sex. The state may “pay” for her “crime” as she struggles to care for a child alone for nearly two decades, perhaps needing food stamps or Medicaid.

The point here is that the woman in the story could be someone’s sister, daughter, or niece. Better yet, to any of the men who have gotten to this point in the article, imagine if you were this woman. Imagine a world where every single sexual encounter came with the risk of serious consequences for your own body, and imagine the state telling you that you do not have a right to do what is best for your own body after that single act. Imagine that, as a woman, at the end of the day, you will be solely responsible for handling an unplanned pregnancy, despite taking the correct precautionary measures. Imagine that those who have difficulty empathizing with your situation—that people who can never face pregnancy and the decisions it entails—are the ones making decisions about what you do when the unplanned does happen.

While I would like to say more, I will leave readers with a few broader comments that may impact the direction of future conversations on abortion, women’s bodies, and feminism in the future of Left Turn:

Restrictions on women’s rights have existed in the United States and abroad for most of recorded history. Let us not believe that women “had it good” prior to the Trump era, and that a particular political party is protecting our rights
and another is after our rights. The control over women’s bodies is a structural issue. It is a problem produced by patriarchy, which has anchored itself into our culture on every level. Patriarchy is the reason most women do not receive paid maternity leave in the United States. It is the reason that maternity leave, when it exists, often does not exceed eight weeks. Structural patriarchy is the reason there remains a pay gap between female and male wages. It is the reason little girls are not encouraged to study math and the hard sciences. It is the reason young women are made to feel shame over their bodies at reaching puberty, while young men are introduced into the world of toxic male adulthood rife with catcalling and slut shaming. It is the reason we say, “boys will be boys” at the sound of Trump’s “locker room talk,” rather than shame and excoriate the male who would disparage female bodies simply for their being female.

Structural patriarchy is the illogic that permeates the atmosphere of our society. And as meme culture aptly reminds us, “if men could get pregnant, abortions would be available at gas stations.” Let us remember that women are not the only ones who suffer the consequences of what males might see as harmless sexual interactions. They do, however, suffer far more than men. More importantly, let us remember that women’s struggles to own their bodies, their incomes, their ideas, and their successes are directly related to the poisonous proposition that men don’t have to deal with these problems. Oriented toward a future exposition on the indispensable role in women’s rights that men must take up, I leave you, the reader, to ask yourself to think about the ways in which women in your life have been affected in ways that the men in your life haven’t, and to ask yourself how men have responded to these problems. For the future of my capacity to receive reproductive health procedures and to pursue a life of purpose and autonomy is directly tied to how your father, brother, husband, son, nephew, or yourself views the legitimacy of a woman’s right to determine the trajectory of her own life.

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“Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.”

—Simone de Beauvoir, in Second Sex

You Can’t Litigate Your Way To a Union: The IWW Campaign at Boulevard Bingo

Lenny Flank

The whole thing started in June of 1992. Jeff Kelly just happened to be driving down the road one day and he saw a group of people standing in front of this bingo hall with picket signs. As Lehigh Valley Wobs, we have a standing policy that whenever we see picket lines, we always stop and ask what’s going on. So, he pulled over and asked what was happening.

It turned out that a group of bingo workers were upset about the working rules they had in the bingo hall. The issue they were most concerned about was that literally every day they came into work there would be different work rules. People would be punished for rules that didn’t exist until they were punished for them. The bingo hall was operated at the time by a guy who brought his wife in as the new supervisor. She changed all the work rules because she was trying to force people out and hire her relatives instead. So, one of the workers happened to have been fired and that was the spark that set it off. The rest of the workers, there were ten of them all together, walked off the job, picked up signs, and started picketing. Their hope was that they would force the boss into hiring this person. Instead, the boss fired all ten of them right there on the picket line. So, when Jeff heard the story, they asked him if there was anything he could do to help. They had talked to the Teamsters about three months before and were shot down. Most AFL/CIO unions have a policy, either unwritten or not, that they don’t attempt to organize any company with less than 50 employees. So, Jeff told them that we might be able to help. He went home and called me and Faramarz Farbod. We met in a bar and sat down and decided this was a fight that we probably had the resources to go ahead with.

The NLRB gets involved

The next day we showed up on the picket line. We told them that we could file charges on their behalf with the National Labor Relations Board. We had no idea how long that was going to take, but we thought they had a pretty good
chance of winning it. So it snowballed from there. After about a week all ten of them had signed union cards. In July we sent a letter to the bingo hall owners saying look, you can’t fire these people, it’s illegal. We want you to take them back on the job. They are represented by a union and we want to talk about a contract. Of course, we never got an answer so we went ahead and filed charges.

By October we got the decision from the NLRB that they had issued a merit finding and they ordered the bingo hall to rehire all ten of the employees. The bingo hall rehired them and fired them again within 24 hours. At that point we filed more charges and then from there things got crazy. We picketed every day for about three months.

We discussed civil disobedience, but ultimately decided against it because it would have been a tremendous financial strain, we just didn’t have the money to post bail or pay for a lawyer. The police showed up when we first started picketing, they were there every fifteen minutes for the first four days. Remarkably enough, the police were fairly supportive of us because they knew we had the legal right to be there. There wasn’t a whole hell of a lot they could do to stop us. After a while they were getting so annoyed with the bingo owners that they flat out told them not to call them anymore, there was nothing they could do. There were also replacement workers who were relatives of the manager. To their credit, there was actually one or two of them who refused to go in. There were also a lot of customers who refused to go in. Not enough as it turned out, but a lot.

The thrust of our strategy at that point was to try and force a voluntary recognition. What we wanted to do was to hurt the bingo hall so badly that they would give in without having to go to the NLRB. We knew the fed process would be long and drawn out and we didn’t know if these people were willing to hang tough for that long or not. We wanted to try and extract a voluntary recognition, but that ultimately went nowhere because the boss was the biggest asshole I had ever met in my life.

When the NLRB ordered him to rehire everyone and he promptly fired them all again, even the feds were outraged. They are used to dealing with big companies who are at least know the rules. When they break the rules they don’t do it quite so blatantly. They were really pissed off about it, which as it turned out it was a good thing for us because it turned the feds into our allies. That doesn’t happen very often in an IWW strike.

A strike fund?

The other good thing was that by firing the employees, it turned into a lockout, which meant they could collect unemployment.

One of the biggest problems we had at the beginning of this thing was that if the flight went longer than a week, we didn’t have any money to keep this thing going. There was a lot of conflict between us and the IWW general administration over this. The distinct impression I got was that the GA resented giving us money to help these workers out. I kept trying to make these people understand that these workers didn’t have a job. They had rent to pay, bills to
pay and food to buy. If we couldn’t keep them out they were going to go back. We didn’t have any choice in the matter. At the time we were putting out a newsletter and every month we had an appeal for funds. We actually raised about a thousand dollars, but it was not enough. We just couldn’t raise enough on our own, so we had no choice but to go to the GA and they did not like it. In the end, the good thing about the Lehigh Valley branch is that we have connections all over the country, good working relations with a lot of other branches. Our fellow workers in Philadelphia, Santa Cruz, and San Francisco went to bat for us. Without those folks we probably would not have got a nickel. So the most fortunate thing for us was that the federal government was providing the strike fund. All these people collected unemployment for 26 weeks. That was the key factor that allowed this to get off the ground.

A contract, and more firings

Ultimately what happened was the NLRB schedule the trial. Fifteen minutes before it was about to start, the bingo hall came in and said they wanted to talk about a settlement. We hashed it out and reached an agreement. The boss agreed to reinstate all ten of the workers, give them part of their back pay, and he agreed to sign a contract with the IWW. We got everything signed, we got the contract, everyone went back to work and then we ran into a problem.

The bingo hall was actually owned by two separate organizations. The supervisor was managing on behalf of both of them. Right after everyone was reinstated under the contract the county government stepped in. They had been investigating this supervisor because he had alleged connections to all kinds of organized crime people in Philadelphia. They basically concluded that he was siphoning off money so they pulled his bingo license. He was actually President of one of the organizations, the Pennsylvania Association of Songwriters, Composers and Lyricists. The other organization is called Allied Air Force. He ran a little museum where they had old airplanes and helicopters. Presumably, they used the bingo hall money to fix up the airplanes. Allied was allowed to keep its license but it had restrictions placed upon it by the District Attorney’s office, the primary of which was that they had to fire the manager, which they did.

The president of Allied Air Force decided that he was going to run the bingo hall himself. This guy had no experience whatsoever, he was an airplane mechanic. He also seemed to have the idea that he was the boss and if there were parts of the contract that he didn’t like, he didn’t have to follow them. So he started violating the contract from the day it was signed. At first we tried to be reasonable with the guy. We sat down and talked to him, but he basically told us to fuck off. At that point we had no other option but to file more charges. We went ahead and did that and right after that our supporters started getting written up for disciplinary measures, then fired one at a time. As each one was fired, we would file more charges. That dragged on for about a year until it was finally scheduled for a trial.
More legal tactics

One of the tactics management used to put pressure on the union was to file a lawsuit against me personally, their reasoning being that it would bankrupt us because we didn’t have money for a lawyer. They thought it would scare me into dropping all of this and that we would just fold up and go away. As it turned out none of that happened. Instead, it presented a great opportunity for us because our lawyer was working for next to nothing and their lawyer wasn’t. Our strategy was to file challenges to everything we could possibly think of. We filed all kinds of motions for discovery, the point being to have their lawyers run up such legal bills that this would be a tremendous cost to Allied Air Force. We hoped that eventually it would get to the point where they just could not afford to drag this thing out anymore, and it turned out that was exactly what happened.

When the NLRB charges were scheduled to go to trial again, about ten minutes before the trial was about to start the lawyer for Allied Air Force came over to me and said he wanted to talk about a settlement. We said the only deal we were interested in was that we weren’t going to ask for anyone to be reinstated because there were no union employees left. What we did want was that people get at least half of the back pay they had coming to them and that they drop the lawsuit against me. We dickered around for a couple of hours, but they basically gave in and signed the agreement.

Conclusion

Our basic problem was that we had no one in the workforce when this whole thing started. The only option we had was to get our people back in the workforce. Once it became clear that we were not going to get voluntary recognition and he was not going to reinstate these people, the only other option was to go to the feds. If it had been our choice, we would not have taken that option because we knew what the probable outcome would be, which was exactly what happened. It took so long and dragged out so far that by the time we got the rulings in our favor nobody cared. Everyone had found jobs someplace else, there was no one left to go back. That’s why we don’t have a job shop there now, because it took two years to get everyone back.

Lenny is a longtime labor organizer and environmental, social, and antiwar activist. He was a founder of the Lehigh Valley IWW in the early 1990s.
In 2017, Sociology Professor Rachel Sherman wrote Uneasy Street: The Anxiety of Affluence, a book which drew upon 50 in-depth interviews with Uber-wealthy New Yorkers in order to obtain a picture of just how they perceived their status.

Sherman found that her interviewees, all in the top 1-2 percent of income or wealth or both, had thoroughly imbibed the narrative of meritocracy to rationalize their affluence and immense privileges. That is, they believed they deserved all their money because of hard work and individual effort. Most identified themselves as socially and political liberal and took pains to distinguish themselves from “bad” rich people who flaunt their wealth. Although one unselfconsciously acknowledged “I used to say I was going to be a revolutionary but then I had my first massage.”

One striking characteristic was that these folks never talk about money and obsess over the “stigma of privilege.” One typical respondent whose wealth exceeded $50 million told Sherman, “There’s nobody who knows how much money we spend. You’re the only person I’ve ever said the numbers to out-loud.” Another couple who had inherited $50 million and lived in a penthouse had the post office change their mailing address to the floor number because PH sounded “elite and snobby.” Another common trait was removing the price tags from items entering the house so the housekeeper and and staff didn’t see them. As if the nanny didn’t know…

Her subjects (who remained anonymous) readily acknowledged being extremely advantaged but remained “good people, normal people,” who work hard, are careful about ostentatious consumption, and above all, “give back.” They spend considerable time trying to legitimate inequality and Sherman concludes they’ve largely succeeded in feeling “morally worthy.”

As a follow-up to this study, Prof. Sherman has been conducting similar in-depth interviews with young people whose parents or ancestors accumulated sizable fortunes, wealth they now have or will soon inherit. Sherman’s recent piece, “The Rich Kid Revolution,” (The New York Times, 4/28/19) reveals a stark contrast in self-perception from her earlier findings.

First, her interviewees totally “get” the lie of meritocracy as they ruefully skewer family myths about individual effort, scrimping and saving and the origins of wealth. One young woman who’s in line to inherit a considerable fortune told Sherman, “My dad has always been a CEO, and it was clear to me that he spent a lot of time at work, but it has never been clear to me that he worked a lot harder than a domestic worker, for example. I will never believe that.”

Sherman discovered that whether the immense fortunes came from “the direct dispossession of indigenous people, enslavement of African-Americans,
production of fossil fuels or obvious exploitation of workers, they often express especially acute guilt." One response has been that some wealthy people under age 35 have formed organizations to fund social justice initiatives.

Second, many of her respondents have read about racialized capitalism and harbor no illusions about their own success. From access to the “right” schools and acquiring cultural capital to social networking and good, high paying jobs, they readily acknowledged that it’s all derived from their class (and race) privilege. Third, they are convinced the economic system is “immoral,” equality of opportunity does not exist and their wealth and privileges are absolutely “unearned.” Finally, they grasp, often from personal observation, that traditional philanthropy is primarily about keeping those at the top in place, obtaining generous tax breaks and treating symptoms while ignoring the causes rooted in the very social structures from which they benefit.

Beyond the article’s hyperbolic title and a certain vagueness about where this new consciousness may lead, the piece—whether intentionally or not—does raise issues that demand much wider public discussion.

First, a note about philanthro-capitalism or as Peter Buffet (Warren Buffet’s son) terms it, “conscience laundering.” In Chris Rock’s pithy phrase, “Behind every fortune is a great crime” and given what we know about the sources of great wealth—the collectivity—these monies should be supporting public needs that are democratically determined not the cherry-picked, pet projects of billionaires. And this reveals another motive behind private charity: the desire to stifle any enthusiasm for an activist government responsible to the public will.

I should add that whenever I hear a philanthropist piously proclaim, “I just wanted to give something back,” my first impulse is to shout “Why not give it all back?” That is, I’ve always been partial to the moral injunction, “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required” (Luke 12:48). And although I won’t attempt to improve on scripture, I might suggest “From whom much is taken, much is owed.”

Second, one might ask about the case where a person of modest means succeeds at something and accumulates a fortune? We’ve all heard or read ad infinitum, someone exclaim, “Damn it! Nobody even handed me anything. I did it all on my own. I’m entirely self-made.” Isn’t that evidence of individual merit? No. For starters, as Chuck Collins, heir to the Oscar Mayer fortune, once put it, “Where would wealthy entrepreneurs be without taxpayer investments in the Internet, transportation, public education, the legal system, the human genome project and so on?” Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize winner in Economics, has calculated the societal contribution at ninety percent of what people earn in Northwest Europe and the United States.

In addition to the sources mentioned above, just off the top of my head I can list many other factors that belie this powerfully seductive but wholly fictional narrative, one that’s also touted to and embraced by many members of the working class: Child labor, Chinese and Irish immigrant labor (railroads), eminent domain, massacres of striking workers, state repression of unions,
Immigration Act of 1864, public land grabs, corporate welfare, installing foreign dictators to guarantee cheap labor and resources, inheritance laws, public schools and universities, public expense mail systems, property and contract laws, government tax breaks incentives to business, Securities and Exchange Commission to ensure trust in the stock market, the U.S. military, and a police state to keep the rabble from picking up pitchforks. Another factor that almost merits its own paragraphs is pure luck. By any objective criteria, we can conclude that absent this arrangement there would be no accumulation of private wealth.

Finally, meritocracy is the classic American foundation myth and provides the basis for an entire array of other fairy tales. Foremost, this illusion serves to justify policies that foster economic inequality and hinder the development of social movements. After so many decades of neoliberal ideology, this lie is now firmly lodged in the public’s collective consciousness but I’m convinced that with effort and relying on the evidence, it can be expunged.

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This essay originally appeared in Counterpunch, May 10, 2019.

“The monstrous concentration of wealth in America has not only created an education system in which the rich can effectively buy college admission for their children... It has created a justice system in which the rich can buy their way out of prison... a political system in which the rich can buy their way into Congress and even into the presidency. And a health-care system in which the super-rich can buy care unavailable to others... it seems, everything is for sale.”

— Robert Reich
Si Se Puede: Make the Road’s Organizing Efforts in the Lehigh Valley

ASHLEY VELASQUEZ INTERVIEWS RICARDO ALMODOVAR

Si Se Puede translates to “Yes, we can” or “Yes, it is possible.” The slogan was created by Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America and has been used by countless worker and civil rights groups.

Make the Road PA is an organization that builds power for justice in Latinx* and working class communities. Originally founded in New York State, Make the Road has branches in New Jersey, Connecticut, and Nevada. MRPA was first established in Reading, PA and the organization has recently opened locations in Allentown and Philadelphia. It has been 2 years since Make the Road arrived in the Lehigh Valley. In that time, MRPA has organized meetings, rallies, protests, and community events focused on immigrant and worker rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Make the Road PA endorsed the progressive congressional candidate Greg Edwards, during the 2018 preliminary elections and organizers canvassed 200,000 households and registered thousands of new voters. Below I interview Ricardo Almodovar, a community organizer and ask about his work and experiences in the organization.

What is your role in Make the Road PA and describe the work you do.

Ricardo Almodovar: I am a Community Organizer with Make the Road PA. I organize people in our community to create change through community involvement, meetings, workshops, trainings, phone banks and door-knocking/canvassing operations. It typically starts off with a one on one meeting with folks to have a deep conversation about their life and their passion. We start to build a relationship and trust and create a plan together accordingly. Think of it as extending a hand for folks to join the movement for liberation. The following Lilla Watson quote reflects this sentiment pretty well: “if you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together.”

Why is MRPA necessary in the Lehigh Valley?

Almodovar: MRPA is necessary in the Lehigh Valley due to the lack of resources provided to the significant Latinx population in Allentown and beyond as well as the rampant discrimination many of us have faced and continue to encounter. We also know representation is important in politics and we are able to endorse candidates through our political arm, Make the Road Action in PA (501c4) as well as hold elected officials accountable when they make promises to the community.

How has MRPA been successful? What challenges has the organization faced?

Almodovar: MRPA has been successful in organizing hundreds of people to take action. We use tactics such as surveys, petition drives, rallies, marches, and
direct action in an escalated process. In other words, we’ll survey our people long before a protest is organized. Contrary to popular belief, spontaneous actions don’t happen as often as you’d think while most actions are planned well in advance with an experienced team of organizers. Challenges we face are language and cultural barriers, but we overcome them by building relationships with folks while creating our own family of active and positive people in the movement.

Politics has always felt very complicated, especially in 2019. How do we convince those who are confused, scared, or unmotivated by politics to organize?

Almodovar: Building relationships is crucial in sustaining a movement and organizing people in our communities. At Make the Road PA, we use a method called Anger, Hope and a Plan. Anger: We must first know what makes people angry if we’re going to motivate them to take action. An open-ended question will suffice. For example, What would you like to see change in our community? We must also explain victories we’ve had in the past to give people hope. Examples can include local or national victories depending on how they answer the open-ended question. MRPA has registered thousands of voters in PA and had the largest canvassing operation in the state with over 200,000 doors knocked before the midterm general elections. Lastly, we make a plan and finish with making a firm commitment for involvement. Urgency is key to making the person commit their time and energy. If we want to create change, the time is now to get involved.

What is the future of Make the Road PA? What does the organization need to continue to be successful?

Almodovar: Make the Road PA continues to be a voice for marginalized communities and we will continue to organize and build our base. We’ll register voters, knock on more doors, make phone calls, host meetings, start campaigns, meet new people and make friends all while having a good time!

Is there anything else you would like to share with the readers?

Almodovar: Make the Road PA in Allentown is located at 347 N. 8th Street Allentown, PA 18102. We have weekly meetings that are free and open to the community. Action Committee Meetings are every Wednesday at 6pm and is the foot in the door to the movement through MRPA. Comité de Mujeres (Women’s Committee) is every Thursday at 6pm. Amor y Rabia (Love and Rage) is our LGBT+ committee and we meet every Saturday at 4pm. They all have the same location, a meal is provided at every meeting, and meetings can be bilingual depending on participants’ needs. Join us! “You have nothing to lose but your chains.”

* Almodovar uses Latinx as a gender-neutral term referencing the Latin American population. Typically Latino is used, which is grammatically masculine. Latinx decenters masculinity as the default identity and includes woman and gender nonconforming people.
On Rep. Ilhan Omar’s Calling Obama a “Pretty Face” Who “Got Away With Murder.”

GARY OLSON

Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar represents Minnesota’s 5th District, one of the most liberal in the country where no Republican has been elected since 1962. A Muslim woman born in Africa, she was eight years old when her family fled their native Somalia during the Somali Civil War in 1991. They spent four years in a Kenyan refugee camp and in 1995 were approved for resettlement as refugees in the United States, eventually settling in Minneapolis in 1997. Omar was elected to Congress in 2018.

In a recent interview in Politico Magazine, parts of which were published in Omar’s local newspaper, the Star-Tribune, Omar criticized former President Obama for being a “pretty face” who “got away with murder.” It is instructive to read the “Comments” from readers in the Star-Tribune. While some readers praised her position, here are a dozen typical snippets from the vast majority of negative responses:

“I have no patience for traitors, Reckless slander, Most black women know to keep their heads down, She has terrible political instincts, She should be primaried, Omar is dangerous and doesn’t represent our interests, Doesn’t take instruction well, I was a big fan but no more, Obama was a lawfully-elected president, Talk about biting the hand that feeds you, Omar is a trash human being, No way she could possibly be talking for herself.” (Minneapolis Star-Tribune, March 9, 2019).

What is missing here, of course, is any attempt to refute Omar’s statements and it is no wonder because the record is clear. Obama ran for the presidency in 2008 as an anti-war, liberal Democrat. But after taking office he only fulfilled the “liberal Democrat” half of his promise by becoming Bush’s mirror image in terms of foreign policy. He was a ruling class wet dream as he proceeded to wage wars every single day of his two terms.

Despite his previous pledge, Obama failed to close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, maintained troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, sold a record $30 billion in weapons to Saudi Arabia, increased the US nuclear arsenal, tried to help the Islamic State overthrow Syrian president Bashar Assad, built secret military bases in Africa, supported Israel’s attacks on the Palestinians, backed the crushing repression of Arab Spring and claimed that the United States was the world’s “one indispensable nation.” He accepted the Nobel Peace Prize just as he was about to send 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan.

In Libya, Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, created a failed state which soon hosted a jihadist stronghold. And due to the conditions he fostered, untold thousands of desperate refugees drowned in the Mediterranean
Sea. Today, in what remains of Libya, people are selling other human beings as slaves while rape and kidnapping are rampant.

In a bloody end to his two terms in office, in 2016, Obama dropped 26,171 bombs on Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, and Libya. He ordered 500+ “special” drone strikes on Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan compared to 57 under Bush and increased global special operations a massive 130% over the Bush period.

During Obama’s presidency, the anti-war segment within the Democratic Party largely remained silent. However, Rep. Omar’s allegations provides them an opportunity to make a bold statement. Instead of kvetching and lobbing ad hominem attacks against Omar, why not cut to the chase and present a reality-based defense, not only of Obama but for U.S. foreign policy in general? In that spirit I magnanimously suggest the kernel of a rebuttal they might consider which goes as follows:

First, the facts regarding Obama are not in dispute and his behavior wasn’t an error in judgement, a blunder, a tragedy or the result of faulty intelligence reports. You must understand that facts, divorced from motives and contexts are misleading and even dangerous.

During World War II, American strategists knew the United States would emerge as the post-war superpower and they planned accordingly. Several decades ago, Noam Chomsky alerted many of his readers to a concise, lucid statement outlining future U.S. foreign policy. Its author was Cold War strategist and scholar George Kennan who led the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff during this time. In the Top Secret document (PPS23), Kennan didn’t mince words about the fundamental thinking that would guide U.S. foreign policy from that point forward. It is succinctly summarized in the following paragraph:

We have about 50 percent of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3 of its population...In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity...We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford the luxury of altruism and world benefaction...We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

Chomsky reminds us that this Top Secret document was intended for internal consumption. It was also written by one of the “most dovish, liberal and humane” officials in government but there was no mistaking its intent.

Second, something you may have not heard in Econ 101 is that Obama, like all his predecessors, operated under a strict, unforgiving imperative: The capitalist system requires the endless accumulation of wealth on the one hand and violence, suffering and impoverishment on the other. Maintaining the
economic disparity that Kennan wrote about in 1948 mandates the suppression of any radical efforts to reduce it. Given this context, we might think of these efforts as not only salutary but from one perspective, ethically justified.

Third, Obama knew that incalculably grotesque violence—so many killings—had preceded his time in office. Understandably, many surviving family members and friends felt aggrieved. Regrettably, they didn’t grasp that some lives matter slightly less than others. In any event, these resentful people posed both an imminent and long-term threat to our Shining City on a Hill.

Fourth and closely related, although it is not (yet) a topic in polite conversation, Obama was steadfast in adhering to a higher law. So before carping from the sidelines, Rep. Omar might have heeded Dr. Henry Kissinger’s sage advice that “We must learn to distinguish morality from moralizing.” Once one assumes the awesome responsibilities of the presidency, many options are simply off the table. For example, Rep. Omar accused Obama of “droning countries around the world.” However, when he was forced to vaporize children in the Middle East with his Hellfire missile-armed Reaper drones, he was abiding by a different moral calculus and there is no reason to be squeamish about it. Let us be honest. The deaths of those babies were usually mercifully swift and also a necessary prophylactic measure. Adopting a page from the Zionist playbook, we know that a certain percentage of them would have grown up to be terrorists.

Fifth, let us stop pussy-footing around and say straight out that our exceptional country was built on land secured by genocide, African slavery and remitting barbarism toward Third World peoples. The world is a nasty place and “might actually does make right.” Embrace it. Own it. And then perhaps quietly at first, celebrate it. Sooner than you think you will be liberated from those nagging guilt pangs that are only residue from an obsolete moral code that was itself only someone’s entirely subjective value judgment.

Finally, on the assumption that all of the above is what our government should be doing for us, there is just one additional consideration. As a character in Wallace Shawn’s play, “Aunt Dan and Lemon” confides, “...we’re living a certain way of life—we’re actually living—due to the existence of certain other people who are willing to take the job of killing others on their backs, and it is not a bad thing every once in a while to admit that is the way we are living and, even to give to those certain people a tiny, fractional crumb of thanks.” And really, should there not be some sort of alternate Nobel Prize for those who do what is erroneously called the “dirty work” that continues to guarantee and safeguard the nonpareil economic system devised in human history?

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“What Happened?”

FARAMARZ FARBOD

That’s the title of Hillary Clinton’s new book.

But do we know “What Happened” in the 2016 election? Let me start by stating what didn’t happen: Putin did not happen; he is not responsible for the election of Trump. I will not, however, say more about this subject in this short note. Suffice it to say that if you are tired of the Russiagaters, as I am, I commend you. You may consider it a sign of sanity.

Hillary Clinton’s new book inadvertently hints at what happened on its cover: her name, as the author of the book, appears right below the title as if to suggest to her readers to go no further than the cover page, namely Hillary Clinton happened.

That is correct but I think this formulation does not go far enough analytically. We ought to learn to depersonalize politics if we are to have a deeper understanding of the social forces at work. The Clintons do not belong to an ordinary family in US politics. Their name is virtually synonymous with the neoliberal turn in US politics and I suggest we think of them in terms of an ism: Clintonism. So, properly speaking, Clintonism stands for the neoliberal turn dating back to at least the early 1990s (if not the 1970s).

And what is the neoliberal agenda? It has entailed vicious assaults against the working class with the aim of rolling back labor’s historic gains, the deindustrialization of the US economy, peddling austerity, pushing privatization of not just economic activities and assets but of human aspirations, the financialization of the economy (creating a volatile casino capitalism), a massive rise in the incarceration rates (the making of a prison-industrial complex), the further militarization of society and of foreign policy, and the protection of investor rights abroad at the expense of labor and the environment.

The result has been a massive growth in income and wealth inequalities and the accompanying impoverishment and alienation of millions of North Americans. Neoliberalism had already impoverished hundreds of millions of people in the Global South; now late-stage capitalism required that the ruling elites push austerity and neoliberal policies at home as well.

Insofar then as Clintonism represents this neoliberal turn, it is best understood as a bulwark against progressivism, notwithstanding its rhetoric - especially during electoral cycles. I should say also that Obama did not represent a deviation from Clintonism understood as such.

Returning to the 2016 elections, we must not forget either that one the most telling facts about it was the rigging of the Democratic primaries by the Democratic National Committee and the Hillary Clinton campaign to ensure
that no deviation from Clintonism, as described here, no matter how mild (i.e., the social democratic-lite agenda of Bernie Sanders), is permitted.

I think we judge amiss if we insist on thinking of Trump as Clinton’s “Other” or of Trumpism and Clintonism as mutually exclusive phenomena. Rather, Trumpism beyond Trump himself (neo-authoritarianism) is an ATTENDANT of Clintonism beyond Hillary Clinton herself (neoliberalism) once saner political alternatives (social democracy) are successfully blocked from entering the political arena.

It is also true that the arrogance of the powerful, if not their interests, often prevents them from taking a good look at themselves. They prefer propagating various bogeymen to explain their failures. But the stakes are too high for us to follow their chosen path or to play the game in accord with the rules they set. If we fail to see these forces for what they are, whence they come from, and what they portend, we are sure to suffer even greater indignities to come.

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This short essay was published on Nov. 4, 2017, as a note by the author on his Facebook page. We think placing the 2016 electoral outcome within the context of neoliberalism can deepen our understanding. (p. 19)
US-Russia Relations: Marching Toward Disaster?

DOUG HEATH

American mass media and political discourse have been so relentless in blaming Russia alone for the prolonged escalating tension between our countries that most Americans probably cannot imagine how Russians could justify their behavior or criticize ours. This mindset is particularly dangerous now that the two governments are abandoning the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty “that broke the back of the Cold War nuclear arms race” and have stepped up to the starting line for a new nuclear arms race. It is imperative that we resume arms control negotiations but impossible until we escape the current American groupthink. This requires an examination our role in creating the current tension.

It is in this spirit—not with any intent to absolve Russia of responsibility for the consequences of its behavior—that I offer a summary of US and NATO actions since the end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe’s former Soviet satellites, the Russian Near Abroad, and Russia itself. This is accompanied by four maps and an analogy intended to help Americans comprehend the Russian perspective. I conclude with a discussion of the risk of nuclear war, which is described as “two minutes before midnight” by the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in its last two settings of the “doomsday clock.”

US Behavior in Post-Soviet Russia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, US economic advisers aggressively promoted “shock therapy” to privatize state-owned properties as fast as possible. Russian president Boris Yeltsin passively complied and tolerated corruption that facilitated the enormous theft of assets by what quickly became the new Russian oligarchy. Pauperization of the state sector shredded the social safety net. This triggered unprecedented downward mobility of the Russian masses highlighted by astonishing demographic statistics: a 9.5% decline in the lifespan of Russian men between 1991 and 1994 (from 63.4 to 57.4 years) and a 33% decline in the total fertility rate between 1991 and 1999 (from 1.73 to 1.16 children per mother).

Yeltsin’s approval rating fell into the single digits, but he rallied to win re-election. How? Bold print on the cover of the July 15, 1996 issue of Time said, “YANKS TO THE RESCUE—THE SECRET STORY OF HOW AMERICAN ADVISERS HELPED YELTSIN WIN,” accompanied by a sketch of the smiling Yeltsin holding an American flag. It is the story of a team of American political campaign veterans who worked for months in Russia and spent millions of dollars on focus groups and negative ads to manipulate the electorate of this fledgling democracy and deliver Yeltsin’s improbable victory. What we actually
did in Russia according to this celebratory account is as egregious as the worst of the allegations against Russians regarding the 2016 US election.

Beyond the ethical injunction against hypocrisy, we have a practical need to acknowledge the logical consequences of our own behavior. The last US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, Jr., addressed this need many years after he left Moscow. He wrote, “In 1991, polls indicated that about 80 percent of Russian citizens had a favorable view of the United States; in 1999, nearly the same percentage had an unfavorable view.” I think such a decisive reversal of public opinion is explained primarily by the severe damage caused by American-led “shock therapy,” but Matlock cites a different cause—the distrust generated by US and NATO actions just beyond Russia’s western border.

**US and NATO Actions in Eastern Europe and Russia’s Near Abroad**

Examining US actions on the margins of Russia requires looking back to 1990 after the Berlin Wall fell but before the Soviet Union collapsed. US, West German, and British officials made verbal promises to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastward if the Soviet Union would accept the unification of East and West Germany. (See Figure 1.) But after unification, Germany began to host NATO forces in its formerly communist eastern region, and by the end of the decade Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary had joined NATO. This eroded the western buffer Russia had erected behind the Iron Curtain between 1945 and 1948 to prevent another invasion following the double devastation inflicted in World Wars I and II.

**FIGURE 1**
When the US Senate ratified the revised NATO treaty in 1998, George Kennan, the elderly architect of containment a half-century earlier, correctly predicted that “the Russians will gradually react quite adversely” and that this “is the beginning of a new cold war.” He criticized the Senate debate as “superficial and ill informed” and the act of expanding NATO as a “tragic mistake” in which “we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime.”

Ignoring Kennan’s insight, NATO doubled down in 2004 by moving into the former Soviet satellites of Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia and, more importantly, into three other states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—located in Russia’s Near Abroad. This term denotes the now-independent states governing territories that had belonged to the former Soviet Union. (See Figure 2.) Russians could only watch in anger, fear, and humiliation as NATO moved into what had been part of their country for most of preceding three centuries: part of czarist Russia from 1721 until 1920 and of the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1991. Even more ominously, in 2008 NATO publicly offered prospective future membership to Georgia and the kingpin of the Near Abroad, Ukraine.

FIGURE 2

Russian sensitivities regarding the Near Abroad derive partly from Moscow’s loss of valuable geographic assets: rich farmland; vital fossil fuel and mineral deposits; billions of rubles of infrastructure investment; key facilities in the atomic weapons and space programs; and major military
bases. Their sensitivity is even greater concerning the fate of the millions of Russians—approximately one of every seven—who woke up in their own beds one morning in December 1991 to discover that they were no longer living in their own country. Their citizenship and accompanying rights had been thrown into doubt. The six of every seven Russians living in territory still governed by Moscow make a fundamental distinction between the Near Abroad (recently part of their country) and Far Abroad (the rest of the foreign world). It would be unrealistic to imagine that Russians either inside or outside of post-Soviet Russia would tolerate bullying by a new government in Latvia or Kazakhstan. It would be absurd to suppose that Russians would accept criticism from Washington when Moscow acts to protect its interests in Estonia or Ukraine. Furthermore, the symbolic dimension cannot be ignored; more than a thousand years ago Ukraine’s capital, Kiev, was the capital of the first Russian state, the Kievan Rus.

Ukraine is an amalgam of territories including two Russian-populated regions that were transferred from Russia during Soviet times: the southeastern region in 1922 by Lenin and the Crimean Peninsula in 1954 by Khrushchev. (See Figure 3.) Neither had ever been part of Ukraine. Together they contain approximately half of the 20-25 million ethnic Russians living in the Near Abroad and Russia’s most important naval base at Sevastopol, which Russia maintained after 1992 under a 50-year lease from Ukraine.

FIGURE 3

Failure to provide this essential context should be considered journalistic or pedagogic malpractice. Without knowing that Moscow transferred these two historically Russian regions, Americans are left to make the logical but erroneous assumptions that Ukraine has always consisted of the same territory it contained at its time of independence and that Russians are foreigners who do
not belong there. The result is a dangerously distorted perspective regardless of whether the journalist or teacher who makes this crucial omission does so out of ignorance, indifference, bias, or malice.

*Rethinking US-Russia Relations with a Hypothetical American Near-Abroad*

Americans who seek to understand the deterioration of US-Russia relations could conduct the mental experiment of imagining a role reversal at the end of Cold War: a massive collapse of the US federation, with America rather than the Soviet Union suffering political disorder, economic restructuring, and an unprecedented decline in the standard of living. Specifically, imagine the creation of an American Near Abroad in 1991 by fourteen seceding states that established themselves as new countries no longer ruled by Washington. (See Figure 4.)

**FIGURE 4**

![Map of the United States and a Hypothetical American Near Abroad](image)

Also imagine that in 1999 the Soviet Union reneged on its promises by expanding its Cold War alliance, the Warsaw Pact, to include Mexico, Cuba, and Haiti, as NATO expanded into Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. How would we respond to these Soviet actions in territory the Monroe Doctrine declared off-limits in 1823?

Take this a bit further by shifting focus from “our own backyard” to what had actually been states within the union. Imagine that in 2004 the newly independent governments in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont joined the Warsaw Pact, as the Baltics joined NATO. Would Americans think Russians are liars who break their promises?
Also imagine that the Soviet Union was spending millions of dollars after 2000 to establish and expand pro-Soviet organizations in Georgia and Texas, as our neo-conservative National Endowment for Democracy did for pro-American groups in Georgia and Ukraine. Would we think we were justified in condemning these Soviet actions in the American Near Abroad? And how would we Americans react in 2014 to a Soviet-supported coup in Texas against a democratically elected government led by a Texan who insisted on maintaining good relations with the US? This is the parallel to the US-supported coup in Ukraine.

Suppose that the independent country of Texas had been leasing us a crucial naval base like Sevastopol, one that we had built long ago near Houston. Then the US would be facing the prospect of the Warsaw Pact taking control of that base as well as the surrounding territory, which, in this analogy, would be a region whose majority population self-identifies as American more than Texan, like Crimea with its 70% Russian majority. Do you think the US would annex the naval base and surrounding area like Russia annexed Crimea just weeks after the coup?

Would Americans be deterred by the fact that our annexation would violate the principle of territorial integrity enshrined in international law? It is a safe guess that if we deigned to give any response to such a charge, it would be a categorical dismissal of international law.

Would we be deterred by the ensuing economic sanctions? Undoubtedly our president’s approval ratings would rise as we patriotically rallied against the countries that sought to punish us in this way.

Would we passively watch as the new Texan government used autonomous militias that committed atrocities against our fellow Americans in eastern Texas? (See the blue line around the white region in Figure 4.) It would be surprising to say the least if the US failed to respond with military force as Russia has done in eastern Ukraine.

What would we think if the Soviet mass media ignored many of those atrocities and the neo-Nazi character of some of those militias? It is well documented that this has been the pattern of American mass media coverage of eastern Ukraine since 2014.8

The Threat of Nuclear War

As a former State Department official with a visceral experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis, William R. Polk argues that our increasingly reckless disregard of Russia’s sphere of influence has produced a perilous situation.

“Just as the Russians realized that Cuba was part of our sphere of dominance and so backed down in the Missile Crisis, they will probably set their response to our actions on the belief that we will similarly back down because of our realization that Ukraine is in their neighborhood and not in ours. The danger, of course, is that, for domestic political reasons and because of
the urging of the neoconservatives and other hawks, we may not accept this geostrategic fact. Then, conflict, with all the horror that could mean, would become virtually inevitable.”

It is well past time that we “accept this geostrategic fact” and act accordingly. Although there are serious nuclear dangers involving North Korea, India-Pakistan, and the Middle East, “our top priority should be to get back to the negotiating table...with Russia,” according to Joan Rohlfing, president of the Nuclear Threat Initiative. Calling this “the most dangerous period since the Cuban Missile Crisis,” Rohlfing says that it presents “the biggest existential threat that most people have never heard of.”

The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty will become null and void on August 1, six months after the February 1 announcement of US withdrawal. This will make Europe more vulnerable to accidental nuclear war than it was even in the 1980s. NATO’s Able Archer 83 war game included at least four non-routine actions that matched Soviet predictions of what would accompany an American first strike, which created frantic communications in the Soviet military that could have triggered missile launches and Armageddon.

Withdrawal from the INF in turn jeopardizes the prospects for maintaining the 2011 New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) until its 2021 expiration and then either activating its optional five-year extension or replacing it with another treaty. New START, which covers long-range missiles, “drove American and Russian nuclear arsenals to their lowest levels in nearly 60 years,” but here, too, we may soon be reversing course.

We must preserve and update these treaties rather than abandoning them with no replacements in hand. In the recent words of former Soviet Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, and former US Secretary of State, George Schultz, the updates must

“address the changes in the security landscape that have occurred over the past decades—including missile defenses, precision conventional weapons, space systems, cyberthreats and the nuclear weapons of other countries. ... Equally difficult problems have been solved in the past, once the two sides put their minds to it. We are confident this can be done again. ... The United States and Russia must resume progress on a path toward the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. The alternative, which is unacceptable, is the continuing threat of those weapons to our very existence.”

Although Gorbachev and Schultz are confident that we can make treaties that would secure a peaceful coexistence, the question here is whether we actually want to negotiate. We should want to, of course, but Americans have placed two massive obstacles in the road to negotiation, pushing us instead to make what Noam Chomsky calls a “march to disaster.” The first obstacle is US behavior vis-à-vis Russia. Specifically, after the American manipulation
of Russia’s 1996 election, the US and NATO have consistently behaved in a manner that undermines Russia’s propensity to negotiate. This can be easily understood and properly appreciated by imagining how we would react if they had been able to make comparable moves within a hypothetical American Near Abroad and along its southern margin. The second obstacle is American groupthink about Russia. With only the rarest exceptions our mass media have reported and editorialized in a manner that encourages Americans to believe that we have done nothing to create conflict, clearly implying that Russia is entirely to blame and is therefore unworthy of consideration or cooperation on our part. These are the things we must find ways to change in order to free ourselves from life under the nuclear sword of Damocles.

Doug Heath retired as Professor Emeritus of Geography, Geology, and Environmental Studies at Northampton Community College. Since then he has taught a course in World Geography and Global Issues as an adjunct professor at Moravian College.

Notes
2 https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/ and https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/past-announcements/ Unlike during the Cold War, climate change and information warfare and other disruptive technologies are also considered in setting the doomsday clock.
3 The total fertility rate is a projection of the number of births per woman over her childbearing period, ages 15 to 44, based on the birth rates for 1991 through 1999. This and the male lifespan data come from the table, “Vital Statistics of Russia, 1946–2018.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Russia#After_WWII
5 The discovery in 2009 of notes taken at meetings in 1990 led Der Spiegel to conduct interviews to clarify the dispute over what had or had not been promised two decades earlier. The resulting article supports the Russian position that the promises were made and broken.

“When all think alike, no one is thinking.”
— Walter Lippmann
Venezuela and Totalitarian Media in the US

TED MORGAN

In speaking of media reporting leading up to the Gulf War of 1991, Noam Chomsky declared that the United States “went to war in the manner of a totalitarian state.” Mass media coverage so totally reinforced George H.W. Bush administration claims that the American public was not aware that there were real grounds for believing that war could be avoided.

So it is, in fact, whenever the US government decides to wage war or engage in some form of overt imperial intervention in other nations –Vietnam, Central America, Afghanistan, Iraq, among many others. Well-orchestrated government propaganda creates the pretext for intervention, leaders of both political parties fall in line, and the mass media parrot their proclamations. It is only later on, when evidence begins to undermine propaganda claims, that dissenting views begin to emerge in mainstream political discourse.

In his systematic analysis of media coverage of the Vietnam War, Daniel Hallin demonstrated how national media totally failed to question American policy in Indochina until “credible” government officials themselves began to question the party line. As a rule, such critics focus on poor analysis or failing strategies, in what Hallin has labeled the “sphere of legitimate controversy.” None challenge the belief that the United States had good, even noble, intentions when it intervenes; such views are consigned to what Hallin called the “sphere of deviance,” reserved for views “unworthy of being heard.”

In two senses, then, mass media coverage is totalitarian-like: by failing to challenge government propaganda in the lead up to war, and by failing to challenge the myth that however it may fall short, the US means well when it intervenes elsewhere in the world. In these ways, media coverage falls in what Hallin called the “sphere of consensus,” essentially behaving as cheerleaders for US foreign policy. To be sure, Americans can seek out sources that provide critical perspectives left out of mainstream media, but mainstream discourse typically dismisses these as “ideological,” and most Americans seem ignorant of, or primed to write off, these sources. As William Gamson has noted, the mass media are “the major site in which contests over meaning must succeed politically.”

So it is that we find ourselves in the midst of another US intervention, what the Council on Foreign Relations would call a legitimate economic war against the nation of Venezuela. At least at this writing, the US has not intervened militarily. Yet, the patterns are the same; the mass media from Fox News on the right to the New York Times on the left side of mainstream discourse echo the dominant script in explaining conditions in Venezuela and the reasons for the well-meaning US actions. Along with numerous other critics writing in independent media, the media watchdog organization Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR: www.fair.org) has published scores of articles documenting
systematic distortions on Venezuela across the full range of mass media going back to the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1998—all in “lock-step” with US propaganda.

Briefly, the contemporary story line goes something like this: Venezuela is a failed socialist state, due entirely to the corrupt practices of the dictatorial President, Nicolás Maduro. While usurping power and crushing political opposition, Maduro’s policies have bankrupted Venezuela’s economy leading to debilitating shortages in food and medicine. The Venezuelan people are increasingly desperate. Even US-backed efforts to bring “humanitarian aid” to the people of Venezuela have been rebuffed by Maduro’s military. A potential way out of this morass is offered by the possible return of the legitimate “interim president,” Juan Guaidó.

As with all propaganda, there are truths in this story: Maduro has concentrated power in his military-backed government, and there has been significant mismanagement of Venezuela’s state-owned oil producer, PDVSA, along with corruption on the part of government officials. Food and medicine shortages have grown drastically, and many Venezuelans have fled the country.

Yet, as Jacques Ellul wrote in his classic work, Propaganda, “Propaganda by its very nature is an enterprise for perverting the significance of events and of insinuating false intentions.” The Big Lie, in short, resides in “intentions and interpretations.” What is systematically left out of the dominant story—and virtually all mass media coverage—is the role the United States has played in seeking to replace the Bolivarian Revolution of Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro with a regime friendly to US economic and strategic interests. The US has long provided support and training for oppositional movements within Venezuela; it has lent support to coup efforts and even assassination attempts; and it has undermined, isolated, and eventually strangled the Venezuelan economy through sanctions and financial embargo.

Not only do US actions greatly exacerbate the suffering of the Venezuelan people, but, as with related efforts to destabilize (or crush) uncooperative leftist regimes in Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua, they push the target government in the direction of increasing authoritarianism, thereby providing some apparent credibility to US propaganda claims.

Crucially but predictably invisible in mainstream media is the way these actions reveal and conform to the long-standing elite intention of maintaining US hegemony in Latin America. Indeed, leaving US economic warfare out of the story reinforces perceptions that, in seeking an end to the Bolivarian revolution, US intentions are good. It conveniently obscures three central objectives of US intervention: 1) gaining control over the production and distribution of Venezuela’s vast oil reserves—the largest in the world, 2) reasserting US hegemony over Latin America, and 3) preventing patterns of economic development that fail to conform to the neoliberal path demanded by the US and global capital—a persistent objective of US foreign policy. One can expect a US-backed regime to forcefully introduce the kind of disastrous neoliberal policies that
have been so devastating for the Chilean people in the years following the 1973 US coup there.

By placing the immediate crisis in the context of longer-term US engagement in Venezuela, and Latin America generally, we not only find the totalitarian-like media traits confirmed, but we can perceive the fundamental imperatives of US foreign policy and how these lie beyond what Noam Chomsky has called the “boundaries of legitimate discourse.”

Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution: A Threat to US Hegemony in Latin America

From 1958 to 1998, the so-called Punto-Fijo era, Venezuela enjoyed a formal democracy, ruled by a two-party power-sharing agreement that excluded participation by other political parties. Buoyed by oil exports, the economy prospered for more than two decades, although poverty was widespread, particularly among the non-white population. The economic downturn of the 80s and 90s, accompanied by IMF-mandated government austerity measures, led to a drastic reduction in living standards, increasing inequality and popular discontent, and significant government repression. A 1989 government massacre of thousands of civilian protesters in Caracas (known as the “Caracazo”) was a catalyst for Hugo Chavez’ “Bolivarian Revolution,” named after the 19th century Venezuelan liberator Simon Bolivar.

The charismatic Chavez was elected President in 1998, promising a “new republic” with a new constitution, aimed at improving the lives of the poor and working classes while simultaneously empowering them through the establishment of local grass-roots councils. Media critics and some historians have denounced the undemocratic aspects of Chavez’ efforts to shift control of the police, courts and newly-scripted state media into conformity with government policy, yet, as Alan MacLeod has observed in his carefully documented account, left unsaid is that Chavez ushered in a “radical experiment in a much deeper, meaningful and participatory democracy.” Reviewing US and UK mass media accounts and citing Venezuelan opinion polls administered by anti-chavista organizations, MacLeod commented, “presenting the Punto Fijo period as a democratic era and Chavez’ “Bolivarian Revolution” as a regression into tyranny would be completely contrary to the empirical evidence. However, as well shall see, the media portrayed the country in exactly this fashion.”

During Chavez’ first four years as President, the state-owned oil company (PDVSA) was controlled by forces hostile to the government. During those years, the company managers used the control of oil to destabilize and even overthrow the government in a 2002 coup that lasted less than 48 hours. With funding from the so-called National Endowment for Democracy created by the Reagan administration, the US supported the coup. Interestingly, in its one day in power the coup engaged in precisely the kind of actions it and others had accused Chavez of carrying out. The coup was widely characterized in the US media as a popular uprising, yet a massive popular protest terminated the coup and returned Chavez to office. Still, while the coup held power, the New York Times editorialized,
With yesterday’s resignation of President Hugo Chavez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator. Mr. Chavez, a ruinous demagogue, stepped down after the military intervened and handed power to respected business leader, Pedro Carmona…. Rightly, [Mr. Chavez’] removal was a purely Venezuelan affair.  

In the aftermath of the coup and a damaging opposition-organized general strike, Chavez took control of the state-owned oil company: he won an opposition-sought recall vote in 2004 and a landslide re-election in 2006. 

The “Bolivarian Revolution”, while flawed, did indeed produce enormous improvements in the lives of millions of Venezuelans. In a 2009 economic study of ten years of the Chavez administration, the Center for Economic and Policy Research found that the Venezuelan economy had almost doubled in the years following the failed coup, and that the private sector had grown faster than the public sector. During that expansion, household poverty had been cut by more than half, and extreme poverty had declined by 72%. Inequality fell substantially, infant mortality fell by more than a third, higher education enrollments more than doubled, and unemployment declined from 11.3% to 7.8%. At 31.4%, inflation was “about where it was ten years ago.” The study noted that, like most countries, Venezuela’s faced the challenge of the world economic recession that followed the crash of 2007.  

Chavez often railed against “Yankee imperialism” while pursuing an economic and political path antithetical to US (and global capital’s) neoliberal global requirements. Before Chavez, Venezuela cooperated with US demands that it overproduce oil to undermine OPEC and keep oil prices low. Chavez cut oil production which drove the price of oil (and profits from Venezuelan oil exports) sky-high. Even more significantly, in direct defiance of US domination of its Latin American “back yard,” Chavez used oil-generated revenues to provide assistance to other left-leaning governments or political parties in Latin America. Along with global and local conditions, these helped bring to power governments that were either leftist or pursued independence from the US hegemon.  

Hugo Chavez died of cancer in 2103. His Vice-President Nicolás Maduro was narrowly elected President over the right-wing candidate, Henrique Capriles. Alone in the world, the United States rejected the outcome and supported Capriles’ demands for a 100% audit of the election –an audit that confirmed the outcome. US media reports on the election revealed an “overwhelming tendency to describe the elections as unfair or unclean.”

The Maduro years coincided with sharply declining government revenue triggered initially by plummeting global oil prices compounded by the imposition and escalation of US economic sanctions and efforts to deprive Venezuela of revenue generation opportunities. The heavily indebted government sought to sustain the Bolivarian program by creating money instead of bowing to neoliberal austerity demands (thereby triggering hyperinflation), while shoring up its rule with increasing authoritarianism and human rights violations (while also facing increasing violence by opposition forces).
The US Congress passed the so-called “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014” enabling President Obama in early 2015 to declare that Venezuela was “an extraordinary threat to the national security” of the United States. Declaring a “state of emergency,” Obama issued sanctions against alleged Venezuelan human rights violators.

**The Propaganda Model in 2019:**

The Trump administration escalated the long-standing economic war against Venezuelan *Chavismo*. In 2017, through sanctions and US Treasury warnings to international financial institutions, the administration sought to compound Venezuela’s economic distress by cutting off access to global financial credit—helping, in Venezuelan economist (and Maduro critic) Fernando Rodríguez’ account, to “precipitate the collapse in oil output”\(^{11}\) (see Chart, below, demonstrating plummeting oil production after sanctions were imposed, compared to Colombia’s non-sanctioned production). Unable to export oil for revenue, Venezuela was virtually unable to import much-needed goods like food and medicine.

![Graph showing Venezuela and Colombia Oil Production, 2013-18](image)

In January 2019, the administration again escalated the economic war. First by “recognizing” the (unelected) leader of the Maduro-opposing Venezuelan National Assembly, Juan Guaidó as the legitimate “interim president” of Venezuela. As an early member of the militant opposition group, Popular Will, Guaidó and others had been quietly groomed for regime change activities with funding from a key US organization, the so-called National Endowment for Democracy.\(^ {12}\) In conjunction with Guaidó’s emergence, a new round of right-wing anti-Maduro protests erupted, along with clashes between pro- and anti-Maduro forces. On Jan. 25, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appointed the notorious Elliott Abrams as the administration’s special envoy for Venezuela; Abrams’ suggestions that “all options are on the table” raises the specter of US military intervention.\(^ {13}\)
Days later, the US imposed a crippling new round of sanctions against
the Venezuelan oil producer PDVSA, blocking its access to $7 billion in
assets and restricting Venezuela’s access to gold deposits it could sell to raise
desperately needed revenue. In a 2000-word story in the British Independent,
former UN rapporteur and human rights expert, Alfred de Zayas was featured
denouncing the “illegal” sanctions for weighing most heavily on the poorest
Venezuelans. As “economic warfare,” de Zayas noted, “Modern day economic
sanctions and blockades are comparable to medieval sieges of towns… [They]
attempt to bring not just a town, but sovereign countries to their knees.”
De Zayas likened the US sanctions to those the US imposed on Chile—designed in
Richard Nixon’s words to make Chile “scream”—prior to the US overthrow of
President Allende in 1973.

Finally, as the devastating impact of sanctions was becoming more visible,
the Trump administration and Juan Guaidó announced that $20 million in
“humanitarian aid” would be provided to help alleviate the suffering of the
Venezuelan people. Ignored by most of the US media, both the United Nations
and the Red Cross warned the US not to engage in this “politicized” public
relations stunt, since humanitarian aid is by definition disassociated from a
particular political agenda.

Maduro rejected the aid for what it was, a publicity stunt designed to lure
Venezuelans and particularly military personnel away from Maduro and gain
support for Guaidó. Particularly during February, headlines about “Maduro
blocking critical humanitarian aid to Venezuela” were widely reinforced by a
deluge of media images of anti-Maduro protests (vs. rare footage of pro-Maduro
rallies), aid vehicles being rebuffed by Venezuelan military at the Colombia-
Venezuela border, and the widely displayed image—originally tweeted by
Mike Pompeo—of a fuel tanker and cargo containers blocking access to the
bridge between Colombia and Venezuela. The Canadian Broadcast Company
later acknowledged that it had fallen for Pompeo’s lie. Instead the blockade
preceded the alleged aid shipments; the recently constructed bridge had not
yet been opened because of increasing Venezuelan concern about the security
of its Colombian border. Stymied in its “humanitarian aid” stunt, the Trump
administration provided an additional $56 million in support of Guaidó, turned
control of Venezuelan accounts in any US banks over to Guaidó, and urged
Latin American allies to shift control of assets from Maduro to Guaidó.

Over a two-month period, FAIR published 15 distinct articles docu-
menting the mass media’s pervasive support of administration propaganda.
Entirely absent from these media accounts, except when voiced by the widely
denigrated Maduro, were any critiques suggesting US objectives deviate from
bringing democracy and humanitarian aid to the allegedly oppressed people
of Venezuela. Fox News “reports” were far more virulent, repeatedly attacking
Democratic presidential candidates by equating their alleged “socialist”
goals with the “failed socialism” of Venezuela. [An age-old tactic, echoed in
Britain where the Daily Express and Daily Mail attacked Labour leader Jeremy
Corbyn for pursuing the Venezuela model for Britain.] Yet the more liberal
and Trump-critical outlets like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *MSNBC*, and *The New Yorker* consistently supported US policies and the dominant story line, only occasionally expressing concerns that more militant action might re-ignite anti-Americanism in the region. All the media remain cheerleaders for US hegemony in Latin America.

*The Restoration of US Hegemony over Latin America:*

In July 2018, economist Mark Weisbrot, who has written widely about Venezuela outside the boundaries of mainstream media discourse, penned a hypothetical letter that resigning State Department official, Thomas Shannon, might have given to Donald Trump’s Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Concerned that heavy-handed US intervention would trigger a Latin American backlash against the US, the letter reveals the “other side” of the mainstream debate from Trump’s bellicose threats. It also articulates the central US concern for hegemony and details US efforts to this end in nations like Haiti, Honduras, and Brazil.

Bemoaning insufficient attention given to Latin America—an “unpleasant, unintended consequence of that fateful war [against Iraq] that destabilized the Middle East”—Weisbrot-as-Shannon noted that “in the first decade of this century left governments came to govern the majority of Latin America,” including Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Chile. He continued, “These left governments were following more or less the same foreign policy, which the more outspoken among them labeled ‘anti-imperialist.’ I don’t have to tell you what that means to us.”

However, Weisbrot-as-Shannon continued,

“in large part [as] a result of our work over the last twenty years [work that included a military coup in Honduras, “parliamentary coups” in Brazil and Paraguay, and the strangulation of Venezuela’s economy], *Latin America is now ours....*” [I]n the countries that have most of the population of the region—including Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Colombia—we have governments that are solidly aligned with us, to a degree not seen for decades.”

He went on to observe that “thanks to our years of patient public diplomacy, the media have ignored the impact of our financial embargo, much as it ignored our years of previous intervention.”

*Conclusion: What Can the Left Do?*

News coverage in March 2019 largely revolved around two damaging electrical blackouts in Venezuela, the fate of Juan Guaidó’s return to Venezuela, and reports of Russian and Chinese support for Maduro amid speculation about the potential for civil war and/or some form of US military intervention. Meanwhile, in an opinion column, Francisco Rodriguez and Jeffrey Sachs
urged compromise in Venezuela, noting that “sanctions will cost Venezuela’s economy $11 billion in lost oil revenue in the next year, which is equal to 94 percent of what the country spent last year in goods imports.” As they put it, the message to Venezuelans of US support for Guaidó is stark: “Change regime or starve.”

A subsequent effort by Guaidó to foment an April uprising and lure the military to desert Maduro—exposed as a “fake corporate news story” by FAIR—was an abject failure, leading the New York Times to opine, “No one said regime change was going to be easy.”

In these desperate times for Venezuelans, the American left finds itself once again largely outside the boundaries of what passes for legitimate discourse in the United States. It is true that some of the more progressive members of Congress—Tulsi Gabbard, Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Bernie Sanders—have expressed varying degrees of criticisms of US intervention in Venezuela. It is also true that their critiques have been largely ignored by the more liberal media while being viciously attacked by Fox News and others.

Gabriel Hetland, of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), suggests that the left “should be guided by three principles: non-interventionism, self-determination, and solidarity with the oppressed.” This, she argues, requires persistent opposition to US interference in Venezuela’s internal affairs, support for free and fair elections and strengthening of the popular grass-roots institutions (both of which, she notes, have suffered under Maduro), and standing in solidarity with the oppressed subordinate classes. Anticipating a potential new government taking power at some point, she observes that “a critical task will be to prevent the exclusion and demonization of Chavistas, Chavismo and the Left in general,” noting that the “dangers of this occurring are very real.” Finally, she notes, “it means working to transform US politics,” which, one might add, requires ending the hegemony of US and global capital’s regime of neoliberalism.

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Endnotes
5 Alan MacLeod, Bad News from Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting (London: Routledge, 2018).

6 During his one day in power, the businessman Pedro Carmona “abolished the recently ratified constitution, suspended the Supreme Court, liquidated Congress and gave himself the power to rule alone with a council of advisors.” See MacLeod, 28ff.


9 MacLeod, 68. See MacLeod’s full discussion of the 2013 election, 58-79.

10 As Ellen Brown has argued, owing massive debt in dollars, the Venezuelan government was reduced to printing Bolívares and selling them on the international currency exchanges for dollars; as speculation in dollars drove up their price, the Bolivar was “massively deflated.” As Brown observes, “Venezuela and other countries that are carrying massive debts in currencies that are not their own are not sovereign,” and thus can’t succeed in issuing their own currency to aid development. Ellen Brown, “The Venezuelan Myth Keeping Us From Transforming Our Economy,” February 9, 2019, https://ellenbrown.com/2019/02/09/the-venezuela-myth-keeping-us-from-transforming-our-economy/ (accessed 3/12/2019)


13 Among other nefarious deeds, Abrams played a major role in US support for a genocidal regime in Guatemala and murderous military and paramilitary forces in El Salvador; he helped to illegally provide weapons to the US-backed Contras in Nicaragua under the guise of “humanitarian aid” and to facilitate the Iran-Contra scandal. He was convicted of lying to Congress, although President George H.W. Bush pardoned him at the end of his administration's tenure.


15 Space constraints make it impossible to document the range of US media responses in “lock step” with US propaganda. Readers can easily pursue further documentation by consulting www.fair.org. More generally, for critical insights, see articles on US-Venezuela relations by Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (www.cepr.net). See also articles in Monthly Review Online (www.mronline.org), and http://telasurenglish.net, a Latin American resource devoted to “unification of the South.”


Calle 13, a Puerto Rican duo made up of brothers René Pérez Joglar and Eduardo José Cabral Martínez, started out as a reggaetón group whose songs have always had an intellectual and literary depth rarely found in contemporary reggaetón. They began to expand their musical style repertoire in around 2009 to include various genres and styles, and in 2011 they came out with what has become a sort of anthem of Latin American unity, Latinoamérica. In this song, they brilliantly capture the struggle of being Latin American without any of the cheesy, superficial “unity and peace” rhetoric that appears in many songs of its kind. They do this by making references to important moments in history such as various dictatorships and the colonization of Latin America at the hands of various empires. The song doesn’t sugarcoat history or have a “let’s forget what happened and love each other” vibe. However, it does have a message of hope and pride in the resilience of the people. Written in the first person, the poetic yo becomes all of us: Calle 13’s message in this epigraph is that while they – the colonizers – have taken everything from us, even our legs, we will continue to walk. We will stand firm and continue to fight back. In recent years, Joglar has gone solo and become more radical in his views and his criticism of US politics, capitalism, and imperialism. In 1970, Eduardo Galeano wrote a book that is potentially more relevant today than it’s ever been, Open Veins of Latin America, which was a big inspiration for Joglar and Latinoamérica; Galeano was one of Joglar’s idols and mentors. Open Veins is a historical and political analysis of the Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent, as its subtitle says. Reading it in 2019 is uncanny, as it is hard to believe how much of Galeano’s Marxist analysis applies today, and in many cases, how much worse things have gotten since the 70s.

After the genocide and ransacking of Latin America during the initial colonization period by European imperialist powers, the US stepped in to make sure they appropriated anything that was left that could be profited off of. The US committed all sorts of crimes against humanity in the name of spreading capitalism, which, at its core, is inhumane. During the wave of US imperialism of Latin America, in 1912, William Taft declares, “The day is not far distant when three Stars and Stripes at three equidistant points will mark our territory: one at the North Pole, another at the Panama Canal, and the third at the South Pole. The whole hemisphere will be ours in fact, as by virtue of our superiority of race, it is already ours morally.” (Galeano, 107) The level of arrogance and selfishness is appalling, and there is no denying the intricate relationship between capitalism and white supremacy.
In Open Veins, Galeano dedicates a significant amount of his analysis to the natural wealth of Venezuela, its petroleum, and goes as far as to say it will eventually be its demise\(^3\). One of the best qualities of the book is Galeano’s ability to recount historic events with a literary, almost lyrical tone, so you don’t feel like you’re reading a text book. He continuously refers to the oil business giants such as Standard Oil (which later became Exxon) as “cartels” who bully entire countries and will do anything to avoid the nationalization of oil lest it interfere with its profit-over-everything mentality. The “cartels” believed that no countries that had oil in the 60s should have any right to profit from it. The fear of communism at that time was rampant and in the name of this boogeyman the CIA and the oil cartels committed some of the worst crimes against humanity in the history of the world.

Hugo Chávez, the democratically elected president of Venezuela from 1999 until 2013, decided that enough was enough, that his country would no longer be exploited for oil, and that he was going to revolutionize the country for the majority, which included the poor and people of color. “Before Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998, Venezuela attracted little international attention. [...] it was best known for its beauty queens and its oil. Those national icons represent racial and cultural politics that are driving today’s unrest.” (Marsh) The US began a crusade to stop him by any means necessary, including propaganda campaigns, blockades, and attempts at his life. And yet still, Chávez would not back down. He succeeded in nationalizing Venezuela’s oil and maintaining the profits within its borders, and the US succeeded in making Venezuela a public enemy. Chávez kept winning re-elections because his politics focused on the actual majority in Venezuela, which the rich elite could not get over.

After his death, vice president Maduro continued in the footsteps of Chávez, but due to many reasons, not the least of which being that he doesn’t necessarily have the charisma or the presence that Chávez had – and quite frankly, those shoes were going to be hard to fill no matter what – the right-wing opposition found and exploited his weaknesses. Most recently, the leader of the opposition, Juan Guaidó, backed by the US, illegally declared himself president. The US and other nations with monetary interests in Venezuela’s oil were quick to recognize the “new president,” and they started new fake news campaigns regarding the support Guaidó had in Venezuela. Photoshopped images appeared of rallies that were sparsely attended. In looking at the actual, real pictures of these rallies and events, and in seeing the social media attention it was all getting, one thing became evident: the class, and thus racial, divide in the support rallies for Maduro and Guaidó were astounding. Supporters of Guaidó appear dressed to the nines, the women in heels, with perfectly done hair and manicured nails. Maduro’s supporters wear jeans and t-shirts. “The light-skinned protesters were overwhelmingly wealthy – and they wanted you to know it. Many of the women marched in high heels, the men peacocking in business suits, proudly displayed in the uniforms of their privileged class. The Chavistas wore patriotic yellow, blue and red t-shirts, sneakers, jeans.” (Palast)
Not only are these differences astounding, but the images are being manipulated to make the Guaidó demonstrations look bigger than they are. “The New York Times did not run a photo of this past week’s pro-Maduro demonstrations. But in hard to find photos and reports from my colleagues on the ground, the Chavista demonstrations are bigger, involving mass turnouts in several cities, not just wealthy neighborhoods in Caracas.” (Palast) Guaidó’s supporters want capitalism. They want free trade. They want to be allowed to accumulate wealth at the expense of their poor neighbors. They are selfish and arrogant. Maduro’s supporters are overwhelmingly people of color who support the programs put in place that allow everyone to have access to healthcare, food, and housing. In a tweet from January 25th, Vijay Prashad said, “Guys, let’s speak plainly. The picture above is of Venezuela’s Constituent Assembly – dominated by the Chavistas. The picture below are the coup makers of the legislature. Spot the difference?” This tweet was accompanied by a collage of two photos...the first one, of the Constituent Assembly, was composed of almost entirely people of color – black, mestizo, and indigenous. The second, all white, all dressed in suits and fancy clothes. It is not surprising that the class divide between the two groups of supporters goes right along with the race divide. Capitalism is, at its root, another arm of white supremacy.

“This is the story of Venezuela in black and white, the story not told in the New York Times or the rest of our establishment media. This year’s so-called popular uprising is, at its heart, a furious backlash of the whiter (and wealthier) Venezuelans against their replacement by the larger Mestizo (mixed-race) poor.” (Palast) Since capitalism and white supremacy are intrinsically and inseparably connected, it makes sense that the elite became extra angry when their money started to become worthless due to inflation and blockades, and they began their propaganda and smear campaign. “Knowing that the Mestizo majority would not elect their Great White Hope Guaidó, they simply took to the streets – often armed. [...] To anti-Chavista protesters, race was an issue as much as class economics. I heard these opposition demonstrators shout ‘Chavez, Monkey!’ and worse.” (Palast) The ironic part is that Guaidó himself has become their white savior, but he is clearly of mestizo heritage himself.

It should come as no surprise that this issue has barely been talked about in the media, and has not been addressed at all by any mainstream media sources. The US has its own racial issues they refuse to acknowledge, they are not about to allow them to be acknowledged in a country they just aided in a soft coup. Nothing good has ever come out of the US intervening in Latin America (or anywhere, for that matter). The fact that the US is so eager and willing to support Guaidó should be a big red flag for anyone.

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Notes
1 “I am Latin America. A town without legs but that can still walk.” (My translation) from the 2011 song Latinoamérica by Calle 13.
2 Reggaetón is originally music that empowers an oppressed class, and Calle 13 is almost like an attempt to return to that.
3 In many instances Galeano is almost prophetic, such as when he warns that Rockefeller and Washington’s biggest fear is that thousands of immigrant children will appear like locusts at the southern border. (Paraphrased.)

Works Cited
@vijayprashad (Vijay Prashad). “Guys, let’s speak plainly. The picture above is of Venezuela’s Constituent Assembly - dominated by the Chavistas. The picture below are the coup makers of the legislature. Spot the difference?” Twitter, 25 Jan. 2019, 11:07 a.m. https://twitter.com/vijayprashad/status/108875934680338433

“Most of the nation’s media is owned by the white oligarchic opposition. Having never experienced a civil rights movement such as that in the United States, Venezuela’s white elite is unabashedly racist, and often displayed cartoons depicting Hugo Chavez, the wildly popular president of indigenous and African extraction, as a monkey.”

— Glen Ford, editor, Black Agenda Report
We Must Stop War With Iran Before It’s Too Late

NOAM CHOMSKY

Led by John Bolton, the Trump administration is pursuing catastrophe to protect U.S. dominance.

Assuming that rationality prevails and that Bolton and co. can be contained, the U.S. will continue with the successful program of crushing Iran’s economy and punishing its population.

The threat of a U.S. attack on Iran is all too real. Led by John Bolton, the Trump administration is spinning tales of Iranian misdeeds. It’s easy to concoct pretexts for aggression. History provides many examples.

The assault against Iran is one element of the international program of flaunting overwhelming U.S. power to put an end to “successful defiance” of the master of the globe: the primary reason for the U.S. torture of Cuba for 60 years.

The reasoning would easily be understood by any Mafia Don. Successful defiance can inspire others to pursue the same course. The “virus” can “spread contagion,” as Kissinger put it when laboring to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile. The need to destroy such viruses and inoculate victims against contagion—commonly by imposing harsh dictatorships—is a leading principle of world affairs.

Iran has been guilty of the crime of successful defiance since the 1979 uprising that deposed the tyrant the U.S. had installed in the 1953 coup that, with help from the British, destroyed the parliamentary system and restored obedience. The achievement was welcomed by liberal opinion. As the New York Times explained in 1954, thanks to the subsequent agreement between Iran and foreign oil companies, “Underdeveloped countries with rich resources now have an object lesson in the heavy cost that must be paid by one of their number which goes berserk with fanatical nationalism.” The article goes on to state, “It is perhaps too much to hope that Iran’s experience will prevent the rise of Mossadeghs in other countries, but that experience may at least strengthen the hands of more reasonable and more far-seeing leaders.”

Little has changed since. To take another more recent example, Hugo Chávez changed from tolerated bad boy to dangerous criminal when he encouraged OPEC to raise oil prices for the benefit of the global south, the wrong people. Soon after, his government was overthrown by a military coup, welcomed by the leading voice of liberal journalism. The Times editors exulted that “Venezuelan democracy is no longer threatened by a would-be dictator,” the “ruinous demagogue” Hugo Chávez, “after the military intervened and handed power to a respected business leader, Pedro Carmona”—who quickly dissolved the National Assembly, suspended the constitution and disbanded the Supreme Court, but, unfortunately, was overthrown within days by a popular uprising, compelling Washington to resort to other means to kill the virus.
The quest for dominance

Once Iranian “successful defiance” was terminated, and the “clear-eyed” Shah was safely installed in power, Iran became a pillar of U.S. control of the Middle East, along with Saudi Arabia and post-1967 Israel, which was closely allied with the Shah’s Iran, though not formally. Israel also had shared interests with Saudi Arabia, a relationship now becoming more overt as the Trump administration oversees an alliance of reactionary Middle East states as a base for U.S. power in the region.

Control of the strategically significant Middle East, with its huge and easily accessible oil reserves, has been a centerpiece of policy since the U.S. gained the position of global hegemon after World War II. The reasons are not obscure. The State Department recognized that Saudi Arabia is “a stupendous source of strategic power” and “one of the greatest material prizes in world history.” Eisenhower described it as the most “strategically important part of the world.” That control of Middle East oil yields “substantial control of the world” and “critical leverage” over industrial rivals has been understood by influential statesmen from Roosevelt adviser A. A. Berle to Zbigniew Brzezinski.

These principles hold quite independently of U.S. access to the region’s resources, which, in fact, has not been of primary concern. Through much of this period the U.S. was a major producer of fossil fuels, as it is again today. But the principles remain the same, and are reinforced by other factors, among them the insatiable demand of the oil dictatorships for military equipment and the Saudi agreement to support the dollar as global currency, affording the U.S. major advantages.

Middle East correspondent Tom Stevenson does not exaggerate when he writes that, “The U.S.’s inherited mastery of the Gulf has given it a degree of leverage over both rivals and allies probably unparalleled in the history of empire… It is difficult to overstate the role of the Gulf in the way the world is currently run.”

It is, then, understandable why successful defiance in the region cannot be tolerated.

After the overthrow of its Iranian client, the U.S. turned to direct support for Saddam’s invasion of Iran, tacitly condoning his use of chemical weapons and finally intervening directly by protecting Iraqi shipping in the Gulf from Iranian interdiction to ensure Iran’s submission. The extent of Reagan’s commitment to his friend Saddam was illustrated graphically when Iraqi missiles struck the USS Stark, killing 37 crew, eliciting a tap on the wrist in response. Only Israel has been able to get away with something like that (USS Liberty, 1967).

When the war ended, under President George H.W. Bush, the Pentagon and Department of Energy invited Iraqi engineers to the U.S. for advanced training in weapons production, an existential threat to Iran. Since then, harsh sanctions and cyber attacks—an act of aggression according to Pentagon doctrine—have been employed to punish the miscreants.
Threat to the world order

U.S. political leaders across the spectrum warn that all options are open in assaulting Iran – “containing it,” in prevailing Newspeak. It is irrelevant that “the threat or use of force” is explicitly banned in the UN Charter, the foundation of modern international law.

Iran is regularly depicted as the greatest threat to world peace—in the U.S., that is. Global opinion differs, regarding the U.S. as the greatest threat to world peace, but the American population is protected from this unwelcome news by the Free Press.

That Iran’s government is a threat to its own population is not in doubt, nor is the fact that like everyone else, Iran seeks to expand its influence. The issue, rather, is Iran’s alleged threat to world order generally.

What then is that threat? A sensible answer has been provided by U.S. intelligence, which advised Congress in 2010 (nothing has materially changed since) that Iranian military doctrine is strictly “defensive … designed to slow an invasion and force a diplomatic solution to hostilities,” and that “Iran’s nuclear program and its willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy.” (U.S. intelligence agencies acknowledged in 2007 and 2012 that Iran doesn’t currently have a nuclear weapons program.) For those who wish to rampage freely in the region, a deterrent is an intolerable threat—even worse than “successful defiance.”

There would of course be ways to end the alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons. One start was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the joint agreement on nuclear weapons, endorsed by the Security Council and abrogated by the Trump administration, in full awareness that Iran has lived up to its commitments.

Hawks claim that the agreement did not go far enough, but there are simple ways to go beyond. The most obvious is to move towards a nuclear-weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, as strongly advocated by the Arab states, by Iran and by G-77 (the former non-aligned countries), with general support elsewhere. There is a key obstacle. The proposal is regularly vetoed by the U.S. at the NPT review conferences, mostly recently by Obama in 2015. The reason, as everyone knows, is that the plan would require the U.S. to acknowledge formally that Israel has nuclear weapons and even to authorize inspections. Again, intolerable.

It should not be forgotten that the U.S. (along with Britain) has a unique responsibility to establish a Middle East NWFZ. When attempting to provide some legal cover for the invasion of Iraq, the two aggressors claimed that Saddam was developing nuclear weapons in violation of Security Council Resolution 687 of 1991, after the Gulf war, which obligated Saddam to end such programs (as in fact he did). Little attention is paid to Article 14, calling for “steps towards the goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction.”
We Must Stop War With Iran Before It’s Too Late

It is also worth noting that when Iran was ruled by the Shah, there was little concern about Iranian intentions to develop nuclear weapons. These were clearly stated by the Shah, who informed foreign journalists that Iran would develop nuclear weapons “without a doubt and sooner than one would think.” The father of Iran’s nuclear energy program and former head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran was confident that the leadership’s plan “was to build a nuclear bomb.” The CIA reported that it had “no doubt” Iran would develop nuclear weapons if neighboring countries did (as Israel of course has).

This was during the period when Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Henry Kissinger and other high officials were pressuring U.S. universities (my own, MIT, included) to facilitate Iran’s nuclear programs. Asked later why he supported such programs under the Shah but since strenuously opposes them, Kissinger responded honestly that Iran was an ally then. Simple enough.

The neoliberal formula

Assuming that rationality prevails and that Bolton and co. can be contained, the U.S. will continue with the successful program of crushing Iran’s economy and punishing its population. Europe is too intimidated to respond, and others lack the power to stand up to the Master. The same policies are being pursued in Venezuela, and have been employed against Cuba for many years, ever since the Kennedy administration recognized that its campaign to impose “the terrors of the earth” on Cuba (in the words of historian Arthur Schlesinger) brought the world close to destruction during the missile crisis.

It is a mistake to seek some grand geopolitical thinking behind Trump’s performances. These are readily explained as the actions of a narcissistic megalomaniac whose doctrine is to maintain personal power, and who has the political savvy to satisfy his constituencies, primarily corporate power and private wealth but also the voting base. The latter is kept in line by gifts to the religious right, dramatic pronouncements about protection of Americans from hordes of rapists and murderers and other demons, and the pretense to be standing up for the working stiff whom the administration’s actual policies are in fact shafting at every turn.

So far, it is working well. The neoliberal formula is flourishing: spectacular profits for the primary constituency along with general stagnation and precarity for the majority, ameliorated slightly by the continuing slow recovery from the Great Recession of 2008. In brief, Trump is doing just fine. He is helped by the obsession of the Democrats with Russiagate and their downplaying of his major crimes, the most important, by far, the policy of leading the race to environmental catastrophe. Another Trump term might—literally—be a death knell for organized human life.

A new poll shows that Trump’s job approval among likely voters has passed 50%, higher than Obama’s at this stage of his presidency. A smart policy for Trump would be to continue to shake his fist at the world, charging that weak-kneed liberals like “Sleepy Joe” and “crazy Bernie” would submit to the terrible enemies who are being subdued by the street tough with the MAGA hat. The
stance is assisted by the liberal media, which reflexively echo the charges that the “rogue state” of Iran has to become a “normal state” like the U.S. (Pompeo’s mantra), even while warning timidly that war might not be the best way to achieve that goal.

There are of course other paths that can be pursued. And, crucially, there can be no delay in mounting powerful opposition to the threat of yet another crime of aggression, with its likely catastrophic outcomes.

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“*If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!*”

— Donald Trump tweet
Make Capitalism History

Faramarz Farbod

To perish or to radically transform the way we relate to one another and to nature, that is the question humanity has never had to face until now.

The evidence backing the above assertion is strong and accumulating. Nevertheless, there remains a stubborn problem of awareness as many who understand the perils facing humanity fail to connect them to its source: the capitalist organization of planetary life. Failure to address this problem will only guarantee that the predictable future characterized by immense suffering associated with a generalized social collapse and ecological ruination on a planetary scale will come to pass.

In this brief essay, I will tackle this problem of awareness by addressing a series of thematically-related questions that are often raised by those who question whether the source of the problems we currently face can reasonably be said to be the capitalist system.

Questions

Why pick on capitalism when people from time immemorial have wrestled with various kinds of environmental degradation? Haven’t humans experienced such matters as soil erosion and depletion, overhunting, and widespread logging prior to the advent of the capitalist social order? Isn’t the problem more accurately located in the kind of human interactions with nature that organized human life requires? After all, didn’t the Maya, a sophisticated civilization made up of 19 million people, experience a rapid collapse in a span of a mere century due to a drought that had been severely exacerbated by rapid deforestation? Why then place the blame on capitalism and not on organized human life itself, especially given that revolutionary advances in technology have made possible a dramatic increase in human populations and vastly increased the impact of human actions on the environment?

A Response

It is true that peoples in the antiquity faced environmental degradation. For example, deforestation was responsible for 60% of the drought that led to the rapid collapse of the Maya during the 8th or 9th centuries. But it is important to realize that the problems then were limited to a locality or a region. Today, by contrast, the ecological reach of the problems we face are global and threaten nearly the entirety of life on the planet. This is the first unique feature of the contemporary era.

Science, in fact, tells us that we are now living in a do-or-die moment in history. Take the global warming as the Earth is now recording the highest levels of atmospheric carbon in over three million years. The planet has heated up by a
degree since the dawn of the industrial age. “Limiting global warming to 1.5°C [compared to a catastrophic 2°C above the preindustrial level] would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society,” says the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change.

Take the heating of the oceans. Since 1871 the oceans have been heating on average by an equivalent of about 1.5 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs per second. The heating has accelerated as carbon emissions have risen. Today that equivalent is between 3 and 6 atomic bombs per second. The oceans absorb more than 90% of the heat trapped by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. This added energy raises the sea levels and enables more intense hurricanes and typhoons.

Or take the accelerated rate of extinction of species on Earth. A New UN report projects the extinction of one million animal and plant species within decades, representing one-eighth of total number of species. The report is the most comprehensive ever completed involving 145 experts from 50 countries, with input from another 310 contributors, over a 3 year-long systematic review of 15,000 scientific sources. “The overwhelming evidence,” it concludes, “presents an ominous picture.” “We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide.” It urges immediate transformative change, by which it means a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values.

The second, and related, feature of the contemporary era is that we are no longer witnessing societies whose activities threaten their existence but a globalized economic order whose normal operations threaten life on a planetary scale. That is, we are dealing with a capitalist economic system with a global reach. It is precisely because the system’s reach is global that the damage it inflicts on life-support systems is so widespread as to set it on a tragic collision course with the Earth itself.

It is crucial to realize that this widespread damage originates from the normal functioning of the system and not from its malfunction. The systemic nature of the ecological degradation should compel us to analyze with sober senses the central driving forces of the system as a whole. These are (a) a cancer-like hunger for endless growth driven by the “egotistical calculation” of commerce seeking maximum profitability, (b) the treatment of human labor as a cost leading capital to oppose labor capturing a fair share of the wealth it creates, and (c) the determination of massive investments by private interests, and increasingly by a transnational capitalist class, a tiny sliver of the total global population.

Let’s take the last point. Peter Phillips shows in his recent book Giants: The Global Power Elite that just 199 people manage 17 transnational investment companies that together controlled $41 trillion worth of assets in 2017. They, the governments that accommodate them, and other networks of power they
have set up, are primarily motivated by securing capital investments free from any resistance, with maximum return on investment, and with nation-states as “population containment zones” for global capital.

So far, I have concentrated on the global nature of capitalism and its impact on the planet’s ecosystem. Capitalism, however, has intensified its assault not just against this beautiful planet but against the people inhabiting it. Everywhere, the lords of capital use the differences of class, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality to divide the people and keep the regime of brutal exploitation, accumulation, and domination safe from any serious challenge. It is in the nature of capital to sacrifice the people and the planet at the altar of accumulation for accumulation sake.

How else are we to make sense of the facts that the world’s 2,200 billionaires increased their wealth by $2.5 billion per day in 2018 while nearly half of humanity (3.4 billion people) live with less than $5.50 a day; that the super-rich had stored $7.6 trillion of their wealth in offshore tax havens in 2015 while some 10,000 will die daily of lack of access to health care; and that Ethiopia’s health budget, a country of 105 million people, is nearly equivalent to just a 1% tax on Jeff Bezos’ fortune ($112 billion), the richest man in the world?

Looking Ahead

The ruling class has no good ideas about how to address the existential crises the reproduction of its own class domination generates. Nor could we assume that it even has a serious understanding of the system or ways to ameliorate its socio-ecological consequences. In fact, the ever-increasing concentration of wealth in its hands ensures that no solution, even if it is compelled to accept it by pressures from below, can remain effective for long and not be subject to rollback.

It is left to us, therefore, to free our minds and acquire the ‘we’ consciousness necessary to mount a serious challenge to global capitalism and its by-products: imperialism, neoliberalism, war and militarism, racism, sexism, poverty and, especially, the destruction of the ecosystem.

There are some encouraging signs that the young have begun responding to the latter crisis. On May 24, 2019, hundreds of thousands participated in a student strike movement in over 1664 cities across 125 countries urging action to address the ecological crisis. Earlier on March 15, 2019, over 1.6 million people across 133 countries in over 2000 places turned out at such demonstrations. Other environmental movements had appeared earlier. In late April of this year, Extinction Rebellion, a British group, occupied major locations in London for ten days that led to the British government declaring a state of “climate emergency,” which received approval from parliament on May 1. In the US, the Sunrise Movement, comprised of young activists, has been pushing politicians to adopt a Green New Deal.

Time, however, is not on our side. We must act more forcefully and in more radical directions before the full range of catastrophes awaiting us materialize. We must not be satisfied with only pushing politicians to align themselves with
the goals of the Paris Agreement. The latter is merely a step towards the long ecological revolution needed to create a just, free, and sustainable society. A Green New Deal should, for instance, take on the role of militarism and war in destroying the planet’s ecology.

But we can only do so if we try to see through the ideological mystifications the system generates to camouflege its nature and if we engage in serious anti-capitalist politics from below. Only then can we generate a radical hope to transform fundamentally the way we relate to one another and to nature. Such a radical hope rests on the premise that we are capable of collective rationality and can act proactively to avert predictable disasters. To rely only on reactive forms of consciousness and action will not do. We cannot spring to (limited) action in reaction to the already-occurring socio-ecological disasters and expect to overcome the sources of the multiple crises we are facing.

As Dr. King once said, “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” There is, he said, “such a thing as being too late,” especially now and in relation to the rapid unfolding of the ecocidal tendencies of the system. But as the worst is yet to come, we must insist with Marx that humanity be “at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” and I would add, with nature, and act to transform the world accordingly.

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“A system that has only one goal, the maximization of profits in an endless quest for the accumulation of capital on an ever-expanding scale, and which thus seeks to transform every single thing on earth into a commodity with a price, is a system that is soulless; it can never have a soul, never be green.”

—Fred Magdoff & John Bellamy Foster
Footprints in the Sand

Each morning alone on the beach, not thinking about how far I might walk, I look back over my shoulder to see my footprint trail in the sand. At water’s edge spent waves rippled menacingly close to my footprints, a scene becomes instantly symbiotic. People know to me are like those footprints. They’re also vulnerable and then vanish thanks to nature’s ultimate power to dismiss.

All footprints lack permanence, so awareness of this causes my wonder about folks thinking they can make indestructible footprints on the path of life’s journey. Why is it they won’t, or perhaps can’t, grasp the fact we’re ultimately destined to become very small particles wafting in breezes moving in all directions including above beaches where down below footprints always disappear.

PHILIP REISS

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You know a media is subservient to power when they unceasingly ask dissidents, on the rare occasion they are invited on, about whether Assange has indeed committed crimes the state is mendaciously charging him with (such as computer crime or hacking), BUT unerringly go along with all the massive state crimes that Assange has exposed without ever asking any serious questions of the perpetrators and their countless apologists.

Assange’s fatal mistake may have been seeking asylum in Ecuador rather than Cuba, unless we are not aware of circumstances making that option not possible. Cuba has a long pedigree of standing up to the bully from the north.

We are disgusted at the UK & Ecuador in arresting Assange to extradite him to the US. A bloody former empire serving the wishes of the current one, ugh. And Ecuador! It was not so long ago that it stood up to the rogue behavior of the US. Now it has been reduced to a vassal state. Shameful. And what of “we the people” in the belly of the beast? Will we act to stop the injustice?

We Don’t Like that the Grand Jury has called Chelsea Manning in the first place. We Don’t Like that she was held in solitary confinement. We Don’t Like that Trump’s DOJ is attempting to criminalize Wikileaks publication of leaks. We Don’t Like that Snowden is exiled in Russia. We Don’t Like that Ecuador & the UK conspired to arrest Julian Assange and extradite him to the US. We Want To See a large protest to protect Assange from being arrested and extradited. Will AOC and her progressive colleagues in Congress take an unequivocal public stand against the plans to snatch Assange?

Almost every state condemned Trump’s recognition of Israel’s theft of the land, water, and grapes of Syrian Golan Heights. But there have been no actions to impose any real cost for this blatant violation of international law by the US and Israel. We are witnessing an enfeebled international community reduced to ineffective responses, which reminds me of the offerings of ‘thoughts and prayers’ by politicians in the US in response to repeated mass shootings.

On March 27, the Russian “agent”/”asset” in the Oval Office threatened Russia!! “Russia has to get out” of Venezuela, said Trump as he met with the wife of the CIA-puppet (Guaido) who the US is trying to install as president of Venezuela by sadistically strangulating the Venezuelan economy, urging a military coup, and soliciting the support of Brazil’s fascist President, Bolsonaro. Furthermore, the corporate Dems who have been fuming with rage nonstop for 3 years about the undetectable Russian meddling in the US elections continue to remain silent as the Russian “agent” in the Oval Office openly colludes with the fascist Brazilian president to violently overthrow the government in Venezuela, an ally of Russia. Seriously, you can’t make this stuff up.

The liberal viewers of MSNBC & CNN who’ve been lied to shamelessly for nearly 3 years about Russia-gate and who believed it all must now be referred to as the ‘new basket of deplorables.’ They are Russophobic, disillusioned, unhinged, confused, exhibit significant aversion to reality, gullible, ready to suspend their critical faculty, intolerant of dissent, unable to explain it all rationally- you name it.
Will the real resistance to Trump show up now that Russia-gate joke imploded? Can we at last mount a serious challenge to the US oligarchs who have in fact rigged the political and economic system in their favor?

Will the MSM reexamine their Russia-gate hysteria? Of course not. They didn’t when they lied about WMD in the path to the criminal destruction of Iraq. In that case, all the lying pundits and deceiving officials continued to appear endlessly on the maddeningly vacuous cable news programing ever since. Hell, some officials were even hired as “experts” instead of being put on trial for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Those who told the truth, well, predictably, they remained uninvited. Our guess is that the same will happen now. The MSM will not reexamine its maddening 2-year-long hysteria; the same dishonest talking heads will continue to appear on the shows; and the dissidents will remain marginalized. What’s more, the same can be said about the dismal corporate Dems: they will not set out to examine their critical role in this hysteria-making as well as in helping elect Trump in 2016. And surely, Trump will now bask in the gift that the corporate Dems and their minions in the press have just bestowed upon him and will use it to re-elect himself for the 2nd term -- an outcome that, we think, good many corporate Dems prefer over the return of even a mildly social democratic politics in the form of a Sanders victory.

HBO’s Bill Maher loses his mind when it comes to 3 issues: Islamophobia, Russiagate, and Israel-Palestine. On his show Real Time with Bill Maher, aired on March 8, he made the absurd comment that “Palestinians are victims, but not of Israel; they’re victims of other Palestinians, unfortunately.” And his audience clapped in approval!! Clearly, Israel is not just occupying Palestinian territories; (pro-) Israel (propaganda) also occupies the minds of many US-Americans.

On Thursday, February 28, Israel’s prime minister Netanyahu faced indictment on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. On the same day the UN Human Rights Council reported its finding that Israeli forces may have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza by intentionally targeting unarmed children, journalists, health workers, and the disabled. They have killed 183 (including 35 children) and injured 23,000 since last year in a bloody response to the weekly Great March of Return protests. The UN Report calls on states to arrest those responsible for these international crimes. If there are any serious concerns about justice and Palestinian lives in Israel, Netanyahu would be charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity. Clearly Israel does not care about the lives of Palestinians. Of course, we’ve seen this before: Nixon was indicted not for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Chile, etc. but for Watergate-a minor state crime against those with power who can defend themselves. The defenseless Palestinians (like the then Laotians...) cannot and have no effective recourse to pursue justice unless ordinary citizens demand it.

The propaganda machine is hard at work with Venezuela. On April 1st, Joanna Hausmann, prominent social media figure and comedian and daughter of Ricardo Hausmann, who was responsible for the crisis that led to Chávez becoming president, Venezuela’s IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) representative appointed by Guaidó, posted a video for the New York Times called “What My Fellow Liberals Don’t Get About Venezuela” in which she calls Maduro a “tyrannical dictator.” The backlash was so strong from both sides she didn’t tweet again for a month. She failed to disclose her relationship with her father and how Guaidó succeeding in a coup would benefit her monetarily directly, and even centrists came at her and the New York times for lack of journalistic integrity. Among many falsehoods and hypocrisies, she calls Maduro a tyrannical dictator, but, what tyrannical dictator would allow Guaidó to get as far as he did? The message is convoluted and delusional.
From the Green Party US, May 16, 2019:

The Green Party strongly protests the arrests today of individuals inside the Venezuelan Embassy. Members of the organization Embassy Protection Collective had been staying inside the embassy since April 10, 2019, with permission of the embassy. Their objective was to help prevent a U.S. administration-aided effort by the Venezuelan opposition to take over the embassy. Several members of the Green Party were part of the organization.

The United Nations recognizes Nicolas Maduro as the legitimate president of Venezuela. It is illegal under international law for the U.S. to facilitate control of the embassy to opposition leader Juan Guaido, who has asserted a claim to the office.

The Embassy Protection Collective released a statement recently saying that eviction and arrests of the individuals, inside the embassy with the approval of the Venezuelan government, would violate international law.

“Today’s action creates a horrific precedent. International law protects foreign embassies,” said Margaret Flowers, Green Party of the United States Co-chair, and one of the activists arrested today as part of the nonviolent effort to prevent the takeover. “The Trump Administration is violating the Vienna Convention by not only allowing the illegal seizure of diplomatic premises but by facilitating it. Such action raises concerns for the safety and security of diplomatic staff and embassies, including our own, throughout the world.”

The Green Party platform states that “the U.S. must recognize the sovereignty of nation-states and their right of self-determination.” The Green Party has called for a policy of non-intervention and for sanctions against Venezuela to be lifted.

Readers may be interested to know that they can attend informal, free-to-the-public classes on the 1st, 3rd, and 5th Wednesday evenings (6–9 PM) of every month. The current topic is Film & Politics, and past classes have included Global Politics, West Asian Politics, and Globalization and Social Movements. There are no prerequisites nor any requirement for regular attendance. Everyone is welcome to attend all or as many classes as schedules permit.

The classes are taught by Left Turn coeditor Faramarz Farbod, who teaches politics at Moravian College. For more information please write farbodf@moravian.edu.
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