Labor, Environment, and Green New Deal
Aviva Chomsky

Israel’s Recent Election
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Dollar Meals and Diabetes
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Know This Now
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Orwell’s Doublethink
Anthony DiMaggio
Editor: Faramarz Farbod. Associate editors: Rita Corriel, Peter Crownfield, Alex Fischer, Robert Kocsis, Ted Morgan, Philip Reiss, William Rosebrock, Sakura Shinjo, Ashley Velasquez.

We bid fond farewell to former editor Martin Boksenbaum. (see page 65)

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Notes from the Editors

Excessive gun violence and mass shootings have become the norm in the US, so has the trite and totally ineffective response of offering “our thoughts and prayers” by the governing political elite. There were about 252 mass shootings in the first 215 days of 2019. About 35% of mass shooters are young white men with prior training in how to use guns — often learned as high school participants (continued on page 69)
When it comes to heat, extreme weather, wildfires, and melting glaciers, the planet is now in what the media increasingly refers to as “record” territory, as climate change’s momentum outpaces predictions. In such a situation, in a country whose president and administration seem hell-bent on doing everything they conceivably can to make matters worse, the Green New Deal (GND) seems to offer at least a modest opening to a path forward.

You know, the resolution introduced this February in the House of Representatives by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Edward Markey (D-MA). Unsurprisingly, the proposal has been roundly attacked by the right. But it’s stirred up some controversy on the left as well. You might imagine that labor unions and environmental organizations would be wholeheartedly for a massive federal investment in good jobs and a just transition away from fossil fuels. But does organized labor actually support or oppose the Green New Deal? What about environmental organizations? If you’re not even sure how to answer such questions, you’re not alone.

That 14-page resolution calls for “a new national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization on a scale not seen since World War II and the New Deal era.” Its purpose: to reduce U.S. carbon emissions to net zero within a decade, while guaranteeing significant numbers of new jobs and social welfare to American workers. Read it and you’ll find that it actually attempts to overcome historical divisions between the American labor and environmental movements by linking a call for good jobs and worker protection to obvious and much-needed environmental goals.

In the process, the GND proposal goes impressively far beyond the modest goals of the Paris Climate Accords and other international agreements. It supports specific, enforceable targets for bringing climate change under control, while drawing clear connections between social, labor, and environmental rights. Acknowledging in blunt terms the urgency of making systemic change on a rapidly warming planet, it calls for the kind of national mobilization Americans haven’t experienced since the end of the Second World War. Described that way, it sounds like something both the labor and environmental movements would naturally support without a second thought. There is, however, both a history of mistrust and real disagreement over issues, which both movements are now grappling with. And the media is doing its part by exaggerating labor’s opposition to the proposal, while ignoring what environmental organizations have to say.
One Green New Deal controversy focuses on the future role of fossil fuels in that plan. A number of environmental organizations believe that such energy sources have no place in our future, that they need to stay in the ground, period. They cite climate science and the urgent need to move rapidly and drastically to eliminate carbon emissions as the basis for such a conclusion. As it happens, the Green New Deal avoids directly challenging the fossil-fuel industry. In fact, it doesn’t even use the term “fossil fuels.”

From another perspective, some unions hope that new technologies like carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) will make those fuels more efficient and far cleaner. If the addition of carbon to the atmosphere could be reduced significantly or offset in some fashion, while humanity still burned natural gas, oil, or even coal, they say, jobs in those sectors could be preserved. And the unions have other concerns as well. They tend, for instance, to look skeptically on the GND’s promises of a “just transition” for displaced fossil-fuel workers like coal miners, given the devastation that has fallen on workers and their communities when industries have shut down in the past. They also fear that, without accompanying trade protections, polluting industries will simply export their emissions rather than reduce them.

Being more of a statement of purpose than an elaborated plan, the Green New Deal is short on both detail and answers when it comes to such issues. The actual roadmap to achieving its goals, the proposal states, “must be developed through transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities, labor unions, worker cooperatives, civil society groups, academia, and businesses.” Both unions and environmental organizations are already mobilizing to make sure their voices are part of the process.

The right wing was quick to mockingly publicize the Green New Deal not just as thoroughly unrealistic but as utterly un-American. Under the circumstances, perhaps it’s not surprising that a recent poll found 69% of Republicans but only 36% of Democrats had heard “a lot” about it. Similarly, 80% of Republicans already “strongly opposed” it, while only 46% of Democrats strongly supported it.3 And 40% of those polled said that they had heard “mostly negative” things about it, while only 14% had heard “mostly positive” things. One reason for this disparity: Fox News has devoted more time to the topic than any other television news outlet. And President Trump naturally pitched in, tweeting that the GND would eliminate “Planes, Cars, Cows, Oil, Gas & the Military.” Such claims, however fantastical, have already spread widely. But even the mainstream media has tended to play up the negative.

Both right-wing and mainstream media outlets have promoted the idea that unions are in firm opposition to the Green New Deal, frequently exaggerating and distorting the nature of what opposition there is. As for the concerns of environmentalists, readers would largely have to follow radical online publications or search out the websites of green organizations.
The Media, the Labor Movement, and the Green New Deal

The Washington Examiner, Fox News, and other right-wing outlets have waxed gleeful every time representatives of organized labor, including Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, have critiqued or expressed reservations about the Green New Deal, a topic on which the rest of the mainstream media has also run stories. Labor’s position is, however, significantly more complicated than any of them have acknowledged.

In an hour-long interview at the Economic Club of Washington in April—reported in the Examiner under the headline “AFL-CIO Opposes Green New Deal”—Trumka actually devoted less than 30 seconds to responding to a question on the topic. Asked if he supported the GND, he replied “Not as currently written… We weren’t part of the process, and so the workers’ interest really wasn’t completely figured into it. So, we would want a whole lot of changes made so that workers and our jobs are protected in the process.” Not exactly a wholesale rejection.

His brief reaction echoed a March letter from the AFL-CIO Energy Committee to Ocasio-Cortez and Markey signed by the presidents of the United Mine Workers and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Among other things, it protested the absence of a labor voice in drafting the proposal. It also focused on the potential loss of jobs, as well as the fact that the GND was “not rooted in an engineering-based approach” to climate change, reflecting union hopes that improved technologies might allow the US to meet climate goals while still extracting and burning fossil fuels (and so preserving jobs in that sector of the economy).

Wyoming Republican Senator John Barrasso, a long-time ally of the coal, oil, and gas industries, a climate-change denier, and a reliably anti-union vote in Congress, first noted the existence of the letter in a tweet headlined: “The @AFLCIO, which represents 12.5 million workers & includes 55 labor unions, slams the #GreenNewDeal.” Both the right wing and the mainstream media largely agreed with his interpretation. The Washington Post, for instance, headlined its article “AFL-CIO Criticizes the Green New Deal,” while the Examiner called the federation the “latest opponent” of the resolution.

Two facts were, however, missing in action in this reporting. First, the members of the AFL-CIO Energy Committee come from only eight unions, most of them deeply dependent on the fossil-fuel industry. In that sense, it doesn’t represent the federation as a whole. Second, the letter itself was more nuanced than the media coverage suggested and even its signers were far from unanimous. True, one of them, Terry O’Sullivan, president of the Laborers International Union of North America, claimed to be unalterably opposed to the GND, saying it was “exactly how not to” address infrastructure and climate change. Linking them, he wrote, would cause “social and economic devastation.” In contrast, in an article ignored by the media and headlined “Labor Champions a Green New Deal,” another signer, United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard, suggested that the letter actually supported the GND.
The Energy Committee’s letter laid out its own vision of how to address the coming crisis through:

“[the] development and deployment of technologies like solar, wind, nuclear, hydroelectric, carbon capture and utilization, battery storage, and highspeed rail that limit or eliminate carbon emissions. We know that the increase in natural gas production has lowered emissions in the power sector and provided a new source of construction and manufacturing jobs. We must invest in energy efficiency in the industrial and commercial sectors, retrofits and upgrades to schools and public buildings, and to make our communities safe and resilient. All of these investments must be paired with strong labor and procurement standards to grow family-sustaining, middle class union jobs.”

Much of this sounds like it’s aligned with the language of the GND, which also calls for increased efficiency, retrofits, upgrades, and labor guarantees. The differences may seem subtle, but are worth mentioning. The Energy Committee emphasizes investment in new carbon capture and storage technology, while the GND advocates only “proven low-tech solutions that increase soil carbon storage, such as land preservation and afforestation.” For obvious reasons, CCUS is the preferred path of the fossil-fuel industry itself: it’s an aspirational technology that will require massive federal investment in big energy and holds out the promise (however illusory) that fossil fuels can continue to be extracted and burned. Many environmental organizations argue that its development is not just a gift to fossil-fuel companies, but a pie-in-the-sky distraction from the real work of ending the use of oil, coal, and natural gas.

The Energy Committee’s letter also advocated increasing the use of natural gas as part of a path to lowering carbon emissions—and it’s true that natural gas does emit less carbon than burning either coal or oil. In fact, until recently, the shift from coal to natural-gas-fired power plants played a role in slightly lowering U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Still, natural gas is a fossil fuel, and the more we burn, the more we contribute to climate change. It in no way falls into the GND’s category of “clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources.” And keep in mind that, even during a decade of reductions, the United States still emitted far more greenhouse gases per capita than most other countries and, in the last two years, its carbon dioxide emissions have begun to rise again. Our per capita emissions are still way above those of, say, Europe or Japan. Shifting to a slightly cleaner fossil fuel while continuing to burn so much carbon does little to avert catastrophic climate change.

These disputes are real. Nevertheless, the right wing caricatured the AFL-CIO response to paint the GND as an outlandish, anti-worker proposal.

From the left, the environmental organization Friends of the Earth also caricatured the AFL-CIO’s stance, writing: “With the energy committee’s position, the AFL joins climate deniers like the Koch brothers, the Republican Party, and Big Oil. We encourage the AFL and other unions within it to rethink this position.” Such language only exacerbates any labor-environmental divide, while
ignoring union concerns that workers in affected industries will be paying the true price for lowering carbon emissions.

Friends of the Earth could have focused instead on Richard Trumka’s words at the 2018 Global Climate Action Summit. The Federation, he insisted, does not question climate science.

“I learned something about science in the mine. When the boss told us to ignore the deadly hazards of the job… that sagging timber over our heads… that Black Lung cough… science told us the truth. And today, again, science tells us the truth: climate change threatens our workers, our jobs, and our economy.”

He then asked one question: “Does your plan for fighting climate change ask more from sick, retired coal miners than it does from you and your family? If it does, then you need to think again.”

Or as Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants and a strong Green New Deal supporter, put it:

“The skepticism really comes from a place of generally being opposed to something that they believe is going to be an attack on their jobs, their livelihoods, and their communities… We have to do things like show communities that have been hurt that we actually mean what we say when we say ‘leave no worker behind.’”

For the unions, an emphasis on trade is also critical from both an environmental and a labor perspective. United Steelworkers President Gerard elaborated:

“The USW has aggressively demanded that climate policies include strong trade measures to ensure American jobs in energy-intensive and trade-exposed industries are not decimated by U.S. corporations evading pollution-control regulations by shipping factories to countries that ignore pollution.”

Why Labor Hesitates: A Tangled History

While a skeptic could read Gerard’s stance on trade as no more than a narrow self-interest in preserving jobs in the face of a planetary crisis, it’s also a crucial issue purely from a climate-change perspective. In addition to the shift from coal to natural gas, another factor in the slight decline in U.S. carbon dioxide emissions until recently was deindustrialization and the outsourcing of industrial production to Mexico, China, or Vietnam, which represents a thoroughly illusory reduction in carbon emissions. The atmosphere, of course, doesn’t care whether a factory is located in the United States or China, since total global emissions are what’s warming our planet.

While the AFL-CIO leadership has been cautious about the Green New Deal proposal, some unions have enthusiastically hailed it, among them public and service sector ones. With its two million members, the Service Employees International Union, not currently affiliated with the AFL-CIO, signed on wholeheartedly at its convention in early June. The 50,000-strong Association of Flight Attendants soon seconded that position as its president, Sara Nelson, explained that, in her industry, “it’s not the solutions to climate change that kill jobs. Climate change itself is the job killer,” since extreme
weather and increased turbulence are grounding more flights and making air travel more dangerous.\textsuperscript{12}

Maine’s state federation and a number of labor councils followed suit, as have quite a few union locals. While the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, for instance, has been reluctant to endorse the Green New Deal, at least one of its locals has signed on. “We’re all about green jobs,” declared Lou Antonellis, the business manager of local 103 in Boston. “We’ve been promoting green technology for a long time.”\textsuperscript{13}

There is a context—think of it as a deeply tangled history—that lies behind the complexity of labor’s response to the Green New Deal. As a start, labor in the United States has rarely spoken with a unified voice. In addition, the union movement is now distinctly on the defensive. The unionized share of the labor force has fallen from a high of 35\% in the 1950s to less than 11\% today, thanks to a combination of deindustrialization, automation, cutbacks, attacks on the public sector, and a virulent corporate backlash against unions that began in the 1970s. Mass production powerhouses like the auto workers, steel workers, and miners—all in sectors in which a fossil-fuel-free future is challenging to imagine—have been hit the hardest, a situation that provides some context for their suspicions about climate-change proposals.

The weak position of organized labor in the United States also contributes to the AFL-CIO’s opposition to the notion that the planet’s biggest polluting states need to make the biggest reductions. As a result, its stance on international climate agreements lags well behind the international union movement. The AFL-CIO, for instance, opposed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol because it required greater reductions from the biggest polluters and, since then, has consistently supported the U.S. government position that wealthy countries should not be required to meet emissions reductions standards unless poor countries do, too.

Environmental Organizations and the Green New Deal

You wouldn’t know it from the media coverage, but environmental organizations are also divided on the Green New Deal. Many of them feel the proposal is too weak. Its language, they say, still allows for fossil-fuel extraction, use, and export, and for the expansion of nuclear energy.

The GND, after all, aims not at zero carbon emissions, but at “net-zero.” In translation, that means carbon dioxide emissions could continue as long as some kind of offset system was implemented to compensate for them. Even as the AFL-CIO Energy Committee argues that net-zero goes too far, many environmental organizations critique the GND’s unwillingness to opt for “zero emissions.” In fact, even zero emissions raise red flags for some environmentalists, who point out that nuclear power, despite its non-renewable nature and devastating potential environmental consequences, remains a zero-emissions form of energy production. Instead, many environmental organizations advocate that we move to energy sources that are both 100\% renewable and zero emissions.

Like the unions, such radical environmental organizations complained that they were left out of the discussion leading up to the Green New Deal proposal.
and had no chance to push for moving more quickly to 100% renewables and what they call “100% decarbonization.” While they, like the unions, call for a “just transition,” their focus tends to be on indigenous and other front-line communities affected by fossil-fuel extraction as well as workers in those industries. Unlike the labor critiques, this environmental position has gotten scant attention in the mainstream media.

Many of the 600 signers of a letter outlining the radical environmental critique of the GND were small, local or faith-based organizations. Some of the large mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the Environmental Defense Fund were conspicuously absent from the signatories. Others like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, 350.org, the Sunrise Movement, the Rainforest Action Network, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and Amazon Watch did, however, sign on. So, notably, did the Labor Network for Sustainability, the most radical voice in the labor movement working in support of climate-change action.

The Indigenous Environmental Network wrote:

“We remain concerned that unless some changes are made to the resolution, the Green New Deal will leave incentives by industries and governments to continue causing harm to Indigenous communities. Furthermore, as our communities who live on the frontline of the climate crisis have been saying for generations, the most impactful and direct way to address the problem is to keep fossil fuels in the ground. We can no longer leave any options for the fossil fuel industry to determine the economic and energy future of this country. And until the Green New Deal can be explicit in this demand as well as closing the loop on harmful incentives, we cannot fully endorse the resolution.”

Other organizations like 350.org signed on to the Green New Deal despite reservations. Greenpeace lauded it, while cautioning that “the oil, gas, and coal industry will fight this tooth and nail while continuing to dump pollution into our atmosphere. In order to get us to the green future we want, federal legislation MUST also halt any major oil, gas, and coal expansion projects like pipelines and new drilling.”

The Future of the GND

Despite challenges from parts of both the labor and the environmental movements, which its sponsors had undoubtedly hoped would be among its strongest supporters, Markey and Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal resolution has gone a remarkably long way toward putting a genuine discussion of what an effective and just climate policy might look like in the public arena for the first time. For grassroots environmental organizations, labor unions, nongovernmental outfits, Congress, and the media, as heat waves multiply, the Arctic burns, and extreme weather of every sort becomes everyday news, the question of what is to be done is finally emerging as a subject to contend with, even in the
2020 presidential election campaign. In policy discussions, the urgency of the climate crisis is being acknowledged for the first time and the question of how to radically lower carbon emissions while prioritizing social justice is coming to the fore. These are exactly the debates that are needed in this all-hands-on-deck moment when human civilization is itself, for the first time in our history, in question.

Aviva Chomsky is professor of history and coordinator of Latin American studies at Salem State University in Massachusetts. Her most recent book is Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal.

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Sources, references, and notes are available in the online version of this essay.

“...workers and their communities need a strategy that demands a green restructuring, where decision-making is based on what is useful to society, not what's most profitable...”

—Dianne Feeley, a retired auto worker
The Challenges of Global Warming: Government Inaction and Crimes Against Humanity

TED MORGAN

The bad news just keeps coming. Again and again science-based studies uncover increasing evidence that the planet is headed toward unfathomable disaster.

In the last year alone, we have seen publication of the US National Climate Assessment’s Fourth National Climate report, the UN Global Sustainable Development report (“The Future is Now”), the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration report, the World Meteorological Association report on Accelerating Climate Change, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports on Climate Change and Land and Ocean and Cryosphere, the Science Advisory Group to the UN Climate Action Summit’s report “United in Science,” to say nothing of countless articles in science journals warning that catastrophe lies ahead.

As “United in Science” put it, current efforts need to be “roughly tripled to be aligned with the 2°C goal and increased fivefold to align with the 1.5°C goal” adopted by the 2016 Paris Agreement (emphasis added).

Again and again, we are confronted by the damage already resulting from climate change: more intense and frequent extreme weather events like hurricanes, floods, droughts, forest fires, and heat waves; rising sea levels that threaten the homes, lives and livelihoods of millions of people; and melting ice caps and permafrost, among others.

The consensus among science-based reports is that the path ahead is far worse: widespread food and water scarcity, increased exposure to diseases and allergic illnesses, economic decline, and damage to the “infrastructure, ecosystems, and social systems that provide essential benefits to communities.”

As Noam Chomsky put it, “To describe these challenges as ‘extremely severe’ would be an error. The phrase does not capture the enormity of the kinds of challenges that lie ahead.”

We can observe three kinds of responses to the crisis of climate change. First, activism on a global scale is clearly on the rise, commonly led by young people who will bear the greatest burden of climate change.

Millions participated in the global Climate Strike on September 20. 530 groups from around the world signed on to the Lofoten Declaration calling for rapid phasing out of fossil fuels.

One of the signers, the Extinction Rebellion has mobilized two weeks of dramatic direct action and civil disobedience in cities from New York and Philadelphia to London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Amsterdam, Toronto and Sydney: from traffic blockades to rallies, marches, and street theatre to throwing red paint on Wall Street’s bull statue. Some 200 young mothers marched from Westminster to 10 Downing Street where they engaged in a Nurse-In, nursing the babies they seek to protect from climate disaster.

Second, most nations of the world, many states and localities within the United States, even some corporations and the US military, now recognize that the world
faces a profound challenge. Several governments have taken preliminary steps toward altering their emissions, and even more have pledged to do so. In contrast to the energy of the Climate Strike and the warnings of the UN Science Advisory Group warning, the UN Climate Action Summit produced only modest pledges from a minority of nations. These steps remain woefully inadequate if the world is to avoid a cataclysmic outcome.

Why this relative inaction in the face of global catastrophe? The vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions are produced by the world’s developed capitalist economies, with China and the US leading the way. By contrast, people in nations that have the least impact on climate change are most vulnerable to the worst of its effects. This climate injustice is only one manifestation of the inequalities and injustices built into the capitalist powers’ imperial exploitation of the “under-developed” world. In the late Immanuel Wallerstein’s framework, the core capitalist powers compete with each other for dominance in exploiting the resources of the underdeveloped periphery nations.

Consequently, each of the capitalist powers is loathe to weaken its competitive position vis-à-vis the other capitalist economies. In a capitalist world, each economic unit must act to protect what it deems its own interests. The only counterweight comes from the public sector.

Yet in a capitalist world, each public authority — local, state or national government — is constrained by the fear that pushing public interests too far will cause capital flight, thereby undermining its viability. And, of course, corporations and the wealthy dominate the shaping of public policy — nowhere more than in the US.

This is the way capitalism works, which suggests how profound and systemic the changes will have to be if the world is to avoid catastrophe.

Lastly there’s the Rogue State, the United States, where the Trump administration and its fossil fuel allies have brazenly thumbed their noses at the world by blatantly accelerating the race to destruction.

Among his brazen attempts to flout the international scientific consensus, Trump has pledged to withdraw the US from the Paris Agreement; he promoted fossil fuel interests at the 2017 climate talks, he campaigned to end the “war on coal,” and subsequently his administration has moved to relax environmental coal plant emissions while weakening the federal government’s ability to set national standards. The administration removed restrictions on the leakage of methane from the nation’s oil and gas wells; it has taken steps to encourage coastal and Arctic oil drilling and exploration; and Trump announced he was revoking California’s authority under the Clean Air Act to enforce automobile emissions standard tougher than those of the federal government.

But itself, climate change has caused 150,000 deaths each year, a number that is likely to double in a decade, and it has contributed to 5 million human illnesses every year. Left unchecked, climate change casualties could climb into the millions. Those political actors and fossil fuel producers who resist the fundamental changes that are necessary become guilty of producing these deaths — in short, guilty of crimes against humanity.

The world cannot wait for the capitalist states to enact adequate constraints on greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, the Climate Strike and Extinction Rebellion have to be the beginning of a global uprising of increasing numbers of an increasingly
well-informed public, becoming a coordinated force for radical change that can no longer be dismissed by the powers that be.

Obviously, this force is much needed in the US.

*Ted Morgan is emeritus professor of political science at Lehigh University. He can be contacted at epm2@lehigh.edu.*

> “Political leaders worldwide are failing to address the environmental crisis. If global corporate capitalism continues to drive the international economy, global catastrophe is inevitable.”

—Open letter from Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, and 98 other signers worldwide
Can you talk about your background?

I grew up in Connecticut, mostly in Wolcott. One of my parents was usually in school, first my dad, who went to college and later to law school on the GI Bill, and then my mom who became a high-school math teacher. They were both working-class kids—emphasis on “kids” because they were 19 and 23 when I, the oldest of three, was born and, when it came to taking responsibility for family life, both were late bloomers. They weren’t labor people, though my mom belonged to the National Education Association. They divorced when I was 19, by which time I was pretty much on my own.

You came of age during the excitement and tumult of the 1960s. What were you doing at the time and how did it influence you?

I went to college in 1966, to Barnard in New York City, but I stayed there just a year before I dropped out. While I was there, I became active in the antiwar movement, but I wasn’t an organizer in the sense that I strategized. That happened later on, in increments. First, I was working at Columbia University’s math library just as Local 1199’s drive to unionize Columbia’s libraries was going public in the winter of 1968-69, and I got involved in that.

The next year I was living in North Carolina and joined a women’s liberation group. North Carolina’s left was entirely different from New York City’s. In New York, there were so many leftists that all sorts of groups could flourish to the point where they imagined they’d someday take over the world. In that atmosphere, sectarianism ran rampant. Not so in North Carolina, where leftists were so outnumbered and outgunned, both literally and figuratively, that different groups tended to make common cause whenever they got the chance to do so.

Through my women’s group I worked on all sorts of causes: welfare rights, Black communities’ access to medical care, worker organizing, the war in Vietnam...you name it. Then, in 1971, I moved to the Bronx, got involved in various kinds of community organizing such as tenant issues, unemployed workers’ rights and strike support, to name just a few. Because I worked in office
jobs in Manhattan, I also joined a group of clerical workers, Office Workers United, that advocated for unionism in white-collar workplaces like insurance companies and publishing houses. This is how I learned to think strategically, which is another way of saying I learned how to be not just an activist but also an organizer.

What led to your interest in history and why labor history specifically?

I thoroughly disliked reading history until the early 1970s, when I discovered labor history and African American history, neither of which got any coverage in my history classes in high school. I had no political critique of “great man” history; all I knew was that it bored me. Then, in the Bronx, I took part in a community organization that, among other things, ran a little bookstore on 183rd Street, and I started reading the books on sale there, mostly African American history.

The one I remember most vividly is To Be A Slave, a collection of excerpts from slave narratives that was edited by Julius Lester. I loved that book. Now I realize that I was experiencing the excitement of reading primary documents for the first time. All I knew then was that the book offered first-person stories that were astonishing, infuriating, saddening, and inspiring all at the same time. This is how I discovered that history didn’t have to be boring.

About a year into this reading project, an older woman involved in Office Workers United steered me toward labor history, in particular Labor’s Untold Story by Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais. I read it again and again. So, when I went back to college in my late twenties, I gravitated toward courses in history, and by the time I was finished, I wanted to be a historian. Going to graduate school at Yale, where David Montgomery had recently joined the faculty, made it possible to concentrate in labor history under the guidance of a world-class mentor.

There were important changes in history scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s such as “history from the bottom up” and “people’s history.” What influence if any did these efforts have on you and how do you assess them?

I first encountered “history from the bottom up” and “people’s history” through the books I found at that little store on 183rd Street, through Labor’s Untold Story, and through the stuff I picked up at random at radical bookstores in Manhattan, especially the Communist Party’s Jefferson Books and the Maoist-oriented China Books and Periodicals.

My tendency as a labor historian has always been to look at life beyond the workplace as well as on the job, and I’d say that derives first and foremost from experience. Life taught me that working people are multi-dimensional. They care about many things in addition to work and unions, and they bring multiple concerns and aspirations to any movement they get involved with. For some women, for example, getting active in a union can be a way of getting out from under the thumb of your husband as well as getting a fair shake at work. That was certainly true for me when I joined 1199.
Later on, in the Bronx, I worked with a group of unemployed youth; we’d leaflet and petition and pull guerrilla actions to get quick justice for people who were coming to the unemployment office on Jerome Avenue and 168th Street, where we set up shop on the sidewalk out in front. The other people involved in that project made a profound impression on me and still, more than 40 years later, influence the way I think about working people. For instance, there was a guy named Sonny who was a pretty tough Kung Fu fighter but also an extraordinarily patient, tender teacher of Kung Fu for children in his neighborhood. Another person, Shirley, was an avid feminist; she carried around a spiral notebook in which she’d write down her thoughts on the subject, including all of the lyrics to Helen Reddy’s song “I Am Woman,” which Shirley loved.

Another lesson that I still vividly remember took place under the auspices of Office Workers United. Those of us who worked in midtown Manhattan got the local YWCA to supply free meeting rooms and every few weeks we’d leaflet to try to get office workers out to a lunchtime meeting about organizing at work. Very few people showed up. Then one time, about a year into this effort, we leafleted for a meeting about organizing an office worker’s contingent in an upcoming antiwar march. That was our only meeting that got a good turnout, and we did in fact muster a contingent for the march. The lesson seemed clear to me. That few people came to talk about unionism didn’t mean they thought the status quo was hunky dory; it was that they had other things on their minds, among them the war in Vietnam. These and similar experiences go a long way to explain why From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend addresses subjects beyond labor history’s usual parameters.

The multi-dimensional nature of working-class life is definitely a rich feature of From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend. Is there an example or two from the book that make that point especially well?

One prime example that springs to mind is the way the book addresses the era we commonly call “the sixties.” Historians of the American sixties—which actually began in the mid-1950s and extended into the late 1970s—typically overlook or underplay the fact that workers took part in the liberation movements that sprang up in that era. Likewise, the fact that many of the radical youth exceptionally active in those movements were children of the working class.

In From the Folks, the chapter on sixties movements places workers and their children at center stage; and, really, that’s not hard to do because they were actually there. Rosa Parks was an experienced civil rights organizer and a department store seamstress; E.D. Nixon was her fellow leader of the local NAACP in Montgomery and an officer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Fannie Lou Hamer was a guiding light of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and a third-generation sharecropper who got evicted from her home when she became active in the movement for voting rights; Bobby Seale was the founding chairman of the Black Panther Party and the son of
a carpenter who had moved his family from Texas to Oakland, California, during World War II.

I could continue in this vein for another hour because much the same pattern prevailed in the Chicano movement, the Puerto Rican movement, the Asian American movement, the Native American movement, and the welfare rights movement along with large parts of the antiwar movement, the women’s movement, the queer movement, and the vanguard of the movement among people with disabilities. And it’s not just that working-class individuals played prominent roles in liberation movements; it’s also that grassroots activism surged in working-class communities, which mobilized around issues including tenants’ rights, healthcare, community control of schools, environmental pollution, and police brutality.

Sixties consciousness and causes penetrated the labor movement, too. The Black freedom struggle inspired a giant wave of union organizing among public employees and workers in semi-public institutions such as New York City’s voluntary hospitals. Chicano nationalism fueled the rise of the United Farm Workers. Women asserted their rights in uprisings like the Farah strike of 1972-1974, in which 4,000 Mexican American women struck for union recognition and won the support of a national coalition of unionists, Chicano nationalists, radical students, men and women, religious groups, and others. The rebellion at Farah was part of a gigantic strike wave that stretched from 1968 into 1977, a period in which work stoppages numbered over 5,000 per year, involved an average of 2.5 million workers, and included quite a few wildcat strikes. This, too, should be seen as a sixties movement, for in virtually every case the strikers described their struggle as a fight for equality, fairness, dignity, self-determination…in short, liberation from oppressive regimes.

My own experience made me especially determined to challenge American historians’ conventional wisdom about the sixties; I knew at a gut level that stereotypes casting workers as enemies of sixties movements are simplistic to say the least. But you can scratch the surface of any period in labor history and find complexities like those I’ve just outlined. In the decades that preceded the Civil War, the labor movement spawned not only unions and the first central labor councils but also workers’ political parties, workers’ cooperatives, and a massive self-help movement that promoted abstinence from alcohol. In the 1880s workers came together in the Knights of Labor not only to fight for fair wages and the eight-hour day but also to sing songs, write poetry, attend picnics and parties, and discuss the importance of kindergartens and currency reform. During the labor upheavals of the 1930s, victories in the workplace inspired thoughts about remaking the rest of the world. Len De Caux, editor of the CIO News, put it this way: “Now we’re a movement, many workers asked, why can’t we move on to more and more? … Why can’t we go on to create a new society with workers on top, to end age-old injustices, to banish poverty and war.”

This is why the multi-dimensional nature of working-class life looms so large in From the Folks.
Another outstanding feature of the book is the ongoing tension between wonderful episodes of multiracial working-class unity on the one hand and other instances where the white supremacist nature of the society infected white workers and resulted in disunity while also fueling the oppression of people of color. Is this going to be an ongoing problem until enough white workers confront white supremacy head on?

This has always been a monumental issue for the American labor movement, and the long history of how white supremacy has played out there in terms of exclusion, division, betrayal and violence is just plain depressing. Still, I think we can draw useful lessons from this history, especially the moments of multiracial solidarity but also the moments when the same old same old has prevailed.

One important lesson on the latter front is that race itself—the assignment of people to different categories based on their ancestry and physical appearance—is both very powerful and very fragile. It’s powerful enough to have served as a central, often the central, organizational principle of American society ever since the late 1600s, when colonial law simultaneously institutionalized chattel slavery and racial categories. At the same time, it’s so fragile that it must be constantly re-invented and re-asserted through party politics, which routinely call on working people to support this or that group of elites on the basis of racial policies, not class interests. This has been going on ever since the late 1820s, when the Democratic Party established itself as the voice of both white workingmen and slaveholders by offering them the common ground of white supremacy.

While the particulars have changed over the past 190 years, the basic structure has remained the same. The Roosevelt coalition of the 1930s-1940s included class-conscious workers of all colors, but the Democratic majorities in Congress depended on the presence of southern “Dixiecrats” who rejected racial equality and detested the CIO. Today, Donald Trump’s Republican Party presents itself as the mouthpiece of the “forgotten American”—presumably white, perhaps African American, but above all a native-born person threatened by immigrants. On the other side we have the Democratic Party, whose insurgent progressives may yet win the day but whose regulars deploy a politics of race that merely mirrors Trump’s—whatever he’s for, we’re against—and here, too, class politics have no place. This situation poses immense challenges for a labor movement that may not be strong enough to take on the Democratic establishment, let alone inclined to do so.

But history suggests that we might be mistaken to zero in on party politics as we try to figure out what the labor movement can do to counteract the Trump phenomenon. The moments when white workers have managed to transcend white supremacy—when class solidarity has overshadowed racial divisions—have invariably arrived when the labor movement was gaining ground in workplaces. Extrapolating from this fact, I’d say that the most important thing unions can do to promote working-class unity is to win on the job. And by this I don’t mean that the union wins by acquiring more dues-paying members; I mean that the workers win by seeing how much they can accomplish through collective action.
To bring all of this back to your question, I don’t think history supports the idea that white workers need to grapple with all of the pernicious implications of white supremacy before they join with workers of color to build working class solidarity. Instead, I think history offers multiple examples of white workers’ overcoming white supremacy in the process of struggling side by side with workers of color.

A case in point is Sylvia Woods’s testimony in Rank and File, a wonderful compendium of first-person testimony of worker organizers collected by Alice and Staughton Lynd. During World War II, Woods, an African American activist, worked at Bendix Aviation in Chicago. Talking with the Lynds about her years at the plant, she recalls how Mamie Harris, a white union officer, responded when white workers objected to a Black man’s getting a skilled job in the tool room. “He’s coming here to work.” Mamie told them. “Anybody who doesn’t like it if a black person comes in this shop can leave right now. Turn in your union cards and get the hell out. Go.” No one left, and six months later the tool room elected this man as shop steward. Over time, that is, Mamie Harris, Sylvia Woods and others built a strong interracial local at Bendix.

Black and white members didn’t just practice solidarity at work; they also partied together after work. New friendships and new points of view developed to the point where one of the plant’s most vocal white racists began to champion Black workers’ rights. And even after Bendix shuttered the plant at the end of the war, that local’s members continued to get together. “We could call a union meeting and bring in maybe seventy-five percent of our plant two years after it closed down,” Sylvia Woods remembers. Looking back, she concludes, “I have seen people change. This is the faith you’ve got to have in people.”

This is the faith that today’s labor movement very badly needs. We have at least some evidence that hostile work environments can change—can even become friendly environments—when union people take a strong stand against bigotry. Let’s act on that. Let’s demonstrate that another world is possible.

And you document the similar dynamic where men and women workers sometimes struggled in common cause and others where male workers opposed women’s equality. On this front I think it’s especially important to consider connections between what happens on the job and what happens at home. To illustrate the point, I’ll share a story told to me by Francine Moccio, author of Live Wire — a wonderful book about women in the construction division of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in New York City, IBEW Local 3. Some years ago, Francine told me a story that I don’t think made it into her book, and here it is: Like most electricians in the IBEW, members of Local 3’s construction division attend the “topping out” ceremony that the Ironworkers hold once they’ve finished a building’s frame and the electricians have wired the elevator that workers will use to construct the rest of the building. They put a fir tree and an American flag on top of the frame and throw a little party, which the workers’ families often attend. One time, Francine went to a topping out party on a jobsite where Local 3 had a woman working, and when her union brothers’ wives saw her, they were shocked and kind of angry.
Talking with them, Francine found that they weren’t afraid their men were going to engage in sexual hijinks with this woman. What bothered them, rather, was that their husbands expected to be waited on when they came home from work. These guys didn’t want to do a lick of housework, and they excused themselves from helping out at home by telling their wives, “I go out there every day and do men’s work that you could never do, so don’t ask me to do women’s work when I come home.” But at the topping out party, the wives were seeing that, actually, a woman can do what a male electrician does. So why couldn’t the men wash a dish or change a diaper or run a vacuum cleaner now and then? As this story suggests, workingmen’s opposition to women’s equality in the workplace may have less to do with the workplace than with home life.

I should add that, as a member of a household in which both husband and wife spend long hours on the job, I deeply sympathize with anyone, male or female, who craves a leisurely home life. Fact is, however, that’s not what early twenty-first-century capitalism has in store for us, so let’s working men and women stick together instead of quibbling about who has to do the dishes (both of us, hello!).

Socialism and labor have historically been closely linked, yet today we find ourselves in a period where socialism is rapidly rising in popularity while organized labor is in catastrophic decline. Do you see ways in this new period where labor can be invigorated by socialism and socialists?

Had you asked me this six months ago, I might have dithered; but here’s what happened this past July when I taught a seminar at UMass’s master’s program in union leadership and activism: for the very first time since I began teaching labor history in the program in 2005, my students—all of them labor movement staffers or rank-and-file activists—asked me to stay late one day to talk about the history of socialism. Bottom line: the young people in labor movement jobs have already cast their lot with socialism. We oldsters need to get with it, sharing our knowledge, our questions, our hopes. It’s difficult for those of us from the sixties generation to give the reins to youngsters, but all I’ve seen at UMass tells me that our successors are definitely up to the task.

From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend is incredibly comprehensive; is there any one thing you would like readers to take away after reading it?

Here is what I most want readers to take away from the book: The labor movement may be down, but it’s never down for the count. Every day for more than 400 years, working people have been devising new ways to defend themselves against indignity, deprivation and injustice. When one line of defense fails, another takes its place, and since collective strategies are invariably the most effective for the most people, the arc bends in that direction. This is the main lesson of labor history, and since the past is the best predictor of the future, there is every reason to believe that working people will make a better world.

Andy Piascik is a long-time activist and award-winning writer whose most recent book is the novel In Motion. He can be reached at andypiascik@yahoo.com.
Occupy Wall Street: A Post-Mortem Examination

LENNY FLANK

In September 2011, a small group of demonstrators sat down and occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City, near Wall Street, as a protest against the lopsided distribution of wealth in the US and the domination of the political process by the wealthy elite. Within weeks, similar occupations spread across the United States from coast to coast, and Occupy Wall Street became the biggest mass protest movement since the 1960s. As one of the organizers for Occupy St Pete (Florida), I became a part of that movement.

In a way, the Occupy movement was more successful than we ever could have hoped. With its slogan “We are the 99 percent,” Occupy’s message of class struggle changed the entire political dialogue, and our message of “economic justice” still resonates today. In a very real sense, the Bernie Sanders phenomenon of 2016 and the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez phenomenon of 2019 are direct descendants of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and would not have been possible without that stage having been set. But in the end, the Occupy movement failed to capitalize on its ideological success, and, in the face of police attacks, it melted away. Today it is only a vague memory.

So, let me now, as someone who was on the scene at the time and actively involved with several different Occupy groups, give some thoughts about a post-mortem examination, so we can learn from its mistakes.

I’ll begin by reprinting an article I wrote for the Occupy Tampa “newsletter” back in 2012, just as the police attacks on the movement were at their peak, which spells out what I saw at the time as some of the strategic mistakes that Occupy made.

Out of the Parks and Into the Streets: A New Strategy for Occupy 2.0

You may have noticed lately that both the Democratic and Republican parties have made desperate attempts to steal Occupy’s message and rhetoric. Obama and Biden talk as often as they can about the “middle class”; MoveOn has lifted all our 99% rhetoric and used it to begin training new organizers for the Democratic party; even the Republican marketing icon Frank Lutz has declared that Republicans should adopt the language of the 99% and try to sound anti-corporate too.

Luntz is selling this message for the same reason MoveOn and the Dem Party are—because Occupy has been effective at changing the terms of the entire political debate, it took both parties completely by surprise, and now both parties want to jump on a bandwagon that neither party did jack shit to create. The fact that both parties are now trying to steal Occupy’s rhetoric during an election year (and neither party gave a damn about Occupy’s rhetoric just a year ago when they were both arguing over how much austerity to impose
Indicates that Occupy has indeed set the entire agenda for the political world. The genie is out of the bottle now, and neither party will be able to put it back in. Occupy has won the ideological battle. The debate is happening within the framework we have chosen. Now it remains to win the political and economic battle.

Now is the time for us to move to the next strategic step. The “occupy the park” tactic was useful in the beginning, to bring attention to the movement, give it a base to grow in, and allow it to build power. Now, though, the next task is to take that power and direct it against our enemies—and our enemies are not in the park. It is time we move out of the parks and into the streets and buildings.

We need to learn some lessons from the strategy of the insurgent. Insurgents don’t “take and hold” territory. As all the big Occupy branches learned the hard way, that only makes it easy for the enemy to surround you, cut you off, and crush you. Instead, insurgents “take, hold a little while, then move somewhere else.” If, instead of trying to defend Freedom Park, the whole encampment had just picked up and moved to another base in another park, and then again, and again, and again, the cops would have faced the impossible task of either sealing off every park in the city, or chasing the occupiers ineffectually all over the place forever. Instead, Occupy tried to stand toe-to-toe with the cops in a fixed battle. The result was preordained. Fixed fights are always fatal to insurgents. We had no chance at all of winning that fight.

By futilely defending the park instead of retreating to another base of operations to carry on the fight against the 1%, the Occupy movement also made a serious political mistake. So long as we were seen as the victims, as simple peaceful nonviolent protesters who were being attacked by the cops, the Occupy movement won public sympathy and support—but as soon as we began to be seen (rightly or wrongly) as provoking confrontations with the cops, we lost that public support, quickly. By turning the Occupy movement into a mere duel with the cops, we placed the “occupy” part ahead of the “wall street” part, turned the fight away from a battle for economic justice and into a battle with the cops over who could stay in a park, thereby losing sight of our real goals and losing our support. A fight of the 99% against the corporate 1% is a fight that will win public support and sympathy—a fight with the cops over whether we can sleep in a park, is not.

So, as a matter of practicality as well as of strategy and tactics, we must expand out of the parks—and into the buildings where our corporate enemy is. To my mind, the most effective things Occupy did were the things that happened outside the parks, like the actions at the CEO’s houses and stockholder meetings, inside the banks, and of course the dock shutdown. Those are the kinds of things we should be focused on, and the purpose of the base camp is to give us the place we need to plan and stage those kinds of things. Rather than being the total sum of the Occupy movement, the park occupations must be turned into mere base camps, mobile and flexible, where we can meet wherever is most convenient to plan actions in the surrounding community, aimed directly at the 1% and their minions wherever they are—in the banks, the corporate buildings,
Occupy Wall Street: A Post-Mortem Examination

wherever they happen to be. Meanwhile, we defend the base camp by moving it around all the time, and the cops will be fighting against water—every time they reach out for us, we just flow away, around them and through them. It’s an impossible task for them. To the 1%, we must be like the wind…We are all around you, but invisible. We can gently blow dust in your eyes to sting you a little bit, or we can be a sudden tornado that tears down what you’ve built up. If you try to hit us, you contact nothing; if you reach out to grab us, you get a handful of empty air. We are everywhere, but we are nowhere.

Hence my recommendation that we make the base camps mobile and transitory, making it impossible for the cops to stamp them out, and that we focus more on the “wall street” part than the “occupy” part, making the movement less about occupying a particular park and more about fighting the 1% on their own turf in the surrounding community. We need a base camp where we can do the things we need to do. The occupied parks can still serve that role. Our previous mistake was, I think, in (1) making that a fixed immobile camp that the cops could easily surround and crush, and (2) turning the impossible defense of that fixed immobile camp into the raison d’etre for the entire movement.

In Occupy St Pete, we adopted this mobile strategy right from the beginning—mostly because we were forced into it by circumstances. Like many other smaller Occupy branches, we were never large enough and never had the resources to successfully occupy a park 24/7. At our height we never had more than 350-400 people, and like every other Occupy we shrank drastically over the winter—right now we have around 20 active core people and perhaps another 75 or so others who will do occasional actions. So, we have adopted the hit-and-run tactic—40 or 50 of us show up at a bank and wave signs and sing and make noise for an hour or so, while a couple people go inside to close out their accounts. Occupy St Pete never tried to permanently occupy a park, but instead focused all its efforts into projects and actions in the surrounding community. It has made us far more effective—we have become the local leaders in the statewide effort to end the “nuclear cost recovery” policy, we have done several successful “move your money” actions at area banks and have successfully pressured the city government of Gulfport to move its money out of Bank of America, and we are playing a large role in the effort to call a city referendum to vote on rebuilding the Pier in St Pete. Since our numbers are small and our reach is limited, we always try for maximum press coverage so we can get our message out to as many people as possible. That strategy has made us far more effective than either the local Democratic Party activists (who spend their time ineffectually leafleting in front of legislative offices about state laws they don’t like but can’t stop) or Occupy Tampa (which used up all its money and resources trying to hold a park with just a couple dozen people).

The bigger Occupy groups like New York, Oakland and Seattle, moreover, have already demonstrated that they are simply incapable of taking and holding a park permanently against the semi-military might of the police and security forces. Any such efforts are doomed to failure. The larger Occupy groups will, then, inexorably be forced into the same situation as Occupy St Pete—ineffectually
defending the parks against the police will simply no longer be the center of their efforts, and they will instead focus their resources on actions in the surrounding community, directly at the places where the 1% exercise their power. Such a strategy not only makes a virtue out of a practical necessity, but it also happens to be the right thing to do, politically and strategically.

*Out of the parks! Into the streets!*

Sadly, within just a few months of that article, the Occupy Wall Street movement was dead.

Certainly, there were many contributing causes of death for the Occupy movement, but one, I think, looms above all the rest: an utter lack of organization. Occupy was a ship without a captain and without even a rudder—and it was intentionally built so. This was, at least partially, a result of the circumstances of its birth. The massive civil rights and anti-war movements of the 60s were, by this time, just a memory for most people. Their organizers were either dead or elderly, and when the “economic justice” movement exploded into being at Zuccotti Park, the younger generation had virtually no experience with large-scale political protest. So, it turned to the only contemporary model that it had: the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, especially in Egypt. It remained to be seen, however, whether the Egyptian model of a “leaderless revolution” would work in the United States. And, indeed, circumstances would show that ultimately it did not work in Egypt either—when the Mubarak government fell, the unorganized mass of demonstrators were unable to assume political control of the government, and the resulting power vacuum was filled by a military regime which killed Egyptian democracy at birth.

The amorphous structure of Occupy was also a response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the failure of the entire Leninist/Maoist model of the highly centralized top-down “revolutionary party”. This meant that the only remaining leftist organizations that had not become discredited and discounted were from the anarchist wing, which were ideologically based on a horizontal structure that rejected the idea of “leaders”. Occupy would, to its detriment, take this to the extreme.

I found the entire experiment to be interesting, though, and it was one of the things that drew me to Occupy. In prior years, I had been a member of the IWW and served two terms as co-Chair of the General Executive Board. While the IWW was anarcho-syndicalist, with a series of branches and job shops that were more or less independent, we also had the GEB which acted as a coordinator and facilitator, and which set general principles for the entire organization. It was interesting for me to see firsthand how a “leaderless organization” would work, or if it even would work at all.

Almost immediately I could see major problems. The vast majority of people in the Occupy movement were young, and they had no previous organizing experience—most of them had never really been involved before with any political groups. As a result, they tended to flounder with no real idea how to go about organizing a political fight. In each Occupy branch there were of
course a handful of now-older organizing veterans ranging from the civil rights campaign to the more recent Central America and anti-nuke campaigns, and we tried to offer some direction. But in most Occupy branches, this fell victim to an extreme “no leaders” ideology, which sidelined all the experienced organizers while leaving the group to struggle with learning basic organizing strategies that had already been worked out decades ago. In essence, Occupy had to learn to reinvent the wheel because it refused to listen to the auto mechanics in its ranks. The result, predictably, was chaos.

The loose anti-authoritarian structure also led to endless faction fights and ideological conflict, as lots of inexperienced people argued endlessly with each other over every possible thing with no “referee” to either keep things civil or to act to end the infighting. Many Occupy branches did nothing more than debate forever over what they were “going to do” without ever actually doing anything. And since there was no clearly-set goal and no agreed-upon strategy, it allowed everyone to drag in a big long shopping list of their own favorite ideological goals, which diffused the group’s efforts—by trying to accomplish everything at once, they ended up accomplishing nothing at all. It would have been better to focus all the effort on one or two goals at a time.

In the smaller branches, meanwhile, the lack of organization also made it easy for outside groups (everyone from the Ron Paul fringe to the local Democratic Party) to move in and take over. With no structure and no authority, these branches had no way to prevent the takeover.

After an initial period of disorganization and turmoil, my local branch, Occupy St Pete in Florida, settled into an organizational structure that worked well for us. We had the advantage that a majority of our membership consisted of older people with previous political experience, ranging from the IWW to the Sierra Club. So, recognizing that the endless unproductive ideological debates were a result of the lack of organization, we formed a structure that we called the “wagon wheel,” in which working groups were formed in a circle around the General Assembly, each connected to it by a spoke, and was delegated the authority to make its own strategy and plan its own actions and then carry them out. It did not need the approval of the GA for each action, but was subject to being overruled by the GA if it became necessary. This gave the organizers in each working group “ownership” over their projects, which insured that tasks would be carried out by people who were both motivated to do them and answerable for getting them done.

One of the reasons why this structure worked well for us, however, was because we were such a small group, with only 50 or so actively-organizing members. This small size meant that we all knew each other, so when a particular person was granted authority to undertake organizing a task or action, the rest of us could trust that it would be done in such a way that the rest of us could support. In larger groups that I saw that attempted the same “wagon wheel” model, it did not work as well because the group was too big for everyone to know everyone else, and that level of trust was not possible. As a result, there were constant problems with working groups running off on their own agenda.
and doing actions that were not supported by the rest of the branch, which led to conflict and rancor. On the other hand, many of the larger groups were never able to provide any meaningful structure or organization at all, and they devolved into a mere debating society where people sat in the park and argued ideology all the time and never did much else.

So, what were the lessons that I drew from my experience with Occupy? My strongest conclusion was that the Left in the US has still not found a workable method of organization that effectively balances the need for a decentralized structure with the need for an effective leadership that can set goals, assign people to meet them, and take steps to correct failures and deficiencies. Occupy did a wonderful job of winning the ideological battle, but it failed utterly at the political and organizational battle.

*Lenny Flank is a longtime labor organizer and environmental, social, and antiwar activist. He was a founder of the Lehigh Valley IWW in the early 1990s.*

“*Occupy Wall Street had such limits because the local authorities were able to enforce, basically in our imaginations, an image of what proper civil disobedience is – one that is simply ineffective.*”

—Edward Snowden, National Security Agency whistleblower
A Prophetic Poor People’s Movement Led by the Poor People

KEITH COLLINS

The role of the prophet in the ancient Hebrew scriptures was to confront, correct and transform society when it has lost its moral compass.

As ancient empires emerged fortified by the thirst for conquest and dominion the foundation for a class, race and, gender-based caste system was established, and remains with us till this day.

If we are to posit that societies should be judged not based upon conquest, land acquisition, standard of living, or GNP (Gross National Product) but rather upon how the most marginalized within that society are treated then we must also posit that America is a failed Empire. The American Empire suffers from a vigorous and vicious disdain for the poor and a violent state sponsored commitment to racial, gender, and sexual oppression.

The Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign founded by Cheri Honkala is committed to addressing these most urgent concerns with a prophetic voice.

Imagine the underground railroad movement during slavery in America without the active leadership and participation of slaves. Imagine the suffrage movement without women leaders. The uniqueness of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign is that it is a movement for the benefit of poor people that is led by and composed of poor people. In an age of commodification and data mining we reject the temptation of corporate, political, and soft money to fund the movement.

We also resist the lure of the non-profit industrial complex which often serves as a front for major political parties and their agenda to herd the most marginalized like livestock into the polls at election time and not to eradicate the problems stated in their mission statements.

In addition, we reject the charitable/philanthropic model of addressing poverty because it does not promote the end of poverty. The philanthropic model was designed to make society comfortable with poverty and the illusion that things are getting better when in fact poverty is at an all-time high in America.

We have chosen “Lives over Luxury.” Not a popular stance in a society bent on survival of the fittest and winning at all cost. When people forsake all others to achieve the American dream, they wake up to a nightmare for those left in the wake of their pursuits.

The spirit of empire, greed, and nationalism has found its way into every segment of our society. Politicians, educators, business leaders, and members of the faith community must all be called into accountability. The system is not
broken; it’s functioning the way it was intended. We must abolish the present system in the same manner that slaves, free Blacks, and white abolitionists abolished slavery.

We accept the mantle handed down by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he said:

Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level. That’s the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.¹

Join the Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights campaign @ economichumanrights.org or find us on Facebook: Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign.

Keith Collins is the Pastor in the Church of the Overcomer in Philadelphia, PA, and a member of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign.

“If I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights...[W]hen we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power...that after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution...an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967

Endnotes
1 https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/02/14/gentrifying-black-history
Editor’s Note: This article originally appeared on the author’s Facebook page on October 9, 2009. Ten years has passed but the “tradition of silence” by the prestige media in the US regarding the CIA-backed execution of Ernesto Che Guevara continues.

“Know this now, you are killing a man”

FARAMARZ FARBOD

Those were the last words of Ernesto Che Guevara before he was murdered by a Bolivian soldier who had “fortified his courage with several beers” after the first soldier had failed to carry out the order to kill him.

What would an 81-year old Che be telling us about the multiple crises the world community faces today? Would he have been the honorary guest at the recent debut of Michael Moore’s latest documentary “Capitalism: A Love Story?” Or, would he have by now faded from public memory and the world stage in the absence of the martyr status he acquired from having been assassinated with the aid of the CIA? We won’t know the answer to these questions but we do know that since his execution the revolutionary guerrilla leader has been revered by millions around the world, and in some quarters reviled by those eager to stamp out any radical consciousness from resurfacing. But on the 42nd anniversary of Che’s murder, the prestige media in the US have once more chosen silence over either revulsion or reverence.
Before going any further, let me pause and say a few words about Che’s execution and the CIA man most responsible for his capture and murder. Che was murdered by a US-trained Bolivian army ranger unit aided by the CIA operative Felix Rodriguez. Rodrigues lives in Miami and has been a veteran of bloody US imperialist adventures such as the 1961 invasion of Cuba at Bay of Pigs, the training of the terrorist Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and the advising of the fascist Argentine military government during the same dreadful period (1980s) there in Argentina. In 2007, he told the BBC that his only regret is that he had not kept the iconic pipe of the legendary rebel leader and instead had given it away as memorabilia to the Bolivian soldier that shot Che. He treasures his historical collection at his home from the years of his service as a CIA operative including the framed picture of himself and George Bush Senior talking in the White House, a CIA medal for exceptional service, a picture of Che’s severed hands put in formaldehyde to preserve his fingerprints for identification purposes (in case his friend Fidel Castro denied that the displayed corpse was Che’s), and a blood-soaked North Vietnamese flag.¹

Now back to the silence of the media today. A Google search yielded only two short Associated Press pieces mentioning the 42nd anniversary of Che’s death without any mention of the US connection. No one who matters in North America has ever apologized for this atrocity. And the silence of the media tells volumes about the intellectual cowardice of the chattering classes here. The one AP piece carried by the NYT (“Today in History”) mentions Che’s execution in a line but chooses for “Today’s Highlight in History” the following: “On Oct. 9, 1919, the Cincinnati Reds won the World Series, 5–3, defeating the Chicago White Sox 10–5 at Comiskey Park. (The victory turned hollow amid charges eight of the White Sox had thrown the Series in what became known as the “Black Sox” scandal.)”²

The other AP piece published by the Miami Herald reports that Che’s legacy lives on in Bolivia. President Evo Morales of Bolivia along with 2,000 people from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe, participated in a tribute to Che in the town where his slain body was displayed for the world to see. Morales said Che was “invincible in his ideals” and that “…in all this history, after so many years, he inspires us to continue fighting, changing not only Bolivia, but all of Latin America and, better, the world.” Interestingly, the AP piece reports that “The tribute concluded the Social Alternative conference that began Tuesday, organized by social and union leaders from around the globe.”³

Now, wait a minute, WHAT Social Alternative meeting? (Again, a Google search for the phrase ‘Social Alternative conference” yielded only the AP piece above!) Does this mean that Che’s last words were prophetic? That the fatal bullet that struck his body killed only a 39-year old man but not the idea of constructing socioeconomic alternatives to what passes as civilized order today? If so, why haven’t we heard about this and the people who have traveled to Bolivia this week from around the world? Who are they? Did any North American participate in this? Who do they represent? What alternative visions do they propose?
Oh, well, forgive me for getting ahead of myself. For a moment I forgot that article of faith in North America that There Is No Alternative to capitalism. So, let me thank the media instead for filtering out the unimportant news items and maintaining the tradition of silence on another anniversary of Che’s US-backed execution.

_Hasta la Victoria Siempre Comandante Che_

_Faramarz Farbod, a native of Iran, teaches politics at Moravian College. He is a founder of Beyond Capitalism Working Group. He can be reached at farbodf@moravian.edu._

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**Endnotes**

1  http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7027619.stm

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“At the time, twenty of the twenty-three top Bolivian military brass had been trained at the infamous U.S. “School of the Americas.” Some additional 1,200 officers in the Bolivian army also received training and the C.I.A. inserted disguised agents into their ranks. Their primary task was to hunt down and kill the guerrillas.”

—Gary Olson
Orwell’s Doublethink,  
Alive and Well in Trump’s America

ANTHONY DI MAGGIO

George Orwell’s 1984 is a dystopian novel about authoritarianism, and is widely understood as a critique of Stalinism and centralized communist states. But Orwell believed that propaganda functioned in both communist and capitalist states alike. His insights about the uses and abuses of propaganda are remarkably relevant when studying American and western “democracies.” Orwell was particularly concerned with thought control, as practiced in corporate media, which had the effect of stifling free and independent inquiry. In line with Orwell’s insight, western societies such as the United States have long been characterized by indoctrination of the masses at the hands of political elites, who dominate national discourse despite the widely celebrated guises of journalistic and personal freedom.

As Orwell understood, thought control and indoctrination were pervasive in “free” capitalist societies, where “unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban.” And 1984 is as important as ever in helping us understand how authoritarianism and fascism apply to western politics. More specifically, Orwell’s concept of “doublethink” is relevant when reflecting on the white supremacist, neofascist virtue signaling that is ritualistically engaged in by the Trump administration.

Doublethink is the ultimate form of propaganda, as it represents a sort of gaslighting in which repression is rationalized by powerful societal actors, and in the name of “liberating” the individual. In 1984, Orwell’s totalitarian government (Ingsoc) in the nation of Oceania officially adopts doublethink as its language. As a form of state propaganda, doublethink is defined as the practice of “holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.” For Orwell, doublethink was a form of social control whereby subjects are said “to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory, and believing in both of them.” The three pillars of Ingsoc’s doublethink propaganda in 1984 include the slogans: “War is Peace”; “Freedom is Slavery”; and “Ignorance is Strength.”

In the US, doublethink is hardly unique to the Trump administration. The notion that wars are fought for peace spans virtually the entire history of the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries. Presidents like George W. Bush and Barack Obama (among many others) repeated this lie in order to pacify anti-war sentiment, while simultaneously pursuing a vision for infinite war. In Trump’s America, Orwellian doublethink is now utilized to mainstream and legitimize a fascistic commitment to white supremacist politics. The president relies on a dual strategy of repression, on the one hand by expanding the reactionary US police state, and on the other by drawing on reactionaries from
his base who engage in coercion and terrorism against his political “enemies.” Nowhere is this dual strategy clearer than in Trump’s immigration agenda, and as related to his interactions with fascists in his support base.

Coupled with the rise of a fascistic police state are the president’s efforts to strengthen the government’s longstanding commitment to neoliberalism. Political leaders in both major parties have committed to neoliberal governance over the last forty years, as defined by deregulation of corporate interests, large and sustained tax cuts for the upper class, an assault on the welfare state, an ecologically devastating attack on the earth and human sustainability, and the sustenance of the corporate military-industrial complex. Such support for neoliberal capitalism is fused with the demonization of minorities and people of color, and the strengthening of policing structures that target immigrants, in what I and other intellectuals refer to as “neoliberal fascism.”

Two examples demonstrate the power of racist Orwellian doublethink: Trump’s response to the August 2017 Charlottesville terrorist attack by “alt-right” white supremacists, and Trump’s role in validating the August 2019 terrorist attack in El Paso. Both attacks meet the classic definition of terrorism, in that they were conscious and premeditated acts of murder against political opponents, pursued in the name of stoking fear and furthering a white supremacist political agenda. In Charlottesville, white nationalists at the “Unite the Right Rally” engaged in violence against anti-fascist protesters, resulting in the murder of a counter-demonstrator, Heather Heyer, and in serious injuries to dozens of others. In El Paso, another white supremacist engaged in a mass shooting, killing more than 20 individuals in a local Walmart, in the name of promoting a white ethno-nationalist state, preventing a “Hispanic invasion of Texas,” and curtailing immigration to the United States by Latinx individuals.

In both cases, the Trump administration engaged in doublethink propaganda by simultaneously condemning hatred and bigotry, and indulging in said bigotry, in celebration of the violence in Charlottesville and rewarding the attacker in the case of El Paso via a reactionary policy response. Following Charlottesville, Trump “condemned” white nationalists who engaged in violence, while simultaneously speaking fondly of participants in the “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally as “very fine people,” and lamenting protesters calling for the removal of Confederate monuments in the American south.

Similarly, Trump indulged in a doublethink propaganda campaign throughout 2019, and in the run-up to and wake of the El Paso terrorist attack. In declaring a “national emergency,” Trump confiscated taxpayer funds without Congressional authorization to use in building his separation wall between the US and Mexico. He and Donald Trump Jr. rationalized their attacks on unauthorized immigrants by comparing them to animals and infestations. Conditions at the US border and in immigration facilities quickly deteriorated as reports emerged of immigrants being held in cages and in facilities described as “concentration camps,” with children being separated unnecessarily from parents, and detainees facing nightmarish living conditions in detention facilities that included “dangerous” overcrowding and denial of basic goods such as soap, toothpaste, and medical treatment.
In the wake of the August terrorist attack in El Paso, Trump referred to the event as “sinister,” while “condemn[ing] racism, bigotry, and white supremacy,” and announcing that “Hate has no place in America.” This statement would have been more meaningful had he not spent years trafficking in hate rhetoric against Mexican immigrants and other people of color, who he referred to in total as “drug dealers” and “rapists” and compared to vermin, locking them in concentration camp-style prisons under a quickly mushrooming police state devoted to criminalizing people of color. His “condemnations” of the El Paso terrorist attack may have held some value had he not also responded to the incident by proposing to “marry” background check gun legislation with “desperately needed immigration reform,” in an effort to intensify his crackdown on unauthorized Mexican immigrants.

Trump’s comments and actions above reveal him to be a shrewd Orwellian propagandist. He “condemns” bigotry, then rewards the purveyor of a terrorist attack by seeking to tie the right-wing immigration agenda to a heinous act of gun violence. Trump then gaslights journalists by railing against their accurate reporting on his celebrations of white supremacy. The pattern is now well-established: speak highly of white nationalists and white nationalist principles. Simultaneously “condemn” them so you can claim that you oppose racism and prejudice. Then attack journalists for promoting “fake news” due to their accurate reporting of your celebrations of bigotry.

The lesson to be taken from all of this is quite clear for the extremists in Trump’s base: racist terrorism/violence is legitimate so long as it’s undertaken in service of reactionary agendas of the state. Such attacks are rewarded by a favorable presidential response that directly ties the act in question to a push for even more reactionary immigration “reform.” And this message is received loud and clear by large numbers of Trump’s supporters, who can realistically be classified as terrorist supporters and fascists. As Pew Research Center polling from 2017 revealed, approximately 1 in 5 Trump supporters, or 32 million American adults, agree that “targeting and killing civilians can be justified in order to further a political, social, or religious cause.” This statistic is truly horrifying, considering that roughly one in ten Americans also believe it’s acceptable to hold fascist and Nazi beliefs.

The fascist connection among Trump and his supporters is not merely theoretical. Mass shootings engaged in by members of the reactionary right, and in pursuit of Trump’s immigration agenda, suggest the fascist threat is real. And the threat is widespread, as recent evidence suggests that paramilitary-based violence among “lone-wolf” reactionaries on the right account for two-thirds of mass shootings and domestic terror attacks.

Trump’s flirtations with extremists on the fascist right are undeniable when the president indulges those who advocate white supremacist violence against immigrants. Most recently, Trump “joked” that “only in the panhandle” can people “get away with” using violence against immigrants, a comment he made in direct response to a woman at his rally who yelled that the answer to dealing with illegal immigrants is to “shoot them.” Again, Trump engaged in a feat of doublethink propaganda by virtue signaling to his audience via his joke.
about fascist violence, while simultaneously stating that “we can’t” use violence against immigrants.  

Trump’s virtue signaling to the fascist right represents a potent and deadly weapon at the president’s disposal. He can actively encourage violence against immigrants and people of color, while claiming that he deplores said violence. He can stoke the fires of vigilante violence among what amounts to a modern-day brownshirt fascist base, which targets his political “enemies” on the “left” and among immigrants and people of color, while allegedly deploving violence and condemning the media for pedaling “fake news” by reporting that he supports white supremacy. The implications of this strategy are not yet fully understood in terms of their magnitude, even if they are ominous. Will future targets of the right include prominent Democratic-progressive presidential candidates like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren? Or what about other Democratic leaders of “the Squad” of four prominent women of color – Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley – who have been vocally critical of Trump, and who the president recently demanded “go back” to their own countries, despite all four being US citizens and three being born on US soil? 

In a state dominated by doublethink propaganda, psychological warfare, coupled with fascist police state politics, is the name of the game. Dystopian politics become the norm when the president shamelessly ties his reactionary agenda to domestic terror attacks. But discussion of the dual threats of propaganda and fascism is marginalized in “mainstream” political discourse, which has routinely avoided references to the Trump administration as fascist and failed to effectively identify the emergence of fascism within Trump’s base. Unauthorized immigrants are the first target of Trump’s burgeoning military state. It’s impossible to say who could be next, although popular targets may include reporters, academics, and left-leaning protesters. If journalists have not yet recognized the fire they are playing with via their amplification of Trump’s hate rhetoric, which they have done in pursuit of rising profits, it may be too late to protect what remains of American freedoms in the future. Particularly if this president decides to target First Amendment press protections next. Trump has paid no political price to date for his extremism, as his job approval rating remains staunchly at 40 to 45 percent of Americans, despite his trafficking in hate rhetoric and his escalation of attacks on immigrants. His re-election, coupled with the sense of vindication for a sitting president that comes along with it, may make him feel even more empowered to crack down on his political enemies, either directly through the police state or indirectly through his brownshirt base. Only time will tell.

Anthony DiMaggio is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Lehigh University. He studies American politics, with an emphasis on social movements, the media, inequality, and public opinion. He is the author of numerous books, including Selling War, Selling Hope (SUNY Press, 2015), The Politics of Persuasion (SUNY Press, 2017), and Political Power in America (SUNY Press, 2019).

Sources, references, and notes are available in the online version of this essay.
Dollar Meals and Diabetes

ELIZABETH ORAM

Logan County, West Virginia was the epicenter of the final battle of the “mine wars” of the 20th century: the Battle of Blair Mountain. In 1921, thousands of miners—white, black and immigrant—stood together and took up arms against the forces of state and corporate terror that held them hostage in coal country. They were proud workers and they knew they deserved better. To the defeated and discouraged working class of present-day Appalachia, the story of the Battle of Blair Mountain must sound like a fairy tale.

Today, Logan County is ground zero for another battle—the struggle to survive in a region with the highest rates of Type 2 Diabetes (T2D) in the country. It is a place where all the risk factors for this global pandemic come together: chronic economic stress, broken communities, powerlessness, poverty, and toxic food.

Eighty years after conquering the major communicable diseases, the poor are still dying younger than the rich. In a shocking reversal rarely seen outside of wartime, 2017 saw a decline in life expectancy among some sectors of the poor in the US. A 2018 survey finds the same dismal reversal of longevity gains in Great Britain. Public health indicators between the rich and the poor continue to diverge, but now it is chronic illness, not infection, that is the killer. Insidious and poorly understood biologic processes are driving accelerating rates of cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. And, like the infectious pandemics of the 18th and 19th centuries, these illnesses claim more victims among the poor.

The prevailing 19th century explanation for this disparity was “miasma”: a mysterious and invisible cloud of toxic air that was thought to hover over the slums of industrial England and sicken the residents. The first epidemiologist, John Snow, debunked this explanation forever by proving that it was tainted water, traced to a single pump, that was causing cholera. The germ theory took hold.

There is no germ theory for these modern-day scourges—no coherent, scientifically acceptable explanation for why poor people get more chronic illnesses. Medicine, the scientific lens through which we interpret and understand disease, is not a neutral force. When capitalism emerged from the ashes of the feudal realm, science took the place of religion as the legitimating ideology for the new social order. Who can dispute a scientific fact? But the focus of medical science is on individual habits, biology and genes. It’s an orientation that ignores environment, social relations and the now-undisputed unity of mind and body in the genesis of illness. Is health an individual problem with individual solutions? Or is health the social product of how we live in society? There are powerful repercussions depending on how these questions
are answered. Modern medicine’s answer—that our individual biology determines our health—effectively eliminates the possibility that societal change can improve our wellbeing. We can only change ourselves, or submit to our genetic fate. It is a belief system that works very well to cement the status quo in place. But is it an accurate representation of how disease works?

Medically, T2D is the inability of cells to utilize insulin, with eventual failure of the pancreas to produce insulin. Insulin is the “key” that allows glucose (sugar) into the cells. If insulin is absent or blocked from entering the cell, blood sugar rises in the bloodstream, but cells are starved. A high blood sugar environment is uniquely toxic to cells. The failure of insulin—“insulin resistance”—is related to a pervasive high sugar diet and obesity. Researchers have characterized diabetes as a microcosm of the degenerative process of aging on a cellular level. The elevated blood sugar binds to cellular structures, producing inflammation that accelerates the damage of aging. Unsurprisingly, diabetes is the major risk factor for heart disease and stroke—diabetics have three times the risk of death from these cardiovascular conditions. Diabetics may suffer blindness due to retinopathy, amputation due to vascular disease, numbness and pain due to nerve damage and kidney failure requiring dialysis. It increases the risk for cancer and dementia. Diabetes is like speeding up the aging process. But it is premature aging with a preference for the poor.

The number of people diagnosed with diabetes has skyrocketed since 1980, increasing more than fourfold. The global prevalence has doubled. According to the World Health Organization, we are on track for one out of four people in the world to have diabetes by 2050, and estimates of undiagnosed illness is as high as 30-50%. Incidence is rising fastest in middle- and low-income countries.

Health care providers like myself are taught that diabetes is a hereditary affliction made worse by “lifestyle” factors: unhealthy food choices, a sedentary lifestyle and obesity. We are trained to treat one patient at a time, and use the personal responsibility mantra to push our patients to improve their health status. Gluttony and sloth will get you sick.

Over the years I started to question these assumptions. If diabetes is primarily genetic, why has prevalence doubled in 40 years? It is impossible for genes to change that quickly. On the other hand, when we analyze maps of diabetes incidence, it is zip code, not genetic code, that appears to confer risk. Very poor localities like Appalachia, Native American reservations and impoverished urban neighborhoods all have outsized incidence. Endocrinologists blame the exceptionally high prevalence of T2D in Native American populations on “bad genetic substrate.” But I found studies comparing members of a Native American tribe who grew up with strikingly different socioeconomic circumstances (due to income-producing casinos on their land). The more economically secure section of the tribe has dramatically lower rates of T2D. Same genes, different outcome.

If T2D is not primarily hereditary, then certainly it is due to diet, obesity and lack of exercise. It is, after all, a condition in which the body has trouble turning
food into energy. Is the globally pervasive Western diet the unseen contagion that is sickening modern humans and taking years off our lives? The answer is a qualified yes. The modern western diet is high in sugar, denatured white flour, vegetable oils, and meat; it is low in fresh vegetables, fruits and whole grains. More importantly, it is spiked with hidden sugar and fats, highly processed, and laced with chemicals to make it feel good in your mouth. The scientists Gary Taubes and Robert Lustig have shown that sugar, present in almost all processed foods, is physically addictive. Sugar and simple carbohydrates are also calming—they temporarily treat feelings of stress and depression through the release of endorphins, the body’s own opioid compounds. The impact of sugar alone could account for the entire obesity and diabetes epidemic.

The popular writer Michael Pollan has written persuasively and urgently about the disastrous health effects of corporate food production driven by powerful agribusiness interests. But his dietary mantra: “eat food, not too much, mostly plants,” is a tough ask for the residents of Logan County, home to 37 fast food restaurants; or those forced to live in the “food deserts” of dense impoverished urban neighborhoods, where there are Burger Kings with 64 oz. sodas, but no greengrocers. The tax-subsidized food industry spends billions on saturation marketing, chemical flavor manipulation, and portion creep—this expenditure has been highly effective in changing eating behavior over the years. Opting out is a luxury that takes time and money.

Making the “choice” to eat real food means having access to affordable, high quality fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, and protein, and more importantly, the time to prep and cook a healthy meal from scratch every evening. Making the “choice” to be healthy means having safe streets to play in, bike lanes in neighborhoods that are walkable and time for informal group sports. Working Americans are exhausted and indebted, every family member is in the work force and work schedules are punishingly unpredictable by design—when parents finally pick up hungry and cranky children from day care, they want to treat them to something fun, delicious, fast and cheap. There is a straight road from Dollar Meals to diabetes.

The jaw-dropping explosion in diabetes having been normalized, treatment of this illness has become an industry. Lip service is given to “healthy lifestyles” by the pharmaceutical industry, but maintenance of an ever-growing market for expensive drugs used for a lifetime is the holy grail of Big Pharma. And profits continue to roll in as the disease destroys organs: the kidney dialysis industry has been wholly financialized and is now controlled by two corporate players, DaVita and Fresenius, whose stock is ascendant on Wall Street. Kidney failure preferentially affects the poor, but it is fully covered by Medicare at any age, so treating it is much more profitable than preventing it. A ProPublica investigation has found that fatality rates for dialysis in the US are worse than anywhere else in the developed world—commercial dialysis care means short staffing, filth, high rates of infection and medication errors. A decade ago every major hospital had a diabetes center to focus on prevention—the vast majority have closed. The real money is in treating the complications.
So far in our story we have a corporate global food system that has replaced real food with highly profitable, adulterated, non-nutritive food-like substances for an expanding market around the world. Add to that an insurance industry that masquerades as health care; health care that profits from our illness; oppressive conditions of work that leave us stressed and exhausted with no time to prepare and enjoy real food, and communities built for machines that deprive us of the natural physical exercise our bodies need to survive. And yet we have only scratched the surface of the modern miasma.

The late Richard Levins was known as “the dialectical biologist.” A Marxist, a farmer, a biologist, and professor emeritus at Harvard, Levins insisted that a dialectical method was necessary to deal with complexity and change in the social and natural world. Medicine, on the other hand, divorces itself from the social, and deals in simple linear, causal relationships between biological parts: A causes B and is cured by C. But health and illness are always in dialectical relationship with environment, society, culture and history. We can’t chop reality into little pieces without losing the plot. The global pandemic of diabetes, and the social gradient that confers increased risk on the poor, is similarly complex. Biological feedback systems designed by evolution to protect us from danger have become the danger.

It turns out that our bodies generate substances that can cause diabetes, even in the presence of an optimal diet. These substances—hormones called cortisol and adrenalin—are produced by the adrenal glands to be released into the bloodstream under conditions of extreme life-threatening necessity. That is the evolutionary function, anyway—think tiger chasing prey on the savannah. The effect is to temporarily raise the blood sugar under stress to super-charge muscle and brain function. Robert Sapolsky is a neuroscientist who has been studying baboon populations in Africa for 30 years, and what he has discovered about a stress response gone awry is part of the puzzle of diabetes.

Humans are experiencing something new—chronic stress, stress that lasts for days, weeks, even years, and the physiologic consequences are devastating. When cortisol levels in the bloodstream are chronically elevated, the result is not only diabetes, but a cascade of related ills: impaired immunity to infection and malignancy, abdominal obesity, increased rates of dementia (high blood sugar is toxic to the brain’s hippocampus), high blood pressure, depression, diminished fertility and more. Pregnant women who experience frequent stress can have babies who secrete higher levels of glucocorticoids their whole lives—they are overweight and get more diabetes. According to physician and researcher Gabor Mate: “stress is not an abstract psychological event, it is a set of physical responses in the body.”

We know from post-mortem studies that the adrenal glands of poor people are abnormal and enlarged from overuse—the work of continually pumping cortisol and adrenalin into the blood. What causes this kind of chronic stress? Why do the poor get more of it? Arline Geronimus, a professor of public health at the University of Michigan, studies the health effects of the stressors of poverty, along with gender and race inequality. It is a catalogue
of misery: unsafe living conditions, the constant threat of random violence, rampant everyday racism, discrimination and social exclusion, excessive caregiving responsibilities, deteriorated housing and crowded conditions, precarious employment and chronic financial insecurity. Geronimus calls the cellular damage wrought by this onslaught “weathering” – it prematurely ages every organ system in the body.\(^\text{14}\) As author Damon Young put it recently, writing in the New York Times about the premature death of black men: “we age out of bullets and into high blood pressure.”\(^\text{15}\)

The levels of stress that cause this weathering occur when the threats to bare survival are always just beyond our ability to control. We then expend all of our energy simply trying to cope, but the threat is always close behind. We lack the power to control the forces that are buffeting our lives, and the lives of those we love. To be poor is to be at the bottom, always looking up.

It is this pyramid of hierarchy that is the most important factor in the social gradient of illness. In Sapolsky’s baboon tribe, it’s good to be the king. It’s also healthier—lower order members of the pack have higher stress hormone levels with resulting lower fertility, excess disease and shorter life spans. In the human tribe, “hierarchy” is a euphemism for our class position, and the consequences are the same. The health effects of an accident of birth are more diabetes, more cardiovascular disease, more cancer and a shorter life span. This association is borne out in the famous Whitehall Studies. These longitudinal trials of health outcomes for thousands of British civil servants were begun in 1967 and are still ongoing. The subjects are not poor, and yet any job characterized by the experience of domination led to shortened life spans. According to Sir Michael Marmot, principal investigator:

> We have strong evidence that there are two important influences on health in explaining the hierarchy in health. The first is autonomy, control, empowerment. People who are disempowered, people who don’t have autonomy, people who have little control over their lives, are at increased risk of heart disease, increased risk of mental illness. And we’ve also shown they had metabolic disturbances, the so-called metabolic syndrome, which increases risk of diabetes. We’ve shown that these work factors increase risk of the metabolic syndrome related to insulin resistance and lipid disturbances that, we think, increase risk of diabetes and heart disease.\(^\text{16}\)

We take for granted that for most Americans, work is hierarchical and alienating. But being dominated and powerless in the workplace literally makes us sick.

We also know that there are factors that are protective against the damaging effects of stress. The single highest predictor of elevated stress hormone levels in Sapolsky’s baboons is social isolation. The single most important buffer is social connectedness and community. The most damaging scenario for human health is lack of control over what is going on, no predictive information about the stressor, no outlets for the frustration caused by it, and no social support in coping with it.\(^\text{17}\)
So, it is not surprising that, according to Vicente Navarro, a researcher who has spent his life documenting the health consequences of capitalism, “the world’s healthiest societies are those with the lowest inequality—societies where leftwing forces are strong.” Navarro attributes this to the increased social cohesion and greater sense of power and participation in less unequal countries. Universal access to health care does not make the social gradient vanish because it cannot heal the weathering of body and spirit.

The quotidian, grinding violence that is life on the losing end of capitalism; a corporate assault that poisons our food and preys on the victims—this is the miasma that sickens us. The people of Logan County in Appalachia have endured decades of deindustrialization and layoffs that have all but destroyed their communities. With those losses go the institutions of collective support and connectedness that Sapolsky cites as essential to resilience and survival. In the wake of this trauma, the victims are disoriented, paralyzed, their sense of self-worth and autonomy shredded. It is that autonomy that is the prerequisite for power, and the antidote to the diseases of despair. The Battle for Blair Mountain occurred in the context of organized working people who knew their labor was indispensable and understood their power in withholding it. The response was rapid and brutal, and it continues to this day in Appalachia. “Stress” doesn’t begin to describe the experience of living in one of capital’s sacrifice zones.

As the globally dominant social and economic system, capitalism’s impact on our lives is all-encompassing. Diabetes may be a final common pathway of a toxic social environment that literally depletes life. Its disparate toll in zip codes like Logan County should be an urgent wake-up call. We are a product of our social relations, but we also shape them. It is that struggle—to forge human connections and locate our power—that brings health.

In 2018, teacher walkouts all over the country were sparked by a wildcat strike in West Virginia. The tipping point for the West Virginia teachers was the imposition of a “personal fitness wellness app,” refusal of which would incur a fine. The teachers saw the deception in a device that is not only personally invasive, but coercive and disempowering. In the face of the real threats to health—inequitable salaries, overcrowded classrooms, and unresponsive officials—the teachers’ united NO echoed with a strike wave across the country. It was the spirit of Blair Mountain.

Elizabeth Oram is a nurse and adjunct lecturer at Hunter College. She is a member of the Professional Staff Congress.

Sources, references, and notes are available in the online version of this essay.
Why It’s Important to Understand Cultural Capital

GARY OLSON

When categorizing my class background, I’ve invariably replied “working class” but in truth that was more aspirational than factual. My father was either unemployed or underemployed and died of a heart attack at age 46 while working as a night shift orderly at a veteran’s hospital in Fargo, ND. I was 12-years-old, with a 7-year-old brother, and thereafter our family income consisted of whatever my mother earned from doing infrequent odd jobs and the social security checks she received for her two boys. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, we had a small house.

Given our socioeconomic status, I had virtually no exposure to music other than the radio’s C&W variety, no domestic or foreign travel save annual visits to my grandparent’s small farm, no books of my own, records, visits to art museums, or attendance at musical or theater performances. Reading material was limited to the local rag, the odd copy of The Reader’s Digest and trips to the public library. Dinner conversations didn’t include soliciting my opinions.

I experienced my lot in life as tragically unfair and even harbored some inchoate bitterness. Later, my 14-year old teenage self, merged this background with unarticulated feelings of self-doubt, of not being “good enough,” especially in relation to my better-off peers. My point here is that it wasn’t until much later I realized my experience was virtually textbook in terms of how clandestine social reproduction of class works and does so in such an efficacious manner.

We know that economic capital is accumulated labor institutionalized in the form of property and is at the root of all other forms. One of these forms is cultural capital, a concept originating with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). He argued that cultural capital greatly facilitates inequality, in part because the elite classes determine which forms of cultural capital are “legitimate” and if mastered, enhance one’s social mobility.

Arguably, the best example is education where the children of the owning class enter the educational system with immense cultural capital advantages. And to be clear, possessing cultural capital isn’t synonymous with being intelligent. Cultural capital includes what one learns outside a formal educational setting and includes non-economic resources, skills and behaviors one accumulates that demonstrate cultural competence. One demonstrates that competency in social interactions and educational settings reward the exhibition of cultural capital. School is one of those settings.

Transmission of cultural capital depends on the cultural capital “previously invested by the family.” This hereditary transmission begins at birth for the offspring of wealthy families and continues through childhood. The length of free time (free of economic necessity) is one significant advantage that’s extremely hard for others to overcome.
What does it look and sound like? It includes collective symbolic elements such as taste, mannerisms, clothing, educational credentials (an Ivy League education, for example), a certain and unmistakable style of speech, how to confidently talk to gatekeepers of social advancement. It might include knowing certain foreign films, food and drink preferences, authors, philosophers and different kinds of music. According to Bourdieu, nothing “is more classifying than music.” Incidentally, the upshot is that high status cultural symbols are internalized and converted into socioeconomic gains. To greatly simplify, one learns what to say (and not to say) and how to say it at dinner parties!

And speaking of social settings, as a newly minted Ph.D. at the start of my career, I recall attending a dinner party where all the other attendees were middle-age academics. Over cocktails, the conversation flowed with names and places that meant nothing to me. From art-house films, summer concerts at Tanglewood, and vacations in Italy or “The Cape” to a new Off-Broadway play, whether a certain author deserved a favorable review in the New York Review of Books and the best gin for martinis.

I still recall feeling queasy and apprehensive about the next few hours and pleading illness, I made an early departure. My meager cultural capital account was already overdrawn. Are such people pretentious, self-congratulatory snobs? Do they, in Baudelaire’s phrase, experience “a feeling of joy at [one’s] own superiority?” According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is acquired unconsciously and disguises educational advance as based solely on individual effort and therefore is wholly deserved.

Later that “earned merit” distinguishes its owner in ways that permit access to high level, dominant positions. It’s especially insidious in that even if remedial efforts reduce actual economic inequality, this “clandestine circulation of cultural capital becomes determinant” in obtaining rare positions of privilege and power. Note: For years I quoted Bourdieu but never publicly uttered his name. Why? Because I feared mispronouncing it, thus sadly showing the hold that a dearth of cultural capital can still exert.

According to Bourdieu, most people unreflectively accept their “sense of place” within the hierarchy. In academia, it’s long been an anomaly for someone from a working-class background to attain faculty status at an elite college or university. The sorting process begins early but even if one gets through the “old boy’s network,” gender and racial barriers, and miraculously obtains an interview, there’s more to overcome. That is, it’s not implausible to assume that hiring committees look favorably on applicants displaying similar levels of cultural capital on the reasonable belief that future friendships may follow. Finally, based on both anecdotal and published research, they know the rare working-class hire will invariably feel like a fish out of water.

In my own case, I accepted a position at a very respectable college and became what I’d charitably describe as a semi-public intellectual. I was neither a red diaper baby (closer to red, white and blue) nor owned a copy of Bourdieu for Dummies. But over some 45 years and due to highly unusual circumstances...
not of my own doing, including the often-discounted role of pure luck, I unintentionally accumulated checkered aspects of cultural capital. My relatively privileged position as a college professor afforded me substantial discretionary time.

For example, invariably traveling on someone else’s dime I was able to teach and travel abroad several times and also spend summers pursuing my interests without financial encumbrance. Eventually I was able to “pass” in some settings but never within the easy comfort zone of those who gained cultural capital almost via osmosis. I should quickly add that I’m grateful that in my early twenties I joined and have remained on the right side of the class struggle.

Why is any of this important? On a personal level, one reason I went into teaching was to help students, many of them first generation college attendees, to gain a better appreciation of how their identities and “place in the world” was shaped, not only by huge disparities in economic capital but the equally insidious tool of cultural capital. By demystifying this wholly fraudulent operation, I hoped students would feel empowered and the possibilities for political struggle to eliminate both forms of capitalist oppression would be enhanced. Today, the need for disarming this weapon has never been stronger.

Gary Olson is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA. He can be reached at olsong@moravian.edu.

Additional Readings:
3. David Morgan, Snobbery (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2019)

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“Understanding cultural capital is critical to understanding how the world works.”

—Gary Olson
Globalization or Universalism?

Reza Ghorashi

Introduction

Globalization is a complex, multifaceted, and correlated phenomenon that affects social, cultural, political, economic, and technological dimensions of human life. Since the dawn of modernity, we have had several rounds of globalization. The process typically goes as follows: Major scientific breakthroughs give rise to technological inventions that enable humans to control and manipulate their physical environment. This opens opportunities for production and exchange of goods and services that did not exist before. The society will evolve and adjust to enable entrepreneurs to take advantage of new economic opportunities. Increased trade and communications with faraway people and communities necessitates opening up to more tolerance of others and secularism.

Earlier Rounds of Globalization

The earliest round of modern era globalization came after The Age of Discovery in the 16th and 17th centuries. New technologies, most notably gunpowder and the compass, imported from the “East” (the Islamic world, and via them India and China) enabled a handful of European sailors to travel on high seas to faraway lands and face strangers that far outnumbered them. This opened up opportunities for trade of high value items such as gold and spices in demand at home, primarily by the aristocracy. Influx of gold and silver increased the money supply tremendously and facilitated exchange and market activities. The era of “merchant capitalism” in Europe had begun. Large entities, such as East India company were formed. Monarchs and princesses increased their support of newly emerging class of merchants and explorers. Increased contact with “other” people resulted in an emphasis on Eurocentric and Christian identities. Spread of Christianity became a noble cause. This was used to justify mistreating “others” as sub-human and savages who could be cheated of their belongings, and even enslaved. The era of colonialism had begun.

The second major round came after the Industrial Revolution in the mid-18th century. Scientific and technological breakthroughs enabled replacing and enhancing of human and animal physical power with that of machines. Suddenly human beings could literally move mountains. Steam boats, and later railroads, enabled much faster traveling and carrying of bulk items. Long distance trade now included raw materials and food items. Securing resources and trade routes enhanced rivalry between European colonial powers. Newly emerged nation-states of Europe made sure that “their” companies benefited from a monopolistic presence in the colonies, and most of the time, at home. The triangular colonial pattern of trade became the norm. The bourgeoisie
had risen to become the dominant class, and “no taxation without representation” had paved the way for liberal democracy.  

The next round came about a century later via the Second Industrial Revolution, the distinct characteristic of which was the introduction of electricity. Suddenly darkness of the night was conquered. Now factories could work 24 hours a day. More relevant here, instant communication, at first via telegraph and later telephone, radio, and eventually television became possible. Politically, a hierarchical global system was established with the British on top, as a superpower, under the principles of the Congress of Vienna.  

The distinctive economic characteristic of the first round of globalization was the long-distance trade of raw materials. The second round’s distinctive characteristic was the addition of exports of manufactures and industrial products. That of the third was the dominance of the export of capital. The colonial powers had run out of new lands and people to colonize and to expand production to avoid economic crises in the Marxian sense. The new comers, notably the US, Japan, and Germany were, according to the “law of uneven development of capitalism,” growing faster and challenging the status quo. The era of “monopoly capital” and “imperialism” had arrived. The result was the most catastrophic man-made disaster in the history of the world up to then: The First World War. A world order was not re-established after the war ended due to several factors such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the re-emergence of “isolationism” in the US, and a “winner takes all” attitude of the victors (particularly the French) in the Versailles Peace Treaty. It took another major disaster, even bigger than the previous one, the Second World War, to re-establish another world order with the US as the hegemonic power. The interwar era was one of the worst periods in social history of humankind that witnessed the rise of Nazism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, and the Great Depression, among other things.  

This world order, despite becoming a bi-polar system, dominated by the US and Soviet Union, survived until the collapse of the latter. After which, the neoconservatives in the US attempted to create a “unipolar moment” in accord with their vision of a “New American Century” which led to more problems.  

The Current Round of Globalization  

The main technological advancement that triggered the latest round of globalization happened in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). The “Third Industrial Revolution” used electronics and AI to automate production. The First Industrial Revolution, relying primarily on steam power drastically enhanced our muscular and physical ability. We could move heavy materials to faraway distances at high speed. The second one, based on electricity, enhanced our senses. We could hear and see and communicate from far distances. The third one has enhanced our brain power and decision making. It began by letting machines (computers) do the routine decisions and is advancing to more complex decision-making situations. A fourth one is underway: “Now a Fourth Industrial Revolution is building on the Third, the digital revolution that has been occurring since the middle of the last century. It is characterized by a
fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres."\textsuperscript{10}

Technological innovations usually end up raising the productivity of labor. In the short run this could mean unemployment and redundancy of the existing labor. This, and the fact that gains from increased productivity of labor have mostly gone to the owners of capital and drastically increased the gap between the “haves” and “have nots,”\textsuperscript{11} necessitated an economic role for the state. Under capitalism, a fundamental economic role of the state is to enforce contracts in the market, that is to enable owners of capital to exploit the workers. In unusual circumstances, such as during major wars or severe recessions the state may take additional steps to save the system.\textsuperscript{12} That necessitates some degree of control over a country’s corporations. On the global level, each state promotes and protects the interests of its own national corporations. This may cause chaos. The “world system” is more stable when there is a hierarchy. The hegemonic power is responsible for stability, including economically, of the world system. England did it for almost a century, from 1815 (final defeat of Napoleon in Waterloo) until 1914 (start of WWI) when the “status quo” was no longer sustainable. The US had done it after WWII until the start of the last round of globalization in the late 1970s.

The most important economic characteristic of this round of globalization is that production itself has become global. “Economic globalization keeps taking new forms – firms are becoming more and more agile: some only provide the intellectual property, like software, blue prints and design, while production is carried out by contracted producers. Firms may undertake R&D, while components and raw materials may arrive from various other countries to be assembled in yet another country. Finally, products may be sold to customers all over the world. Even more complex arrangements are emerging in the area of services. The complexity is amplified by the search for tax optimization and complicated ownership arrangements which are key features in globalization.”\textsuperscript{13} A product like Apple iPhone is produced all over the world.\textsuperscript{14}

This makes the nationality of the major corporations meaningless. These are genuinely global entities that have no loyalty to any one nation-state. The ability of the latter to control these global entities is very limited at best. Indeed, usually it is these global corporations who manipulate nation-states against each other to get a better deal. In some cases, there is no supervision at all. Every single day, several trillion dollars go around the world, hopping from one stock market to the next. They are in New York 9:30 AM to 4 PM local time and move westward with the sun to Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. A few hours later, they are in Western Europe (Zurich, Frankfort, and Paris). By 5 AM NY time they are in London, and at 9:30 AM back to NYC, with practically no national or international control or supervision.

The Response

The response to this inability of nation-states to rein in global corporations came first from the left, then from the right. The left, the progressives and the unions, tried to save the welfare-state under assault from Reaganomics and
Thatcherism in the 1980s. These attempts failed. Symbolically, candidate Bill Clinton opposed NAFTA while president Bill Clinton signed it, albeit with minor cosmetic changes. The failed Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (TPP), proposed by President Obama, would have recognized “sovereignty” of these global corporations in relation to the nation states:

**Investment rules.** Markets were opened to foreign investment among members, and rules added to protect investors from unfair treatment. The controversial investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) provision, which allows investors to sue host governments using international arbitration panels, was included.

The rightwing reaction to globalization in the US came with the Tea Party and a populist nationalism tainted with racism. The phenomenon was not unique to the US. All around the world, from Philippines to Turkey to eastern Europe, and more recently, Italy and Austria, these populists have come to power. In many other countries they have gained a lot more strength. In addition to the economic and political aspects, this nationalism also reacts to socio-cultural dimensions of globalization.

This round of globalization has drastically increased communication and interaction between peoples and communities that so far had known about each other only from books and documentaries. Increased awareness about economic opportunities has made labor a much more mobile factor of production. This century has seen a drastic increase in migrations globally with waves of migrants in search of a better life from Africa to Europe and the “south” to the US. To this one should add the emergence of “failed states,” as a source of mass migration. On the positive side, the virtual space of social media has rendered physical distance irrelevant. Two persons from the opposite sides of the planet could be friends on Facebook and share the same tastes and values as if they belonged to the same community and culture. While this creates a global community, it also creates resentment by some segments of society, and by the nation-state apparatus that loses control over its citizens.

**Conclusion**

In sum, the current round of globalization has made the entirety of life global. It is not only production, capital, or more and more labor (not to ignore outsourcing), or even consumption, but also cultural and social aspects of life that have become global. Lagging are proper global institutions, mostly political, to deal with this new reality. The existing international organizations such as the United Nations and its affiliates, although do a lot of good things, are limited by the fact that they are nation-state-centric. That is, each member represents the interests of its state. Nationalism is not the proper response to this round of globalization. Nor is it desirable. The Trump era has proven this.

We need new global institutions concerned with the welfare of humanity. These should place the universal human, regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality, at the center of their attention. This does not mean that we must start from scratch. In some areas a universal approach and relevant institutions already exist. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and
organizations such as Amnesty International are examples. Passed in 1948, the UDHR was not taken seriously for a while as the “sovereignty” of a nation-state overruled its violation of citizens’ human rights. Since the 1970s, however, this concept of sovereignty has been questioned more and more and by the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 many rejected the Chinese government’s “it’s our internal affairs” argument.  

One can make a case for establishing a global agency to regulate and supervise movements of finance capital and close loopholes, such as “off shore” accounts that global corporations use to avoid paying taxes. Labor unions can go global too: workers everywhere share work-related concerns and have increasingly confronted global corporations in their struggles to improve the conditions of labor. Environmental issues, such as global warming, are another challenge that humankind, regardless of their nationality, is facing. Here too, numerous NGOs and movement activists have raised awareness to the extent that even nation-states have had to respond by signing documents such as the Paris Agreement.  

Not surprisingly, populist nationalists like Donald Trump oppose them. They rely instead on nativist nationalist ideologies.  

A necessary first step towards building a global framework suitable for new realities is to put national identity and nationalism in their proper place. National identity is based on a sense of belonging to an “us.” The early form of this is tribal identity which is based on “blood.” With the advancement of civilization and the emergence of the city this identity becomes more a social construct based on location and profession. Religious identity, although theoretically universal, is limited to those who practice it. Some older religions do not even accept converts; only those born into it are accepted as “us.” National identity is superior to all of the above. An “American” is, in theory, part of “us” regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and other such categories. Its main limitation, however, is that the “them” it constructs acts as the “other” to the “us” and is often enough to mobilize people and to justify organized violence such as wars that kill scores of innocent people.  

For the appropriate global institutions to be created and succeed there is a need for a proper mindset: that is, the “us” should be defined as “universal humanity.” All human beings, regardless of their other attributes, including national identity, should be considered as us. Technological advancements of the past enable us to improve the lots of all human beings. We need social institutions with the same goal. A prerequisite for such institution building is the acceptance of the universal identity of human beings everywhere. This is not as difficult as it may seem. For one thing, most of us show it when there is a natural disaster such as a major earthquake or hurricane. If activists act and think in accord with this understanding then others will join as well. Those whose lives are significantly affected in negative ways by this latest round of globalization are prime candidates for supporting a new global institutional framework on the basis of the universal identity of human beings. The working class, for example, has been hurt by the global nature of production; it is not hard to imagine that it should and would support an alternative consciousness of what constitutes an “us.” Those
who spend time on “virtual communities” on social media, mostly the younger generations, are another potential source of support. The social media can be used to advocate this new “universal” identity. Arguments for a new global architecture or authority to deal with issues of environmental degradation, violations of human rights, and even the deregulated movement of speculative capital around the world, would be more easily accepted once our consciousness makes the shift from the national to the universal understanding of human identity.

G. Reza Ghorashi is professor of Economics and Coordinator of Global Studies at Stockton University of New Jersey. He has published articles on various aspects of globalization.

Sources, references, and notes are available in the online version of this essay.

“The challenge is not to walk back globalization. That is neither feasible nor desirable. The challenge is to turn globalization that benefits capital and big business to a globalization that serves working people.”

—Reza Ghorashi
Making Sense of the Recent Election in Israel

JEFF HALPER

Editor’s Note: We have combined two Facebook postings by Jeff Halper that dealt with the September 17, 2019 election in Israel. The first appeared on September 14, three days prior to the election, and the second, on September 18, the day after. The titles for each section are ours. In a surprising twist since the election, President Reuven Rivlin chose Mr. Netanyahu over his rival, Benny Gantz, to form a ruling coalition, thus giving the former a potential political lifeline. But as the readers will note, no matter which of these men forms a ruling coalition, none seeks a change in the nature of settler colonial and apartheid practices by Israel.

Whither Political Zionism?

I have been struggling to find something profound, insightful, even mildly interesting about Israel’s elections, including the (yawn) drama around Netanyahu’s announcement that after the elections he will annex the Jordan Valley, followed by all the settlements, but—he emphasized—without giving one Palestinian Israeli citizenship. But it’s all Deja Vu all over again, no development different from the process of apartheid we have known for decades.

I guess the “news” of this election is that political Zionism has exhausted itself. The Zionist “left” has disappeared, victim to the illusion that a settler colonial enterprise could—and would—“make peace” with its victims while maintaining its control over the entire country. The election has been reduced to a contest between two right-wing Likud parties, Netanyahu’s (whose only purpose seems to be keeping him out of jail) and “Blue/White”, a part of Generals whose slogan is “Israel over everything” (Israel über alles—really!). Its leader Gantz opened his campaign by bragging that he killed 6000 “terrorists” in Gaza. (A case against Gantz for war crimes in Gaza is now being heard in a Dutch court.) And Blue/White agrees to annexation.

The only “issue” is whether the government will be secular (and right wing) or will include the ultra-orthodox (and be right wing). The only bright light is that in his ideological blindness Netanyahu is finally casting off the cloak of the two-state solution and revealing for everyone to see Israel’s true intention: the creation of an apartheid regime over the entire country. That, of course, has been the case for at least the past 20 years, but it has been impossible to shake Jewish liberals (including Bernie & Warren) and governments from the two-state illusion, and that is what has saved the day for Israel. Thanks to Netanyahu (and Trump), reality emerges in all its starkness: either a Jewish state of apartheid or a single democratic state of equal rights for everyone, Israelis and Palestinians alike. That battle, however, will be won or lost outside of elections and political parties, since apartheid has become acceptable to ALL Israeli parties, with the exception of the Joint Arab List that remains stuck in the two-state illusion.

The ball is in our court—civil society: the Palestinians, of course, the few Israeli Jews who can begin to see a different future, growing numbers of Jews
abroad who see the betrayal of Jewish values by Zionism more clearly, and a worldwide movement for Palestinian rights, all supported by international law, human rights conventions and elemental justice. Whether we will have the agency to organize politically so as to bring about a single state, or whether we will have to wait for future generations to do the work (with all the suffering that will occur in the meantime), is up to us. The Israeli elections are merely a sideshow.

*Nine Takeaways about the Election*

1. Netanyahu is out. His only hope of avoiding prison was to get immunity from the Parliament, and without a majority of 61 (the Likud/right bloc got only 55) that is impossible. Either the Likud will go into a unity government with Gantz’s almost as right-wing Blue/White party, but without Netanyahu – or Netanyahu in a rotation in which he becomes Prime Minister again in two years – either scenario landing him in prison or at least out as PM.

2. Gantz (a general facing trial for war crimes in Holland) will be PM. Although his party is merely Likud B, Gantz lacks the appetite for annexation or settlement building, preferring to just let de facto apartheid go on without any political movement here or there. Without the settlers in the government (their party, Yamina of the declared fascist Ayelet Shaked got only seven seats and will not be in a unity government), the pressure on Gantz from that direction is off. Whether Trump will still present his Deal of the Century remains an open question, without a dominant ideological Netanyahu/settler presence I don’t think Gantz could pull it off, or even want to, and Trump is isolated in the international community on this issue. We are faced with creeping, “quiet” yet repressive apartheid (Blue/White is led by three testosterone-filled generals) instead of the ideological, in-your-face annexationist apartheid we are used to. Israel will become a more “normal” country and the issue of occupation might recede to the background. That will make it harder to fight and even to keep on the political map. We will have to decide how to respond.

3. Avigdor Lieberman, the Russian hoodlum who lives in a West Bank settlement and wants to institute the death penalty in Israel, was the big winner. Its classic “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” He happens to despise Netanyahu and, because he represents a Russian immigrant constituency that is very secular and in large part not really “Jewish” by religious law, he is opposed to the ultra-orthodox in government. He also rode an anti-orthodox feeling among secular Israelis in general. He is the king-maker, his Israel Beitenu party holding the 9 swing votes needed to form a government coalition of at least 61. He will mediate a Gantz/Likud unity government, but without Netanyahu. Regardless, he prevents any Israeli government from moving significantly towards accommodation with the Palestinians.

4. The Joint Arab List did well – 13 seats – making it the third-largest party. But they will not be in the government, which is willing to accept only “Zionist” parties. Still, they can’t be ignored. Either they will support the government from the outside in return for certain demands (government investment in the Arab sector, renewed peace process (ya’ani), amendments to Jewish Nationality
Making Sense of the Recent Election in Israel

Law), or they will be the head of the opposition, which carries with it some political weight. It’s becoming clear that the “Arabs” (as Palestinians are called in Israel) can no longer be dismissed or left out of political calculations. It is also pretty clear that they want in, to be part of Israeli society. They are only marginally interested in the wider Palestinian issue and will not support a one-state solution (which I will nevertheless continue to advocate).

5. The Orthodox religious parties (Aguda/UTJ, Shas) have lost their clout. This does not have any implications for the bigger political picture, but getting Deri out as the Minister of the Interior (he is also on his way to jail) might ease the pressures on the African asylum-seekers who Netanyahu/Likud/Deri has been persecuting and trying to expel by force.

6. Although Ayelet Shaked did tremendous damage to the judicial system as Minister of Justice—a campaign continued by the Likud guy that followed her, partly motivated by the need to keep Netanyahu out of prison—the justice system has been saved from Shaked by a whisker. She did manage to move the Supreme court to the right, but she would have disempowered it altogether had she been put in that position again.

7. The Zionist left, Labor and Meretz/Democratic Union, were saved from oblivion by the sin of their teeth. They just passed the threshold of getting into the parliament. They may be part of the unity government, or not (they are dispensable). Suffice it to say they have no political clout whatsoever, and very little to do with the Palestinian issue. Both consider themselves “social” parties that confine themselves to local issues.

8. Although the political complexion hasn’t changed much, the departure of Netanyahu (though it might take a couple months) significantly changes the political picture. Though a racist, corrupt and divisive figure, Netanyahu is a master manipulator, both at home and abroad. He has a Big Picture strategy, speaks English as a native language and well, knows all the world figures, and has a clear ideology. Thus, he has been able to hold things together for Israel as it destroys the two-state solution and pursues an increasingly repressive but unpopular (abroad) regime of apartheid. The person replacing him as head of the Likud will not be PM for at least the next two years and, even if s/he does come into power, will not have the skills of Netanyahu. He will be replaced probably by Gidon Sa’ar, a run-of-the-mill local politician. Even if Sa’ar (or someone else) becomes PM, s/he might not be able to prevent the unravelling of Israeli apartheid, especially as we move past Trump (inshallah). This gives us an opening for action and real change, if we can manage to be organized, strategic, and armed with our own end-game—one democratic state.

9. The elections also showed that Jews (unfortunately) are just like everybody else. The election was issue-less, and most glaringly skipped over the entire issue of occupation and the continued oppression of the Palestinians (except for Netanyahu’s pledge to annex the Jordan Valley, merely an election ploy.) Although Jews suffered terribly in their history, they expelled most of the Palestinians from their homes just three years after the end of the Holocaust
and have continued to displace and repress them for the past 72 years. And yet, despite their own suffering, the (Israeli) Jews couldn’t care less about “the Arabs.” Their suffering has not made them any more sensitive to others’ suffering than it has to anyone else. In fact, they have become just as numbed to political issues outside of their own personal lives as all the rest of us in this “all about me” capitalist system we all inhabit.

The struggle continues.

Jeff Halper is an American-born anthropologist, author, lecturer, and political activist who has lived in Israel since 1973. He is a co-founder of The People Yes! Network and the former Director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, a peace and human rights organization dedicated to ending the Israeli Occupation and achieving a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians. His most recent book is War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification.

“The political spectrum of Israel has gone so far to the fascist right that this is basically a contest between racist, fascist right and a milder form of the racist, fascist right. There is no left in Israel.”

—As’ad AbuKhalil, commentator on Middle East politics
Baba looked out the window into the dark alley. Anxiously, he began tapping on the window ledge with the fingers of his right hand as he held on to the other side with his left. He began to whistle. He always whistled when he was worried.

“Ey baba, kojast? Where is she?” Baba asked out loud. His little girl entered the room, and stood behind him. “Baba? Where is Maman?” she asked. Baba turned to face his daughter. “She’ll be back, azizam.” “Let’s eat! I’ve prepared the dinner table,” she said. “You go on ahead, and call your brothers to eat. I will be there soon.” Baba murmured under his breath: “You, foolish woman. You foolish, foolish woman.”

He then stepped away from the window. Hope had faded from his eyes. Instead, dark circles had formed under them, his forehead now shadowed with hard lines. He was not sleeping nor eating well since Maman started helping out at the Sazehman. She started out by working in their kitchen and helping with tailoring needs. Eventually, she attended their meetings and passed around newspapers, acting as a mentor to other women, informing them of the political climate. Sure, Maman came from an activist family, which inspired and influenced her desire to be a part of the Sazehman.

But there was another reason, buried deep in her, which she would later reveal to her youngest daughter. Joining the efforts of the revolution gave Maman an escape route from her marriage. While she had learned to love Baba, she also felt trapped in their marriage. She was only 17 when they married. Prior to the marriage, Maman had wanted to sing on a radio show. She wanted to go to college. But Mamanbozorg, her mother, forbid her to sing in public. They were a pious family then, and pious women didn’t sing on public radio. In fact, after the Ayatollah toppled the Shah, women were forbidden to sing solo.

Maman continued her activism, as it gave her something to do and she believed she should continue in her siblings’ footsteps. Baba had no say in any of it, of course. Mamanbozorg had warned him: “If you stop my daughter, she will divorce you.” His wife came from an activist family; Baba didn’t like this, and didn’t want any part in it. But he remained loyal and stayed, and bore it all in silence. He would grow accustomed to this silence. He would learn to bear this silence so much that he would talk less and less in the years that followed. In this silence, Baba kept himself together, for his children, for his young wife.

Maman knew they were coming for her, the Revolutionary Guards of the Islamic Regime.

Tonight, was the eve of a holy night; Muslims were commemorating their prophet. Maman was anxious; she had harbored an uneasy feeling for the past month. It was only a matter of time before someone found her activities suspicious.
She had been discreet of course — she hadn’t deliberately called attention to herself. She wore her black chador when she went out so she was hidden from head to toe. Underneath, she wore a white scarf, a beige manteau — a long dress shirt — and khaki pants. On public buses, she kept to herself, eyes to the ground, an occasional smile to another female passenger. Despite the nerves in her body agitating, her heart racing like it did as if she had just a little extra caffeine, she still believed in the mission: to liberate Iran from dictatorship, from the abusive hands of those who stood in the way of justice and humanity. Before Khomeini brought the Islamic Republic to power, Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran’s last king, also took advantage of his throne. He too wanted to control people. He sent his SAVAK team — his brutal secret police — to take down anyone who opposed him, or anyone who stood in his way. The SAVAK even went after the pious women, who covered their hair, which at the time was not compulsory, by pulling on their scarves. Four years prior, the SAVAK shot and killed Maman’s only sister and brother-in-law during a demonstration.

The doorbell rang and Baba jumped.

“We are here to take your wife for questioning,” one of the guards said when Baba popped the front door open. The soldier guards wore khaki shirts and pants. They were fully bearded, heavy rifles around their shoulders. They carried briefcases too.

Maman wasn’t able to say anything at all. She methodically put on her long, black veil and then went to their car. One of the guards sat in the rear beside her. They ordered her to cover her eyes with her scarf and tie it in the back of her head and bow her head down. She knew they were probably taking her to Evin, the now notorious house of terror — a big, robust prison built by Israeli technicians during the Shah’s regime. They then handcuffed her from the front instead of the back — this was a favor, she thought.

The Evin prison stands by the outskirts of the Alborz Mountains in Northern Tehran with high stonewalls and towers where armed soldiers stand guard. The dusty, cream colors of the wall have been tearing with time; the prison is over 40 years old. The heavy metal doors stand as a reminder that there is no freedom once you enter.

Evin is like the River Styx, between life and death. It’s a name that gives people goose bumps. Evin is the unknown. You don’t know if your sentence is death or life in prison.

Maman and her companion inmates slept on military blankets that smelled of wool mixed with chemicals. They each received two blankets and red plastic cups that smelled awful every time they drank hot tea, which was mixed with a kafoor, a special chemical to suppress sexual desire.

Secrecy permeated the cells. The women did not trust each other. After all, anyone could be a spy. Many repented for their acts against the Islamic Regime because they believed they were wrong. Others repented simply to avoid execution. The women put on a guise in front of the guards. Their faces read obedience and repentance.
One of the men began whipping the soles of Maman's feet with a cable. She tried not to scream, only letting out soft, broken groans. Her feet bruised and ached. As the whipping continued, Maman imagined herself in America. She was not blind to America's history of genocide of native Americans, slavery, discrimination, or the Vietnam Wars. She knew that America had played a major role in shaping Iran's past by meddling in its affairs in mid-20th century. She was well aware that America's intervention had altered Iran's destiny for ill.

But in this moment of suffering, she needed to believe in an America that promised freedom: the freedom to be herself, to reclaim her dreams and hopes, to be the woman she didn’t get to be in Iran, bounded by a stifling marriage, and a revolution she would later regret fighting for. She knew she would have opportunities in America that she wouldn’t have in Iran. That was the American dream to Maman.

She slowly began to feel hopeful even as the pain continued to penetrate her body. She imagined the taste of freedom—like butter melting on white, Jasmine Rice—and the smell of freedom—like fresh Barbari bread out of the oven; what a heavenly aroma. Freedom must have tasted and felt like this. The whipping continued. Maman shut her eyes, clenching her fists. Azadi. Freedom. She repeated to herself.

The women gathered for dinner. The guards brought over the usual: dry bread and cheese. Everyone ate, heads down, remembering that this moment was a rare bit of normalcy in the cell. But this night’s silence was suddenly broken by gunshots: loud, sharp bullets that marked an execution outside the cells.

Out in the yard, 30 women lined up against dark brick walls, and for the last time, they sang from their hearts, freeing their forbidden voices, for the regime that was about to execute them had always been taking away something, always depriving, censoring, and brutally raping them, on the streets and inside the prison cells. Under the name of God, these dictators polluted the air and committed such heinous crimes with eyes wide open, giving religion its undeserving name, tainting faith and humanity and justice.

The women sang Raghseh Shokoofeha, Dance of the Blossoms. They wished each other well as the line drew closer to the finish, and with each bullet, their voices died as each fell to the ground. They danced like the blossom as it twirled with the spring winds, around the green fields amongst the flowers and seeds. The restless blossom gave a kiss to the wind under the sun with its red lips. 

Shokoofeh miraghsad az badeh bahari
Shodeh sarta sareh dasht sabzo golzari...

The women inside were unable to swallow the pieces of bread that were now lodged in their throats. The spoons dropped, and no one said a word, each woman counting the number of gunshots until silence. This was one of many executions that took place while Maman served her term.

Death lingered in the hallways, in the small, tight cells, in the shower stalls, on the walls where some women hung themselves with their scarves. Everyday Maman wondered when her name would be called. But she never mourned or
cried. She kept busy and didn’t share much with other cellmates. In prison, she learned to mistrust. She learned to close her heart enough to protect herself, enough to keep her guard.

As the days went by, the atmosphere grew tense. Every week, the guards came to the women’s small units, called a few names, and took people away; none of the remaining prisoners knew where to or for how long. The next day, they’d come and retrieve the belongings of those they’d taken: clothes, accessories, anything that marked their existence. Maman and her companions feared the uncertainty of their inmates’ whereabouts, but they knew that wherever they were taken, they must be closer to death.

Maman’s name was eventually called.

The guards took her to a big room and told her to tie her scarf around her eyes. She sat on what felt like a rough carpet, between small wooden boards on the floor with no room to move. At night, the prisoners slept in the same position seated, only getting up to use the bathroom. No one could make any noise. They could only breathe. If they needed anything, they raised their hands. During meals, if their spoons touched their plates and made noise, Haji, the head prison guard, kicked them. He was a big, broad-shouldered man with an empty head, a metalworker turned head of the political prisons, who killed people with ease. Because of his profession, his hands were heavy and when he struck a prisoner, she couldn’t breathe for several moments. Everyone feared him, even Maman. Rough and aggressive, he made fun of prisoners in front of others and humiliated them. He used them to make bread or take charge of a unit. When there was prayer, he made everyone pray, and if someone refused, he accused her of godlessness.

For six months, Maman stayed in one position, blindfolded. Death had never felt closer. In the mornings, someone touched their shoulders to wake them up for prayer. Maman felt a touch on her shoulder. Her body twitched. Was it, morning already? She wondered.

It was time for Morning Prayer. She listened to the swift sound of chadors brushing against the floor, one after another, like a slow dance. Her mind calmed, she could feel herself smiling — she was not alone. She prayed and thought of her children, her daughter and two sons. Did they know that she was alive? She had not been allowed visitation hours, nor had she been given the chance to make any calls. She wasn’t even sure she’d make it out alive. This felt like the end, but she would keep strong. She had to.

Maman approximated time based on when she was served breakfast, lunch, and dinner. When the women cried, they kept their heads up so as not to make noise, but mostly to show the guards that they weren’t giving up. When there was silence, Maman busied herself by thinking about different things. She prayed and started to think of a food recipe: Ghormeh Sabzi — a traditional Iranian stew. First, trim cow or lamb meat and cut into 3/4” cubes. Next, fry onions over medium heat in half of the oil until golden. Add turmeric and fry for 2 more minutes. Then increase heat, add meat cubes and…
She had to keep her sanity. She missed humanity, love, and compassion. She was tired of cruelty and having the enemy watch her at all times. She imagined her mother and father holding her in their arms like a baby. They would pat her head and her back; tell her that everything would be fine, and that they still loved her. It was strange for her to need love from her parents instead of wanting to hold her own children. There was God too, of course. She never once stopped having faith in Him. Despite all the hardships and suffering, she believed then that he gave her the strength to carry forward. It wouldn’t be until after her immigration to the States, when Maman was in her 50s, that she eventually stopped believing in God. She would then realize that she had strength within her all along, and that it was her own strength that allowed her to survive.

Maman endured 194 days of blindness in a colorless world of constant fear. She heard the firing squad and the unbearable, hushed cries of women betrayed by their government, women whose only crime was their idea of liberation, their hope for forbidden freedoms, to put an end to arbitrary punishments, and to silences that gave neither hope nor relief, to marg—death that plagued the soul.

She felt a tap on her shoulder so she stood. Maman and her inmates were taken to a large room where they stood in rows. They were then told that they could uncover their eyes. The women finally saw each other again. They had all lost much weight, their eyes weary and hollow. Maman went to the bathroom and saw a big bicycle in a corner with a mirror on its handle. It was the first time she saw her reflection in six months.

“Salam,” she said hello to herself as she touched her weary face. She felt joy upon meeting a familiar and happy face in the mirror. She smiled, for she had become someone else. Life had another meaning. She had won the battle between evil and self, between death and life.

Though Maman was originally sentenced to a 15-year prison sentence, she was released after five years. She wasn’t sure why she had been given early release, but believed that being a mother worked in her favor. Or maybe it was just luck. For the first time in five years, she stood outside the heavy metal doors of Evin. She was free, but could not yet grasp freedom in its entirety.

It was the afternoon of August 27th 1986 when Maman walked out of Evin and went home. It was as if she’d woken up from a nightmare. She felt a mix of excitement, happiness, sadness, and anger. She had missed much of life in five years.

She felt numb when the car stopped in front of her house and her children came into view. She found herself in a dream and would remain a stranger for a long time, searching the house for signs of familiarity and recognition. Her children had grown up and were unused to her motherly presence. Maman struggled to understand what she had ultimately lost and what she’d gained, if anything.

For the first few months, she fell into a depressive state. She visited a psychologist, and was put on antidepressants. As time went on, she reduced the medication little by little, as she didn’t enjoy the side effects of dizziness and drowsiness.
She recalled those days behind bars. She had decided then that if she were to be released, she would have another child. Some of her inmates had encouraged her to have more children. It had seemed natural then, to want to grow a family.

_Maman_ stood in the middle of the living room in a baby blue dress shirt and a cream skirt, looking out the big windows facing the Alborz Mountains. Her face glowing, she rested her hands on her growing belly. She had been out of prison for a year, and now radiated with the lightness growing inside her. It did feel a bit strange, to carry a child again at 38. But this would be a new beginning for her and her family. She even wished that she would have twins.

She knew that the fight was not over. America awaited her. She was going to dream again. She’d always been a dreamer.

_Maman_ began singing softly as she prepared her afternoon black tea with cardamom.

> “Sar oomad Zemestoon…”

Winter has come to an end.

_Baba_ watched _Maman_ as she kneeled down to pray in her white _chador_, her back toward him. He was relieved to have her back, and looked forward to welcoming their new baby — the lightness after much hurt. He would learn to bury the anger and the pain, and in his grand silence, he’d remained loyal to _Maman_, to his children. In his silence, he would keep his love.

Baba began to whistle. He always whistled when he was worried.

_Elaheh Farmand_ lives in the US but grew up in Tehran where she often heard hushed snippets about her mother’s time in prison. She felt compelled to understand her mother’s ordeal as well as the killing of her aunt and uncles. She has interviewed her family members about their past and has written several unfinished pieces based on her mother’s accounts. This latest version, which takes a slight fictional take on some dialogues and aesthetics of the story, is the most developed, though her mother’s story is still yet to be fully told.

> “I did not live through either Maman’s pain or her loss of family and dreams, but somehow I inherited suffering. Suffering can be inherited. We must choose how we cope with it. I choose to write about it, and fight for a meaningful life.”

—_Elaheh Farmand_
The Making of Inheritance

CAMBIZ AMIR-KHOSRAVI

While planning a trip to Florida in 2011 to see my ailing mother-in-law, I realized that the Department of Motor Vehicles had misspelled my last name. Instead of Khosravi, they spelled it Khosrui.

It might be a minor issue to most people but having a Middle Eastern name in today’s xenophobic climate I naturally became paranoid. Having heard of others being arrested and deported to a rendition camp in some country where the US had outsourced this type of practice, just because their name was similar to a known terrorist, made me feel certain that I needed to have this mistake corrected immediately.

A trip to the DMV was my immediate plan. They told me that they needed proof of my identity before they could issue a corrected driver’s license. The procedure was worthy of a documentary film in itself. To make the correction, I needed documents to prove my identity. Each document had points attached to it. A passport, for example, had 6 points, so did a birth certificate, while a credit card had only 2 points, and so on. In total, I needed 16 points.

So, I began an online search for proofs of my identity. That is when I discovered my father’s true identity.

While I searched for my father’s name, I came across several books describing his role in the history of modern Iran. Suddenly, all that had seemed certain to me—what I had been told about him—was turned upside down. This revelation, besides being shocking, opened up a wealth of information about his role vis-a-vis Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi king of Iran who ruled from 1925 until 1941. In that year, after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The latter is the king most people know of when the Shah of Iran is mentioned.

Until then, what I knew about my father was that he had been a general and a Minister of Finance under Reza Shah, that the Iranian paper currency had his signature on it, and that he had visited the US in 1944 where I was born. What I learned subsequently from those books on Iran of the Pahlavi era, however, painted a surprisingly troubling picture of his role.

I have been a filmmaker for most of my adult life. It occurred to me then that making a documentary film about the history of modern Iran by way of a personal memoir would literally be a documentary I was born to make.

To say that my father and I weren’t very close is an understatement. In fact, the most memorable time of my life happened on August 19th, 1953, outside of the front door of my aunt’s house in Tehran, where I had been living away from my father. On that day, upon hearing loud shouting outside, I rushed to see what was going on. I opened the front door, which separated the house’s courtyard from the street. Though young (I was only nine-years old), I had seen
Left Turn

many demonstrations before in Tehran but none quite like this one. The anger expressed by a stick-wielding mob greatly disturbed me.

Not to mention that all this mayhem was happening barely 20 feet away from where I was standing while I had no idea why. Suddenly, an older man in the crowd raised his fist and shouted Mossadeq. Quickly, a crowd of men surrounded him and started to beat him up and then they threw his lifeless body on top of a bus parked nearby. Then, a shot hit the ground next to me to my right. In the distance, I saw tanks moving towards where I was standing. At the same time, across the street, people were looting Mossadeq’s house. Some were carrying mirrors, others pipes, sink faucets, mattresses, and other household items. The tanks and truckloads of soldiers, now alongside a cheering crowd, passed by me and turned right into the street where Mossadeq lived.

That was August 19, 1953, the day the CIA staged the coup that overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq. His major sin: the nationalization of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the British oil company that had been exercising monopoly control over Iran’s oil since oil was discovered in 1908. The coup was staged under the pretext that Mossadeq was a communist and had a cozy relationship with the Russians. There was no mention of oil.

Let’s rewind to the beginning of the 20th century in Iran, then known as Persia.

When Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi king, was sixteen years old, he joined the Persian Cossack Brigade. He also served in the Iranian Army, where he gained the rank of gunnery sergeant. In 1911, he was promoted to First Lieutenant. By 1915 he was promoted to the rank of Colonel. This was also the year my father served under him as a regimental bugle boy.

On 14 January 1921, the commander of the British Forces in Iran, promoted the then Reza Khan to lead the entire brigade. Reza Khan led his detachment of the Cossack Brigade to Tehran and forced the dissolution of the previous government and of the Qajar dynasty.

My father played an active part in the 1921 coup as an officer serving under Reza Khan’s command. The British favored Reza Khan’s move and a creation of a centralized power that could act as a bulwark against Bolshevik influence in Iran and better secure British control of India as well.

Reza Khan declared himself Shah of Iran in 1925 and became the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty.

At this time my father was close to Reza Shah and was promoted to head the Shah’s personal bank, Pahlavi Bank. Soon after that Reza Shah started to transfer much of the oil royalties that Britain had agreed to give to Iran (Persia at the time) into his personal accounts abroad. In this way, my father became an important aid to Reza Shah’s extraction of wealth from Iran.

Of course, extracting the wealth of Iran had begun earlier in the century after a British prospector, William D’Arcy, discovered oil in 1908 and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was founded in 1909. In 1914, the British
government purchased 51% of the shares of the company, effectively nationalizing it. Mossadeq nationalized Iran’s oil industry in 1951 after a long list of grievances against the company had spawned strong nationalistic sentiments inside Iran. He established the National Iranian Oil Company. However, the UK joined by the US blocked the sale of Iran’s oil aiming to strangulate its economy and destabilize Mossadeq’s government leading up to the August 19, 1953 coup which removed Mossadeq from power and restored the authority of the Shah. In 1954, the oil issue was settled in favor of a Consortium of western oil companies effectively reversing the nationalization of oil in Iran. In that same year, the British company was renamed the British Petroleum Company (BP).

Clearly, none of the above information was known to me as a 9-year-old boy. Today, much of the public in the US remains unaware of the same. So it was that I gave myself the task of making a documentary film through which I could narrate not only my personal biography but also tell a pivotal story about the making of modern Iran and its relationship with the US.

Cambiz Amir-Khosravi is an award-winning video producer whose work have won prizes at various film festivals and are part of the permanent collections of major museums. Libraries, and universities, such as the Museum of Modern Art, The Kitchen in NYC, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia. For more information, please visit: cambizkhosravi.com

“Congratulations for a work that deftly combines the personal and the political.”

—Stephen Kinzer, Author of All The Shah’s Men
Closing the Justice Gap with Incubators: An Interview with Fred Rooney

RJ Vogt

On any given day, you might find Fred Rooney in the Dominican Republic, Pakistan or his hometown of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Just last week, the 66-year-old called the “father of legal incubators” by the American Bar Association hopped aboard a flight to Bulgaria.

The man’s wild travel schedule reflects the national and international interest in legal incubators, Rooney’s brainchild, since he helped launch the nation’s first at City University of New York in 2007. The basic concept is simple: lawyers who want to serve low- and middle-income people often need help getting community-based practices up and running. Incubators provide that help via subsidized office space, resources and amenities as well as business and legal skills development. A dozen years after Rooney came up with the first model, more than 60 incubators similar to CUNY’s have sprung up in 33 states and across four countries. Much of the growth can be traced to his relentless advocacy for increasing access to justice by helping people “do well by doing good.” In 2012, he was awarded a Fulbright Scholar grant to set up an incubator in the Dominican Republic, and from 2014 to 2018 he served as a Fulbright Specialist on a similar project in Islamabad, Pakistan, that focused on women’s access to legal support.

This month he embarked on his latest Fulbright Scholar grant, a project to set up a legal incubator to help Roma lawyers in Sofia, Bulgaria, practice public interest law in their community. Before he left, Rooney sat down with Law360 to discuss how legal incubators can be a crucial component in closing the justice gap at home and abroad.

What do you mean by “doing well by doing good”?

It’s a fairly simple philosophy, not only for lawyers but for most people who want to help their communities: you’ve got to be able to do well, economically, in order to help other people. I found that the better I did in my law practice, the more it gave us the cushion we needed to provide pro bono and low bono work. You can’t really do that if you’re struggling. That’s why it’s so important to help people start off on the right foot, learn how to maximize their time in order to generate income and then be able to give it back to the communities they’re hoping to serve.

How did the original CUNY incubator work?

It was an 18-month program: half the time devoted to developing business skills and half the time devoted to professional legal skill development. That was the model for business incubators—I learned about what they were doing
for graphic designers and startup companies and bakers and then retrofitted those ideas to the needs of lawyers.

A key aspect of the CUNY incubator, in terms of increasing access to justice, was that it would get grants from government and other organizations that lawyers in the incubator could carry out. Many of the lawyers did not have the skills to do that when they entered the incubator, but we developed training for them.

They were able to combine what they learned in the incubator classroom and then go out and work on housing and immigration.

**What areas of law do incubator grads work in?**

I’d say immigration, family and housing. Housing is huge. Consumer debt is big. People’s bread and butter kinds of areas like real estate, learning how to do closings. Also, with an aging population, learning how to deal with elder issues is really important: affordable, reasonably priced wills and powers of attorneys or guardianships.

We’ve also seen incubators set up specifically to train lawyers in the area of domestic violence. There’s also a couple focused on environmental issues.

It’s amazing to see how they’ve grown and morphed into something that is not the cookie cutter model that we started in CUNY. We’ve never tried to have any kind of control over how programs are set up, we’ve just been there to help people create them in ways that best suit the needs of the particular area.

**How can legal incubators help complement the work of legal services organizations?**

The number one challenge when launching your own practice is creating a client base. At CUNY, we were able to connect with legal aid organizations and they would provide their over income clients who just barely didn’t qualify for services.

We would encourage the lawyers in the incubator to collectively go out into communities helping senior citizens, helping people with housing issues, immigration issues, and they were getting their names out so that once people began to know that they were there and they had a practice, they were then called upon to provide services.

**Why do you think the incubator model hadn’t already been brought to legal education, before 2007?**

We really needed to have law schools rethink what their ultimate goal was. Was it simply to graduate students who would then go into big firms, make a lot of money, and then give back through alumni contributions? That seemed to be it.

When we started the idea of education for lawyers, and this is honestly the honest to God truth, the only thing that law schools did is they would have an alumni weekend and they would provide [continuing legal education] credits and bagels. That was it.

And as you can see from the way that incubators began to grow and flourish, law schools bought into the concept. Once a law school in one geographic area started an incubator, there was a lot of pressure on other law schools to follow suit.
Still today, one group of law schools that have shown virtually no interest in incubators have been the Ivy League schools. We’re much more attractive to law schools who have students from working class and immigrant families—their opportunities in large firms are not as great.

What are you planning to accomplish in Bulgaria?
The focus on this particular incubator is the training of young Roma law graduates. In a country like Bulgaria where Roma communities are extremely marginalized, their young law graduates have no uncles or godfathers to take their hand and walk them into jobs and opportunities. Without the ability to create their own law practices, they often leave law and go into something else—they want to practice law and serve their communities, but it’s not always easy without someone there to help.

Fred Rooney is a former Fulbright Scholar, current Fulbright Specialist, international advocate for access to justice, attorney-at-law and the creator of the first legal incubator in the United States, designed to train law graduates to provide affordable legal services in underserved communities in the US and abroad.

A version of this story originally appeared under the Access to Justice section in the law360 website on August 18, 2019.

“Participating in Fulbright has been the highlight of my professional life, and to live and work abroad has been transformative to me on a personal level. If not for Fulbright, I would not have been able to replicate the legal incubator model outside of the United States. Learning from my own experience, my message to everyone I meet can best be summed up as ‘Don’t be intimidated. Apply.’”

—Fred Rooney
Remembering Martin Boksenbaum

NANCY TATE

Martin Boksenbaum, a LEPOCO supporter since the 1980s and a Lehigh Valley leader on much work for the environment and in building community, died on August 7. His work and his dedication to that work is missed by so many including LEPOCO.

Martin Boksenbaum and Janet Goloub came to the Lehigh Valley in 1980. They first lived in Allentown and then in Treichlers. Martin taught in the Allentown School District for two decades.

I still remember a 1992 conversation with Martin on a walk for indigenous rights during the Quincentennial year of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas. It is interesting that that thread of concern for indigenous rights continued in Martin’s work surfacing again in the Americas Solidarity Group (ASG) in recent years. At gatherings held in Martin’s honor people spoke of the long consistency in the themes of his work for a better world and in his deep commitment to bringing people and groups together in that work.

Some will remember that Martin played violin in a trio at several LEPOCO Annual Dinners—one indication of his love for music and his involvement in the arts community. He was a leader in the Lehigh Valley Arts Council. Martin worked diligently in the local manifestations of the Green Party—a big supporter of the campaign of Greta Browne for a seat in the U.S. Congress in 2006. He was a long-time devoted booster of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELF)—organizing local workshops and programs about CELDF and writing about their accomplishments in this newsletter.

In 2003 Martin was a founding member of the Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley. He was a driving force in the organization that has produced the very popular annual Sustainable Lehigh Valley Directory of Organizations since 2003. More recently he was a leader in the production of three issues of the Left Turn journal by the Beyond Capitalism Working Group of the Alliance. He was a steady presence for the Alliance in the community.

Janet Goloub (who Martin described as his life partner of 38 years) died in 2015. Janet was more directly involved in the workings of LEPOCO, as a member of the Steering Committee and in the Americas Solidarity Group. Martin honored Janet’s memory by becoming involved in some of the places where she had worked before her death—this included volunteering at WDIY and working in LEPOCO’s ASG and on this newsletter. His contributions were many, but it is worth noting his efforts were instrumental in gathering wider local community support for the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act (the Act is still pending in Congress as HR-1945 with 72 cosponsors).

Martin was fortunate to find a new life partner after Janet’s death—Pam Ruch of Emmaus. They had happy times together including a cultural awareness
trip to Cuba earlier this year. Martin organized a presentation by the Cuba delegation for a LEPOCO Potluck & Politics program in June.

Leukemia took Martin’s life all too quickly. Those trying to continue the work he was doing will need lots of help and support. Memorial donations were requested to the Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley, 1966 Creek Road, Bethlehem, PA 18015.

Faramarz Farbod, who teaches politics at Moravian College, became deeply involved in the work of the Alliance at the invitation of Martin in 2011. At an Alliance gathering Faramarz shared from seven statements by Martin that were among Martin’s goals for “Quality of Life,” written in 2017. One of those statements reads: “To be engaged in meaningful activities for the rest of my life and to be excited and enthusiastic about what I have to do and get to do each day.” Those of us who knew Martin saw that commitment in practice regularly. Faramarz wrote on the day of Martin’s death, “It is with profound sadness that I inform you of the passing of our friend and my comrade Martin Boksenbaum. A good and a passionate heart has stopped beating…”

Nancy Tate is a founding member and long-time staff person at LEPOCO, the Lehigh-Pocono Committee of Concern.

This originally appeared in the September/October 2019 edition of the LEPOCO Newsletter.

“If I am suspected of having ‘close relations’ with ‘alien friends,’ call in the CIA. If I am suspected of “being now or having ever been such and such,” call in the FBI. If I am suspected of being tired, bitter, and angry because of the badgering and blackmail basic to our peacetime compulsory military service, then you have sent me the wrong form.”

—Martin Boksenbaum, from his September 1, 1963 letter protesting intimidation tactics by the Selective Service System’s Draft Board
The “Red Indian’s” Penultimate Speech to the White Man

MAHMOUD DARWISH

A long time will pass for our present to become a past like us. But first, we will march to our doom, we will defend the trees we wear and defend the bell of the night, and a moon we desire over our huts. We will defend the imprudence of our gazelles, the clay of our pots and our feathers in the wings of the final songs. In a little while you will erect your world upon our world: from our cemeteries you will open the road to the satellite moon. This is the age of industry. This is the age of minerals, and put of coal the champagne of the strong will dawn … There are dead and settlements, dead and bulldozers, dead and hospitals, dead and radar screens that capture the dead who die more than once in life, screens that capture the dead who live after death, and the dead who breed the beast of civilization as death, and the dead who die to carry the earth after the relics …

Where, master of white ones, do you take my people … and your people? To what abyss does this robot loaded with planes and plane carriers take the earth, to what spacious abyss do you ascend?

You have what you desire: the new Rome, the Sparta of technology and the ideology of madness,

but as for us, we will escape from an age we haven’t yet prepared our anxieties for.

We will move to the land of birds as a flock of previous humans and look upon our land through its pebbles, through holes in the clouds, look upon our land through the speech of stars and through the air of the lakes, through the fragile corn fuzz and the tomb’s flower, through poplar leaves, through everything that besieges you, white ones, we will look, as dying dead, as dead who live, dead who return, who disclose the secrets, so grant the earth respite until it tells the truth, all the truth, about you and us …

*Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) was a renowned Palestinian national poet.*
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Beyond Capitalism is a working group of the Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley. (est. 2013)

Common Questions about Left Turn

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in JROTC programs. Shouldn’t facts such as these tell us that there is something deeper than just a problem of easy access to guns and some “crazy” individuals shooting people? The supporters of a gun culture want us to talk about mental illness, offer more thoughts and prayers, and even have more people armed to fight off others with guns who wish the rest of us harm. Some even think the gun culture is tightly intertwined with the spirit of rugged individualism and argue that weakening the former will mean altering that dynamic character of the US culture which has made it an “exceptional” nation. But not every person with mental illness drives 10 hours to El Paso to kill non-whites at a store. There may be personality disorder issues in some cases but not mental illness in every case. No, we don’t have a sporadic individual mental illness problem, rather, we have a national problem — and one with deep historical and institutional roots. The excessive gun violence in the US is indicative of a society afflicted by multiple unattended or unresolved problems. Here is a laundry list of some of them: racism, xenophobia, pervasive militarism accompanied by the glorification of violence, misogyny, toxic forms of masculinity, grave socioeconomic inequalities, increasing precariousness, the substitution of crass forms of consumerism for the loss of meaning, dignity, and agency in the political and economic domains of life, and the growth of neo-authoritarian tendencies in politics and culture. No such list is complete without mentioning two other aggravating circumstance that warrants special attention. We are referring to the unwillingness of the nation’s ideological institutions to come to terms with the history of (a) genocide against the native American populations and the kidnapping and enslavement of the Africans, both intimately tied to the origins of the 2nd Amendment, and (b) colonialism and neocolonialism in relation to the nations of the Global South. Unless the nation confronts the nefarious legacies of the native genocide, racial apartheid and terrorism, and the brutal realities of imperialism (past and present), we cannot see how we could begin to effectively address the problem of deadly violence afflicting the north American society. In sum, we focus on individual behavior and ignore the above historical and institutional factors at our own peril.

Another September Labor Day in the US came and went with the usual smell and sight of hot dogs, burgers, merchandise sales, and so on. But that was not always the case. On this day working people were supposed to enjoy picnics AND engage in labor marches demanding improvements in the condition of work. What is more, there is an alternative Labor Day left out of the dominant US political culture, i.e. May Day. The latter is the holiday for radical labor activism. The powers-that-be, of course, fear radical labor activism. So, back in 1894, President Grover Cleveland favored the September holiday over the May one. He thus begun this federal holiday (for federal workers only) hoping to distract attention from May Day’s radical history and activism. If we would like to build a humane and just society, we must return to those radical traditions of struggle by working people that have been so thoroughly and deliberately ignored by the commercial media and the governing elite.

The politics of cloaking empire is alive and well as once more the nation remembered the 9/11 terror attacks in the US and as the commercial media failed again to remind north Americans that there are indeed two tales of two 9/11s, one in the US and the other in Chile. Amnesia serves empire well.

The US 9/11 occurred in 2001. Suicide pilots flew jets into the WTC buildings in New York City and the Pentagon killing thousands. President George W Bush bombed and invaded Afghanistan killing tens of thousands, then proceeded to Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands more, and curtailed civil liberties and advanced a rightist, pro-corporate, agenda at home. Estimates are that since 2001 the US has waged wars in 15 to 22 countries.

The 18th anniversary of the US 9/11 was also the 46th anniversary of Chile’s 9/11 — a far more devastating one for Chileans. On September 11 of 1973, Nixon’s CIA toppled the elected government

(continued on next page)
of Salvador Allende with the goal of controlling the Chilean copper. A pro-corporate, violent, and far right, coup leader, Gen. Pinochet, took power with the US backing. The General killed, disappeared, and tortured thousands of Chileans and presided over the most extreme capitalist makeover known as “shock therapy” egged on by the likes of Milton Friedman, the US guru of “free market” capitalism.

The long silence about such imperial crimes tells us quite a lot about the subservient nature of the managerial class in the US to power. This is abundantly clear, for example, as no establishment politician dares to expose the nature of US foreign policy and as the corporate media do their utmost to hide the fact of empire from north Americans. The corporate media are after all corporate, that is, they are a part of large corporate conglomerates. In this sense, they are not just subservient to power but are themselves constitutive of it; they are not the “Fourth Estate” — as often claimed — but are “for the state” in service to empire and class power.

Take the first two Democratic primary debates. Only 17 minutes of a total of more than five-and-a-half hours of debate time was given to the subject of US foreign policy. Not that more time allotted to the subject would mean exposing the US imperial machinations. Nevertheless, and predictably, neither the politicians nor the commercial media want to talk about the rule of the globalizing US oligarchs. Regularly missing from the debates are such topics as the reasons for the presence of 800+ US military bases all over the world, the continuing US bombing of several countries, the US special ops operations in 128 countries, the illegal US regime change operations, the imposition of brutal US sanctions on so many nations causing mass suffering, the US support for the brutal apartheid Israel’s settler colonial policies, the US strategic alliance with the murderous and petro-feudal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the colossal ecological cost of militarism and war, the massive drain on resources by the gigantic military budget, and the dreadful plight of the real whistleblowers who have exposed crimes of the state.

If we desire ever to see an honest form of politics emerge that’s capable of telling elementary truths about how the world works and the role played in it by the US, we must mobilize powerful social movements to demand a just foreign policy and refuse to limit the scope of our politics and vision to the domestic side of it only. In fact, failing to do so will mean the end of any possibility for realizing even mildly reformist policies a la a Bernie Sanders, even if he wins the presidency. As noted, US militarism and imperial policies eat up much of the available resources thereby leaving very little for any reformist adjustments to the status quo at home. This aside from the fact that not challenging militarism at home and abroad spells doom for the environment and will render any Green New Deal a wholly inadequate response to the ecological challenges facing the planet. The US is an empire and any politics of resistance and liberation must challenge that fact.

Staggering inequalities mark the performance of late capitalism in the US. During the period from 1978 to 2018, CEO compensation increased by 940.9%, the stock market (S&P 500) by 542.9%, the wages of the top 0.1% by 320.5% all the while the wages of the average workers increased by merely 12%. Had the inequality levels remained the same as they were in the late 1970s, the wages of the bottom 90% would have been double what it is today. Let’s consider the latter fact when debating whether the federal minimum wage should be increased to $15 an hour and whether the US should adopt a living wage policy for its working population.

We mention with great sadness the death of our friend and colleague, Martin Boksenbaum. Martin lost his battle with leukemia in the morning of August 7 at the age of 80. He was a pillar of the Beyond Capitalism Working Group from its outset in 2012 until his deteriorating health prevented him from continuing. In late 2017, he suggested we study the history of the Black Panthers and out of that came the idea of a publication by means of which we could reach out to the community and make connections. Martin contributed to every aspect of producing Left Turn, the BCWG’s publication. He lived to see the third issue of Left Turn come out a few days before his passing.
Martin lived a committed life, untiringly engaging with many projects and a variety of community activities in addition to those mentioned above. In a 2017 note to himself in which he set out personal goals while contemplating “Quality of Life” matters, he wrote: “To be known for my integrity, intelligence, collaborative spirit and work, creativity, and caring, nurturing nature.” That is Martin in a nutshell as viewed by those who were fortunate enough to have their lives affected by his presence. It is heartening to see so many who had accompanied him in activism and community building continue to carry out his legacy of affection for all life, deep respect for the integrity of this beautiful planet, and struggle to bring about a saner world than the one we inhabit presently. We remember Martin with great affection and have reprinted in this issue a remembrance written by our friend and his, Nancy Tate of LEPOCO, the Lehigh-Pocono Committee of Concern, a longtime peace and justice organization in the Lehigh Valley. We miss you Martin.

“War seduces the ignorant and gullible to harm and kill the innocent and powerless.”
—Philip Reiss

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 editor Faramarz Farbod, who teaches politics at Moravian College. For more information please write forbodf@moravian.edu.
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