Stephen Bronner on the spirit of the laws

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz on the Americanization of European immigrants

David Graeber and Andrej Grubacic Introduction to Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*

Eric Dirnbach reviews *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*

El Jones’ poem “A woman’s going to send the bombs”

Ted Morgan on the capitol assault
Let us Burn All Illusions in 2021

Left Turn welcomes the year 2021 without any illusions about the nature of the system that produced the severe political, economic, and public health crises of 2020 and the new horrors surely on their way if we as a society fail to counteract the ingrained tendencies and deliberate policies that have produced the present unsustainable historical moment. We do not share with the liberal class the sense of optimism that has been generated by the electoral defeat of the Trump regime if it only entails the removal from office of the Trump malignancy without embarking on a massive and disruptive collective struggle demanding a substantive change of course in policymaking and a radical reconstruction of society from below.

That’s not to say we underestimate the removal of Trump from office, rather we think it’s a necessary, yet insufficient, step toward weakening the most reactionary forces in the U.S. and in the world, where rightwing forces have ascended. To decisively change the balance of forces in the longer run, We the People must resist a return to the pre-Trump “normal” of rule by the hawkish neoliberal elites. Clearly, such a return is precisely what the powers that be intend. We are in for a rude awakening if we let them succeed.

Let’s not forget the complicity of the neoliberal elites in creating the conditions for the rise of the reactionary forces in the first place. For decades, they pursued pro-corporate policies at home and abroad, abandoned the working class in favor of the professional suburbanites and the unions for the big-tech donors, pushed austerity at home, and pursued interventionism abroad. When an electoral insurgency a la Bernie Sanders emerged in 2016 and 2020, promising to pursue mild social democratic policies, the neoliberal establishment united to ensure its defeat.

Can we not agree that (1) the neoliberal order has led to greater public disempowerment, re-sentiment, and distrust of institutions, and (2) blocking social democratic alternatives under such conditions only further empowers even more retrograde and reactionary forces? If we agree, then, a return to the pre-Trump “normal” would very likely mean the strengthening of the present reactionary tendencies with the additional possibility that a less unhinged and more competent personality might assume the leadership position.

Just because the country witnessed its highest level of voter participation since 1908, the election of several additional progressives to national legislative offices, and a new administration with the most “diverse” and intersectional staff heretofore, does not warrant complacency. What matters most are policies and our ability to force changes. We know that the Biden administration represents business-as-usual politics and has filled key positions with familiar neoliberal politicians from the previous administrations. Their raison d’être is serving corporate power and the U.S. empire albeit with a touch of diversity or a heavy reliance on identity politics optics.

(continued on page 69)
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Editor’s Note: David Graeber died unexpectedly on 2 September 2020 at the age of 59 from internal bleeding while vacationing in Venice. His loss leaves all of us with a gaping hole in our hearts and in the struggle for a radically different world. To commemorate him, we decided to publish likely his last writing, co-authored with Andrej Grubacic, as the introduction for Pyotr Kropotkin’s classic Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution. The essay is reflective of both his wit and commitment to knowledge and freedom.

Introduction to Pyotr Kropotkin’s Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution

David Graeber and Andrej Grubacic

Sometimes—not very often—a particularly cogent argument against reigning political common sense presents such a shock to the system that it becomes necessary to create an entire body of theory to refute it. Such interventions are themselves events, in the philosophical sense; that is, they reveal aspects of reality that had been largely invisible but, once revealed, seem so entirely obvious that they can never be unseen. Much of the work of the intellectual Right is identifying, and heading off, such challenges.

Let us offer three examples.

In the late eighteenth century, a Huron-Wendat statesman named Kondiaronk, who had been to Europe and was intimately familiar with French and English settler society, engaged in a series of debates with the French governor of Quebec, and one of his chief aides, a certain Lahontan. In them he presented the argument that punitive law and the whole apparatus of the state exist not because of some fundamental flaw in human nature but owing to the existence of another set of institutions—private property, money—that by their very nature drive people to act in such ways as to make coercive measures necessary. Equality, he argued, is thus the condition for any meaningful freedom. These debates were later turned into a book by Lahontan, which in the first decades of the eighteenth century was wildly successful. It became a play that ran for twenty years in Paris, and seemingly every Enlightenment thinker wrote an imitation. Eventually, these arguments—and the broader indigenous critique of French society—grew so powerful that defenders of the existing social order such as Turgot and Adam Smith effectively had to invent the notion of social evolution as a direct riposte. Those who first came up with the argument that human societies could be organized according to stages of development, each with their own characteristic technologies and forms of organization, were quite explicit that that’s what they were about. “Everyone loves freedom and equality,” noted Turgot; the question is how much of either is consistent with an advanced commercial society based on a sophisticated division of labor. The resulting theories of social evolution dominated the nineteenth century, and are still very much with us, if in slightly modified form, today.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the anarchist critique of the liberal state—that the rule of law was ultimately based on arbitrary violence, and ulti-
mately, simply a secularized version of an all-powerful God that could create morality because it stood outside it—was taken so seriously by defenders of the state that right-wing legal theorists like Karl Schmitt ultimately came up with the intellectual armature for fascism. Schmitt ends his most famous work, *Political Theology*, with a rant against Bakunin, whose rejection of “decisionism”—the arbitrary authority to create a legal order, but therefore also to set it aside—was ultimately, he claimed, every bit as arbitrary as the authority Bakunin claimed to be opposing. Schmitt’s very conception of political theology, foundational for almost all contemporary right-wing thought, was an attempt to answer Bakunin’s *God and the State*.

The challenge posed by Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution* arguably runs deeper still, since it’s not just about the nature of government, but the nature of nature—that is, reality—itself.

Theories of social evolution, what Turgot first christened “progress,” might have begun as a way of defusing the challenge of the indigenous critique, but they soon began to take a more virulent form, as hardcore liberals like Herbert Spencer began to represent social evolution not just as a matter of increasing complexity, differentiation, and integration, but as a kind of Hobbesian struggle for survival. The phrase “survival of the fittest” was actually coined in 1852 by Spencer, to describe human history—and ultimately, one assumes, to justify European genocide and colonialism. It was only taken up by Darwin some ten years later, when, in *The Origin of Species*, he used it as a way of describing the forms of natural selection he had identified in his famous expedition to the Galapagos Islands. At the time Kropotkin was writing, in the 1880s and ’90s, Darwin’s ideas had been taken up by market liberals, most notoriously his “bulldog” Thomas Huxley, and the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, to propound what’s often called a “gladiatorial view” of natural history. Species duke it out like boxers in a ring or bond traders on a market floor; the strong prevail.

Kropotkin’s response—that cooperation is just as decisive a factor in natural selection than competition—was not entirely original. He never pretended that it was. In fact he was not only drawing on the best biological, anthropological, archaeological, and historical knowledge available in his day, including his own explorations of Siberia, but also on an alternative Russian school of evolutionary theory which held that the English hypercompetitive school was based, as he put it, on “a tissue of absurdities”: men like “Kessler, Severtsov, Menzibir, Brandt—four great Russian zoologists, and a 5th lesser one, Poliaikov, and finally myself, a simple traveler.”

Still, we must give Kropotkin credit. He was much more than a simple traveler. Such men had been successfully ignored by English Darwinians, in the heyday of empire—and, indeed, by almost everyone else. Kropotkin’s shot across the bows was not. In part, this was no doubt because he presented his scientific findings in a larger political context, in a form that made it impossible to deny just how much the reigning version of Darwinian science was itself not just an unconscious reflection of taken-for-granted liberal categories. (As Marx so famously put it, “The anatomy of Man is the key to the anatomy of the ape.”) It was an attempt to catapult the views of the commercial classes into universality. Darwinism at that time was still a conscious, militant political intervention to reshape common sense; a centrist insurgency, one might say, or perhaps better, a would-be centrist insurgency, since it was aimed at creating a new center. It was not yet common sense; it was an attempt to create a new universal common sense. If it was not, ultimately, completely successful, it was in a certain measure because of the very power of Kropotkin’s counterargument.

It is not difficult to see what made these liberal intellectuals so uneasy. Consider the famous passage from *Mutual Aid*, which really deserves to be quoted in full:

It is not love, and not even sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horses to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves; not love which induces wolves to form a pack for hunting; not love which induces kittens or lambs to play, or a dozen of species of young birds to spend their days together in the autumn; and it is neither love nor personal sympathy which induces many thousand fallow-deer scattered over a territory as large as France to form into a score of separate herds, all marching towards a given spot, in order to cross there a river. It is a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy—an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution, and which has taught animals and men alike the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life. . . . It is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of an instinct—of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependence of every one’s happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own.

Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.

One need only consider the virulence of the reaction. At least two fields of study (admittedly, overlapping ones) sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, have since been created specifically to reconcile Kropotkin’s points about cooperation between animals with the assumption that we are all ultimately driven by, as Dawkins was ultimately to put it, our “selfish genes.” When the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane reportedly said that he would be willing to lay down his life to save “two brothers, four half-brothers or eight first cousins,” he was simply parroting the kind of “scientific” calculus that was introduced everywhere to answer Kropotkin, in the same way that progress was invented to check Kondiaronk, or the doctrine of the state of exception, to check Bakunin. The phrase “selfish gene” was not chosen fortuitously. Kropotkin had revealed behavior in the natural world that was exactly the opposite of selfishness: the entire game of Darwinists now is to find some reason, any reason, to continue to insist that even the most playful, loving, whimsical, heroically self-sacrificing, or sociable behavior is really selfish after all.
The efforts of the intellectual right to meet the enormity of the challenge presented by Kropotkin's theory are understandable. As we have already pointed out, this is precisely what they are supposed to be doing. This is why they are referred to as “reactionaries.” They don’t really believe in political creativity as a value in itself—in fact they find it profoundly dangerous. As a result, right-wing intellectuals are mainly there to react to ideas put forward by the Left. But what about the intellectual Left?

This is where things get a bit confusing. While the right-wing intellectuals sought to neutralize Kropotkin’s evolutionary holism by developing entire intellectual systems, the Marxist Left pretended that his intervention had never occurred. One might even hazard to say that the Marxist response to Kropotkin’s emphasis on cooperative federalism was to further develop the aspects of Marx’s own theory that pulled most sharply in the other direction: that is, its most productivist and progressivist aspects. Rich insights from Mutual Aid were at best ignored and, at worst, brushed off with a patronizing chuckle. There has been such a persistent tendency in Marxist scholarship, and by extension, left-leaning scholarship in general, of ridiculing Kropotkin’s “lifeboat socialism” and “naive utopianism” that a renowned biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, felt compelled to insist, in a famous essay, that “Kropotkin was no crackpot.”

There are two possible explanations for this strategic dismissal. One is pure sectarianism. As already noted, Kropotkin’s intellectual intervention was part of a larger political project. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth saw the foundations of the welfare state, whose key institutions were, indeed, largely created by mutual aid groups, entirely independently of the state, then gradually coopted by states and political parties. Most right and left intellectuals were perfectly aligned on this one: Bismarck fully admitted he created German social welfare institutions as a “hedge” to the working class so they would not become socialists; socialists insisted that anything from social insurance to public libraries be run not by the neighborhood and syndical groups that had actually created them but by top-down vanguardist parties. In this context both saw writing off Kropotkin’s ethical socialist proposals as tomfoolery as impossible to maintain, but a lived practical reality we all engage in daily, to different degrees, and that even factories could not operate without it—even if much of it operates on the sly, between the cracks, or shifts, or informally, or in what’s not said, or entirely subversively. It’s become fashionable lately to say that creative cooperation, largely on the internet. This is nonsense. It has always been so.

This is a worthy intellectual project. For some reason, almost no one is interested in carrying it out. Instead of examining how the relations of hierarchy and exploitation are reproduced, refused, and entangled with relations of mutual aid, or in what’s not said, or entirely subversively. It’s become fashionable lately to say that capitalism has entered a new phase in which it has become parasitical of forms of creative cooperation, largely on the internet. This is nonsense. It has always been so.

There’s another possible explanation though, one that has more to do with what might be called the “positional reality” of both traditional Marxism and contemporary social theory. What is the role of a radical intellectual? Most intellectuals still do claim to be radicals of some sort or another. In theory they all agree with Marx that it’s not enough to understand the world; the point is to change it. But what does this actually mean in practice?

In one important paragraph of Mutual Aid, Kropotkin offers a suggestion: the role of a radical scholar is to “restore the real proportion between conflict and union.”
Admittedly, this kind of internalization of the enemy reached its heyday in the 1980s and '90s, when the global Left was in full retreat. Things have moved on. Is Kropotkin relevant again? Well, obviously, Kropotkin was always relevant, but this book is being released in the belief that there is a new, radicalized generation, many of whom have never been exposed to these ideas directly, but who show all signs of being able to make a more clear-minded assessment of the global situation than their parents and grandparents, if only because they know that if they don't, the world in store for them will soon become an absolute hellscape.

It’s already beginning to happen. The political relevance of ideas first espoused in Mutual Aid is being rediscovered by the new generations of social movements across the planet. The ongoing social revolution in Democratic Federation of Northeast Syria (Rojava) has been profoundly influenced by Kropotkin’s writings about social ecology and cooperative federalism, in part via the works of Murray Bookchin, in part by going back to the source, in large part too by drawing on their own Kurdish traditions and revolutionary experience. Kurdish revolutionaries have taken on the task of constructing a new social science antagonistic to knowledge structures of capitalist modernity. Those involved in collective projects of sociology of freedom and jineoloji have indeed begun to “reconstruct stone by stone the institutions which used to unite” people and struggles. In the Global North, everywhere from various occupy movements to solidarity projects confronting the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual aid has emerged as a key phrase used by activists and mainstream journalists alike. At present, mutual aid is invoked in migrant solidarity mobilizations in Greece and in the organization of Zapatista society in Chiapas. Even scholars are rumored to occasionally use it.

When Mutual Aid was first released in 1902, there were few scientists courageous enough to challenge the idea that capitalism and nationalism were rooted in human nature, or that the authority of states was ultimately inviolable. Most who did were, indeed, written off as crackpots or, if they were too obviously important to be dismissed in this way, like Albert Einstein, as “eccentrics” whose political views had about as much significance as their unusual hairstyles. The rest of the world though is moving along. Will the scientists—even, possibly, the social scientists—eventually follow?

We write this introduction during a wave of global popular revolt against racism and state violence, as public authorities spew venom against “anarchists” in much the way they did in Kropotkin’s time. It seems a peculiarly fitting moment to raise a glass to the old “despiser of law and private property” who changed the face of science in ways that continue to affect us today. Pyotr Kropotkin’s scholarship was careful and colorful, insightful and revolutionary. It has also aged unusually well. Kropotkin’s rejection of both capitalism and bureaucratic socialism, his predictions of where the latter might lead, have been vindicated time and time again. Looking back at most of the arguments that raged in his day, there’s really no question about who was actually right. That was “always, in some sense, imminent in the present.” To create a new world, we can only start by rediscovering what is and has always been right before our eyes.

David Graeber taught anthropology at the London School of Economics. One of the original organizers of Occupy Wall Street, he authored several books including Debt: The First 5,000 Years; Bullshit Jobs: A Theory; and co-authored the forthcoming The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity.

Andrej Grubacic teaches cultural anthropology and is the author of Wobblies and Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History; Donot Mourn, Balkanize! Essays after Yugoslavia; and the editor of From Here to There: The Staughton Lynd Reader.

“If Kropotkin overemphasized mutual aid, most Darwinians in Western Europe had exaggerated competition just as strongly. If Kropotkin drew inappropriate hope for social reform from his concept of nature, other Darwinians had erred just as firmly (and for motives that most of us would now decry) in justifying imperial conquest, racism, and oppression of industrial workers as the harsh outcome of natural selection in the competitive mode.”

—Evolutionary Biologist Stephen Jay Gould, “Kropotkin was no crackpot” in Natural History, 1988
The Spirit of the Laws: Constitutional Republics, Capitalism, and the Future of Socialism

Stephen Eric Bronner

The liberal republic is today the fulcrum of progressive politics. Protecting liberal principles, the democratic character of the republic, and existing social rights from white nationalist reactionaries in the United States and anti-immigrant and racist parties in Europe has been the over-riding issue for Western radicals since the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. Elsewhere and especially in the Middle East, the liberal republic remains an unrealized goal and the primary aim of radical politics. Terms like republic, rights, and the rule of law are tossed about so regularly that they have virtually lost all meaning. Communist states used to call themselves peoples republics and that is still the case with China and North Korea; rights are often relativized to the point where they insulate dictatorships from criticism; and social rights is often used to justify economic equality without political liberty. The test for a republic is not simply what its constitution says but whether it is willing to enforce what Montesquieu termed “the spirit of the laws.” An elemental fairness in applying the law and a willingness to constrain the arbitrary exercise of institutional power, issues that have so radically come to the forefront with the movement surrounding “Black Lives Matter!” and protests against police killings of young African Americans, ultimately determines just how “liberal” the liberal rule of law really is and whether social rights are in play.

Not only economic interests but also political and ideological issues come into play. Rosa Luxemburg correctly spoke about the quest for reforms born of class compromise as a “labor of Sisyphus,” since reactionary capitalist interests are always on the lookout to roll back progressive legislation and, even more important, the accountability of elites to the citizenry. By the same token, however, the ability of citizens both to resist and pursue further reforms is dramatically influenced by the degree to which the state and its institutions adhere to liberal republican values. Economic “austerity” is always connected with political reaction and the reassertion of cultural traditionalism. That is why defense of civil liberties and the quest for social rights are flip sides of the same coin. It is an old story: the power of authoritarian and business elites depends upon the degree not merely of organizational, but ideological, unity among working people and their supporters. Raising awareness of the practical conditions for solidarity and beginning the intellectual work of coordinating interests is perhaps the crucial political question facing progressive activists today.

This marks a change. Enlightenment political thinkers identified liberty with political rights such as freedom of religion and assembly, speech, and arbitrary imprisonment. Only explicit legal prohibitions universally applied, they believed, should constrain individual freedom. Indeed, the logic of thinkers like John Locke or Adam Smith was transparent. The new liberal state should be kept weak so that “civil society” might be made strong. An “invisible hand” would regulate supply and demand and, ultimately, foster equality. Capitalism would enhance the public good as a “watchman state” set the rules in which private associations could compete and flourish. It was after all in civil society — the economy, the family, educational institutions, and the myriad associations of everyday life — that individuals became who and what they were.

But it soon became apparent that the “invisible hand” wasn’t working, that inequality was thriving, that elites were mostly unconcerned with republican principles; and that exercising political liberty required freedom from oppressive economic conditions. Commitment to the liberal republic subsequently became intertwined with the conflict between workers seeking to maximize their wages and improve their daily lives as against capitalists wishing to maximize their profits and control over their employees. But the late nineteenth century flourished principally in authoritarian states and monarchies like Austria-Hungary and Germany rather than in England and the United States. The labor movement was strongest where it could link calls for economic with political democracy for the class that was effectively denied both. Social democrats demanded what today might be called “welfare rights;” communists called for prioritizing “people over profits;” workers’ councils sought to fulfill the dream of participatory democracy with full economic equality; and, finally, postcolonial states attempted to follow their own economic course for communitarian social or religious purposes. Nevertheless, these concerns were only part of a broader project committed to both welfare rights and maximizing the exercise of liberty — and that goal remains as important as it ever was for the development of a rational radicalism.

Especially for those most in need of radical social and economic reforms, however, the liberal republican ideal is still a source of hope. Little wonder that the attack on the welfare state in the United States has brought with it an attack upon civil liberties, the right to vote and political democracy while in Greece and Spain attempts by the European Union to introduce economic austerity quickly translated into a conflict over democratic state sovereignty. Indeed, there is nothing new about the character of this double-barreled assault.

Revolution and Counter-Revolution are terms that derive from an epoch of democratic revolutions that extends from the England in 1688 to the United States in 1776 to France in 1789 to the nineteenth century uprisings in the Caribbean, Latin America and elsewhere. Far more important than the differences between these events was the common spirit, sense of purpose, and interchange between activists in what was clearly an international revolution opposed by similar forces comprising a counter-revolution. Everywhere those committed to the creation of a secular state under the liberal rule of law, and intent upon constraining the arbitrary power of religious and other private institutions, squared off against advocates of the Army with officers reared in the old regime and the Church frantically engaged in attempts to preserve its ideological and institutional hegemony as well as the social structures of a pre-modern community.

Such was the origin of the Counter-Revolution. Everything associated with the Enlightenment came under suspicion in the years 1815-1848. Stendhal appropriately called this era a “swamp.” It was dominated by the army and the church or, using the title of his most famous novel, “the red and the black,” which symbolized
“thrones and altars.” Integral nationalism and absolutist understandings of religious faith have always served as intoxicants for reactionaries. With the attack upon the republican ideal of the citizen came the attack on the rights of the Other along with ideals of cosmopolitanism and tolerance. Chauvinism, racism, and sexism now took center stage. Tensions between supporters of enlightenment as against counter-revolutionary ideals simmered in Europe for the next three decades following the fall of Napoleon in 1815. They reached a climax in revolutionary calls for republics in 1848 that, especially in France, would prove “democratic” and egalitarian. Perhaps it was because these international revolutions solidified the link between democracy and social equality, and because the reaction to them was so clear in its values, that Marx and Engels were able to elucidate their theory of counter-revolution when they did. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon (1851) would remain a staple for analyzing every form of counter-revolution that has emerged since Napoleon III and Bismarck propagated an even more intensified commitment to integral nationalism and the organic community following the defeat of the international revolutions of 1848. This helps explain why the most divergent socialists were so concerned with integrating the political heritage of the Enlightenment and the revolutionary bourgeoisie into their transformative egalitarian vision for the economy. Rosa Luxemburg admired the Great English Revolution no less than Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky looked back to the American Revolution, and Jean Jaures and Leon Blum as surely as Lenin and Trotsky sought to link the aims of the labor movement with what they considered the heritage of the French Revolution. Neglecting constitutional liberty in the name of economic equality or social rights has proven a recipe for disaster. Learning that lesson marks the progressive enterprise of our time.

* * *

Capitalism is ultimately predicated upon the transformation of objects into commodities that are bought and sold on the market. The commodity thus defines not merely production and consumption, but social action as well. The extent to which previously non-commercial activities like religion and art, or “free” goods like air and water, become subordinate to the commodity form determines the progress of capitalism or what, today, is called “globalization.” Capitalism needs to be understood not merely as the struggle between classes in an exploitative system but, rather, an overarching trajectory that is associated with science, bureaucracy, standardization, the division of labor, and the criteria of “efficiency” that speak to a world of scarcity or what philosophers liked to call “the realm of necessity.”

Tradition has always been its enemy: “all that is solid melts into air, all that is sacred becomes profane” wrote Marx and Engels in The Communist Manifesto. What counts are mathematical determinations of value amenable to the requirements of the capitalist accumulation process. Workers are increasingly rendered subject to “reification”—or being treated as “things”—as the division of labor takes hold and they succumb to the adage “time is money.” Workers become mere costs of production in the pursuit of profit. “Alienation” is intimately connected with this process. Old ideas of community are destroyed, nature becomes an object for domination, and trust between individuals is lost. Alienation strips the individual of any organic connection to the world and other people, according to the “young Marx,” and workers are turned into mere cogs of a machine that separates them from their comrades, the products of their labor, and their own potentiality as individuals. Capital ever more surely becomes the subject, and workers the object of the “commodity form”—and what Hegel (not Marx) first termed an “inverted world” results. Capitalism and its bourgeois agents are obsessed with creating more capital while all the bonds associated with traditional society unravel: the sense of community, the binding power of nationality, and the existential dominance of religion. What Emile Durkheim termed anomie becomes ever more intense: urban life and technologized production leaves the individual feeling ever more bereft and alone.

Little wonder then that traditional elites and those outside the cities in formerly colonized territories and the Middle East should prove so suspicious of capitalism and the onset of modernity. These nations mostly lack an indigenous enlightenment tradition and an organic bourgeoisie. The recourse toward religion as an antidote to anomie is only logical. Islamic liberals and socialists like Jewish reformists and Catholic radicals attach their response to the alienating aspects of modernity with a basic commitment to modernity itself. But there is another approach that is best understood as the confrontation with modernity tout court through reliance upon traditional values associated with traditional society such as bigotry, patriarchy, fear of education, and an absolutist belief in an enchanted world created by their God. These all serve as reactionary responses to individualism, instrument rationality, and a capitalist culture.

They are not epiphenomena, or mere reflexes of economic processes, but rather lived experiences that complicate oppression, divide the oppressed, and obscure the functioning of capitalism. Whether with the Tea Party or ultra-right populist parties in Europe, or al Qaeda and ISIS, they combine to form an ersatz identity in rebellion against universal rights, separation of church and state, and the spirit of the laws as determined by the commitment to liberal democracy. Thus, the alienation produced by modernity creates an essentially modern preoccupation with pre-modern forms of solidarity predicated upon seemingly unique (group) experiences of reality. Resistance to all of this is possible as shown by the activities of, say, the international women’s movement, human rights groups, international organizations, and international law. Nevertheless, modernity sparks regression and progress brings reaction in its wake: the public sphere becomes contested terrain as the political left and the political right, each after its fashion, attempt to transform what were historically private issues into issues of public concern.

* * *

Social rights can extend or diminish the democratic parameters of capitalist society. As for the state, whether in the Occident or the Orient, it is already implicated in the workings of the “free market.” At issue is only the type of state, a modernizing dictatorship or a liberal republic, as well as the priorities it will privilege with respect to the military budget as against financing welfare programs or fostering religion or secularism. Such choices should not be underestimated since they will have a pronounced influence on public life. The influence that citizens have on deter-
ming them marks the degree to which it is possible to speak meaningfully about national self-determination. Not only competition among capitalist elites but enfranchisement creates the need for capitalist elites to compromise and enter coalitions with groups having very different interests. The type of compromise achieved can either strengthen or weaken the dependency of workers and other classes on capital. Of course, there is a limit to such compromises: meeting capitalist interests is the precondition for accommodating other interests. That is why the system is called capitalism. Yet capitalist control over investment priorities and distribution of wealth (especially under turbulent circumstances) requires legitimation or, more specifically, the consent of the governed. The inability to deal with this question appropriately has severely hampered the socialist enterprise.

In 1980, I contributed an article entitled “The Socialist Project” for an issue of Social Research (Volume 47, No.1) that was devoted to the state and (pessimistic) future of socialism. It was edited by Henry Pachter and included essays by prominent socialists like Richard Lowenthal and Irving Fetscher. Any number of books and journal articles dealing with this topic had preceded its publication and others have appeared since. But “the end of socialism” still hangs over academic conferences dealing with current policies, left-wing conventions, and public talks by important progressive thinkers and activists. Such attention seems all the more puzzling since, upon existing struggles. To be sure: socialism is not what it once was. The old parties, such as national health insurance, redistribution of wealth, and regulation of capital. Yet capitalist control over investment priorities and distribution of wealth, disempowered under capitalism and that investment decisions should not remain in private hands. Or, to put it other way, capitalism remains a protest against an inhumane world, the egalitarian hope of the wretched of the earth, and — perhaps most importantly — a regulative ideal to judge the compromises and mistakes of its partisans.

Obstacles blocking the translation of socialist ideals into practice have been discussed often enough: how to secure investment, control markets, and assess the needs of consumers and the character of consumption. Such issues set the limit for socialist reform, and meaningfully dealing with them might even require revolution. Yet, their impact can be either mitigated or enhanced within the present system. Socialist ideas and socialist activists are generally recognized for their attempts to protect voting rights, and abolishing the individual. Cosmopolitan rather than xenophobic, secular and libertarian, socialist republicans are identified with reforms such as national health insurance, redistribution of wealth, and regulation of capital. They still recognize that workers are something more than a cost of production, disempowered under capitalism, and that investment decisions should not remain in private hands. Or, to put it another way, socialism remains a protest against an inhumane world, the egalitarian hope of the wretched of the earth, and — perhaps most importantly — a regulative ideal to judge the compromises and mistakes of its partisans.

Claiming that none of this is worth the effort, that these ideals are illusory and that they cripple the fight for competitive advantage, has always been the argument of those who, as Brecht liked to say, “sit at the golden tables.” Amid the great recession of 2007-8, indeed, Newsweek ran a headline saying “We are all socialists now!” The subsequent thunder from the right was deafening. Its supporters identified socialism with empowering the state against the market, supporting immigration, protecting voting rights, and abolishing the individual. Cosmopolitan rather than xenophobic, secular and libertarian, socialist republicans are identified with reforms such as national health insurance, redistribution of wealth, and regulation of capital. Some might claim that none of this is “real” socialism, that it is not “enough.” But that kind of talk renders the concept ahistorical, abstract, and politically irrelevant. The young Marx insisted that critical philosophy does not face the world with fixed categories and doctrinaire principles and that it should not look with disdain upon existing struggles. To be sure: socialism is not what it once was. The old parties,
ideologies, and slogans have mostly fallen by the wayside. And perhaps what we have now is only an appetizer. But socialism still animates not simply left-wing factions of established labor parties but also elements of mass movements that surfaced during the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street as well as others with roots in the ghettos of Brazil, Greece, Southern Europe, and elsewhere. Socialism is today a bundle of regulative ideals and it inherently remains an unfinished project. So long as capitalism and class society exist, however, so will its antagonist, socialism, and the dream of a more humane future.

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Laws of right are established and handed down by men. The inner voice must necessarily collide or agree with them. Man cannot be limited to what is presented to him, but maintains that he has the standard of right within himself. He may be subject to the necessity and force of external authority, but not in the same way as he is to the necessity of nature; for always his inner being says to him how a thing ought to be, and within himself he finds the confirmation or lack of confirmation of what is generally accepted. In nature the highest truth is that a law is. In right a thing is not valid because it is, since every one demands that it shall conform to his standard. Hence arises a possible conflict between what is and what ought to be, between absolute unchanging right and the arbitrary decision of what ought to be right.

—G.W.F. Hegel, The Philosophy of Right

A Runaway Inequality Problem

FARAMARZ FARBOD

One of the great unexamined questions of our times is why there is so much suffering, despair, misery and rage in the midst of unimaginable wealth. Naturally, pundits and politicians wish to avoid this question because an open public discussion of the widening wealth gap can impart critical insights into the nature and logic of capitalism they’ve worked so hard to hide from view. Cloaking the workings of the system is easier when it has not gone bust. During severe economic downturns, the pundits and the media narrative managers have a more difficult time keeping critical consciousness from entering public discussions.

A recent case in point is the Great Recession of 2008, to which the state responded by bailing out the bankers and shifting trillions of dollars from the taxpayers to the financial oligarchs, while the millions of households facing foreclosures and economic ruin received meager support. As a consequence, the Occupy Wall Street movement emerged in 2010. The movement defied the narrative managers and introduced a critical perspective about the problem of runaway inequality into public consciousness.

Of course, narrative management is only the first line of defense to protect the status quo, and once rendered ineffective, the state swiftly moved to repress the movement. Under the Obama administration, Law Enforcements nationwide coordinated efforts to remove and prevent protesters from occupying any public spaces. By then however the movement had popularized the slogan “We Are the 99%,” and helped paved the way for future challenges to the status quo. That came in the form of a mild social democratic electoral insurgency a la Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020. Again, the neoliberal establishment united to quell the challenge and succeeded in preventing Bernie from winning higher office, while instead the actions of the establishment led to the victory of Donald Trump in 2016.

The year 2020 also saw a long-expected economic downturn starting in February that was followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated business closures in March. This combination of the economic and public health crises has exposed the system’s inequities far more effectively than anything in the recent past. Millions within our borders and beyond have borne witness to harsh realities of life, which include inadequate or lack of access to health care, and differential or poor access to transportation, decent jobs, virtual educational opportunities, affordable housing, healthy food as well as flexibilized labor and persistent poverty, all of which are related to chronic disinvestment in vulnerable and marginalized communities. What’s more, people in the U.S. witnessed a scandalously dysfunctional political system unable to meet the fundamental needs of its citizens during dire circumstances.

More movements will likely emerge in response to this monumental failure of an economic system and its governing class. This year, we have already seen the massive anti-racist movement that emerged in response to racist state police violence. While
the left has a historic responsibility in this moment, if it fails to mobilize the masses, organize the unorganized to engage in collective and disruptive social struggles to demand the necessary course corrections, it runs the risk of allowing the elite to return to a pre-Trump course, thus facilitating the development of future retrograde alternatives of rightwing variety that’ll prove to be even more repressive than the Tea Party and Trumpism of the present moment.

Of course, the problem with the media narrative management persists, for the prevailing discourse has centered around the virus itself, the social practices that can prevent its spread, and Trump’s criminal mismanagement of the pandemic. The modern political discourse, managed by the mainstream media, fails to acknowledge the structural or systemic factors and is instead well-suited to talking about issues in terms of personalities in a vacuum, or at best in terms of limited partisan politics. But below the surface and behind the personalities lurk political and economic systems that operate free from close examination. Without examining these systemic inequities, tens of millions will remain in precarious conditions and be wholly unprepared to face the inevitable coming crises beyond the present pandemic.

What we don’t hear is that wealth inequality is rooted in the very DNA of a modern capitalist system, that wealth inequality translates into political inequality, that insecurity is a fundamental feature of U.S. capitalism, that unless wealth creation and distribution is democratized and workers and communities empowered none of our social ills will go away and unnecessary mass suffering and resentment will only grow. A topic rarely investigated, for even Bernie Sanders’ discussion lacked clear and solid class analysis, is how and why late capitalism (since the mid-1970s) has produced such radical inequalities. Although runaway inequality is now the dominant trend in late capitalism, it largely remains a taboo subject in mainstream circles. The few bold enough to try to address these issues are labeled class reductionists while anyone fighting for economic justice gets accused of engaging in politics of class warfare. Left unacknowledged is that the runaway inequality problem is the outcome of a ceaseless class warfare waged by capital, the financial oligarchy, and the state they’ve captured. Stating this truism is simply beyond the range of permissible thought in the mainstream.

An Obscenely Unequal World

By the end of 2019, total global wealth stood at $399.2 trillion in USD, but just a mere 0.1% of the global population, totaling 175,000 ultra-wealthy people, owned 25% of global wealth. Together with another 52 million millionaires, making up the top 1%, they owned 43.3% of all personal wealth. Meanwhile billions of people who make up the bottom half of humanity have no personal wealth at all with a pitiful share of just 1% of the global wealth, with the bottom 90% holding only 19%. Furthermore, the share of North America and Europe of this wealth in 2019 was 55%, despite those regions comprising just 17% of the global population.1 That leaves 83% of the people who live outside of the ‘rich north’ and in the ‘poor south’ with only 45% of this wealth.

Of course, inequalities persist within states too and not just at a global level and among nations and regions. To highlight this fact, some analysts prefer the terms ‘global north’ and ‘global south’ to ‘rich north’ and ‘poor south.’

Runaway Inequality in Pre-Pandemic U.S.

Between the years 1975 and 2018 an astounding, but still conservatively estimated, $47 trillion shifted upwards from the working people in the bottom 90 percentile to the top 1%. Had levels of inequality remained as they were in the preceding three decades (1945–1975), working people would have had an additional $2.5 trillion added to their share of respective income, just in 2018! Considered on a more acute level, the combined income of a household of two full-time workers in 2018 is barely more than what a single worker would have earned had inequalities remained at the 1975 level.2 By 2020, this financial strip-mining of the bottom 90% had exceeded $50 trillion, or the equivalent of paying every working person in the bottom 90% an additional $13,728 annually. This is a country in which the median male worker had to work 33 weeks in 1965 to pay for healthcare, housing, transportation and family educational expenses and 53 weeks by 2018.3 Imagine how much more financially secure and less vulnerable the working people in this country would have been in facing the pandemic in the absence of this organized theft.

The U.S. is perhaps the richest society ever in history, yet you wouldn’t know this living in the middle or lower classes. Millions of ordinary people are saddled with immense unjust debts, earn wages that are stuck at the level of the 1970s real purchasing power, have to deal with poor social services, and struggle to make ends meet. Unknown to a modern advanced society, the U.S. has been suffering from “deaths of despair” caused by opioids, alcoholism, depression, and suicides taking the lives of tens of thousands of white middle-aged working people and causing consecutive declines in their life expectancy. Personal debt exceeds $14 trillion. Some 87 million people lacked adequate healthcare coverage before the pandemic hit. 62% of personal bankruptcies have been linked to illness. 40% of the people could not afford $400 in emergency cash, again before the pandemic and the economic depression of 2020. Half of all workers lived paycheck to paycheck. Student debt went from zero in 1960 to $1.7 trillion by 2020. On average, U.S. citizens die holding $62,000 worth of debt.4

The runaway inequality problem has generated pre-existing social and economic vulnerabilities/conditions that have exacerbated the impact of the pandemic independent of the Trump regime’s incompetence, negligence and mismanagement. We are in effect dealing with and ought to approach the present crises as involving
multimorbidities beyond the virus itself. This truism too is simply beyond the range of permissible thought in the mainstream.

**Post-Pandemic U.S.**

The year 2020 proved to be quite revelatory, exposing the enormous costs associated with these social fractures, inequalities and forms of structural violence as the Covid-19 pandemic and capitalist logic combined to further exacerbate inequalities and cause suffering.

Let’s consider the period between March and November of 2020 in the U.S. During these several months the 650 U.S. billionaires grew their wealth by $1 trillion and now own nearly $4 trillion in total, or 3.5% of the estimated $112 trillion of all privately held household wealth in the U.S. The top 1% owned $34.23 trillion (30.5%) of this wealth, the top 10% owned $77.32 trillion (69.04%), while the bottom half of the population owned just $2.08 trillion (1.86%). Therefore, just 650 people, the billionaires, owned twice as much as the bottom 165 million people combined. The obscene level of concentration of wealth held by just a few individuals during this same period is also telling. Jeff Bezos added $70 billion to his wealth (a 61.4% increase), making his wealth stand at $182 billion by November. Elon Musk’s wealth surged by a whopping 413% to a total of $126.2 billion. Mark Zuckerberg saw 85.9% increase in his wealth reaching a total of $101.7 billion. Bill Gates increased his net worth by 21.8% to a total sum of $98 billion. Warren Buffett’s worth reached $88.3 billion, a 30.8% increase during the same period.

Similar patterns held regarding the ownership of corporate equities and mutual fund shares. The media pundits who cover business news often talk about the ups and downs of the stock market as if it reflects the general economic conditions of ordinary workers, however here is a datum or two that should suffice to disabuse the reader of this mistaken impression: (1) the bottom 50% in the U.S. own just $0.16 trillion in stocks while the top 1% own $14.04 trillion, and (2) the top 10% own more than 88% of all corporate equities and mutual fund shares. Such assets comprised about 41% of their overall wealth in the 2nd quarter of 2020. Consequently, the rise in the stock market during the pandemic—fueled by the Fed injecting trillions of dollars into the financial markets and slashing interest rates—massively benefited the top 10% and helped further widen the obscene wealth gap.

Tax policies have also contributed to the radical inequalities in the U.S. To give just two examples: Sheldon Adelson, whose net worth is at least $34 billion, received $560 million in tax breaks from the Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, and Charles Koch, with a net worth of $113 billion, received a $1.4 billion tax break.

The data introduced above paints a statistical portrait of a functioning oligarchy or plutocracy, not a democracy nor a republic.

**The Other America**

In 2020, 8 million people slipped into poverty between May and November when the initial aid to mitigate the pandemic suffering and the business closures ran its course without renewal by the governing class. A survey of U.S. households released by the US Census Bureau on Dec. 2, 2020 showed that 31% of households had difficulty paying for the usual household expenses; 35.3% worried that an “eviction or foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely”; 12.7% say “there was either sometimes or often not enough to eat in the last 7 days”; and 31% of adults expected “someone in their household to have a loss in employment income in the next 4 weeks.” All this in a year in which from mid-March to mid-October more than 84 million claims were filed for unemployment compensation—that’s more than half the civilian labor force—indicating devastating conditions for the working people.

These sobering statistics exist without even considering the deaths and direct suffering caused by Covid-19 itself. As of January 25, 2021, there were 25.4 million cases of coronavirus reported in the U.S. with the number of deaths standing at 423,192. These numbers are so astronomical that people likely struggle to conceptualize suffering on this scale. To help visualize this insurmountable loss consider the following. There were on average 1.7 deaths per minute from Covid-19 in the month of Dec. 2020 alone. The nation’s life expectancy at birth could drop by a year (from 78.8 to 77.7) for the first time since WWII. Each person dead from Covid-19 was on average deprived of about 13 years of life amounting to more than 5.5 million years of life lost in total given the number of deaths as of this writing. Already more than 3.1 million people have lost a close relative. And these deaths are not evenly distributed; for 1 in 800 blacks have died compared to 1 in 1325 whites. 13

This Other America reveals the U.S. as a failed state, one that is negligent of the health needs of millions of people during a deadly pandemic, unable or unwilling to address the basic needs of tens of millions of its working people, and valuing their labor for its role in creating wealth, but not their lives.

But it’s one thing to describe what has been happening and entirely another to consider whether there exists a cure for this radical inequality. What is certain is that this runaway inequality is an intrinsic aspect of the late state capitalist period, one whose beginnings date back to the late 1970s. If we could pull ourselves above the noise and confusion of the moment we may be able to see that the immediate post-war decades may have been a special historical period that could only be replicated with sustained organizing from below. However, we must bear in mind that a return to the pre-neoliberal post war decades of regimented capitalism poses two problems. (1) Leaving capital with all its powers and resources intact only guarantees that it will find ways to rollback whatever gains we are able to make, as it in fact has done since the late 1970s. (2) Capitalism’s very existence depends on an endless process of accumulation of capital. This imperative of ceaseless expansion places the system on a collision course with a finite planet and is at the root of the ecological crises today. The critical left ought to be working simultaneously to push the state to adopt policies to alleviate unnecessary suffering and to go beyond capitalism. A regimented capitalism can offer the left the space and a limited time period to focus intensely on democratizing wealth creation, redistributing power, and reconstructing society from below.

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“Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all of God’s children.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Endnotes for ‘A Runaway Inequality Problem’


4  Ibid.


Editor’s Note: This essay is an excerpt from Not “A Nation of Immigrants”: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and A History of Erasure and Exclusion, which will be published in August 2021.

The Americanization of Eastern and Southern European Immigrants

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

M ahdoom Mamdani locates the founding moment of the modern nation-state at 1492. “That year marked the beginning of the nation-state… born of two developments in Iberia. One was ethnic cleansing, whereby the Castilian monarchy sought to create a homogeneous national homeland for Christian Spaniards by ejecting and converting those among them who were strangers to the nation—Moors and Jews. The other development was the taking of overseas colonies in the Americas by the same Castilian monarchy that spearheaded ethnic cleansing. In this story, modern colonialism was not something that states started doing in the eighteenth century. Modern colonialism and the modern state were born together with the creation of the nation-state. Nationalism did not precede colonialism. Nor was colonialism the highest or the final stage in the making of a nation. The two were co-constituted.”

“Discovery” and the Cult of Columbus

A few months after Catholic entry into ethnically cleansed Granada, the monarchs contracted with a Genoese mercenary who promised he could reach India by sailing west, landing, not in already European “discovered” India, rather on an island of what are now called the Bahamas where the longtime indigenous residents informed him that to the north and south and east and west stretched a huge landmass, two massive continents teeming cities and vast tens of millions of acres of farmlands that produced the major portion of humanity’s food production, all of which the rapacious crusading mercenaries representing Christendom were unaware. Two decades later a Spanish army would possess the heart of that land mass, destroying the most populated city in the world at the time, Tenochtitlan, in the valley of Mexico. October 12, 1492 is etched in brains of every living human as the day of “discovery,” but which the Indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere and of Africa and descendants of enslaved Africans regard as the symbol of infamy, domination, slavery, and genocide. Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes, “To call ‘discovery’ the first invasions of inhabited lands by Europeans as an exercise in Eurocentric power that already frames future narratives of the event so described… Once discovered by Europeans, the Other finally enters the human world.”

The first formal celebration of Columbus in the United States came five years after the Constitution was ratified -- the tricentennial of discovery on October 12, 1792. It was organized by the Tammany Society, also called the Columbian Order, that was founded in 1789, by a group of wealthy men in New York City. An obelisk dedicated to Columbus was erected in Baltimore in 1792, the first known monument to Columbus in North America. Although Bolivarian independence revolutionaries named Gran
Colombia after Columbus, the independent states founded from the former Spanish colonies did not take up celebrating Columbus until the 1920s, even then and now not as a formal holiday. In 1937, at the behest of the Knights of Columbus, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed Columbus Day an official federal holiday.

So, why did the United States, which at its founding had no direct geographical, calendar, or colonizing link to Columbus, embark the event and date as its very founding? Historian Claudia Bushman thinks the cult of Columbus rose in part because it eschewed the English source of U.S. existence and located its origins to first founder. “Columbia,” meaning the land of Columbus, rather than “Columbus” was used for honoring Columbus at first. Columbia University was founded in 1754 as King’s College and was renamed Columbia College when it reopened in 1784 after independence. And, the federal capital was named the District of Columbia. The 1798 hymn “Hail, Columbia” was the early national anthem and is now used whenever the vice president of the United States makes a public appearance. By 1777, a year after the settlers of the thirteen British North American colonies declared independence, the poet Philip Freneau named what would become the United States of America, “Columbia, America as sometimes so called from Columbus, the first discoverer.” There were others who advocated that the thirteen states should adopt the name “Columbia.” South Carolina named its capital Columbia. Brian Hardwerk observes, “Columbus also provided a convenient way to forget about America’s original inhabitants.” Bushman notes that “In early American textbooks from the 1700s Columbus’s vision, “the grand idea of Columbus” who in “going west to Asia” provided the United States with its true course of empire, a predestinated “American road to India.” Benton also explained the racial impact of the arrival of the “White race” on the west coast, “opposite the eastern coast of Asia” would be a benefit: “all the rights and privileges due such a discovery by one of our faith.” Father McGivney proposed Columbus as patron to the organization while James T. Mullen, who became the first “Supreme Knight” suggested the full name, “Knights of Columbus,” to better evoke the ritualist character of the order. Dr. Matthew C. O’Connor, the first “Supreme Physician” asserted that Columbus was to signify that as Catholic descendants of Columbus, they “were entitled to all rights and privileges due to such a discovery by one of our father.” Although the Knights attracted Italian immigrants later in the century, the founding was largely an Irish-American project. Notre Dame historian Thomas Schlereth notes that the Irish-American founders “apparently never entertained the idea of naming themselves after St. Brendan.” He explains that for the Catholics of New Haven, it had to be Columbus, mainly because Columbus was already embraced a symbol of the authentic U.S. American and helped remove them from the stigma of nativism was a symbol providing, as they put it, “social legitimacy and patriotic loyalty.” As Catholic descendants of Columbus, they were entitled to “all the rights and privileges due such a discovery by one of our faith.”

By the time of the four-hundred-year anniversary of their namesake, the Knights of Columbus were located in every state and soon would spread all over Canada, Mexico, and the Philippines and become the largest body of Catholic laymen in the world with over two million members at the turn of the twenty-first century. Catholic historian Christopher J. Kaufman writes, “By adopting Columbus as their patron, this small group of New Haven Irish-American Catholics displayed their pride in America’s Catholic heritage, evoking the aura of Catholicity and affirming the ‘discovery’ of America as a Catholic event.” But it was also a patriotic event, Kaufman notes, “The society’s ceremonies led the initiates on a journey into council chambers where, with symbol, metaphor, and Catholic fellowship, they were taught the lessons of Columbianism: a strong attachment to the faith, a pride in American Catholic
heritage... and a duty to understand and defend the faith against its enemies, in short to display loyalty to Catholicism and to the flag.” In 1882, Thomas Cummings said to fellow members of the newly formed Knights of Columbus, “Under the inspiration of Him whose name we bear, and with the story of Columbus life as exemplified in our beautiful ritual, we have the broadest kind of basis for patriotism and true love of country.”

The organization spread rapidly in the northeast with the backing of well to do Irish-Americans and emphasized the shaping of “citizen culture.” Trouillot notes that “Columbus played a leading role in making citizens out of these immigrants. He provided them with a public example of Catholic devotion and civic virtue, and thus a powerful rejoinder to the cliché that allegiance to Rome preempted the Catholics' attachment to the United States.” This was the beginning of the Americanization project at work, capped by the quindicentennial celebrations of Columbus in 1892-1893.

Columbus in the White City

By 1892, twenty-eight monuments to Columbus had been erected in cities around the country, more than in any other country. Some were statues on pedestals, others are fountains and arches, and some freestanding columns. Many have Columbus holding or viewing a globe or sometimes an American eagle. Columbus Day festivities began being held in various cities in the 1860s, so by the time of the quindicentennial, the Columbus cult was firmly in place. Throughout 1892, there were local celebrations all over the country, leading up to October 12, then to the 1493 quindicentennial national celebration of Columbus extravaganza. It was a love fest for western European and U.S. American triumphal colonialism and imperialism, which was at its genocidal apex with the United States government’s total colonization of its now full continental shape. Plans began for the World’s Fair Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1892 around the time of the U.S. Seventh Cavalry’s massacre of hundreds of Lakota refugees at Wounded Knee, marking the occasion not only a celebration of Columbus, but of colonial victory.

The official guide to the event, which was funded by the U.S. Congress, downplayed the preceding 280 years of Euroamerican history in colonial North America, stating that it was only “preparatory period” to the rise of the United States, informing that “Most fitting it is, therefore, that the people of the greatest nation on the continent discovered by Christopher Columbus, should lead in the celebration of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of that event.” The site of the fair in South Chicago was nicknamed the “White City” for the massive and glistening white fake-marble buildings constructed specifically for the fair, not meant to be permanent, rather templates for how a future city should appear, grandiose and imposing, as well as symbolizing the triumph of capitalism.

A circus of sorts, central to the White City was the Ferris Wheel, which was invented for the occasion. Not far away, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner gave his “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” address to the American Historical Association, which held its annual meeting at the Exposition, while Buffalo Bill’s Wild West performed nearby. Without mentioning the Wounded Knee massacre of two years earlier, Turner chose the year 1890 as the demarcation of the end of the frontier, warning that the seemingly endless moving frontier of white settlement that had formed the U.S. American character and culture had closed, and the future was not clear. Buffalo Bill had the answer: fantasy, reenactment, premiering the soon to be born western movies.

Christian Socialist and ordained Baptist minister Francis Bellamy wrote a pledge of allegiance to the U.S. flag in 1892, which was a presidential election year in addition to being the quindicentennial of Columbus. Both presidential candidates, Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, urged the use of the new pledge as a way of honoring Columbus. The pledge originated for the purpose of advancing patriotism by flying the flag in every school in the country along with reciting the pledge. Bellamy led the way in organizing teachers to use a packaged Columbus Day educational kit. In an amazing feat, on October 21, 1892, they got twelve million schoolchildren around the country to join a hundred thousand Chicago schoolchildren to simultaneously salute the flag and recite the pledge of allegiance. In 1954, thanks to intense lobbying by the Knights of Columbus, the words “one nation under God” was added to Bellamy’s pledge of allegiance.

The United States racialized caste system was on display in the form of live displays of levels of humanity. Nearest to the White City were the Teutonic and Celtic races, represented by two German and two Irish displays, illustrating the Irish climb to whiteness. Next came the Muslim and Asian worlds, then an African in the Dahomean Village, and then at the remotest location from the White City, the North American Indian. Frederick Douglass was present at the Fair as a representative of the government of Haiti and was incensed by the Dahomean Village. He castigated the organizers complaining that his race was being misrepresented by the “barbaric rites” of “African savages brought here to act the monkey.” A measure of the success of the Chicago extravaganza was the naturalization of Columbus as first founder, which rationalized and justified the U.S. occupation of continent. In 1892, historians were already projecting a century ahead to celebrate the Columbus quindicentennial, suggesting that Columbus, Ohio, be the center for the occasion, which actually happened with the AmeriFlora exposition in Columbus, Ohio, in 1992. As Trouillot observes, in order to make Columbus the discoverer of the United States, it was necessary to whiten him. Anglo-American was the definition of whiteness, and clearly Columbus was not Anglo, was not American, and did not speak English. While Columbus was becoming whiter, racism against Italian-Americans was at its height in the United States.

Indigenizing Italians

Like the mass of Irish famine refugees who preceded them four decades earlier, the majority of the four million Italian immigrants were fleeing grinding rural poverty in Southern Italy and Sicily. They were peasants stuck in medieval socio-economic relations as well while others were proletarian sharecroppers and migrant farm workers, all without skills beyond agriculture. In the United States, they were met with endless insults in newspapers and magazines, describing them as “swarthy,” “kinky haired” criminally inclined, regarded as racially impure in an era of the pseudo race theory of eugenics. They were often refused access to schools for their children,
turned away from public places and labor unions, and even in church, forced into church pews set aside for Black worshippers. They were called on the streets with epithets like “dago,” “guinea” — a term of derision applied to enslaved Africans and their descendants — and more racist insults like “white nigger” and “nigger wop.” In 1912, the U.S. House Committee on Immigration debated whether Italians could be considered “full-blooded Caucasians” and immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe were considered “biologically and culturally less intelligent.” Employers often preferred Slovaks and Poles to Italians. Railroad bosses wouldn’t hire them because of their small stature. In the mining industry, English-speaking workers held the skilled and supervisory positions while Italians were hired as laborers. Even those who were educated and skilled were unable to secure any jobs besides unskilled labor. Only in the 1920s did Italians become more integrated into the work force. More immigrants started to work semi-skilled jobs in factories as well as skilled positions, but a third remained in unskilled positions. Even Italian-American union members faced prejudice with meetings held in English, and Italians were not elected to official positions.

Three years after the Chicago fair, a group of Italians in New York formed the Sons of Columbus Legion to celebrate future Columbus anniversaries, mingling with the Irish and the Knights of Columbus who had succeeded in getting the 76-foot Columbus Monument installed in the center of Columbus Circle in New York in 1892. By then the Irish had spread throughout the country “with the full benefits of white status… Columbus himself... became more Irish than ever — until Italian-Americans made new gains in the continuing contest for racial and historical legitimacy…” The Knights lobbied state legislatures to establish October 12 as a legal holiday, and by 1912, they had won over fourteen states, and two decades later convinced the Roosevelt administration to make it a federal holiday.

The oppressed masses of Italian immigrants would also find the attachment to Columbus an avenue to acceptence. Representing Columbus as “first founder” of the United States served to connect being Catholic and being Italian with the eventual birth of the United States, therefore, Italian immigrants could present themselves as Italian descendants of the original Italian founder, not so much as immigrants, but returnees, as part of the origin story of the United States. Historian Danielle Battisti shows how the rewriting of history by casting Columbus as “the first immigrant,” even though he never set foot on the continental land mass that became the United States, and was never an immigrant himself, and even though the English colonies that became the United States did not exist in 1492. Later, in 1965, when Italian-Americans campaigned to overturn immigration exclusion restrictions, they employed the origin story based on Columbus to great effect.

Matthew Frye Jacobson observes that “…race is absolutely central to the history of European immigration and settlement.” That centrality was based in the founding naturalization law that “white persons” were allowed to immigrate and become citizens. “‘The Europeanness — that is to say, whiteness — was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to. It was their whiteness, not any kind of New World magnanimity, that opened the Golden Door” Even so, as we have seen, they had to earn “whiteness.” In 1971, James Baldwin captured the tragedy of the immigrants who chased whiteness: “I had my fill of seeing people come down the gangplank on Wednesday, let us say, speaking not a word of English, and by Friday discovering that I was working for them and they were calling me nigger like everybody else. So that the Italian adventure or even the Jewish adventure, however grim, is distinguished from my own adventure.” Baldwin critiqued how the immigrants’ pursuing the lie of white supremacy “helped to steal the vitality from immigrant communities… And in the debasement and defamation of Black people, they debased and defamed themselves.” He wrote, “white people are not white; part of the price of the ticket is to delude themselves into believing that they are.” Baldwin characterized the United States as a destination where Europeans of all sorts could be melded in contrast to “Negroes” and “Indians.” He writes, “No one was white before he/she came to America,” rather they were Irish, German, Italian, Jewish, English, French, Swiss, Norwegian. In the white Republic, one is either white, or not. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has been active in the international Indigenous movement for more than four decades and is known for her lifelong commitment to national and international social justice issues. She is the winner of the 2017 Lannan Cultural Freedom Prize, and is the author or editor of many books, including An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States, a recipient of the 2015 American Book Award. She lives in San Francisco. Connect with her at redditsite.com or on Twitter @rdunbaro.

I wish someone would look up the names on the roster of Washington’s army at Valley Forge and trace the bloody footprints of their descendants across the North American continent until they were washed up and washed out on the shore of the Pacific. What an all-American Odyssey it would make! What a great history of the Rise and Fall of American Civilization.

Oscar Ameringer (1870-1943), immigrant from Bavaria and Socialist Party organizer in Oklahoma
Adios Diego Maradona: The Football God
Who Played on the Side of the Poor

FEDERICO FUENTES

Debate over who was the greatest ever footballer will rage on, but Diego Armando Maradona, who passed away on November 25 aged 60, will almost certainly go down as the most adored.

Maradona will always be remembered, by hundreds of millions of people around the world, as the football god who played on the side of the poor.

As a child growing up in Fiorito, a villa (shantytown) near Buenos Aires, Maradona only ever knew poverty and violence. Maradona always recalled how his mother — the most important formative figure in his life — regularly lied to her eight children to make sure they had enough to eat.

“Every time the food would come out, she would say ‘my stomach hurts,’” Maradona wrote in his autobiography. “What a lie! It was because there was not enough to go around. That is why I love my old lady so much.”

Football became a means to escape this reality. But to Maradona it was much more than this.

Given a football on his third birthday, Maradona played with it all day and slept with it under his shirt at night, for fear of it being stolen. Everywhere he went, Maradona would walk along bouncing anything he could find up and down on his foot: an orange; a crumpled-up ball of paper; a rolled-up rag.

Asked as a small boy what his life dreams were, he said he had only two: to play in a World Cup and to win it.

Maradona’s gift was obvious from a very young age: his name appeared in national newspapers when he was just 10 years old playing for Argentinos Juniors. At 15, he made his first division debut for the club, and with his first contract he bought a small two-story house for his family.

From there, he went on to scale the greatest heights of the sport, winning trophies in Argentina for Boca Juniors, in Spain with Barcelona and, most famously, in Italy with Napoli.

In 1986, at the age of 25, he accomplished his boyhood dream of raising the World Cup on the back of the most dominant individual performance ever by a single player at the tournament.

Football as resistance

For Maradona, football was more than just a sport: it was a way to express how he felt about the world and the injustices he saw.

Explaining what it meant to play for Napoli, Maradona wrote:

“My debut [for Napoli] was an away game against Verona, in the north of Italy, on 16 September, 1984…

“Their greeted us with a flag that made me understand, suddenly, that Napoli’s struggle wasn’t just a football matter: ‘Welcome to Italy’, it said. It was north against south, racism against poverty…

“To have won Napoli’s first Scudetto in 60 years was, for me, an incomparable victory. Different from any other, even the 1986 World Cup… The Scudetto belonged to the whole city, and the people began to realize that there was no reason to be afraid: that it’s not the one with the most money who wins but the one who fights the most, who wants it the most.”

This bond between Maradona and Naples — where he continues to be adored as an adopted son and god — led him to call on locals to support him when Argentina faced Italy in the city during the 1990 World Cup.

“You shouldn’t forget that in Italy they do not consider you to be Italian,” he declared just days from the game. “The country comes and asks for your support for just one day of the year, and for the other 364 they’ll call you Africans.”

Maradona’s allegiance to the class he came from influenced many of his life choices. Despite being offered much more money by River Plate — a club associated with more affluent sectors and whose nickname is the Millionaires — Maradona told his agent he would only play for their arch rival, the working-class team of Boca Juniors.

He credits this rebellious spirit for arguably his two most famous goals, which came against England at the 1986 World Cup. The politically-charged game took place just a few years after the Malvinas War between the two nations.

It is no surprise that this game — more than the World Cup final (where he gave the assist for the winning goal) or the semi-final against Belgium (where he also scored twice and arguably played even better) — has become so identified with Maradona and what he represented.

It best summed up why Maradona is etched in the hearts of so many. Defeat over England meant defeat over the old colonial empire — for Maradona, for Argentines and for many millions across the Global South.

Asked recently what his dream gift for his 60th birthday would be, he responded: “I dream of being able to score another goal against the English, with the right hand this time!”

As is the case with countless athletes and other high-profile personalities, the football and media establishments were happy to turn a blind eye to Maradona’s personal problems (drug use, treatment of women) when using him to sell sport. As long as they accepted the rules set by the establishment, their private lives were covered up.

In Maradona’s case, however, it became necessary to highlight these elements of his life in order to hide the person he really was — to hide what it was that drove him to be the best.

Refusing to renounce the class that he came from, Maradona had become too much of a threat, particularly in Italy, where he had begun to speak out in support of some workers’ struggles. Hounded by the media, he was banned from playing football for 15 months for drug use not long after the 1990 World Cup.

From there, his football career never recovered. Maradona went on to have brief stints at Sevilla (Spain), before returning to Argentina to play for Newell Old Boys and prepare for the 1994 World Cup.
Banned again for testing positive for ephedrine at that World Cup, Maradona attempted a third football comeback in 1995, playing out his last games at Boca, before turning his hand to coaching teams in Argentina, the United Arab Emirates and Mexico, as well the Argentine national team.

**Friend of the people**

While the media focused on Maradona’s personal problems during the latter half of his life, he continued to express his same rebellious spirit, now increasingly off the pitch.

In 1995, he helped set up a union for professional soccer players, explaining: “The football player is the most important thing in the game and we will defend their demands to the death”. His years of public denunciations of corruption in FIFA were vindicated in 2015 by the scandal that engulfed football’s governing body.

Maradona became a great friend of Cuba and its former president Fidel Castro. His appreciation for the Caribbean island began in 1987, when he first travelled there to receive Prensa Latina’s sportsperson of the year award. He recounted how astonished he was to see there were no children begging or running around barefoot in the streets.

He returned to Cuba for several months in 2000 to receive treatment for his drug addiction, crediting Castro for saving his life.

Maradona also established close relationships with, or expressed support for, other left and progressive presidents in the region, such as Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro (Venezuela), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (Brazil) and Nestor and Cristina Kirchner (Argentina).

In 2005, he participated in the People’s Summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina, together with progressive and left organizations from the region. It was held as a counter to the Summit of the Americas, where heads of states had convened to discuss a United States-pushed free trade agreement for the region.

Wearing a T-shirt with US president George W Bush’s face and the words “war criminal”, Maradona spoke at a rally alongside Chavez and social leaders, declaring: “We Argentines have dignity. Let’s kick out Bush”.

Maradona was one of the staunchest defenders of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution, publicly stating he had turned down advertisement contracts that required him to remain silent on Venezuela and helped circumvent US-imposed sanctions to get food and medicine to the country.

Maradona was also vocal in his support for other anti-imperialist causes, such as Palestine, declaring “My heart is Palestinian” and that “the Palestinian people need everyone’s help and I am at their disposal. I am their number one fan.”

Following his death, Lula said of Maradona: “I have rarely seen a football player stop playing and yet not stop. Maradona continued to play. He continued to play in thoughts, in his political opinions, in his criticisms. He continued to play for poor people all over the world.”

Despite his stature in Argentina, Maradona never entered politics. After Castro suggested to him during an interview that he should get involved in politics after retiring from football, Maradona just smiled. He later explained: “I don’t like politics”.

**Champion of the poor**

Maradona played football in such a way that he would constantly amaze opponents, teammates and spectators with his genius and rebellious style of play that made the impossible seem normal when he had a ball at his feet.

Yet, Maradona never forgot where he came from: “The time when I felt most free was when I lived in the villa.”

When Argentina beat England or Napoli defeated the big Italian teams of the north, it felt like more than just winning a game: it felt like our side, the side of the poor, was striking a blow against the seemingly invincible rich.

In a world of hyper-commercialized sport, where athletes are constantly converted into sanitized commodities to be marketed internationally, there will likely never be a sports superstar like Maradona again.

We will probably never see an athlete's face tattooed on as many people as his is, with a church devoted to him, with so many songs, books and films written about him, and with a capacity to generate a general strike simply because people want to see him play, as happened in Bangladesh when Maradona was sent home from the 1994 World Cup.

Maradona will forever have his detractors who will say he was just a drug addict or a cheat. They will say he should have lived his life differently. But none of them will ever know what it felt like to walk in the boots of Maradona — having come from nothing to not only achieve his wildest dreams but become a legend, adored across the planet and to not just feel like a god, but be treated and constantly told they are one, with the impunity that comes with such a label.

Reflecting on his life in 2005, Maradona pleaded: “Let me live my life, I don’t want to be an example. But I also won’t find peace in death. They used me in life, and they will find the moment to do so when I’m dead.”
Despite this, he added: “If I die, I want to be born again and I want to be a football player. I want to be Diego Armando Maradona again. I am a player that has given much joy to the people and for me that is more than enough.”

Discussing this more recently, Maradona said: “In my career, I have taken some hard knocks, in all senses of the term. On the pitch, I received numerous kicks, and in life, I was attacked in every which way. I was not given any presents… But, after all that, when you think about all the wars and all the children who die very young in this world, I say to myself that I am lucky… I am extremely satisfied with what I achieved.”

“I feel like I made people happy, made people amused, who were coming to watch me in the stadiums and who were watching me on TV. I am happy to have brought joy to people with a ball. That is my biggest source of pride.”

Federico Fuentes is a regular contributor to the Australian-based newspaper Green Left Weekly, and his articles have appeared in Counterpunch, MR Online, Aporrea, Rebellión, America XXI, Comuna, and other publications and websites in both Spanish and English. He has co-authored several books, including three with Marta Harnecker on the new left in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay.

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“A woman’s going to send the bombs”

EL JONES

A woman’s going to send the drones
So ready the covers of your Vogues
The food bank lines are now miles long
But a woman’s the one who sends the bombs
Liberal feminism can’t be wrong
When a woman’s the one who sends the bombs.
  Can’t get workers PPE
  But you go girl Nancy Pelosi
  All hail the bipartisan war parties
  Now Trump is gone we all agree
  George W. Bush has been redeemed
  The war criminals are on our team
  And there’s a Black woman on my TV screen
  And when she bombs I’ll yell yasss Queen
  We’ll force your countries to be free
  And little Black girls can finally see
  Themselves in drones and F-16s
  And this is MLK Jr’s dream
  Brought to you by Wall Street
  Brought to you by the elites
  We’ll never ever give you peace
  Fund military and police
  But a woman could be commander in chief
  See what can happen when you believe?
  This is gender equality
  So everybody take a knee
  The resistance heroes hip hip hooray
  The FBI and CIA
  The generals and NSA
  So please enjoy your new air base
  We’ve all forgot Abu Ghraib
  We all forgot Guantanamo Bay
  And none of them will see the Hague
  The Patriot Act’s so yesterday
  Centrist neoliberal’s all the rage
  Kids still living in a cage
The war party is here to stay
And let's lock Julian Assange away.
We can't let him expose the truth
We're never bringing home the troops
Obama's so cool shooting hoops
You'll all be crushed under the boot
We're plotting out another coup
Billionaires we won't prosecute
We save that for moms of truant youth
Those Timberlands were looking cute
So let the oil companies pollute
Hell put them in the cabinet
Add bankers to make up the set
We'll regulate the internet
Corporate news is all you'll get
But a woman's going to send the jets
Are Yemeni women happy yet?
This moment gives me all the feels
A woman's making weapons deals
A woman's making refugees
A woman's going to rob and steal
Last week we were environmentalists
But now wars for oil are feminist
And history will reminisce
How all the donors benefit
Orange man is out the door
Things can go back to how they were before
Biden voted for the Iraq War
How dare you ask for any more
Your kids still super predators
And his kid's on strike number four
But prison's just for you and yours
And really the crime bill's all your fault
This is the time for unity
Bow down to oil and energy
And let's be friends with GOP
And white suburban families
There's no more white supremacy

Black woman deliver us the vote
We'll still be kneeling on your throat
But a woman's going to send the drones
So volunteer to work those phones
So we can bomb some woman's home
And probably waterboard her son
They're back in fashion neo cons
So four more years of settlements
War parties are in agreement
And let's hashtag Black excellence
Kamala is Vice President
The ladies join the gentlemen
In sword, famine, wild beast, pestilence
The four horse persons of apocalypse
These days we call that feminist
Is this the dream of suffragists?
And I heard her bombs never miss
And don't forget to call her Ms.
Madame, her honour, she or ma'am
Get ready those detainment camps
Muster the troops line up the ranks
A woman's going to send the tanks
And all of us will give her thanks
Especially weapons manufacturers, banks
And thanks to those suburban moms
A woman's going to send the bombs
I'm glad a woman is so strong
To send our countries all those bombs.

El Jones is a spoken word poet, an educator, journalist, and a community activist living in African Nova Scotia. She was the fifth Poet Laureate of Halifax and the author of Live from the Afrikan Resistance! — a book of spoken word poetry.

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Was It only “Fear Itself?”: FDR and Today

Gary Olson

“Movement politics is how the people flex their power, while electoral politics under the corporate duopoly is the domain of the moneyed classes.”
— Glen Ford, Black Agenda Report

While it’s myth that after the stock market crash of 1929, brokers pitched themselves off of tall buildings in Lower Manhattan (None did. A real buzz killer), there was an uptick in suicides among moguls by less dramatic means for a few years. Today, amidst the cascading bad economic news, investors seemingly have only two worries. First, that further waves of COVID-19 infections and deaths might sidetrack the economy’s reopening and affect profits. The second is that procrastinators might be left behind — FOMO, the Fear of Missing Out — as the market continues to rise. One thing that they’re not losing any sleep over is that working class consciousness is rising to the radical level of the 1930s when capitalism faced genuine peril.

In 2020, as in the 1930s, the economy is tanking, unemployment is at Great Depression levels with another 1.5 million workers having filed for unemployment last week, Federal regulations (600+) having been dismantled, CEO compensation now at 287 times that of workers and of the 11 Fed financial bailouts, 10 went to Wall Street banks. Further, at the inception of the Covid-19 outbreak, over 70 percent of Americans were already living on the financial edge, with lifetime savings depleted, and home foreclosures multiplying. Now, many of the job losses are terminal, millions of stores remain shut down across the country, angry protesters throng the streets, and an exceedingly grim future awaits most of the citizens.

Again, as in 1933, the Federal government is taking bold action. But instead of FDR’s New Deal, this time the decisive action entails a $4.5 trillion bailout of emergency corporate lending, some pitance payments to workers, and ominous threats about the dire consequences of not returning to their jobs. What accounts for the difference in the government’s response then and now? I suggest that both responses were self-serving actions by the ruling elite and it’s to our peril not to understand that fact.

As I’ve noted previously, big tech companies have proven virtually immune to what’s happening in the economy inhabited by the rest of us. The tech-heavy NASDAQ recently surpassed 10,000 before retreating and Amazon, Alphabet (Google) and Facebook are soaring. Apple and Microsoft recently became the first to reach $1.5 trillion market caps. According to investment strategists, the Fed’s maintaining low interest and inflation rates has been the magic elixir for these big tech companies. Apple and Microsoft recently became the first to reach $1.5 trillion market caps. According to investment strategists, the Fed’s maintaining low interest and inflation rates has been the magic elixir for these big tech companies.

Robert Armstrong, writing in The Financial Times (quoted in NYT, 6/11/2020) notes, in a strikingly nonchalant manner, that all of this is only more “evidence of an inherent and structural tension between the owning class and the working class.” In the United States, where a small percentage owns most of the wealth, they reap the gains from a resurgent stock market. Thus, as Armstrong continues, “Covid-19 has put working-and-middle-class people under severe strain, while the asset-owning class have felt relatively little pain.”

The Great Depression’s Legacy: FDR’s Efforts to Save Capitalism

After the Great Crash of 1929, a broad spectrum of prominent American writers, artists, poets, playwrights, and painters offered enthusiastic support for socialist ideas. Concurrently, ordinary citizens were questioning the precepts of capitalism and the traditional U.S. political system. Breadlines, shantytowns and hunger marches were growing along with the growing appeal of left-wing class politics and labor radicalism. Unaffiliated groups were organizing self-help cooperatives and racially integrated Unemployed Councils, organized by Communists, were springing up. Protests blocking evictions were occurring in major cities, often involving violent confrontation with the police. From 1930-1932, over 700 actions by the unemployed were reported to the Communist party’s newspaper, the Daily Worker. (Note: The CP ultimately followed directives from the CP International in joining the “Popular Front” and supporting the New Deal.)

In an article titled, “How FDR Saved Capitalism,” the late, neocorporate political scientist and sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset lavished effusive praise on President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s conscious effort to blunt widespread anticapitalist sentiments and undercut the appeal of left-wing radicals.1 At the time, left parties and associated movements emerged in Wisconsin, New York, California, Minnesota, Washington, Nebraska, Oregon, and North Dakota. In Minnesota, Governor Floyd Olson (Farmer-Labor Party) pioneered unemployment insurance, anti-foreclosure laws, public works programs, a pro-worker labor code and public pensions. In one speech, he said “I hope the present system of government goes right to hell” and proposed abolishing capitalism and establishing government control “over all means of production.”

FDR rejected radical politics but the New Deal was deeply influenced by the president’s keen awareness of needing to propose policies that would ween discontented workers away from demanding deep structural changes. The president employed three basic tactis: First, he was masterful in lifting and incorporating left demands into his rhetoric. Second, he sought to co-opt some leaders by extending patronage to non-Democratic Party state and local officials. Part of this involved setting aside references to the Democratic Party per se and frequently mentioning farmers, women, labor, minorities and liberals. Finally, as part of his expedient and temporary tilt toward the left, FDR was not above disingenuously threatening that to save capitalism from itself it might be necessary to “equalize the distribution of wealth” and “throw to the wolves the forty-six men reputed to have incomes in excess of one million dollars.”

This was all presaged in his FDR’s first presidential inaugural address in 1933. Ira Katznelson, author of Fear Itself, a book celebrated by mainstream reviewers, wrote “A climate of universal fear deeply affected political understandings and concerns. Nothing was sure.” In the fifth sentence of his inaugural speech on March 4,1933, President Roosevelt uttered the famous phrase “Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” He then proceeded to blame the
depression on “unscrupulous money changers” who lacked any vision. The president blamed “callous and selfish bankers and businessmen who persisted in engaging in the “evils of the old order.””

While offering to work with legislators, FDR made clear that if Congress failed to act there would be a need for a “temporary departure from the normal balance of public procedure.” The president would seek “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.” Robert Morley, a law professor at Columbia, had created the original “Brain Trust” to advise Roosevelt during the 1932 presidential campaign. He was also responsible for writing FDR’s inaugural address although the latter never acknowledged it. Later, Morley said that because of the speech, “Capitalism was saved in eight days.” Hyperbole aside, the critical point is that Katznelson and many other liberal historians agree that saving capitalism was a major objective of the New Deal and that some form of “liberal democracy” was the preferred means of accomplishing that end.

W.E.B. DuBois had hoped the incipient New Deal would be the opening, the first step toward socialism. However, by 1938, Roosevelt, perhaps concluding the threat had past, slowed his reforms and even proposed a traditional balanced budget. Tellingly, when the Recession of 1937-38 resulted in Republicans defeating several third party incumbents, FDR responded “We have on the positive side eliminated Phil La Follete and the Farmer-Labor people in the Northwest as a standing Third Party threat.”

I trust that others, far better versed in the New Deal period will comment and I’ll only suggest a line of inquiry that needs fleshing out: Unlike today’s predator class, who’ve little to worry about, their counterparts in the 1930s had more to fear than “fear itself” — and acted accordingly. That is, “…the spectre that haunted the New Deal years…was the fear of the dominant class of a renewed populist alliance — this time strengthened by a more combative and a more mature industrial proletariat than had existed in the 1890s.” Liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote of the moment, “It was now a matter of seeing whether a representative democracy could conquer economic collapse. It was a matter of staying off violence — even some thought — revolution.”

Many people now understand that spending on World War II was what “saved capitalism” but I suspect the myth that benevolent motives dominated New Deal thinking is still believed by many. Shielding further light on this matter should prove useful in clarifying and responding to both the diversions and opportunities awaiting us in the near future.

What About today? Not “A few bad police apples,” but a Rotten Capitalist Tree

If polls are to be believed, a majority of the public agrees with the core positions put forth by Black Lives Matter and support the protests against police brutality. I’ve been encouraged by the fact that hundreds of thousands of young, white Millennials have been in the streets, often outnumbering black participants. For exam-

Endnotes
1 Unless otherwise specified, quotes in the next three paragraphs are from Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Hart, “How FDR Saved Capitalism,” Hoover Digest, January 1, 2001. It’s fitting that the article is associated with the Hoover Institute. Housed at Stanford University, it’s named for Herbert Hoover and its mission is to promote private enterprise in the United States. Candolaee Rice will assume its directorship on September 1, 2020. Stanford University, was founded by the railroad Robber Baron Leland Stanford who amassed his fortune by exploiting Chinese labor. Seymour Martin Lipset (1922-2006), a prominent American sociologist and political scientist, was a neoconservative, noted for championing the idea of American exceptionalism. I’m chagrined to acknowledge that Lipset was once President of the American Political Science Association.
Violence in the Capitol, Dangers in the Aftermath

GLENN GREENWALD

From the Cold War to the War on Terror: the harms from authoritarian “solutions” are often greater than the threats they are ostensibly designed to combat.

In the days and weeks after the 9/11 attack, Americans were largely united in emotional horror at what had been done to their country as well as in their willingness to endorse repression and violence in response. As a result, there was little room to raise concerns about the possible excesses or dangers of the American reaction, let alone to dissent from what political leaders were proposing in the name of vengeance and security. The psychological trauma from the carnage and the wreckage at the country’s most cherished symbols swamped rational faculties and thus rendered futile any attempts to urge restraint or caution.

Nonetheless, a few tried. Scorn and sometimes worse were universally heaped upon them.

On September 14 — while bodies were still buried under burning rubble in downtown Manhattan — Congresswoman Barbara Lee cast a lone vote against the Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF). “Some of us must urge the use of restraint,” she said seventy-two hours after the attack, adding: “Our country is in a state of mourning and thus some of us must say: let’s step back for a moment, let’s pause just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today so that this does not spiral out of control.”

For simply urging caution and casting a single “no” vote against war, Lee’s Congressional office was deluged with threats of violence. Armed security was deployed to protect her, largely as a result of media attacks suggesting that she was anti-American and sympathetic to terrorists. Yet twenty years later — with U.S. troops still fighting in Afghanistan under that same AUMF, with Iraq destroyed, ISIS spawned, and U.S. civil liberties and privacy rights permanently crippled — her solitary admonitions look far more like courage, prescience and wisdom than sedition or a desire to downplay the threat of Al Qaeda.

Others also raised similar questions and issued similar warnings. On the left, people like Susan Sontag and Noam Chomsky, and on the right people such as Ron Paul and Pat Buchanan — in different ways and at different times — urged U.S. politicians and Americans generally to resist unleashing an orgy of domestic assaults on civil liberties, foreign invasions, and an endless war posture. They warned that such a cycle, once initiated, would be very difficult to control, even more difficult to reverse, and virtually guaranteed to provoke even greater violence.

These few who dissented from the instant consensus were, like Congresswoman Lee, widely vilified. Both Sontag and Chomsky were branded anti-American Fifth Columnists, while David Frum, writing in National Review, denounced Buchanan and others questioning the excesses of the War on Terror from the right as “Unpatriotic Conservatives”: no different, proclaimed the neocon, than “Noam Chomsky, Ted Rall, Gore Vidal, Alexander Cockburn, and other anti-Americans of the far Left.”

In retrospect, it is hard to deny that those who defied, or at least questioned, the potent 2001 emotional consensus by urging deliberation in lieu of reactionary rage were vindicated by subsequent events: the two-decade expansion of the war in Afghanistan to multiple countries, the enactment of the Patriot Act, the secret implementation of mass surveillance systems, the trillions of dollars of taxpayer wealth transferred to weapons manufacturers, and the paramilitarization of the domestic security state. At the very least, basic rationality requires an acknowledgement that when political passions and rage-driven emotions find their most intense expression, calls for reflection and caution can only be valuable even if ultimately rejected.

Yesterday’s invasion of the Capitol by a Trump-supporting mob has certainly generated intense political passion and pervasive rage. It is not hard to understand why: the introduction of physical force into political protest is always lamentable, usually dangerous, and, except in the rarest of circumstances that are plainly inapplicable here, unjustifiable. It was foreseeable that an action of this type would result in deaths. The most surprising outcome is that “only” four people died: an unarmed woman, a Trump supporter and Air Force veteran, who was shot in the neck by a law enforcement officer, and three other protesters who died from unspecified “medical emergencies” (one reportedly died due to accidentally tasering himself, inducing a heart attack).

The U.S. Capitol remains a potent and cherished symbol even for Americans who are deeply cynical about the ruling class and political system. Its nobility is something continually engrained deep into our collective psyche since childhood, and that meaning endures even when our rational faculties reject it. It is therefore not hard to understand why watching a marauding band of hooligans invade and deface both the House and the Senate, without any identifiable objective other than venting grievances, reflexively engenders a patriotic disgust across the political spectrum.

It is unhinged to the point of being obscene to compare yesterday’s incursion to the 9/11 attack or (as Sen. Chuck Schumer did last night) to Pearl Harbor. By every metric, the magnitude and destructiveness of those two events are in an entirely different universe. But that does not mean there are no applicable lessons to be drawn from those prior attacks.

One is that striking at cherished national symbols — the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, the Capitol — ensures rage and terror far beyond body counts or other concrete harms. That is one major reason that yesterday’s event received far more attention and commentary, and will likely produce far greater consequences, than much deadlier incidents, such as the still-motive-unknown 2017 Las Vegas shooting that killed 59 or the 2016 Orlando shooting that left 49 dead at the Pulse
nightclub. Unlike even horrific indiscriminate shooting sprees, an attack on a symbol of national power will be perceived as an attack on the state or even the society itself.

There are other, more important historical lessons to draw not only from the 9/11 attack but subsequent terrorism on U.S. soil. One is the importance of resisting the coercive framework that demands everyone choose one of two extremes: that the incident is either (a) insignificant or even justifiable, or (b) is an earth-shattering, radically transformative event that demands radical, transformative state responses.

This reductive, binary framework is anti-intellectual and dangerous. One can condemn a particular act while resisting the attempt to inflate the dangers it poses. One can acknowledge the very real existence of a threat while also warning of the harms, often far greater, from proposed solutions. One can reject maximalist, inflammatory rhetoric about an attack (a War of Civilizations, an attempted coup, an insurrection, sedition) without being fairly accused of indifference toward or sympathy for the attackers.

Indeed, the primary focus of the first decade of my journalism was the U.S. War on Terror — in particular, the relentless erosions of civil liberties and the endless militarization of American society in the name of waging it. To make the case that those trends should be opposed, I frequently argued that the threat posed by Islamic radicalism to U.S. citizens was being deliberately exaggerated, inflated and melodramatized. I argued that not because I believed the threat was nonexistent or trivial: I lived in New York City on 9/11 and remember to this day the excruciating horror from the smell and smoke emanating throughout Lower Manhattan and the haunting “missing” posters appended by desperate families, unwilling to accept the obvious reality of their loved ones’ deaths, to every lamp post on every street corner. I shared the same disgust and sadness as most other Americans from the Pulse massacre, the subway bombings in London and Madrid, the workplace mass shooting in San Bernardino.

My insistence that we look at the other side of the ledger — the costs and dangers not only from such attacks but also the “solutions” implemented in the name of stopping them — did not come from indifference towards those deaths or a naive views of those responsible for them. It was instead driven by my simultaneous recognition of the dangers from rights-eroding, authoritarian reactions imposed by the state, particularly in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. One need not engage in denialism or minimization of a threat to rationally resist fear-driven fanaticism — as Barbara Lee so eloquently insisted on September 14, 2001.

Human memories are usually short and the dominance of social media has abridged them even further. Many have forgotten that the Clinton administration seized on the 1995 courthouse bombing in Oklahoma City to radically expand law enforcement powers and escalate its demands for full-scale backdoor access to all encrypted internet communications. The fear necessary to justify such draconian measures was fueled by incessant media hypes of weekend citizen militias in places like Idaho and Montana said to be plotting armed insurrection against the federal government.

One of the first major War on Terror attacks on core Constitutional rights which I wrote about was Newt Gingrich’s 2006 speech suggesting that the First Amendment’s free speech guarantee to fight terrorism should be “modified”.

The former House Speaker approvingly cited a Commentary article by former federal prosecutor Andrew McCarthy — entitled “Free Speech for Terrorists?” — insisting that some ideas are so dangerous, especially in the era of terrorism and the internet, that the First Amendment must be limited to permit greater censorship powers:

With an enemy committed to terrorism, the advocacy of terrorism — the threats, the words — are not mere dogma, or even calls to “action.” They are themselves weapons — weapons of incitement and intimidation, often as effective in achieving their ends as would be firearms and explosives brandished openly. . . .

Do we so lack confidence (except in the sacrosanct status of speech itself) that we are unable to say with assurance that some things are truly evil, and that advocating them not only fails to serve any socially desirable purpose but guarantees more evil? Must our historical deference to opinion, however noxious, defer as well to a call to arms against innocents, or a call to destroy a form of representative government that protects religious and political freedom? May we not even ban and criminalize the advocacy of militant Islam and its métier, which is the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians? . . .

In America’s bumptious, bounteous marketplace, there are no limits on words as the building blocks of ideas, or on ideas as the legitimate instruments of persuasion. Terror has no place in such discourse. It is the function of law to express our society’s judgments. Ours should be simple and humane: words that kill are not words we need abide.

As a free speech advocate and civil libertarian, I was naturally repelled by this notion that some political ideas could be deemed so dangerous by the state that they can be legally suppressed. In response, I asked rhetorically in 2006: “Are there any American values at all in which Bush followers and neocons actually believe -- any constitutional principles that are sacrosanct and whose violations they would oppose if undertaken in the name of fighting The Terrorists?” I concluded: “It certainly doesn’t appear so.”

Beyond raising alarms about civil liberties erosions, I also often insisted that the underlying causes of terrorism aimed at the U.S. should be considered if for no other reason than to understand how to address it without destroying core liberties for Americans.

While religious fanaticism may sometimes be the cause, far more often, I argued, such attacks were motivated by rage over the killing of innocent people, including children, by the U.S. Government’s bombs, drones and tanks in Muslim-majority coun-
tries. Right-wing advocates often demonized such arguments as pro-terrorist or as “justifying” terrorist attacks, but the left largely supported the inquiry into motivating causes, just as they have long supported the attempts to understand what motivates violent crime, on the ground that misguided actions are often driven by valid or at least widely shared redressible grievances. But the view that we should attempt to identify the core motives of terrorist acts or violent crime, rather than just label them evil and vow to destroy their perpetrators, was largely deemed taboo in mainstream discourse.

It is stunning to watch now as every War on Terror rhetorical tactic to justify civil liberties erosions is now being invoked in the name of combating Trumpism, including the aggressive exploitation of the emotions triggered by yesterday’s events at the Capitol to accelerate their implementation and demonize dissent over the quickly formed consensus. The same framework used to assault civil liberties in the name of foreign terrorism is now being seamlessly applied — often by those who spent the last two decades objecting to it — to the threat posed by “domestic white supremacist terrorists,” the term preferred by liberal elites, especially after yesterday, for Trump supporters generally. In so many ways, yesterday was the liberals’ 9/11, as even the most sensible commentators among them are resorting to the most unhinged rhetoric available.

Within hours of the Capitol being cleared, we heard truly radical proposals from numerous members of Congress. Senators and House members who objected to Electoral College certification, or questioned its legitimacy, should be formally expelled from the House if not prosecuted, argued Rep. Cori Bush (D-MO), with other House members expressing support. Even those unarmed protesters who peacefully entered the Capitol should, many argued, be hunted by the FBI as domestic terrorists.

Calls proliferated for the banning of the social media accounts of instigators and protest participants. Journalists and politicians cheered the decision by Facebook and Twitter to temporarily bar the President from using their service, and then cheered again when Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced on Tuesday that the ban on Trump extended through Biden's inauguration. Some journalists, such as CNN’s Oliver Darcy, complained that Facebook had not gone far enough, that more mass censorship was needed of right-wing voices. The once-radical 2006 Gingrich argument — that some opinions are too dangerous to allow to be expressed because they are pro-terrorist and insurrectionary — is now thriving, close to a consensus.

These calls for censorship, online and official, are grounded in the long-discredited, oft-rejected and dangerous view that a person should be held legally accountable not only for their own illegal actions but also for the consequences of their protected speech: meaning the actions others take when they hear inflammatory rhetoric. That was the distorted mentality used by the State of Mississippi in the 1970s to try to hold NAACP leaders liable for the violent acts of their followers against boycott violators after hearing rousing pro-boycott speeches from NAACP leaders, only for the Supreme Court in 1982 to unanimously reject such efforts on the ground that “while the State legitimately may impose damages for the consequences of violent conduct, it may not award compensation for the consequences of nonviolent, protected activity,” adding that even “advocacy of the use of force or violence does not remove speech from the protection of the first amendment.”

The complete reversal in mentality from just a few months ago is dizzying. Those who spent the summer demanding the police be defunded are furious that the police response at the Capitol was insufficiently robust, violent and aggressive. Those who urged the abolition of prisons are demanding Trump supporters be imprisoned for years. Those who, under the banner of “anti-fascism,” demanded the firing of a top New York Times editor for publishing an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) advocating the deployment of the U.S. military to quell riots — a view deemed not just wrong but unspeakable in decent society — are today furious that the National Guard was not deployed at the Capitol to quash pro-Trump supporters. Antifa advocates are working to expose the names of Capitol protesters to empower the FBI to arrest them on terrorism charges. And while Rep. Cori Bush’s proposal to unseat members of Congress for their subversive views went mega-viral, many forget that in 1966, the Georgia State Legislature refused to seat Julian Bond after he refused to repudiate his anti-war work with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, then considered a domestic terrorist group.

Those who argued in the summer that property damage is meaningless or even noble are treating smashed windows and looted podiums at the Capitol as treason, as a coup. One need not dismiss the lamentable actions of yesterday to simultaneously reject efforts to apply terms that are plainly inapplicable: attempted coup, insurrection, sedition. There was zero chance that the few hundred people who breached the Capitol could overthrow the U.S. Government — the most powerful, armed and militarized entity in the world — nor did they try.

Perhaps many view it as more upsetting to see august members of Congress hiding in fear of a riot than to watch ordinary small-business owners weep as their multi-generational store burns to the ground. Undoubtedly, national reporters who spend much time in the Capitol and who have long-time friendships with Senators and House members are more horrified, far more so, by violent gangs in the Capitol rotunda than on the streets of Portland or Kenosha. But that does not mean that rational restraint is unnecessary when searching for sober language to accurately describe these events.

There is a huge difference between, on the one hand, thousands of people shooting their way into the Capitol after a long-planned, coordinated plot with the goal of seizing permanent power, and, on the other, an impulsive and grievance-driven crowd more or less waltzing into the Capitol as the result of strength in numbers and then leaving a few hours later. That the only person shot was a protester killed by an armed agent of the state by itself makes clear how irresponsible these terms are. There
are more adjectives besides “fascist treason” and “harmless protest,” enormous space between those two poles. One should not be forced to choose between the two.

It has long been clear that, in the post-Trump era, media outlets looking to keep viewers hooked, and government officials looking to increase their power, will do everything possible to center and inflate the threat posed by right-wing factions. I’ve said this more times than I can count over the last year at least.

Like all inflated threats, this one has a kernel of truth. As is true of every faction, there are right-wing activists filled with rage and who are willing to engage in violence. Some of them are dangerous (just as some Muslims in the post-9/11 era, and some Antifa nihilists, were and are genuinely violent and dangerous). But as was true of the Cold War and the War on Terror and so many other crisis-spurred reactions, the other side of the ledger — the draconian state powers clearly being planned and urged and prepared in the name of stopping them — carries its own extremely formidable dangers.

Refusing to consider those dangers for fear of standing accused of downplaying the threat is the most common tactic authoritarian advocates of state power use. Less than twenty-four hours after the Capitol breach, one sees this tactic being wielded with great flamboyance and potency, and it is sure to continue long after January 20.

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Mutual Aid in 2020

ANDY PIASCIK

Mutual aid has been around a long time. For many people who practice mutual aid, it is not known by that name. Rather, it is simply a common sense activity essential to the survival of human communities. When you see members of your village or tribe or city or even a faraway community suffering because of a lack of food or health care or shelter, you do what you can to provide them with whatever it is they need.

Through such practices, people come to see mutual aid as a better way to organize collective life than the hierarchical societies most of the world lives in. For some, mutual aid puts into practice the precept that “I am my brother and sister’s keeper.” For others, the labor ideal of “an injury to one is an injury to all” applies. Whatever the inspiration, mutual aid serves as an alternative to social organization where most power rests in the hands of a small number of people and where profits, self-interest and the accumulation of wealth are propagated as the highest goals to which one can aspire.

Mutual aid is in direct contrast to charity. Charity is carried out by the better-off who believe they know what’s best for those in need, with no recognition that injustice is the essence of a society like ours. Charity is doled out by people who have no interest in transforming society and charitable organizations operate to keep people powerless and dependent.

The Black Panthers

Mutual aid has manifested itself in many ways throughout the history of this country. The work of the Black Panthers in the 1960s is one example. Based on their experiences and the expressed needs of Black people, the Panthers established a broad spectrum of community survival programs in cities throughout the country. The Free Breakfast for Children program is the best-known and thousands of children from poor families were served free breakfast, in some cases for years. In response to requests from the people, the Panthers also established mobile health clinics that provided testing and treatment for a wide array of health problems as well as schools for people of all ages with classes on subjects ranging from basic literacy to African-American history. Over time, new people became involved in these activities and initiated new ones.

Food Not Bombs

Another mutual aid organization in the United States that dates to the 1970s is Food Not Bombs. The idea is a simple one: provide healthy meals to hungry people. To do so, a core of people set up outdoors soup kitchens in a park or common area in cities and towns around the country. Food was collected from stores and individuals, and volunteers set up a basic cooking operation at a set time and place. Once a regular schedule is established, as many as several hundred hungry people come to eat once and sometimes twice a day. Vegetarian food was served to encourage bet-
ter health and living harmoniously within the natural world. And naming the effort Food Not Bombs underscored that the meals were being provided in a society whose priorities were seriously askew, one where trillions of dollars are spent on weaponry while millions go hungry for lack of work and government assistance.

**Bridgeport Mutual Aid**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in mutual aid activity and organizations. In Bridgeport, Connecticut where I live, a dozen or so people came together in March of 2020 to form Bridgeport Mutual Aid (BMA). A large percentage of Bridgeport’s residents are poor and many others who are not categorized as such were nonetheless struggling even before the pandemic. Their situations became more precarious when the state ordered many businesses to close, jobs were lost and people were advised not to socialize even with relatives living nearby. The elderly who are most vulnerable found themselves cut off from their usual social network of sons and daughters and grandchildren. When Bridgeport officials also suspended the city’s bus service, those without cars found it much more difficult to shop for groceries and other essentials.

BMA decided to provide food and other items like toilet paper, diapers and sanitary napkins to as many of those in need as possible. Most members had contacts of all kinds throughout the city, especially in poor and working class neighborhoods, and drew on those contacts to spread the word about the project. Because of social distancing requirements and restrictions on travel, a decision was made to deliver the food since it was too dangerous to set up a central gathering place for people to come and pick up whatever they needed.

Since the Spring, BMA members have gathered four afternoons a week. The cars of those making deliveries are loaded, updated lists that include the names and addresses of the newest recipients are printed, and people disperse throughout the city to bring a large box of goods to each household on the list. Members make about 20-25 deliveries each and several hundred people receive groceries and other goods on those four days.

Anyone who requests aid gets it. New people have joined the effort and stores and retailers contribute food and other goods. Supporters contribute money that is used to buy any items that aren’t contributed and BMA also secured a small grant. People work whenever they can, whether it’s four times a week every week or once every four weeks. BMA members belong to the Bridgeport chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America and other organizations and participate in the work those and other groups in the area are doing.

One prime example of organizational overlap occurred in June when activists working to end police brutality established an encampment in front of police headquarters for ten days and nights. BMA folks have also been involved in the organizing against police brutality so it was only natural that BMA participated in both the encampment and in making sure the 50 or so people who were camping out every night had sufficient food. BMA members also helped to ensure that the encampment included portable bathrooms, a first aid tent, a library and entry points where face masks were given to anyone not wearing one.

BMA hopes to expand as the advent of colder weather makes it more difficult for people to travel. COVID cases are on the rise in Bridgeport and health experts are warning about the possibility of very dramatic increases if no significant preventive measures are taken by the federal government. With some experts warning of a winter that will be the worst of our lives, it’s possible stores and other businesses will again close down in which case the work of BMA will become more important.

**Expanding the Circle**

Some food recipients have become BMA members, expanding the circle. New members without activist experience have in this way gotten to know people and organizations working on other important issues like rent relief and police brutality that they did not previously know about. The circle expands further when they tell friends, family members and neighbors about BMA and these other organizations and their projects.

BMA’s work is one small example of mutual aid activities happening all around the country. The need for such efforts grows as ruling elites increasingly show themselves to be completely opposed to the needs of the people. Mutual aid can take whatever form people in a particular place decide.

The practice of mutual aid is antithetical to the predominant social ideology put forward by ruling elites. The idea of a society where people look out for each other is ridiculed at every turn by those who see profits and empire as the highest callings in life. We in this society are bombarded from birth by propaganda that everyone is an isolated individual in competition with every other isolated individual. People know both from their own experience and intuitively that that is wrong, though it is sometimes difficult to know how to live otherwise and then to have the ability to do so. Mutual aid efforts are one piece of how it can be done.

In a society as highly individualistic and atomized as ours where there is often little organizational support for mutual aid projects, such projects are often initiated by people with some degree of collective activist experience. It is one form of political participation among many in the larger effort to create a society based on human and planetary needs. Most everyone in BMA also attends demonstrations, protests, lobbying efforts and meetings of all kinds to pressure institutions of power to act to meet human needs until such time as those institutions can be reformed or done away with.

Human freedom will come about only when people on a massive scale come to see their own actions as central to such efforts and act accordingly. Alongside of and in combination with the essential work of Black Lives Matter and others organizing in workplaces, campuses, prisons and communities everywhere, mutual aid activities help create the possibility for both large-scale participation in all aspects of social life as well as our collective liberation.

Andy Piascik is an award-winning author whose most recent book is the novel In Motion. He can be reached at andypiascik@aol.com.
‘Anarchist jurisdiction’ State of Mind…

RAYMOND NAT TURNER

Some thugs like to
Lie all day—
strip our rights away,
make The People pay,
Chanting, “U-S-A…!”
Hopping flights of fantasy
for the greedy bourgeoisie
And the confederacy—
But we’re taking an
Anti-fascist stand:
‘Cause we’re in an
‘Anarchist jurisdiction’
State of Mind…

We’ve seen enough of
all the nazi stars,
all the lawless czars
And the cult of death
of a bungling Bleach Regime—
Mengele Medicine Team—
We can’t afford to waste more
Time—before we ORGANIZE—
Figuring out how we will rise
to Make the Rich Pay!

Poet’s note: Inspired by the great Billy Joel’s "New York State of Mind"

Raymond Nat Turner, known as "The Town Crier", is a NYC poet privileged to have read at the Harriet Tubman Centennial Symposium. He is Artistic Director of the stalwart JazzPoetry Ensemble UpSurge and has appeared at numerous festivals and venues including the Monterey Jazz Festival and Panafest in Ghana West Africa. He currently is Poet-in-Residence at Black Agenda Report. He’s also Co-Chair of the New York Chapter of the National Writers Union (NWU). Turner has opened for such people as James Baldwin, People’s Advocate Cynthia McKinney, sportswriter Dave Zirin and CA Congresswoman Barbara Lee following her lone vote against attacking Afghanistan.
The Capitol Assault was Symptomatic of Our Dysfunctional Two-Party Politics

TED MORGAN

A americans were shocked to witness the assault on the capitol building on January 6, the day Congress was scheduled to ratify the presidential election. Washington DC and the nation's state capitals remained on high alert through the inauguration as rightwing groups promised more violent attacks.

It's easy to trace the proximate cause of this assault, a president who has long cultivated the lie that the 2020 election was somehow stolen. Prior to the capitol assault, he exhorted his “Save America” rally on the Mall to “stop the steal” and “fight much harder,” asserting “You have to show strength, you have to be strong.”

Much has been made of the fascist overtones of Trump’s efforts, but it is important to understand how we got to such a place. It goes well past Trump to forty years of dysfunctional, neoliberal American politics, and beyond that to the racism deeply embedded in this nation's history. Both political parties share responsibility for our current condition.

Republicans:

The Republican Party role is the most obvious.

In 1968, President Nixon rode a law and order campaign into the White House, appealing to a so-called “silent majority” frightened, if not alienated, by the images of antiwar protesters, inner-city “rioters,” and counterculture “freaks” during the 1960s.

The corporate mass media, of course, fed this dynamic by refusing to take seriously the actual claims of black, antiwar, New Left and feminist activists, instead, making sure the public saw the most inflammatory examples of their behaviors and appearances. In mass mediaspeak, “radical” was used to describe militancy, whereas any system-challenging argument vanished from mainstream discourse —sound familiar? That’s a story I have documented elsewhere.

Nixon’s racist “southern strategy” set in stone the future of the Republican Party, although it remained for Ronald Reagan to seal the deal. Reagan’s rhetoric about basic “decency” and “family values,” effectively played on the feelings of those disaffected by the 60s. Yet Reagan’s actual policies focused on eliminating ways the government addresses public needs, cutting taxes on the wealthy, rebuilding a huge military complex, regenerating an aggressive foreign policy, and deregulating the economy.

However, the people drawn to Reagan’s so-called “conservative” rhetoric and his tax-cut pitch — whether religious traditionalists, rural folks, or members of the white working class — actually lost more and more ground, economically, under Reagan’s and the Republicans’ neoliberalism. They got symbolically gratified while their attention was diverted to the Democrats, liberals, and “Eastern elites” who allegedly caused their problems.

That’s the Republican path that leads directly to Trump and his True Believers. It also echoes the post-Reconstruction Democrats’ austerity pitch that reinforced white supremacy in the South.

What, then, of the Democratic Party?

Democrats:

Smarting from Reagan’s landslide victory in 1984, Democratic centrists — names like Dick Gephardt, Sam Nunn, and Bill Clinton — took steps to move the Party away from its more liberal wing, into the corporate-dependent center. In its more liberal moments the Party voiced hopeful rhetoric about defending the rights of minorities, women, and LGBTQ people, defending the environment, etc. The reality has consistently fallen far short of the rhetoric.

Indeed, the two “liberal” Democratic presidents of the neoliberal era — Bill Clinton and Barack Obama — were responsible for a host of repressive and “free market” (e.g., neoliberal) policies. Clinton’s contributions are perhaps better known: the “end of welfare as we know it,” NAFTA, financial and telecommunications deregulation, and the 1994 Crime Bill that accelerated mass incarceration, among others.

Riding a campaign of “hope” and “change” into the White House, none of Obama’s “liberal” accomplishments—the Affordable Care Act, Supreme Court appointments, the negotiated settlement with Iran, and initial steps on climate—diverged from the neoliberal playbook. At the same time, Obama pushed the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other so-called “free trade” agreements, escalated both domestic surveillance and drone killings abroad, supported the anti-democratic coup in Honduras, and withdrew the public option for health insurance, among others.

The right-wing Republican attack machine kept its rank-and-file in line with attacks on Clinton’s “60s-style” licentiousness and Obama’s being of African descent. For their part, the corporate media repeatedly turned the 60s era into a “good sixties” of a romanticized civil rights movement and a hopeful John Kennedy administration, and a “bad sixties” of violence and narcissistic rebelliousness — the latter a useful hook for selling entertainment and commodities to younger generations.

Dysfunctional Neoliberal Politics:

Republicans, in short, have been all about giveaways to the rich while manipulating the emotions of less well-off white Americans. Democrats have ignored the latter populations, becoming increasingly dependent on corporate money while effectively manipulating the aspirations of marginalized communities.

In their more liberal moments, what Nancy Fraser has called “progressive neoliberalism,” Democrats embrace what is often called “identity politics” — race, gender, and sexuality in particular. Republicans use Democrats’ rhetoric to cement the emotional attachment of their rank and file supporters. As Republican “reactionary neoliberalism” becomes more and more outrageous, Democrats gain popular support. The corporate center, with all its sanctimonious rhetoric, is reinforced when something like the Capitol assault occurs.

As Fraser has observed in The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born, “To reinstate progressive neoliberalism [e.g., Joe Biden and the Democratic mainstream]...
to recreate—indeed to exacerbate—the very conditions that created Trump. And that means preparing the ground for future Trumps—ever more vicious and dangerous.”

Thus, the country remains stuck in a see-saw battle that utterly fails to address the deep crises we face. Neither party speaks a word against a capitalist system that feeds inequality, threatens the planet’s ability to sustain life, and generates a foreign policy marked by militarism and war. The “problem” is always the “other party.” Such are the boundaries of what Noam Chomsky called “legitimate discourse.”

And neither party dares to confront class inequality. Unlike identity concerns about white supremacy, hate speech, harassment and abuse, and the like—all profound problems—class analysis reveals the systemic forces that keep both parties’ rank-and-file in their place at the margins of American politics.

Ultimately, the only way out of this will occur when enough people become aware, not only of the seriousness of the crises facing us, but of the need to come together in a well-mobilized mass movement addressing systemic concerns. We already can see where we’re heading if we don’t do this.


Against Hierarchy

ROBERT JENSEN

It’s getting harder for people in the United States to turn away from the sexism, racism, and inequality that is woven into the fabric of society. From the women’s march of 2017, to the ongoing protests against white supremacy in policing and other institutions, to the wider attention being paid to extreme disparities in wealth—the demand for justice intensifies.

What connects the analyses behind today’s different liberation movements? Do oppressive systems have common roots? How can we think in intersectional fashion about how injustice becomes so entrenched?

A productive place to start is the concept of hierarchy—one group’s claim to a right to exercise authority over another group.

The first hierarchy I thought about critically was patriarchy. At the core of a system of institutionalized male dominance is men’s assertion of the right to own or control women’s reproductive power and sexuality. This is rationalized by patriarchal men—whether conservative or liberal, whether their sexism is of the hostile or benevolent variety—as inevitable, a kind of law of nature. Male dominance is justified as a natural hierarchy.

Such hierarchy is, of course, not natural and not inevitable. Hierarchy is not the only organizing principle that has shaped human societies. In fact, before the development of agriculture about 10,000 years ago, institutionalized hierarchy was rare. This domination/subordination dynamic emerged on a large scale only after humans developed the idea that they could own and control land, plants, and animals, which was followed by men claiming ownership of, and asserting control over, women.

White supremacy—the claim of Europe and its offshoots (the United States, Canada, Australia, etc.) to own or control the resources and labor of the rest of the world—is no more natural than men’s claims on women’s bodies. The domination/subordination dynamic of white supremacy that defines so much of world history for the past 500 years, just like the longer running project of patriarchy, enriches some at great cost to many and further entrenches an unconscious acceptance of hierarchy.

That’s also the story of class hierarchy, which in the contemporary economy is rationalized through capitalist ideology that claims wealth disparities are necessary to create a productive society. The same applies to imperialism’s claim that powerful nation-states’ must exercise “leadership”—a polite synonym for domination—to organize the world’s politics and economics for the benefit of all.

It should not be surprising—given the relentlessness of pro-hierarchy propaganda on multiple fronts over centuries, even millennia—that many people come to accept that life will always be a competition in which the winner dominates, that there’s no hope for equity and fairness, that seeking control is “just the way people are.” In some sense, of course, people are that way and human nature is compatible with hierarchy—when we live in social systems that reward this dominating behav-
ior, people can adapt and many will conform. But other systems have existed in the past, continue to exist on the margins in the present, and are possible in the future.

We should reject not only the injustice and suffering that comes from these hierarchical systems, but the underlying idea that domination/subordination is our fate, that there is no other way to organize societies except with hierarchy. The health of the human family—especially the fate of women, people of color, working and poor people, the developing world—depends on rejecting the claim that this domination/subordination dynamic is inevitable. Also at stake is the health of the planet, the integrity of the ecosystems on which our own lives depend. The assertion by some humans of a right to dominate the larger living world—the ideology at the core of the high-energy/high-technology industrial societies—is ecocidal and, therefore, suicidal.

What does this mean for real-life political decision-making in real time? In the short term, we might decide to prioritize one issue over others, depending on the contingencies of history. In the moment, we might focus on one struggle that demands attention because of immediate threats. But over the long haul, we must dismantle all of these hierarchical systems. And if there is to be a decent human future—perhaps if there is to be any human future at all—we have to transcend the idea that hierarchy is inevitable.

Robert Jensen, an emeritus professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, is the author of *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism and Plain Radical: Living, Loving, and Learning to Leave the Planet Gracefully*.

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1st 100 Days— Portland

RAYMOND NAT TURNER

I have a friend—sometimes bandmate—Daily...
Whining, wringing his hands.
Distressed and depressed—
anxious and agitated—he
Knows nuclear war and
Armageddon are on the
agenda if Boss Tweet’s
Back—big lies, gas-lighting
another four years...

My meditation
and its compassion
keep me from screaming,
“Come on out of that
cannabis cloud, read
writing on other walls—
smell some sub rosa
burgeoning of black
lives—smell the Resistance!”

Instead, I celebrate long stem red roses stretching
Seattle, City of Angels, Tha Town, Minneapolis,
Kenosha, Atlanta, Louisville, Baltimore, Ferguson—
Chicago-Red State teachers’ strikes to The City of Roses!
Instead, I celebrate The City of Roses—
Red roses metastasizing in teargas;
Red roses blooming beneath baton blows—
springing up on Solidarity Street, opening
behind Walls of Moms
Red roses kidnapped in camouflaged fertilizer—
blooming behind walls of ICE; flowering in fascism:
foul compost of a wilting, shriveling empire…
Red roses exploding in FOX-box foot-soldiers’ faces—
silencing lying lawyers;
Red roses burgeoning in blood of John Browns:
Red roses entangled in blue-violent pigmented
thorns—blue symbolizing mystery: How thorns
are being Overcome…

Raymond Nat Turner, known as “The Town Crier”, is a NYC poet privileged to have
read at the Harriet Tubman Centennial Symposium. He is Artistic Director of the
stalwart JazzPoetry Ensemble UpSurge and has appeared at numerous festivals and
venues including the Monterey Jazz Festival and Panafest in Ghana West Africa. He
currently is Poet-in-Residence at Black Agenda Report. He’s also Co-Chair of the New
York Chapter of the National Writers Union (NWU). Turner has opened for such people
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CA Congresswoman Barbara Lee following her lone vote against attacking Afghanistan

History, Geography, Russia, and Vladimir Putin
LENNY FLANK

The history of Russia clearly demonstrates the truth in the adage, “Govern-
ments come and go, but national interests remain the same.”

At the end of the 8th century, a new scourge swept across Europe—raiders from
Scandinavia, known to history as “Vikings”. Armed with a new type of sailing vessel
called the “longship” which was fast, capable of long distances and able to penetrate
the shallow waters of rivers, the Vikings looted and pillaged from one end of Europe
to the other.

But in addition to being raiders, the Vikings were also traders and settlers. Over
time, Scandinavians settled in cities from Dublin to Paris, and reached as far as
North America. In the east, groups of Vikings sailed up the many rivers that drained
into the Black Sea.

One of these was the Dnieper, and around 860 CE a group of Vikings from
Sweden, known as the Varangians, settled on the banks of the river and founded the
city of Kiev. Assimilating with the local Slavic people, they ruled a small area that
became known as “Rus”. Over time, Rus became “Russia”.

But Russia had a problem. The land around it was flat and open with no defen-
sible natural boundaries, an easy invitation for invaders and raiders, and Russia was
surrounded by powerful enemies. Over the next few centuries, Russia was threatened
or invaded by the Byzantine Empire to the south, the Mongols to the east, Sweden
to the north, and Poland and Lithuania from the west. The Mongols did the most
damage, invading in 1223, destroying Kiev, and ruling Russia for the next 60 years.

By 1283, however, Mongol power was declining, and the Russians were able
to defeat the Asian armies and win independence. Further, they were determined
to never be ruled by a foreign power again. The Russian leader Ivan III, known as
“Ivan the Great,” moved the Russian capital to Moscow and forcibly united all of the
various Russian principalities under his rule. Then, under the theory that “the best
defense is a good offense,” Ivan systematically conquered his neighbors until by 1500,
Russia had more than tripled in size.

Later, when Ivan IV assumed the leadership in 1547, he continued the policy
of “defense by attack,” conquering new territories to provide a buffer zone that insulated
Russia from the foreign powers that surrounded it. Although Ivan IV was not a very
nice person (he earned the nickname “Ivan the Terrible”), he expanded the Russian
Empire from the Baltic to Siberia, and set the stage for Russia’s rise as a world power.
But even after Ivan the Terrible’s conquests, Russia remained vulnerable, and lost
large portions of territory through invasions by Poland and Sweden. By the 18th cen-
tury, the Tsars Peter the Great and Catherine the Great turned the Russian Empire
into a colossus, the largest country in the world and a major European power. But still
Russia was vulnerable.

The problem was geography. The annexation of Siberia ended any serious
threat to Russia from China or Mongolia, as any invasion from that direction would
have to cross thousands of miles of vast frozen tundra and then crawl over the Ural Mountains to finally reach Russia's heartland. But towards the west, the situation was different: a corridor of flat plains ran directly from central Europe right to the gates of Moscow. For centuries, one invader after another would follow this pathway, including the Swedes under King Charles XII in 1707, the French under Napoleon in 1812, the Germans under Kaiser Wilhelm in 1914, and Germany again under the Nazis in 1941. All of these invasions ultimately failed, beaten by Russia's vast expanses and brutal winters. But the devastation and loss of life was massive.

Another issue was economic. As Russia modernized and industrialized in the 19th century, its leaders realized that the real strength of any nation lay in its economic power, and that depended largely on trade. Spain, England, and France had all become global superpowers because they had trade networks that stretched around the world, defended by powerful navies that could project military power anywhere it was needed. But although Russia had the longest coastline in the world, it was mostly useless for global trade. Her primary ports were frozen solid and unusable for much of the year, and all of Russia's trade routes ran next to potential hostile powers that could close them off in time of conflict. In the Pacific, Russian sea power was constrained by the Strait of Tushima, which can be sealed off by either Japan or China. In the Black Sea, naval traffic was straitjacketed by the Bosporus and Dardanelles, which can be closed off by Turkey or Greece, and any Russian ships that make it through these straits must exit the Mediterranean at either Gibraltar (controlled by European naval powers) or (today) the easily-blockable Suez Canal. Russian access to the Persian Gulf, on the other hand, was blocked off by Iran and Afghanistan. And northern sea routes from Russia to Europe or North America must go through the Baltic Sea and then the gaps around England and Iceland—controlled by the British Royal Navy. In every direction, Russia's ability to project naval power was stifled by potential enemies.

Lacking any good warm-water ports and facing an easy invasion route from the west, Russia was therefore doomed to remain at best a regional European power. While able to field a huge army within the landmass of Europe, it was still vulnerable itself to destructive invasions, and, surrounded by potential enemies who could cut off its access to the rest of the world, Russia was unable to either develop its naval clout or to engage in significant global trade.

It was a crucial strategic problem that Russia still faces today. In 1853, Tsar Nicholas I attempted to solve part of his difficulties by occupying Crimea and the port of Sebastopol, and either intimidating or invading Turkey to gain control over access to and from the Black Sea. His effort was unsuccessful after the European naval powers intervened. In 1945, under the Communist regime, Joseph Stalin also sought to solve Russia's age-old strategic problem, by seizing a new buffer zone in Eastern Europe that helped block the traditional invasion path that the Nazis had just taken, and followed that with efforts to expand into southern Asia towards the Persian Gulf and to the north towards the Baltic Sea. Stalin and his successors also hoped to use the Cold War geopolitical chessboard to gain control of ports, for either military or commercial use, in Vietnam, China, Africa and the Middle East.

When Vladimir Putin took control of Russia in 2000, it was feared by many in the West that, with his expanded military programs and newly-aggressive foreign policy, he was attempting to rebuild the Soviet Union. But that misses the mark. Yes, Russia under Putin remains an authoritarian state as it had been in the USSR period (though Putin at least tries to put a democratic face on his regime). But the reality is far simpler: Putin inherited all of the same economic and strategic issues that had faced Russia since the days of Ivan the Terrible. Governments come and go, after all, but national interests remain the same. Vladimir Putin is above all a Russian nationalist, and Russia's national interests remain unchanged: defend against the traditional invasion route, and gain unrestricted access to warm-water seas.

But Putin found himself in even worse strategic shape than the Soviet Union had been before its collapse. While the USSR had carefully maintained its East European buffer zone against what it feared would be a NATO invasion (which would of course follow the very same pathway that invaders had always taken), the post-Cold War Russia lost all of this. One by one, former Warsaw Pact allies left the Russian orbit and joined the EU and/or NATO. NATO military forces (which, to today's Russia, means "American and British") were now positioned within easy striking distance of Moscow itself. Even worse, ethnic and national separatism were threatening to retrace Russia's borders even further as former portions of the USSR broke away and became independent—leaving actual or potential hostile nations right next door (what Putin calls his "near-abroad").

It was, to Russia, a clear threat to its very national survival, and Putin has responded to it just as any Russian nationalist from Peter the Great to Stalin would have done. And it is no accident that all of these efforts have been concentrated in the three directions that Russia has always focused on: a move through southern Asia towards the Persian Gulf, a drive through the Black Sea towards the Mediterranean, and the establishment of a buffer zone to block the traditional invasion route in northern Europe. Taking advantage of the West's global war on Muslims, Russia has crushed secessionist movements in Chechnya and other areas of "the stans" in southern Asia, and intervened in Syria (where Russia has a small naval base on the Mediterranean). Using the excuse of "defending ethnic Russians," Putin has established a buffer zone in Crimea, parts of the Ukraine, and Georgia, and has drawn what is in essence a line in the sand, which NATO can attempt to cross (militarily or politically) only at the risk of all-out war. And using the power politics of energy (Russia is the world's largest producer of natural gas), he has both bribed and threatened other nations into tolerating his nationalist aims.

It is a strategy that Ivan the Terrible in 1547 would have recognized and approved.

Lenny is a longtime labor organizer and environmental, social, and antiwar activist. He was a founder of the Lehigh Valley IWW in the early 1990s.
Growing up in Philadelphia, I learned about some of the rich local labor history: the 1827 founding of the first union to cross craft lines, the 1835 general strike, and the 1869 founding of the Knights of Labor. Some of it was personal—my father took part in the 50-day teachers strike of 1981.

But it wasn’t until decades later that I heard about a young Black firebrand named Ben Fletcher who led the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) Local 8 dockworkers union through a tumultuous decade in the early 20th century.

Fletcher remains much lesser known than his African American labor and left contemporaries A. Philip Randolph and W.E.B. Du Bois. Yet Local 8 was perhaps the most powerful union of its day, and the most successful interracial union of its era. It was a model for how workers can run their unions democratically through direct action on the job.

Thankfully Peter Cole has brought Fletcher to renewed attention in a second and expanded edition of *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*. Cole, a history professor at Western Illinois University, has collected an amazing archive of documents that fill out this fascinating story. Here’s how he summarizes Fletcher’s legacy:

“An avowedly revolutionary union led by a black man forced corporations in America’s third-biggest city and fifth-largest port to deal with a union in which the great majority of members were African Americans and European immigrants. And they did it without ever signing a contract, instead enforcing their demands based upon the ever-present threat of a strike.”

I also recommend Cole’s previous *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia*, about the rise and fall of Local 8. We owe him a lot of gratitude for years of scouring various archives. Cole also discussed Fletcher and Local 8 on a recent podcast.

**A Decade Of Dominance**

The book’s introduction gives a brief account of Fletcher’s life and the history of Local 8. Born in 1890, Fletcher grew up near the Delaware River docks where he eventually worked. At that time dockworkers were hired by the “shape-up” system: you lined up and hoped to get chosen for the day’s work.

Fletcher joined the IWW around 1910 and became a leader of the new Local 8 in 1913. The local was born after a successful two-week strike by the 4,000 dockworkers, who opted to affiliate with the IWW rather than the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA)—foreshadowing a decade of conflict between the two unions and their philosophies of unionism. Perhaps Local 8’s greatest victory was abolishing the shape-up and establishing the hiring hall, where the union would dispatch the workers needed each day.

Local 8 was an incredibly diverse union: one-third African Americans, one-third Irish and Irish Americans, and one-third other European immigrants. It made real the IWW’s commitment to interracial unionism, which was extremely rare for unions of that era. The IWW argued that employers kept Black and white workers fighting each other, using race and racism to hurt all workers.

Fletcher also joined the Socialist Party, but his politics were pulled toward radical unionism rather than electoral work. In a letter to a friend he wrote, “While I do not countenance against the working class striking at the ballot box, I am firmly convinced that foremost and historical mission of Labor is to organize as a class, Industrially.” Cole writes that Fletcher “was resolute that the path away from capitalism to socialism was via worker power, on the job, in industrial unions that eventually would pull off a mammoth General Strike to seize power from capitalists.”

Cole describes the classic Wobbly (the nickname for IWW members) style of organizing through direct action on the job. Using work stoppages and other tactics, Local 8 workers fought to control the jobsite as much as possible. For example, if the bosses hired non-members or fired any Wobblies, workers stopped work, delaying the loading or unloading of ships that were on a tight schedule. Through countless day-to-day actions like this, the IWW strengthened its presence on the docks, and improved wages and working conditions, without ever signing a contract.

The local also abolished the racially segregated work gangs that bosses previously had used to pit workers against each other in competition. All work processes, along with all union committees and events, were racially integrated. “Where it had the power,” Cole writes, “the IWW ended segregation—without a legal contract, without an electoral campaign, and with zero influence among local or national politicians.”

**The ILA Edges In**

Fletcher was caught up in the government’s repression of the IWW when World War I started; he and many other Wobblies were arrested. The government called the union “a vicious, treasonable, and criminal conspiracy” and sought to destroy it. Fletcher, the only Black defendant, served several years in prison, returning to Philadelphia to organize again with Local 8.

However, by the mid-1920s, the ILA emerged as the dominant union on the docks. The ILA was favored by the bosses, and its top-down approach to unionism gave it stability and a steady relationship with employers—but working conditions and democracy on the docks suffered. The employers were willing to sign a contract with the ILA that included the eight-hour day, in return for subservience and labor peace. As Cole describes it,

For the first time, the Philadelphia longshoremen had an ironclad legal agreement with their employers. This contract, unfortunately, ensured that workers earned lower wages than in the open shop era while sacrificing their right to strike at will, which the IWW considered essential to maintaining and expanding worker power. Further, their autonomy declined dramatically once the bureaucratic and hierarchical prerogatives of the ILA were substituted for the democratic traditions of Local 8.
Within a few years, regular meetings and contested elections were distant memories. By 1930, New York-style ILA corruption was rampant.

Fletcher continued to organize for years, becoming widely known in labor and left circles. Tragically, a stroke in 1933 and poor health thereafter ended his activism until his death in 1949.

This was a tremendous loss. Cole wonders “what Fletcher might have done in the mid-1930s when, sparked by a Great Depression that seemed to prove the failures and contradictions of capitalism, a massive surge in unionism and antifascism occurred?” Fletcher lived his last years in New York City and was buried in Brooklyn in an unmarked grave that has never been located.

**Fletcher The Organizer**

The second, longer part of the book is a great collection of articles and reports by and about Fletcher and Local 8. They deal with organizing campaigns, strikes, and other events in the life of the IWW. There are government documents from the investigations of Fletcher, including his prison correspondence. Helpfully, Cole provides historical context for all these materials.

Fletcher was widely regarded as a powerful speaker. One letter about his speaking tour in the 1920s reports that at “several meetings about fifteen hundred have listened, spellbound…” and that he “in thunderous tones with clarion ring so capably espouses labor’s cause.” In another letter, an AFL official says Fletcher was the “only one I ever heard who cut right through to the bone of capitalist pretensions, to being an everlasting ruling class, with a concrete constructive working class union argument.”

A fascinating article from the Black socialist magazine The Messenger reports on a Local 8 meeting where both Black and white workers rejected the idea of forming separate locals:

“It is interesting to note, in this connection, that the white workers were as violent as the Negroes in condemning this idea of segregation. All over the hall murmurs were heard, ‘I’ll be damned if I’ll stand for anybody to break up this organization,’ ‘It’s the bosses trying to divide us,’ ‘We’ve been together this long and we will be together on.’”

An article by Fletcher implored unions to organize Black workers: “No genuine attempt by Organized Labor to wrest any worthwhile and lasting concessions from the Employing Class can succeed as long as Organized Labor for the most part is indifferent and in opposition to the fate of Negro Labor.” He also long insisted that Black workers organize with whites and not form their own segregated unions.

In a tribute to Fletcher after his death, a colleague remembered visiting him in Philadelphia: “Day after day and night after night he covered the water front, twenty miles of it, repeatedly at the risk of his life. He took me to see the shuns in the City of Brotherly Love where longshoremen and their families lived. He agonized over their degrading poverty. He was of them. He was with them.”

**Fletcher’s Legacy**

Historian Robin D.G. Kelley, in the book’s foreword, describes Fletcher as a “radical pragmatist in that he paid attention to context, emphasized solidarity, and approached the work in an improvisatory and flexible manner—all without ever losing sight of the long-term goal: the emancipation of the working class from Capital.”

Ultimately Local 8 couldn’t survive against the combined assault from the government, longshore employers, and the ILA. But Fletcher and his local blazed a path of militant unionism a century ago that has much to teach us today.

I’m glad Cole included a story by Anatole Dolgoff, one of the few people alive who knew Fletcher. I met Dolgoff several years ago when he published Left of the Left a memoir of his anarchist father Sam. He has several chapters about Fletcher, and recounts meeting him at the old New York City IWW hall in the 1940s. He remembers that Fletcher “appeared an old man whose health was shot when I knew him.” He says that Fletcher “projected good humor and decency—you wanted to be in his company—but there was something sad that seeped through.”

Ben Fletcher—the forgotten legend, the former giant. With decades of militant organizing experience, and still only in his 50s, he was no longer in the action. The labor movement needed him then, and we need more folks like him now.
1%-Funded Rally Actors

RAYMOND NAT TURNER

Re-open America
as colonial settler
thugs
Opened her—oceans of
blood, rivers of tears...

Calling All Rally Actors—
Calling All Rally Actors
for psy-wars—for encores
from gun stores—ol’ hardcores
Gun-toting rally actors who ride or die—
Black Panther Party-types need not apply...

LIBERATE MICHIGAN!!
LIBERATE MINNESOTA!!
LIBERATE VIRGINIA!!

Boots on the ground—bone-
spurred by Boss Tweet who
believes Lee punked-out at
Appomattox—and bodies littering
Gettysburg were a Chinese Hoax!

Calling All Rally Actors—
Calling All Rally Actors
for psy-wars—for encores
from gun stores—ol’ hardcores
Gun-toting rally actors who ride or die—
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LIBERATE MICHIGAN!!
LIBERATE MINNESOTA!!
LIBERATE VIRGINIA!!

'Signature strike—'Shock and Awe—
assemblies and senates!
Build black sites in St.Paul—bases in
Lansing!
Move the War House, Capitalist Hill and White
Supreme Court to Commonwealth Richmond!
Employ 'enhanced interrogation techniques:'
Waterboard all unappreciative governors!

Calling All Rally Actors—
Calling All Rally Actors
for psy-wars—for encores
from gun stores—ol’ hardcores
Gun-toting rally actors who ride or die—
Black Panther Party-types need not apply...

LIBERATE MICHIGAN!!
LIBERATE MINNESOTA!!
LIBERATE VIRGINIA!!

Calling for a few good men
Who think solidarity sucks;
" The business of America is business"
and profit over people is as good as it gets...

Calling for a few good men who love the rich—
The ‘Right to Work—’ as nail salon
barbershop, tattoo parlor partisans;
infected fighter Stuntmen. As confederate flag-
waving Extras—FOX-box ‘High value targets’ in
“Harm’s Way;”
collateral damage lusting fossil fuel money,
Flowing like fracking fluid...
Calling All Rally Actors—
Calling All Rally Actors
for psy-wars—for encores
from gun stores—ol’ hardcores
Gun-toting rally actors who ride or die—
Black Panther Party-types need not apply…

LIBERATE MICHIGAN!!
LIBERATE MINNESOTA!!
LIBERATE VIRGINIA!!

Calling all Astroturf Tea Party Players—
Charlottesville Veterans Preferred—to
play
Rosa Parks

Raymond Nat Turner, known as "The Town Crier", is a NYC poet privileged to have
read at the Harriet Tubman Centennial Symposium. He is Artistic Director of the
stalwart JazzPoetry Ensemble UpSurge and has appeared at numerous festivals and
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(Notes from the Editor – continued from inside front cover)

...
news source that challenges him, the inflammatory discourse, the hostility to verifiable reality, and the spreading of untruths and violent conspiracies, especially the “Big Lie” of the stolen election. They view these as precursors to a full-blown fascism. As the Yale historian Timothy Snyder wrote in The New York Times Magazine on Jan. 9: “Post-truth is pre-fascism, and Trump has been our post-truth president. When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place. . . . Post-truth wears away the rule of law and invites a regime of myth.” We can agree yet we’re left without an explanation for what needs an explanation: Why do so many support Trump? That Trump is both cause and symptom eludes the liberal framing.

2) It reproduces the myth of the U.S. as a democracy. Elites repeat this claim ad nauseam. It doesn’t help either that politicians reflexively offer soothing speeches about constitutionalism every chance they get. The centrist discourse thus offers a simplistic picture of a fragile democracy threatened by Trump-incited proto-fascists, violent bigots, and insurrectionists. To be clear, fascism is real but bourgeois electoral politics doesn’t equal democracy. An oligarchic class has captured the state and exercises control over politics. They’ve managed to steal at least $50 trillion from the bottom 90% of the population since the 1970s. They’ve transformed politics into an art of austerity-pushing by corporate-backed careerist politicians. Their greatest fear is democracy, and they’ve used fascism to beat back democracy around the world. Those who accept the myth of U.S. democracy need to pay closer attention to history.

3) It ignores the roots of white supremacy and fascism in U.S. politics and culture. The U.S. is a settler colonial state with a history of genocide against the indigenous population. It’s also a racial capitalist state with centuries of slavery and racist terror against blacks. Racism is foundational to the U.S. Racist hooliganism and white nationalism are rooted in a history of extermination and super-exploitation.

4) It hides the complexity of the system and the elite in the rise of violent reactionary forces at home and abroad. The U.S. is an imperialist state with a history of global alliances with Pinochet-type fascist forces, ruinous wars of aggression, torture, and death by economic strangulation waged against mostly the darker nations of the world. There is also four decades of neoliberal assault on the population during which capital engaged in a counter-revolutionary class war to discipline the working class and roll back the New Deal gains it had made in the post-war era. Neoliberalism serves the oligarchs well while effectively abandoning the common good, causing despair and anger among the public. These conditions were replicated in other parts of the world as millions have become resentful and lost trust in institutions. Ignoring this history lets the elites hide their and the system’s complicity in using and empowering the far-right to prop up empire and class rule.

5) It lets the establishment use the Capitol riots to expand the powers of the national security state. The ex-CIA Director John Brennan likens the homegrown ultra-right to foreign insurgencies (say al-Qaeda), clearly implying a counterinsurgency approach to domestic “terrorism.” The Biden team he said is “now moving in laser-like fashion to try to uncover… what looks very similar to insurgencies that we’ve seen overseas, where they germinate in different parts of the country… and it brings together an unholy alliance frequently of religious extremists, authoritarians, fascists, bigots, racists, nativists, even libertarians… there’s been this momentum… generated as a result of the demagogic rhetoric of people that’s just a part of government but also those who continue in the halls of congress.” Yesterday’s “deplorables” and “cultish members” are today’s “insurgents” and “terrorists.” The centrist consensus is pushing for a 9/11-style War on Domestic Terror. Yet, the U.S. is already a heavily militarized surveillance state needing no new coercive measures to confront violent ultra-right groups.

Late capitalist normality produced Trumpism. Liberal anti-fascism obfuscates this fact. Centrist liberals hide their role in upholding oligarchic class rule and hide the U.S. empire and its alliances with fascist forces. They support suppressing dissent to hide these facts and preserve the neoliberal global order. The U.S. has a tradition of suppressing the independent left. The capitalist carceral state is fascism. The genocide of the natives is fascism. Centuries of racial terror is fascism. Supporting fascists in the global South is fascism. As the Black Agenda Report’s columnist Margaret Kimberley told me, fascism is not “something new and Trumpian”; it’s “a mistake to think that he is unique.” The left should oppose the centrist liberal consensus on grounds of principle and self-preservation. Defeating fascism requires that we stop producing the conditions that give rise to it. That means building a radically different society. For now, let’s stop the elites from hijacking 1/6 to silence critical voices and make the world safe for capitalism.

Let’s Burn All Illusions in 2021 appeared on Common Dreams on January 13, and Why Liberal Anti-Fascism Upholds the Status Quo appeared on Common Dreams on January 24.