The Atomism of Neoclassical Economics  Michael A. Lebowitz

Whiteness  Robert Jensen

What Would a Deep Green New Deal Look Like?  Don Fitz

Palestine Can’t Breathe  Faramarz Farbod

The Pandemic Housework Dilemma Is Whitewashed  Nicole Froio

Class Conflict and the Amazon Union Drive in Alabama  Ted Morgan
Notes From the Editor

As the current issue of *Left Turn* goes to press, we are witness to another round of Israeli violence against the Palestinians followed by another cease fire. There is a definite need to raise critical awareness of the Question of Palestine, Zionism and the US-backing for the apartheid state of Israel. Clearly, the most recent spectacular Israeli assault on the Palestinians requires attention in itself. Even more importantly, there is the matter of the need to counter the intention of the powers-that-be (namely, the US, Israel, and the ruling elites in the Arab client states of the US in the region) to conduct politics in West Asia as if Palestinians don’t matter. We believe that Palestinian lives matter and that their suffering constitutes the oldest wound in the heart of the “Middle East” requiring urgent attention. Lastly, the official US and Israeli narratives employ fictions to obscure the reality of Palestinian struggle. They also leave behind historical voids in their accounting of what has transpired leading to the present unsustainable and violent moment.

In this issue of *Left Turn* two essays one by Faramarz Farbod and the other by Tariq Ali discuss the Palestinian struggle for justice and self-determination, Zionism and anti-Semitism. We are also using the remainder of the space in this Notes from the Editor section on this topic by reprinting a letter written to President Biden on Gaza by Dr. Sara Roy, a senior research scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University. Dr. Roy is the author of several books, including the indispensable book *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development* (1995) and most recently of *Unsilencing Gaza: Reflections on Resistance* (2021). Her letter first appeared on www.counterpunch.org on May 21, 2021.

We hope that the two essays and the letter below help readers develop more critical awareness of what’s at stake and what remains to be done.

(continued on page 57)
Contents

Notes From the Editor ........................................................................................................... ii

The Atomism of Neoclassical Economics Michael A. Lebowitz ........................................ 2

Whiteness Robert Jensen ..................................................................................................... 8

What Would a Deep Green New Deal Look Like? Don Fitz ............................................. 16

Palestine Can’t Breathe Faramarz Farbod ........................................................................... 22

Notes on Anti-Semitism, Zionism and Palestine Tariq Ali ................................................ 27

The Pandemic Housework Dilemma Is Whitewashed Nicole Froio .................................. 30

Class Conflict and the Amazon Union Drive in Alabama Ted Morgan ............................... 33

We Must Fight the System, Not Each Other Elaheh Farmand ........................................... 38

A Few Comments on the Origins of Great Wealth Gary Olson ........................................ 40

Skylab and the Sit-Down Strike in Space Lenny Flank ....................................................... 43

Be Very Revolutionary Franca Roibal Fernandez ............................................................... 45

The Graveyard of Empires Redux Rajan Menon ................................................................. 48

The Privileged Minority and the Struggling Majority Phil Reiss ........................................ 54

Contributed work expresses the views of the creators and does not necessarily represent the views of the Alliance

Original writing, drawings, photographs, and other creative work are subject to the creator’s copyright and may be used only with permission of the artist.
The Atomism of Neoclassical Economics

Michael A. Lebowitz

How can we understand capitalism? Neoclassical economics, which is to say, mainstream economics, rarely uses the name. Rather, it talks about the “market system” or the free market, a system in which individual property owners (both those who own material resources and those who own merely their personal capacities) contract with each other in their self-interest. And, as long as they are free to contract and free to choose, we are assured that the result gives us the best of all possible worlds.

Neoclassical economics begins (and ends) with the individual. And this individual is treated as an isolated individual atom: the isolated individual consumer, the isolated individual capitalist owner, the isolated worker. Further, this individual is assumed to be rational, which the theory equates with self-interested. So, as a rational individual, this person is always looking to maximize self-interest, that is, to maximize profits or wages or the utility obtained from the goods purchased. If not doing that, then by definition the individual is not rational. In short, this individual always searches for the right point, the optimum point, in his or her self-interest. Thorstein Veblen, at the beginning of the twentieth century, described this as the view of the individual as “a lightning calculator of pleasures and pains.”

And that’s a very accurate picture of the starting point of this theory, which is the idea of the individual as a calculator or, better yet, as a computer. Certain information is fed into this computer: what it wants to maximize, the resources at its disposal, the technologies that are relevant, and the prices of things. And, on the basis of this information, the computer turns out the correct solution, namely the one that maximizes pleasure or minimizes pain. So, for example, the computer, if a consumer, will decide how much it will purchase of different products based upon the relative utility it receives from each product and their relative prices. Pleasure versus pain.

Or the computer, if a worker, will decide how much it wants to work based on its preferences for leisure versus work and the wage (or alternative sources of income like welfare payments). And the computer, if it is a capitalist, will determine whether to use a machine or worker based on the relative prices of each and the nature of the technology—and whether to use a skilled or unskilled worker based upon the relative price and the relative efficiency of each, given the technology. Or the computer may be a criminal. As a rational criminal, this computer considers the benefits and costs of various acts and chooses those crimes for which the benefits are highest and the costs (the likelihood of being caught and the extent of punishment) are least. Or the computer will determine the best possible characteristics of a potential spouse, weighing pleasure and pain.

It’s all about rational choice. In each case, the computer will generate a correct solution given the data. It will choose the optimum point that maximizes pleasure relative to pain or minimizes pain relative to pleasure. That’s the starting point and premise of neoclassical economics—that the individual will be rational and will choose the best solution possible in his self-interest. As Veblen put it, the individual is...
presumed to be “in stable equilibrium except for the buffets of the impinging forces that displace him in one direction or another.”

Now, the neoclassical economist doesn’t care what equilibrium the computer has generated. What interests the neoclassical economist is how the computer solution will change if one piece of data is changed. It is obvious that if you change the data fed into that computer, it will generate a different optimum solution. So, that is the principal question neoclassical economists pose: let us change the value of one variable and see what the new equilibrium will be. Significantly, neoclassical economists do not pose this as a process that occurs in real time. Rather, they just want to change one variable and to see what the lightning calculator of pleasure and pain would do. But this is not a process that occurs in time. Because in a real world if we did change variable X, this could affect variable Y, and a change in variable Y might affect variable Z or variable X itself (in other words, create a feedback process). In real time, there are always processes of interaction, but neoclassical economics is not considering a real process that occurs in real time. That is why the critical phrase used is “all other things equal” (or, in Latin, ceteris paribus). We change one bit of data and nothing else.

So, with that in mind, let’s think like a neoclassical economist. What happens if we raise the price of one consumer product? Well, obviously that increases the pain of purchasing that product, so the computer as consumer will generate a result in which less of that product is purchased and more of another. A new optimum solution is generated by the computer. Or let us raise the wage. The computer as capitalist, in comparison to the original situation, would choose to use a machine rather than a worker because the pain of hiring the worker has increased. Or let’s increase payments for welfare. The computer as worker chooses to go on welfare rather than to get a job. It’s all very simple. In every case, the question asked by neoclassical economic theory is what that individual, the instantaneous calculator of pleasure and pain, will choose in the second case compared to the first case. And the answer is self-evident. Given that the individual is an instantaneous calculator of pleasure and pain, he would make a different decision. If a potential particular pain is increased, choose less; if a potential particular pleasure is increased, choose more.

In fact, the answer is so self-evident that it is not necessary to derive the answer from any evidence. All the economists have to do is engage in a process of deduction: self-examination, self-interrogation. They ask, what would I do under the circumstances? Now, the economists know that they are rational. In other words, they know that rational persons like themselves act out of self-interest and only that. Indeed, neoclassical economists are particularly rational in this sense; that is, people who study neoclassical economics tend to be much more self-oriented and selfish than people who study in other fields.

Here, then, you have the basic wisdom of neoclassical economics, which serves as the basis and justification for neoliberal state policies. For example, if there’s unemployment insurance and the benefits are increased, the logical conclusion of neoclassical economics is that you’ll get more people who choose unemployment. So, the neoclassical economist says, “unemployment insurance causes unemployment.” The same economists also tell us that having programs in support of single mothers causes mothers to be single and need support. Or they’ll tell us that having welfare
payments based on the number of children in a family—that is, the larger the number of children, the larger the payment—leads to increases in the number of children on welfare. In other words, increase the benefits and more people will choose to be single mothers on welfare. Or if you reduce the cost to individuals of healthcare and the cost of visits to doctors, people will go to the doctors and use hospitals more and the result will be significant increases in the cost of providing healthcare. Therefore, it is simple neoclassical economics that the way to reduce the cost of healthcare is by charging more for it. Clearly, the rational individual under these circumstances will choose health over sickness. Or they’ll tell us that if you raise the minimum wage, capitalists will hire fewer workers; so, raising the minimum wage produces unemployment. The thinking is pervasive. A neoclassical economist will tell you that seatbelt legislation is bad because, by reducing the risk of serious injury, more people will drive recklessly; thus, seatbelt legislation causes accidents.

Look at the policies that flow from neoclassical economics. Do you want to increase employment? Lower wages, reduce welfare payments, and reduce taxes on capital so it invests more? Do you want to lower the number of children growing up dependent upon welfare? Lower the payments to welfare mothers. Do you want to reduce the cost of healthcare? Increase the charge for healthcare. And, most of all, if you want anything good, reduce the interference of the state in the economy—except, and this tells us something about the real beliefs of the economists, the role of the police and the judiciary in enforcing property rights.

Certainly, you don’t try to solve the problem of poverty through state programs. For neoclassical economists, the way to solve poverty is by removing the state and letting the market work. And it’s by individuals making the right choices, for example, by investing in their education (beginning around age six, one economist said in a seminar at my university). If you try to help the poor, that will reduce their incentive. And it is not appropriate to engage in redistribution of income and wealth by taxing the rich to support the poor; this will lead both the rich and the poor to reduce their incentive. A cartoon on my office door for many years described this theory well. One frame said, “The way to give the rich more incentive is to give them more money”; the other frame said, “The way to give the poor more incentive is to give them less money”!

The message is clear: leave everything to those rational individuals. When you try to “do good” through the state, you just make everything worse. Rent controls? Housing shortage. Price controls for food? Starvation. In the strange world of “all other things equal,” by definition, there is only one answer: hands off, laissez-faire. And it is a strange world. Recall the proposition that unemployment insurance causes unemployment. The premise is that unemployment is the result of rational choice, that is, unemployment is voluntary. People are choosing not to have jobs. They just look like they’re out of work involuntarily. They may even think so themselves, but neoclassical economists know better. Unemployment is voluntary. If people wanted to work, they could get jobs by working for lower wages. But what if you’re a little skeptical and say, No, capitalists are firing and laying off workers! That doesn’t look very voluntary on the part of the workers. One neoclassical economist responded by saying that the employer has anticipated the worker’s choice. He anticipates that the worker would prefer to be fired than to work at a lower wage, and so the employer fires the worker “to the mutual satisfaction of both employee and employer.”
But how do we go from those isolated individual computers to talk about policy proposals at the level of a society? Well, those neoclassical economists just combine those computers, assuming that society is simply the sum of the isolated individuals within it. That’s what society is for them, the place where those computers can interact. It is where those isolated self-interested individuals come together for their mutual benefit. And that’s all society is! No one made this point better than former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher: “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.”

So that’s what happens in society according to the neoclassical economist. We move from a single rational computer to two rational computers, each attempting to maximize its self-interest, and they engage in exchange; they can specialize in a certain kind of activity and exchange. Just start everyone off with an “initial endowment” and let the trading begin (quickly, before there are any questions about the inequality of those initial endowments). Each person gets what he or she wants from the other by showing that it is to the other’s advantage. As Adam Smith stated, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from regard to their own interest.” So each party to an exchange benefits or there wouldn’t be an exchange. Further, as long as people are free to engage in any exchange, they will be able to make the best possible exchange. For example, if a particular capitalist won’t pay a worker what she is worth, the worker can go elsewhere. So the result is that in a free market everyone will get what each deserves. John Bates Clark, a leading U.S. economist early in the last century, said it all very explicitly. He began his book, The Distribution of Wealth, by announcing:

It is the purpose of this work to show that the distribution of the income of society is controlled by a natural law, and that this law, if it worked without friction, would give to every agent of production the amount of wealth which that agent creates.

You get what you deserve. So don’t complain. If you don’t get very much, it’s because you are not worth very much. But it is the best you can do.

The result of the combination of these rational, self-seeking individuals, thus, is that everyone benefits. This is what Adam Smith called the “Invisible Hand.” It is the proposition that allows neoclassical economists to move from the rational individual to the rational society. It says, simply, that when an individual seeks his self-interest, he promotes the public good: “He is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.” In other words, selfishness is good. Or, as Gordon Gecko said in Oliver Stone’s classic movie Wall Street: “Greed is good.”

Where did the invisible hand come from? For Adam Smith and many others at the time and after, the answer was clear: it came from God. A familiar view in the eighteenth century was that God created a world of economic harmony in which everyone benefits everyone else by following his own self-interest. That particular religious faith became economic faith, a secular religion, and a central part of that secular faith is that as long as there is no interference by the state, all will be well. As the U.S. economist John Kenneth Galbraith described this view, “In a state of bliss, there is no place for a Ministry of Bliss.”

Very simply, neoclassical economics is a justification of the existing society, with all of its inequality and injustice. Neoclassical economics serves as a justification of
capitalism. But not because it talks about capitalism. Rather, that justification flows from its fundamental assumption that “if you can understand the smallest parts of the system in isolation from one another, then all you have to do is to put them together correctly in order to understand the whole.”6 Accordingly, since every unit acts rationally and maximizes self-interest, so also does society, the sum of the many ones. As Frédéric Bastiat, a nineteenth-century French economist, articulated this premise, “That which is right with regard to one person is also right with regard to society.”7 As long as all are free to choose, it is the best of all possible worlds.

True, there is a problem with the way neoclassical theory moves from the premise of a rational individual to the conclusion that the society is rational. As Keynes pointed out in a famous example, there is a significant fallacy in this inference. Any individual can decide to increase his savings and improve his future position. However, all individuals cannot. By lowering their consumption, they reduce aggregate spending and that leads to lower production, lower employment, and lower income for all. This is called the “paradox of thrift,” and it is a classic example of the “fallacy of composition,” the logical flaw in saying that what is true for one is necessarily true for all.

When people act as if the properties of the individual parts can be assumed to be the properties of the whole, the results can be quite different from their expectations. If one person stands up in a theater, he can see better. But if all people stand up? If one country devalues its currency, it can increase exports, reduce its imports and stimulate the economy. But if all countries devalue their currency? What happens if a country decides that it can be more competitive internationally by destroying trade unions and driving down the wages of workers? What happens if all competing countries do the same? One person goes to university in order to improve his chance at getting a job, but what if all people do? (Well, the answer is go to graduate school!) In this case, one writer commented, the value of your education depends not only on how much you have but also on how much the person ahead of you in the job line has.

In short, we can't just add up the individuals. Because they are interdependent. And interdependence is pervasive in the real world, as are its effects, which can be seen most obviously in the crisis of our common home, the earth. In its theory, though, given that it begins with each rational individual only taking into account the things he has to pay for, neoclassical economics has some difficulty explaining how the rational choices of individuals can lead to irrational social outcomes. So, to the extent that it can, it sweeps results of interdependency offstage into a category called “externalities.” As it turns out, externalities are everywhere, and they are an anomaly for a theory that simply adds up individuals without taking into account their interdependence and interaction. So, the way neoclassical theorists deal with this in their work is by assuming that there are no interdependencies, no externalities, and if there are, they are trivial—minor, second-order effects that can be ignored without losing too much explanatory power. Unfortunately for the theory, this increasingly lacks any credibility, as we exist in a conjuncture marked by the crisis of the earth system.

By not beginning with the recognition of interdependence, neoclassical economics falsifies the nature of both parts and whole. Consider the following example of interdependency, which relates to the fallacy of composition. The idea comes from G.
A. Cohen, a British Marxist philosopher, but I liked it so much I revised it and made it my own and introduced it in my first lectures for my Marxian economics class:

On the floor of a locked room in which there are ten people, there is a single heavy key. Anyone can pick up the key, go to the door, unlock it, and leave. But once that happens, no one else can get out. So, the question Cohen posed is: Are these people free? Each individual is free to pick up the key and leave. But it is a fallacy of composition to conclude from this that everyone can leave. Their freedom is conditional; it depends upon no one else exercising their freedom. Whatever happens, there will be nine people trapped in the room. Cohen used this example to talk about what he called the “structural unfreedom of the proletariat,” namely, how any worker could become a capitalist, but all workers couldn’t become capitalists (a point that Marx had earlier made in one of his many examples of the fallacy of composition).

But why in this case is it wrong to assume that what is true of an individual is true for the whole group? Because there is a constraint on the whole. It is a structural constraint upon the whole that doesn’t apply to any single individual. There is only one key. The particular interdependence of these people is given by the particular structure in which they exist, and their properties and characteristics flow from being parts of that particular whole. To describe and define those people accurately, they can’t be viewed as isolated atoms, as individual computers that can be added up. Can we talk about those individuals without first describing the society of which they are part? All we know about the individuals in the room at this point is that they are interdependent because of the external constraint. But surely there is more to say. We don’t know the particular structure in which they exist, that is, the society of which they are part. Is this a society characterized by equality? Are these individuals separate and self-seeking or do they know and care for each other? If, for example, there is a limited quantity of water in this locked room, surely the nature of social relations among those individuals matters. Are they atomistic individuals free to take what they want or are they functioning as members of a community? How can we understand anything without beginning with the whole and the nature of relations within that whole?

This is one way Marxian political economy differs from neoclassical economics. Rather than starting with individuals and markets, it begins with the nature of the system, a whole characterized by particular relations among parts of that whole. In particular, Capital’s focus was upon exploring capitalism as a system, upon analyzing the logic of capital and the dynamic tendencies that flow from the properties of that system.

Michael Lebowitz is professor emeritus of economics at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and the author of several books including The Socialist Imperative, The Contradictions of “Real Socialism” and The Socialist Alternative. He was Director, Program in Transformative Practice and Human Development, Centro Internacional Miranda, in Caracas, Venezuela, from 2006-2011.

Whiteness

ROBERT JENSEN

Is the United States making progress in the quest to transcend its White-supremacist history? After the end of Jim Crow and legal racial segregation, the debate was over how and to what degree racism endured in less visible ways, with some arguing that the United States had become a “post-racial” society. That debate evaporated with the re-emergence in the political mainstream of overt White supremacy, articulated on websites such as Daily Stormer, and thinly veiled appeals to White identity, given journalistic labels such as “White ethno-nationalism,” which fueled the election of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 presidential race and the strong showing of anti-immigration parties throughout Europe. Today, analyses of racism and advocacy for racial justice must continue to account for the more subtle realities of a White-centered world but also contend with that open White supremacy.

Both of these tasks require a focus on Whiteness. That is obvious when White people claim that status and mobilize politically around it, whether in neo-Nazi groups or more mainstream political formations. But Whiteness is also crucial to understand the more centrist/liberal practices of the dominant culture. Whiteness is a racial category that is meaningful not only for those who embrace it but for all White people, and pathology of Whiteness is the central problem of our racial system.

Paradoxically, shifting Whiteness to the center of the analysis offers a way to de-center Whiteness by making visible the category of White, challenging the unspoken assumption of White-as-norm, and stripping away Whiteness’s always-present claim (whether explicit or implicit) of superiority. The goal is the recognition that the color of the race problem is White — racial conflict is a product of historical and ongoing claims of White supremacy. Though originally crafted and imposed by White elites, White supremacy eventually was accepted by most of the White community. The end of racism, whether in its overt or more subtle manifestations, requires the end of Whiteness. To end Whiteness, it first must be identified and analyzed.

This essay is focused on the idea of Whiteness, not on the consequences of White supremacy on non-White people. The evidence of those consequences is clear and dealt with throughout this volume. Studies from sociology and psychology demonstrate that White people, including those who reject racism and White supremacy, often act in the world based on White-supremacist assumptions. Extensive data outlines the racialized disparities in wealth and well-being that have long existed in U.S. society and endure decades after the significant legislative achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. The focus here will be on the concept at the core of those realities, looking primarily at the United States, where these ideas developed most distinctly and remain most visibly at the center of contemporary social life.

Like many concepts deployed in the study of complex social realities, “Whiteness” can illuminate or obscure reality depending on framing and focus. In this essay, the focus will be primarily on questions of power and wealth; I will use a political and
economic framework. The modern notion of Whiteness was created by elites who wanted to maintain and deepen political and economic power, and White supremacy today protects the status and wealth of a range of Whites. Out of that political and economic system, White people have developed collective practices to shore up White control (the culture of White supremacy) and come to hold certain ideas and experience certain emotions about race (the psychology of White supremacy). Those cultural and psychological factors are important, but to most effectively analyze Whiteness, White supremacy, and White privilege, we must remain grounded in the political and economic sphere. This is crucial in a period in which popular terms such as “multiculturalism” and “diversity” often signal a focus on the cultural and psychological that minimizes or ignores political and economic dimensions.

What are white people?

White people often have White skin, which actually is not really White, of course, but a pale/pinkish/off-White shade that has come to be labeled as White. Associated with that skin pigmentation are a variety of other physical traits regarding, especially, the shape of noses and lips and the texture of hair. White people typically can trace their ancestors to Europe, especially the United Kingdom, northern Europe, and Scandinavia—what many think of as the places that are the source of the people who are most authentically White. But being White is not really about how people look or where our ancestors came from.

White people are most clearly defined as those people living in a White-supremacist society who are understood to be White by other individuals, especially those who make and/or execute political, economic, and social policies in the institutions of that society. People are White, in this sense, when they are perceived as being White by a police officer, by the person interviewing job candidates, or by the loan officer of a bank. A person is White if people with power believe the person to be White.

This means that people whose physical attributes may make it hard to categorize them in racial terms can be perceived as White in one situation and not in another; such decisions about racial classification result not just from qualities in the individual who is being evaluated but from the expectations of those doing the evaluating. A fair-skinned person with White and black ancestors might be classified differently by two different police officers, for example. Markers other than physical appearance also are relevant; light-skinned people who would be categorized as White based on physical appearance can shift into the Latina/Latino classification after someone hears them speak with an accent.

Although the terms “multi-racial” or “bi-racial” are used frequently today to describe people with parents from different racial groups, in the political and economic sense there are few people who straddle racial categories in ways that defy classification. A person may have relatives from many different racial categories and hence be multi-racial in cultural terms, in the sense of having connections to different traditions and practices. But in interactions with others, a multi-racial person is most often going to be treated based on the perceptions people have of the racial group that they assign to the person. In such cases, the actual family history of the multi-racial or bi-racial person is irrelevant to the perceptions of others. There are some mixed-
race individuals whose characteristics are so ambiguous that others will be unable to
categorize them, but that is rare.

Beyond such individual ambiguity, entire groups of people who were not initially
classified as White in the United States—the Irish and Jews, along with immigrants
from parts of southern and eastern Europe—“became” White by accepting the
structure of a White-supremacist system. For example, Noel Ignatieff has described
how Irish were the targets of intense bigotry and discrimination when they first came
in large numbers to the United States but strove as a group to have themselves identi-
fied as White to secure a place in the United States’ racial hierarchy. At the collective
level, therefore, “White” also is not a description of biology but a term that simply
means an identifiable group of people are perceived as White by those with power.

Where did the idea of whiteness come from?

Despite the common assumption that human beings have always categorized
each other on the basis of race, the practice is relatively recent. The creation of modern
Whiteness, and accompanying rigid notion of racial categories, is connected to the
“divide and conquer” strategies that elites throughout history have used to control the
majority of a population and maintain an unequal distribution of wealth and power.

In the early years of the British colonies in North America, indentured serv-

ants, typically working under harsh conditions, made up the majority of the labor
force. Eventually slaves began arriving from Africa, often working alongside those
indentured servants. Rigid racial categories had not yet been created, there were
no clear laws around slavery, and personal relationships and alliances between the
indentured servants and slaves were not uncommon. As the workers from England
began to demand better conditions, the planter elite saw those alliances as a serious
threat to their power. The “solution” was to increase the use of African slaves and
separate them from poor White workers by giving the Whites a higher status with
more opportunities without disturbing the basic hierarchical distribution of wealth and power. This successfully undermined the alliances of blacks and Whites, leading
White workers to identify more with wealthy Whites while blacks were increasingly
associated with the degradation inherent in slavery.

This strategy of elites, written into law in the slave codes, undermined solidarity
between poor blacks and Whites and proved to be a model for not only disrupting
connections between White and all non-White workers, but also for pitting different
non-White groups against each other. The limited benefits that elites bestowed on
White workers have been referred to as “the wage of Whiteness,” which is in large
part psychological—White workers in this system get to think of themselves as supe-
rior to non-Whites, and especially blacks, no matter how impoverished they may be
or how wide the gap between their lives and the lives of wealthy White people.

A powerful summary of this comes from the film Mississippi Burning, in which
a Southern-born White FBI agent in the United States tries to explain the state’s
racial politics to a Northern White colleague. The Southerner tells the story of how
his father, jealous of the success of a nearby black farmer, poisoned that neighbor’s
mule. The father told his son, “If you ain’t better than a nigger, son, who are you
better than?” Challenged by his Northern colleague not to make excuses for racism,
the Southerner says he is simply describing his father, “an old man who was so full of hate that he didn’t know that being poor was what was killing him.”

Notions of White supremacy also were important in White people’s campaign to eliminate indigenous people in what is now the United States and in other parts of the Americas. If native peoples were less than fully human, or at least inferior humans to Europeans, then the extermination of those people and the expropriation of their land could be presented as the inevitable triumph of a superior group and, therefore, morally justified. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt defended the expansion of Whites across the continent as an inevitable process “due solely to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace into the red wastes where the barbarian peoples of the world hold sway.”1

From these roots emerged an increasingly well-developed notion of White supremacy that became codified in law and embedded in cultural practices, with disastrous consequences not only for people of indigenous and African descent but also every other non-White group. Although there have been several points in which the United States has been in a position to renounce this White supremacy—such as the abolition of slavery after the Civil War and the end of apartheid in the 20th century Civil Rights Movement—Whiteness and White supremacy has “survived U.S. history,” to borrow historian David Roediger’s phrase. White people's belief in their special status has demonstrated an incredible tenacity; even when it is widely agreed to be morally bankrupt and intellectually indefensible, the idea of Whiteness and the accompanying White-supremacist system remain deeply woven into the fabric of society.

Why is whiteness so hard to shake?

Roediger’s analysis reminds us that White-defined and -dominated institutions, and White people individually, must confront the gap between stated ideals around racial justice in a post-civil rights society and the actual working of that society. This leads to troubling observations about the White community in general. While it is easy to condemn the bigotry of those White people who are overtly racist—those whose conception of Whiteness has never moved beyond the 19th century—the more vexing questions concern “polite” White society that rejects the ugly expressions of White supremacy but has been unable and/or unwilling to take serious steps to remake society on egalitarian principles.

It is widely accepted that race is real in social terms—political, economic, and cultural systems treat race as if it were a coherent way of categorizing humans—and that race is a fiction in biological terms. Work on the human genome reveals some patterns that correlate with our ancestors’ continent of origin, but there are not distinct races. As discussed in chapter 1 of this volume, modern scientific evidence clearly shown that there is one human race, and the people who are part of it have various kinds of physical differences.

So, there is a scientific consensus that the idea of biological race is incoherent and a professed moral consensus that rejects the claim that people in one socially-constructed racial group could be inherently superior to others. Why, then, does White
supremacy continue to structure U.S. society and so much of the world? Why do people in the socially constructed category of “White” — even those who would agree with the scientific and moral consensus — avoid the implications of the relevant data about the unjust distribution of wealth and power? Why do White people hold onto a sense of themselves as White when at the same time they condemn White supremacy? If the concept of Whiteness has no meaning outside of White supremacy, why do White people who believe in justice have so much trouble letting go of Whiteness?

Given the complex interplay of the political, economic, cultural, and psychological, no simple answers are likely, but patterns can be identified. In societies in which people believe there always will be hierarchies, it appears to be in one’s self-interest (defined in material terms with a short-range view) to accept the hierarchies and try to climb to, or stay in, the highest position possible. The potential rewards for this are access (or the promise of access) to wealth, greater social status, and an inflated sense of self-esteem. Only a small percentage of White people are wealthy, of course, and many White people in contemporary U.S. society do not work or live in positions of high status. So while all three types of rewards are available only to a relatively small group of White people, even the poorest and most vulnerable Whites can extract some social value from Whiteness — the state of being White, of being on top in a racial hierarchy.

The complexity of this is captured in the term “White trash,” a slur used to describe White people with few financial resources and/or low social status. For such people, one response to the cruel hierarchy from which the insult emerges would be to openly reject White supremacy and make common cause with the people of color who are at risk in similar ways — to reject the “White” and embrace the “trash” as a source of solidarity and strength. Yet no sustained cross-racial movement of the dispossessed has taken root in that segment of the White community in the United States, despite the potential for political success of such a grassroots strategy.

Whiteness has the capacity to dull the moral sensibilities of privileged White people, while at the same time providing some way for those without wealth or status to dull the effects of life near the bottom of the hierarchy. Again, the tenacity of the idea of Whiteness is striking.

**White reactions to “white privilege” in the u.s.**

In a White-supremacist society, White people will have advantages that are not a product of any individual effort or ability but are built into the structure of society. We call this White privilege. That is hardly a radical claim, yet it continues to be controversial in many sectors of U.S. society.

Overt White supremacists argue that White people are now victimized in the contemporary racial order, although there is no data to support such a claim of “reverse racism.” Others invoke the idea that U.S. society is a meritocracy and reject the possibility that things they have accomplished could be in any way the product of such privilege. And many of those who concede that racism is still a serious problem attempt to divert attention from White privilege by suggesting that racial justice can best be achieved by adopting a “color-blind” approach to social life and public policy. Such a claim is coherent only if there existed a truly level playing field
on which we could safely ignore color without fear that we would unconsciously replicate White-supremacist patterns. But because of Whites’ historical advantages in the accumulation of wealth, along with contemporary manifestations of unconscious racism, such a level playing field does not exist. To claim to be color blind, then, is to endorse blindness when assessing the effects of color and, therefore, to lend tacit support to White supremacy.

Resistance to the idea of White privilege in the White community comes from across the political spectrum. Part of this is no doubt rooted in calculations of self-interest, but it seems to be in part the product of a lack of clarity in the use of the term, and the tendency for the term to be used in isolation from analyses of other hierarchies.

The claim that White privilege operates in contemporary society does not mean White privilege dictates the outcome of every interaction, but rather that it simply is one significant factor that may affect the outcome of those interactions. Take the commonly cited case of “driving while black/brown,” the experience of being targeted by law enforcement if one is perceived of driving in the “wrong” part of town or in the “wrong” kind of car. The claim is not that every black or brown person will be pulled over for no legitimate reason, or that every such interaction will result in the use of unnecessary force by an officer. Nor is the claim that White people are never treated unjustly by law enforcement officers. But there are patterns of treatment based on race; non-White people must deal with that potential threat on a daily basis in ways White people are privileged to ignore.

As the editors of this volume noted in the introduction, we can, and should, recognize the effects of other hierarchies, such as those involving sex, sexuality, and class. In certain situations a black manager could wield power unfairly over a White worker, given the inequality built into corporate capitalism. An indigenous man could sexually harass a White woman, given the power dynamics in patriarchy. A straight Latino might refuse to rent an apartment to a White gay man or lesbian, given the nature of heterosexism. Recognizing that White privilege exists does not require one to ignore how other systems of privilege operate alongside White supremacy. To claim that White people have privilege is simply to acknowledge that all other social factors being equal, non-White people face a range of hostile behaviors—from racist violence to being taken less seriously in a business meeting, from discrimination in hiring to subtle exclusion in social settings. While all people, including Whites, experience unpleasant interactions with others, White people do not carry the burden of negative racial stereotypes into those interactions. That advantage is what we call White privilege.

“White history month” and the problem of false equivalency

White people sometimes point out that there is no White History Month to balance Black History Month, or no White Student Center to provide similar services to a Latina/Latino Student Center. If race is discussed only in cultural or psychological terms, such claims may appear to have some merit. But when evaluated in the context of the distribution of power and wealth, using a political and economic framework, the frivolous nature of arguments that are based on false equivalency is clear. There is no White History Month because history in a White-supremacist society is rou-
tinely taught from the perspective of White people. There is no White Student Center because the services on a campus typically are designed to serve the needs of the dominant White student population.

Embracing White identity is not equivalent to non-White peoples’ embrace of racialized identities. Pride in being black need not come with a notion that there is something biological or essential about black people from which the pride emerges; instead, black pride can grow from the collective resistance to White supremacy that black people have maintained throughout history. A Chicano identity is a political statement about one’s refusal to accept White dominance. Asian-American and indigenous organizations can create a space where members gather without having to deal with White norms.

No such equivalent pride, identity, or space is necessary or possible for White people, whose racial identity is rooted in domination, not resistance to domination. Whiteness is not an identity rooted in actual cultural traditions but was instead constructed for political and economic domination. Individual White people can be proud of their personal achievements and feel rooted in cultural traditions from specific places in Europe. But Whiteness itself is either politically oppressive or culturally empty. White people who want to live the values of equality that we claim to hold should recognize that such a life requires we abandon our belief in, and reliance on, Whiteness.

The color of the race problem is white

In his 1903 classic The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. DuBois suggested that the question White people so often want to ask black people is, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Because White people do not know how to formulate such a question, DuBois said they most often avoid the issue and deny reality. A focus on Whiteness can help us reverse the direction of the question.

Race problems have their roots in a system of White supremacy. White people invented White supremacy. Therefore, the color of the race problem is White. Rather than asking non-White people how it feels to be a problem, it is long past time for White people to ask ourselves: How does it feel to be a problem? What will we do about it?

Robert Jensen is Emeritus Professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin and a founding board member of the Third Coast Activist Resource Center. He collaborates with the Ecosphere Studies program at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. Jensen is the author of The Restless and Relentless Mind of Wes Jackson: Searching for Sustainability (University Press of Kansas, 2021). His other books include The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men (2017); Plain Radical: Living, Loving, and Learning to Leave the Planet Gracefully (2013); Arguing for Our Lives: A User’s Guide to Constructive Dialogue (2013); All My Bones Shake: Seeking a Progressive Path to the Prophetic Voice, (2009); Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity (2007); The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege (2005); Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity (2004); and Writing Dissent: Taking Radical Ideas from the Margins to the Mainstream (2001).

KEY READINGS


Endnotes

What Would a Deep Green New Deal Look Like?

DON FITZ

The Green New Deal has attracted perhaps the greatest attention of any proposal for decades. It would guarantee Medicare-for-All, Housing-for-All, student loan forgiveness and propose the largest economic growth in human history to address unemployment and climate change. But the last of these hits a stumbling block. Creation of all forms of energy contributes to the destruction of nature and human life. It is possible to increase the global quality of life at the same time we reduce the use of fossil fuels and other sources of energy. Therefore, a “deep” GND would focus on energy reduction, otherwise known as energy conservation. Decreasing total energy use is a prerequisite for securing human existence.

Recognizing True Dangers

Fossil fuel (FF) dangers are well-known and include the destruction of Life via global heating. FF problems also include land grabs from indigenous peoples, farmers, and communities throughout the world as well as the poisoning of air from burning and destruction of terrestrial and aquatic life from spills. But those who focus on climate change tend to minimize very real danger of other types of energy production. A first step in developing a genuine GND is to acknowledge the destructive potential of “alternative energy” (AltE).

Nuclear power disasters such as Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima are horrific, problems with the rest of its life cycle are often glossed over. Mining, milling, and transporting radioactive material to supply nukes with fuel and “dispose” of it exposes entire communities to poisoning that results in a variety of cancers. Though operation of nuclear plants produces few greenhouse gases (GHGs), enormous quantities are released during production of steel, cement and other materials for building nuclear plants. They must be located next to water (for cooling), which means their discharge of hot water is an attack on aquatic life. Radioactive waste from nuclear plants, kept in caskets for 30–50 years, threatens to poison humanity not for decades or centuries, but for millennia (or eternity), which makes nuclear power at least as dangerous as FFs. Inclusion of nuclear power as part of a GND is not the slightest bit green. The only way to address nuclear power is how to abolish it as rapidly as possible while causing the least harm to those who depend on it for energy and income.

Solar power requires manufacturing processes with chemicals which are highly toxic to those who work with them. Even before production begins, many different minerals must be mined and processed, which endangers workers and communities while destroying wildlife habitat. Additional minerals must be obtained for batteries. Once solar systems are used, they are discarded into large toxic dumps. Though few GHGs are created during use of solar panels, large amounts are created during their life cycle.

Wind power creates its own syndrome of nerve-wracking vibrations for those living next to “wind farms,” along with even larger issues with disposal of 160-foot blades. Like solar farms, wind farms undermine ecosystems where they are located.
The life cycle of wind power includes toxic radioactive elements to produce circular rotation of blades.

Hydro-power from dams hurts terrestrial as well as aquatic life by altering the flow of river water. Dams undermine communities whose culture center around water and animals. Dams destroy farms. They exacerbate international conflicts when rivers flow through multiple countries, threaten the lives of construction workers, and result in collapses which can kill over 100,000 people at a time.

Several problems run through multiple AltE systems:

- Despite claims of “zero emissions,” every type of AltE requires large amounts of FFs during their life cycle;
- Every type of AltE is deeply intertwined with attacks on civil liberties, land grabs from indigenous communities, and/or murders of Earth defenders;
- Many have cost overruns which undermine the budgets of communities tricked into financing them.
- Transmission lines require additional land grabs, squashing of citizen and community rights, and increased species extinctions; and,
- Since the most available resources (such as uranium for nukes, sunny land for solar arrays, mountain tops for wind farms, rivers for dams) are used first, each level of expansion requires a greater level of resource use than the previous one, which means the harvesting of AltE is increasingly harmful as time goes by.

Taking into account the extreme problems of the life cycle of every type of energy extraction leads to the following requirements for a genuine GND: Nuclear energy must be halted as quickly and as safely as possible with employment replacement. FF extraction should be dramatically reduced immediately (perhaps by 70–90% of 2020 levels) and be reduced 5–10% annually for the next 10 years thereafter. Rather than being increased, extraction for other forms of energy should be reduced (perhaps 2–5% annually).

Since honesty requires recognition that every form of energy becomes more destructive with time, the critical question for a deep GND is: “How do we reduce energy use while increasing employment and the necessities of life?”

The Naming of Things

But before exploring how to increase employment while reducing production, it is necessary to clean up some greenwashing language that has become common in recent years. Decades ago, Barry Commoner used the phrase “linguistic detoxification” to describe the way corporations come up with a word or phrase to hide the true nature of an ecological obscenity. One of the best examples is the nuclear industry’s term “spent fuel rods” which implies that, once used, fuel rods are not radioactive, when, in fact, they are so deadly that they must be guarded for eternity. An accurate term would be “irradiated fuel rods.”

Perhaps the classic example is the way agribusiness came up with “biosolids” for renaming animal sewage sludge containing dioxin, asbestos, lead, and DDT. As John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton describe in Toxic Sludge Is Good for You (1995), industry persuaded the Environmental Protection Agency to reclassify hazardous animal
waste to “Class A fertilizer” biosolids so they could be dumped on fields where food is grown. Rather than preserving traditions of early environmentalists, many current proponents of AltE use the terms “clean” and “renewable” to describe energy which is neither. AltE is not “clean” due to the many GHG emissions throughout the life cycle of all types of energy in addition to assaults on ecosystems and human health. Though the sun, wind and river power may be eternal, products that must be mined are very much exhaustible, meaning that no form of AltE is renewable.

An honest GND would never refer to AltE as either “clean” or “renewable.” Such a GND proposal would advocate the reduction of FFs but would not suggest a goal 0% of FFs by such-and-such a date because it is unattainable. Every type of AltE requires FFs. While it may be possible to produce some steel and some cement by AltE, it is impossible to produce massive quantities of energy for the entire world with AltE. Instead, a genuine GND would explain that the only form of clean energy is less energy and specify ways to use less energy while improving the quality of life. A genuine GND would never imply that FFs are the only source of monstrously negative effects. Privileging AltE corporations over FF corporations is stating that environmental problems will be solved by choosing one clique of capitalists over another. This means that (a) if FFs should be nationalized, then all mining, milling and manufacturing processes to produced materials needed for AltE should be nationalized; and, (b) if FFs should remain in the ground, then all components for operating nuclear plants, dams, solar facilities and wind farms should also remain in the ground.

A Shorter Work Week for All

The greatest contradiction in current versions of the GND is advocating environmental improvement while having the most massive increase in production the world has ever seen. These two goals are completely irreconcilable. A progressive GND would address this enigma via shortening the work week, which would reduce environmental damage by using less energy. It is quite odd that versions of the GND call for Medicare-for-All, Housing-for-All, Student Loan Forgiveness-for-All; but none of them suggest a Shorter-Work-Week-for-All. The absence of this old progressive demand could be due to the incorrect neoliberal assumption that the best way to solve unemployment is via increased production. Increased production of goods cannot create a long-term increase in employment. (It was WWII and not Roosevelt’s New Deal that consistently increased employment.) US production increased 300-fold from 1913 to 2013. If employment had increased at the same pace, everyone would be working at dozens of jobs today. Unemployment increases from recent economic disruptions like the 2008 financial crisis and Covid in 2020 were due to the inability to shift work from some areas of the economy to others. A planned shrinking of the economy would require including the entire workforce in deciding to shift from negative to positive employment. As the work week is reduced, every group of workers should evaluate what it does, how labor is organized, and how jobs should be redefined so that full employment is preserved. The only part of this idea which is novel is making changes democratically — job categories continuously change, with some types of work shrinking (or disappearing entirely) and other types of work expanding or coming into existence. Just as economic growth does not guarantee increases in employment, economic shrinking need not worsen unemployment if the work week is shortened. However, a shorter work week will not accomplish environmental goals
if it is accompanied by an “intensification of labor” (such as requiring workers at Amazon to handle more packages per hour or increasing class size for teachers). This means that a genuine GND requires workers’ forming strong unions which have a central role in determining what is produced as well as working conditions. Producing

**According to Need Instead of According to Profit**

If a core part of a GND becomes a shorter work week (without speed-up), the question naturally arises: “Will lowering the amount of production result in people going without basic necessities of life?” It is important to understand that production for profit causes the manufacture of goods that have no part of improving our lives.

Current versions of the GND are based on the neoliberal assumption that the best way to provide for necessities of life is through increased payments for purchases (i.e., market economics). A progressive GND would advocate that the best way to provide the necessities of life is by guaranteeing them as human rights. This is often referred so as replacing individual wages with “social wages.” For example, the neoliberal approach to healthcare is offering medical insurance while a progressive approach is to offer medical care directly (without giving a cut to insurance companies). Likewise, a neoliberal GND would offer cash for food, housing, transportation, education and other necessities while a progressive GND would provide them directly to people. Green economics must be based on making dollar amounts less important by replacing individual wages with social wages.

Current versions of the GND seek to provide necessities by increasing the quantity of products rather than focusing on creating things that are useful, reliable and durable. A massive increase in production is an unnecessary attack on ecosystems when there is already much more production than required to provide essentials for everyone on the planet. Needs are not being met because of production which (1) is negative, including war materials, police forces and production which destroys farmland and habitat (all of which should be reduced immediately); (2) is wasteful, which includes both (a) playthings of the richest 1%, and (b) things which many of us are forced to buy for survival and getting to work, the most notable being cars; (3) requires unnecessary processing and transportation, the most notable example being food which is processed to lose nutritional value, packaged to absurd levels, and shipped over 1000 miles before being consumed; and (4) involves planned obsolescence, including design to fall apart or go out of style.

One important aspect of reducing production is often ignored. Each product manufactured must have a repairability index. At a minimum, **criteria for the index** should include (a) availability of technical documents to aid in repair, (b) ease of disassembly, (c) availability of spare parts, (d) price of spare parts, and (e) repair issues specific to the class of products. The index should become a basis for strengthening production requirements each year. A durability index should similarly be developed and strengthened annually. Since those who do the labor of manufacturing products are more likely than owners or stockholders to attain knowledge of how to make commodities that are more reliable and durable, they must have the right to make their knowledge public without repercussions from management. There will always be differences of opinion regarding what is needed versus what is merely desired. A progressive GND should state how those decisions would be made. A major cause of unnecessary production is that decisions concerning what to manufacture and
standards for creating them are made by investors and corporate bosses rather than community residents and workers manufacturing them. A genuine GND would confront problems regarding what is produced by involving all citizens in economic decisions, and not merely the richest.

Reparations!

Perhaps the issue which is least likely to be linked to the GND is reparations to poor communities in Africa, Latin America, and Asia who have been victims of Western imperialism for 500 years. This connection forces us to ask: “Since most minerals necessary for AltE lie in poor countries, will rich countries continue to plunder their resources, exterminate what remains of indigenous cultures, force inhabitants to work for a pittance, jail and kill those who resist, destroy farmland, and leave the country a toxic wasteland for generations to come?” For example, plans to massively expand electric vehicles (EVs) undermine the vastly more sustainable approach of urban redesign for walkable/cyclable communities. Plans would result in manufacturing EVs for the rich world while poor and working class communities would suffer from the extraction of lithium, cobalt and dozens of other materials required for these cars. Africa may be the most mineral-rich continent. In addition to cobalt from the Democratic Republic of the Congo for EVs, Mali is the source of 75% of the uranium for French nukes, Zambia is mined for copper for AltE and hundreds of other minerals are taken from dozens of African countries. If there are to be agreements involving corporations seeking minerals for AltE, who will those agreements be with? Will the agreements be between the ultra-rich owners of the Western empire and its puppet governments? Or, will extraction agreements be with villages and communities which will be most affected by removal of minerals for the production of energy?

Discussions of relationships between rich and poor countries make much of having “free, prior and informed consent” prior to an extraction project. Such an agreement is far from reality because (a) corporate and governmental bodies are so mired in corruption that they contaminate bodies which define and judge the meaning of “free, prior and informed;” (b) no prediction of the effects of extraction can be “informed” since it is impossible to know what the interaction of the multitude of physical, chemical, biological and ecological factors will be prior to extraction taking place, and (c) affected communities are typically bullied into accepting extraction because they fear that families will die from starvation, lack of medical care or unemployment if they do not do so. Thus, the following are essential components of a socially just GND:

Reparations which are sufficient to eliminate poverty must be paid prior to signing extraction agreements; and, Every community must have the right to terminate an extraction agreement at any stage of the project. This is where the other meaning of “deep” comes in. When people hear “deep green,” they often think of how industrial activity deeply affects ecosystems. “Deep” can also refer to having a deep respect for poor communities whose lives are most affected by extraction. Respect is not deep if it is unwilling to accept an answer of “No” to a request for exorbitant, profit-gouging extraction. Peoples across the world may decide that since they have received so little for so long, it may be time for rich countries to share the wealth they have stolen and dig up new wealth much, much more slowly.
A New Green Culture

Just to make sure that it is clear and not forgotten, the fundamental question regarding extraction of material needed for AltE is: “Will rich countries continue to plunder minerals underneath or adjacent to poor communities at a rate that corporations decide? Will they expect poor communities to be satisfied with a vague promise that, for the very first time, great things will happen after the plundering? Or should reparations be fully paid for past and current plundering, with poor communities deciding how much extraction they will allow and at what speed?”

Essential for building a New Green World is the creation of a New Green Culture which asks all of the billions of people on the planet to share their ideas for obtaining the necessities of life while using less energy. Such a culture would aim for one idea to spark to many ideas, all of which strive more toward living together than on inventing energy-guzzling gadgets.

In order to build a New Green Culture which puts the sharing of wealth above personal greed, several things that must happen:

1. To bring billions of people out of economic misery, every country should establish a maximum income which is a multiple of the minimum income, with that multiple being voted on (no less than every five years) by all living in the country.
2. Every country should establish a maximum wealth which is a multiple of the minimum wealth, with that multiple being voted on (no less than every five years) by all living in the country.
3. Global reparations, including sharing wealth and technological know-how between rich and poor countries, is essential for overcoming past and ongoing effects of imperialism. Establishing maximum incomes and maximum wealth possession within countries must be quickly followed by establishing such maximum levels between countries.

A core problem of current versions of the GND is that they propose to solve employment, social justice and energy problems with increased production, which is not necessary to solve any of these. Attempts to solve problems by increasing wealth feeds into the corporate culture of greed and become a barrier to creation of a New Green Culture. Increasing production beyond what is necessary increases environmental problems that threaten the Earth. It tells those who are already rich that they should grab more, more and more. It tells those who are not rich that happiness depends upon the possession of objects. The survival of Humanity depends on the building of a green culture that prizes sharing above all else.

Don Fitz (fitzdon@aol.com) is on the Editorial Board of Green Social Thought where a version of this article was first published. He was the 2016 candidate of the Missouri Green Party for Governor. His book Cuban Health Care: The Ongoing Revolution has been available since June 2020.
Palestine Can’t Breathe

FARAMARZ FARBOD

Another cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinians has been announced ending another round of violent assault on the latter. The settler colonial Jewish supremacist regime in Israel killed 275 Palestinians, 248 of them in the Gaza Strip, 26 in the West Bank and Jerusalem, one inside Israel, including 66 children in Gaza, and at least 6,200 others injured. Israel reported 13 deaths from the more than 4000 homemade and unguided rockets launched by Hamas, the Islamic Movement governing the Gaza Strip since it won elections in 2006. Israel’s deadly assault on Gaza destroyed more than 1,000 homes, five residential towers, three mosques, media office buildings, unknown number of businesses, damaged 17 hospitals and clinics and dozens of schools, wrecked Gaza’s only critical COVID-19 health infrastructure, and cut off its sewer, electricity, and water services.

It’s important to realize that this latest round of deadly Israeli onslaught on Palestinians is merely an instance of a 73 years long project of settler colonialism carried out systematically by the Jewish supremacist state of Israel with full backing of the imperial US state. The US and Israeli official narratives aim to obscure this essential fact. They use propaganda to shift the US public’s perception away from focusing on Israel’s illegal occupation and its ongoing slow ethnic cleansing of Palestinians to instead a focus on Palestinian resistance deliberately mischaracterized by them as terrorism and anti-Semitism. They have succeeded in persuading most people in the US that Israel’s quarrel with the Palestinians is not about territory, but terror.

However, several historical factors are at work that may help undermine the US/Israeli official narrative and open up a rare possibility for US activists for Palestinian justice and self-determination to exert greater pressure from below on Washington to adopt a more evenhanded approach to Israel/Palestine.

First, the various geographically separated and colonized Palestinian communities acted together in resisting the latest round of vicious Jewish supremacist Israeli settler colonial assault on Palestinians. Palestinians in Gaza, West Bank, Jerusalem, inside Israel, and in diaspora joined the call in the month of May to “save Shaikh Jarrah” in Jerusalem from further forced ethnic displacements of Palestinian families and to respond to Israeli violations of Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam’s 3rd holiest place, during the last 10 days of the month of Ramadhan, observed by Muslims worldwide as a time of fasting, prayers, reflection, and community.

This synchronistic unity of Palestinian resistance makes the US and Israeli planners nervous as it threatens to undermine their long-lasting, and hitherto successful, attempts to divide, control and colonize the Palestinians. If sustained, it also presents a new deterrence on the side of the Palestinian resistance insofar as it compels Israel to think twice about the cost of launching another deadly air campaign on Gaza, what it calls “mowing the lawn.” This development bodes ill as well for the Israeli arms industry. So much of the marketing of Israel’s armaments abroad hinges
on their effectiveness in crushing Palestinian resistance, especially in the Gaza Strip, used by Israel as a testing laboratory for its high-tech weaponry. Already the fact that the last deadly assault on Gaza in 2014 was unable to crush Palestinian resistance has led to questioning the effectiveness of Israel’s armaments. And reportedly, the stocks of Israeli arms industry have shown no rebound in the aftermath of the latest 11-day Israeli onslaught and the Palestinian resistance it evoked in May 2021.

Second, we have witnessed the historic rise of anti-racial supremacism in the US. Millions in the US have developed a sensibility and a deeper awareness of racial supremacism thanks to the massive Black Lives Matter protests, especially in the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd by racist policing. It isn’t surprising to see Black liberation activists in the US opposing Jewish supremacism in historical Palestine as they have white supremacism here at home. This cannot but raise the rare possibility of greater solidarity for the Palestinian struggle for justice among larger segments of the US public hitherto inactive or indifferent to the Palestinian suffering. This development too makes the US and Israeli planners nervous as the only public they care about is the US one, since the latter’s awareness and activism only can lead to a shift in Washington policy away from its blind support for Israeli Jewish supremacism and settler colonialism.

Third, we are witnessing the mainstreaming of terms like ‘apartheid’ and ‘Jewish supremacy.’ Two reputable and mainstream human rights organizations, one in Israel and the other in the US, published damning reports calling Israel an apartheid state and accusing it of seeking Jewish supremacy over the entire area of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

On 12 January 2021, B’Tselem in Israel issued its report titled “A regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is apartheid.” It argued that the “entire area” alluded to in its title “is organized under a single principle: advancing and cementing the supremacy of one group – Jews – over another – Palestinians.”

On 27 April 2021, Human Rights Watch in the US issued its comprehensive report titled “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution.” It too asserted that across Israel and the occupied territories …in most aspects of life, Israeli authorities methodically privilege Jewish Israelis and discriminate against Palestinians. Laws, policies, and statements by leading Israeli officials make plain that the objective of maintaining Jewish Israeli control over demographics, political power, and land has long guided government policy. In pursuit of this goal, authorities have dispossessed, confined, forcibly separated, and subjugated Palestinians by virtue of their identity to varying degrees of intensity. In certain areas, as described in this report, these deprivations are so severe that they amount to the crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution. (Italics added)

Of course, Palestinians and their allies have for long argued that Israel is an apartheid settler colonial state, but to no avail. Evidently, it takes mainstream western organizations accusing Israel of Jewish supremacy and crimes against humanity of apartheid and persecution for anyone that matters here to take notice. Regardless, the mainstreaming of these terms is welcome news as it would raise badly needed awareness in the US about the structural nature of the violence Palestinians face on a daily
basis. That Palestinian voices did not (and still do not) matter is surely unsurprising. Silencing the voices of those subjected to imperial violence is a routine matter. The challenge now is to not fall back on seeing Palestinians once again as objects of sympathy and as victims, but as a people endowed with agency and steadfast in seeking justice and self-determination.

Fourth, Israel is losing the battle of images again. In the western world and especially in the US, Palestinians were viewed as refugees until the 1960s when they organized an armed resistance to Israeli expansionism and settler colonialism, after which they were looked upon as violent terrorists driven by anti-Semitism and hatred of the Jews. But the gruesome images of the massacre of some 2,000 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps during the 1982 war in Lebanon created sympathy for Palestinians, even in the US media. Israel responded by pushing the narrative that the struggle was over terrorism, not territory. 9/11 helped Israel to win the battle of narratives and impose its “war on terror” discourse.

However, since the cruel siege of Gaza in 2006, Israel has launched several brutal assaults on the captured Gazans. The images from these deadly assaults have reached millions and made it increasingly difficult for the US and Israeli narrative managers to maintain the fiction that Israel only reacts to Palestinian terrorism— the core of Israeli propaganda and one repeated ad nauseum in the phrase “Israel has the right to defend itself.”

Let’s…

It is crucial that activists for Palestinian justice and self-determination expose with greater urgency apologetics for Israel’s colonization of Palestine and point out several elementary observations about the Palestinian struggle.

Let’s point out that Israel’s own “war on terror” lens willfully distorts reality just as the US version has since 9/11. Like the US, Israel is not motivated foremost by security concerns for its population. In fact, ever since the early 1970s, Israel has pursued expansionism at the expense of security and has done so fully aware of the deleterious consequences of such an orientation for the Palestinians it rules over as well as for the Israeli politics and society that has moved steadily rightward in its politics and cultural sensibilities. For example, 72% of Israelis opposed the recent cease-fire.

Let’s remember that Israeli expansionism violates international laws and makes impossible even the creation of a non-contiguous Palestinian state in a fragment of historical Palestine for a fragment of the Palestinian people. How else are we to interpret the continued building of illegal “settlements” on Palestinian lands for Israeli Jews only and the ongoing Judaization of Arab East Jerusalem? By now Israel has transferred some 700,000 Jewish settler colonists into the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Depopulating historical Palestine of Palestinians and repopulating it with Jewish settler colonists has been going on for 73 years and is the core of the Zionist project of establishing an exclusive Jewish state in Palestine and of engineering a Jewish demographic majority ever since. This necessarily involves the use of force and of ethnic cleansing of the native population. The elimination of the indigenous population is the very logic or the DNA of Zionism. Contrary to the early Zionist claim, Palestine was not “a land without a people for a people without a land.” It was
in fact the most densely populated region of the Eastern Mediterranean with an Arab population that had lived there for centuries in villages and towns and had developed agriculture and an economy. It would have developed in similar ways as had other Arab communities elsewhere had it not been for the rise of Zionism and the backing of British and later the US imperial states for the dispossession and forced expulsion of the inhabitants of historical Palestine.

Let’s not forget what is Gaza. Gaza is where 2 million Gazans live in a tiny land area, with perhaps the highest population density anywhere in the world. It is the world’s largest open-air prison, a laboratory for testing high-tech Israeli weaponry, facing a cruel blockade Israel has imposed since 2006 with Egyptian complicity and backing from the US. Israel regularly bombs Gaza in operations its officials refer to as “mowing the lawn.” The Gazans are a people without any rights, political or civil, and are subject to frequent drone attacks, assassinations, and even restrictions on their caloric intake by sadistic Israeli officials in charge of the siege of the enclave, and who refer to it as “putting Gaza on a diet.” When they protest peacefully as they did most recently during the massive “Great March of Return” protests in 2018-2019, they were viciously assaulted by Israeli IDF snipers who killed 214 unarmed Palestinians, including 46 children, journalists and medical staff, and injured over 36,100 others, including nearly 8,800 children, over 8,000 of whom were hit by live ammunition, while only one Israeli soldier was killed and seven others injured.

How long will “liberal” opinion in the US tolerate a Sparta Israel shamelessly oppressing and murdering the Palestinians? The Biden administration approved $735 million in arms funding for Israel as it was killing Palestinians during its latest attacks on Gaza and East Jerusalem. How much longer will Washington be able to replenish the deadly arsenal of Israel’s military as it assaults Palestinians to crush their resistance?

Let’s not lose sight of the fact that it’s mainly the ruling elites of settler-colonial states of North America, Europe, Canada and Australia who are the most ardent backers of Israeli state terrorism. Here is a clue: the real “shared values” among them, are not the professed ones of democracy, freedom, pluralism, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.

Let’s also debunk the myth of Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East. A Jewish supremacist, settler-colonial state can aspire at best for a closed utopia, a “democracy” for the privileged based solely on their Jewishness, an ethno-religious characteristic. In 2018, Israel passed the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People. Among its “Basic Principles” we find the following: “Exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” It also asserts that “The state views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value, and will act to encourage it and to promote and to consolidate its establishment.” You can’t have a democracy when nearly one half of the inhabitants of the land – the Palestinians – from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea are subjected to crimes of apartheid and persecution. Israel is an ethnocracy, not a democracy.

Let’s point out that though some Palestinians react violently, most do so peacefully. Think BDS movement, the call of Palestinian civil society since 2005 to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel, demanding an end to the occupation, equal rights
for Palestinians, and the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes or compensation for their loss. Or, take the “Great March of Return” during 2018–2019 that was met with brutal, criminal and deadly response from Israel with total silence in the US.

Let’s remind everyone that the violence of Palestinian resistance is that of the oppressed and the occupied and as such will cease when the violence of the oppressor and the occupier ceases. Equating the two is a false equivalency.

Let’s not forget that the violence of the occupier is the violence of apartheid and settler colonialism as well as the spectacular violence of Israeli state terrorism, like the frequent deadly bombings of the Gazans.

Let’s point out the utter hypocrisy of Israel’s claim of self-defense when it violently tries to crush those who resist its terrorism and colonization. Such a claim amounts to a right to occupy and oppress, an absurdity. Indeed, it’s the Palestinians who have the right to resist by all means Israel’s violent and systematic dispossession of their land, homes, and rights as well as the erasure of their history and presence in historical Palestine.

An occupying power has only one crucial obligation: to leave.

Faramarz, a native of Iran, teaches politics at Moravian University. He’s the founder of Beyond Capitalism, a working group of the Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley, and the Editor of its publication, Left Turn. He can be reached at faram@sustainlv.org.

This essay also appeared on DissidentVoice.org on June 6 and subsequently on New Age, a Dhaka-based leading English-language daily newspaper in Bangladesh.

“The state will only be a stage in the realization of Zionism and its task is to prepare the ground for our expansion. The state will have to preserve order… with machine guns.”

—David Ben-Gurion (1938), Israel’s “founding father” and its first prime minister and minister of defense
Notes on Anti-Semitism, Zionism and Palestine

TARIQ ALI

Anti-Semitism is a racist ideology directed against the Jews. It has old roots.

In his classic work, *The Jewish Question, A Marxist Interpretation*, that was published posthumously in France in 1946, the Belgian Marxist, Abram Leon, (active in the resistance during the Second World War, he was captured and executed by the Gestapo in 1944) invented the category of a ‘people-class’ for the role of the Jews who managed to preserve their linguistic, ethnic and religious characteristics through many centuries without becoming assimilated. This was not unique to the Jews, but could apply just as strongly to many ethnic minorities: diaspora Armenians, Copts, Chinese merchants in South East Asia, Muslims in China, etc. The defining characteristic common to these groups is that they became middlemen in a pre-capitalist world, resented alike by rich and poor.

Twentieth century anti-Semitism, usually instigated from above by priests (Russia, Poland), politicians/intellectuals (Germany, France and, after 1938, Italy), big business (USA, Britain), played on the fears and insecurity of a deprived population. Hence August Bebel’s reference to anti-Semitism as ‘the socialism of fools.’ The roots of anti-Semitism like other forms of racism are social, political, ideological and economic. The judeocide of the Second World War, carried out by the political-military-industrial complex of German imperialism, was one of the worst crimes of the twentieth century, but not the only one. The Belgian massacres in the Congo had led to between 10-12 million deaths before the First World War. The uniqueness of the judeocide was that it took place in Europe (the heart of Christian civilization) and was carried out systematically — by Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, French and Italians — as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Hence Hannah Arendt’s phrase, ‘the banality of evil.’ Since the end of the Second World War popular anti-Semitism of the old variety declined in Western Europe, restricted largely to remnants of fascist or neo-fascist organizations.

In Poland, a country where virtually all the Jews were killed, it remained strong, as it did in Hungary. In the Arab world there were well-integrated Jewish minorities in Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus. They did not suffer at the time of the European judeocide. Historically, Muslims and Jews have been much closer to each other than either to Christianity. Even after 1948 when tensions rose between the two communities throughout the Arab east it was Zionist provocations, such as the bombing of Jewish cafes in Baghdad that helped to drive Arab Jews out of their native countries into Israel.

2. Non-Jewish Zionism has an old pedigree and permeates European culture. It dates back to the birth of Christian fundamentalist sects of the 16th and 17th centuries who took the Old Testament literally. They included Oliver Cromwell and John Milton. Later, for other reasons, Rousseau, Locke and Pascal joined the Zionist band-
wagon. And then for vile reasons the Third Reich, too, supported a Jewish homeland. The introduction to the Nuremburg Laws of 15 September 1935 state:

“If the Jews had a state of their own in which the bulk of the people were at home, the Jewish question could already be considered solved today, even for the Jews themselves. The ardent Zionists of all people have objected least to the basic ideas of the Nuremberg Laws, because they know that these laws are the only correct solution for the Jewish people.”

Many years later, Haim Cohen, a former judge of the Supreme Court of Israel stated:

“The bitter irony of fate decreed that the same biological and racist argument extended by the Nazis, and which inspired the inflammatory laws of Nuremberg, serve as the basis for the official definition of Jewishness in the bosom of the state of Israel” (quoted in Joseph Badi, Fundamental Laws of the State of Israel, NY, 1960, p.156)

And Zionist leaders often negotiated with anti-Semites to attain their objectives: Theodor Herzl talked openly with Von Plehve, the chief organizer of pogroms in Tsarist Russia; Jabotinsky collaborated with Petlura, the Ukrainian hangman of the Jews; ‘revisionist’ Zionists were friendly with Mussolini and Pilsudski; the Haavara agreements between the Zionists organizations and the Third Reich agreed to the evacuation of German-Jewish property.

Modern Zionism is the ideology of secular Jewish nationalism. It has little to do with Judaism as a religion and many orthodox Jews to this day have remained hostile to Zionism, like the Hassidic sect which joined a Palestinian march in Washington in April 2002 carrying placards which said: “ZIONISM SUCKS” and “SHARON: PALESTINIAN BLOOD IS NOT WATER”. Zionism was born in the 19th Century as a direct response to the vicious anti-Semitism that pervaded Austria. The first Jewish immigrants to Palestine arrived in 1882 and many of them were interested only in maintaining a cultural presence. There is no such thing as the ‘historical rights’ of Jews to Palestine. This grotesque myth (already in the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza referred to the old testament as ‘a collection of fairy-tales’, denounced the prophets and was excommunicated by the Amsterdam synagogue as a result) ignores real history. Long before the Roman conquest of Judea in 70 AD, a large majority of the Jewish population lived outside Palestine. The native Jews were gradually assimilated into neighboring groups such as the Phoenicians, Philistines, etc. Palestinians are, in most cases, descended from the old Hebrew tribes and genetic science has recently confirmed this, much to the annoyance of Zionists.

Israel was created in 1948 by the British Empire and sustained by its American successor. It was a European settler-state. Its early leaders proclaimed the myth of a ‘Land without People for a People without Land’, thus denying the presence of the Palestinians. Four weeks ago, the Zionist historian Benny Morris in a chilling interview with Haaretz (reprinted as a document in English in the New Left Review, Mar/Apr 2004) admitted the whole truth. 700,000 Palestinians had been driven out of their villages by the Zionist army in 1948. There were numerous incidents of rape, etc. He described it accurately as ‘ethnic cleansing’ not genocide and went on to defend
ethnic cleansing if carried out by a superior civilization, comparing it to the killing of native Americans by the European settlers in North America. That too, for Morris, was justified. Anti-Semites and Zionists shared one thing in common: the view that Jews were a special race that could not be integrated in European societies and needed its own large ghetto or homeland. The fact that this is false is proved by the realities of today. The majority of the world's Jews do not live in Israel, but in Western Europe and North America.

3. Anti-Zionism was a struggle that began against the Zionist colonization project and intellectuals of Jewish origin played an important part in this campaign and do so to this day inside Israel itself. Most of my knowledge of Zionism and anti-Zionism comes from the writings and speeches of anti-Zionist Jews: Akiva Orr, Moshe Machover, Haim Hanegbi, Isaac Deutscher, Ygael Gluckstein (Tony Cliff), Ernest Mandel, Maxime Rodinson, Nathan Weinstock, to name but a few. They argued that Zionism and the structures of the Jewish state offered no real future to the Jewish people settled in Israel. All they offered was infinite war. After 1967, there was a revival of the Palestinian national movement and many different groups arose, most of whom were careful to distinguish between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Nonetheless the role played by Israel undoubtedly fueled popular anti-Semitism in the Arab world. But these are not old roots and a sovereign Palestinian homeland or a democratic single state would soon bring this to an end. Historically, there have been very few clashes between Jews and Muslims in the Arab Empires.

4. The campaign against the supposed new ‘anti-Semitism’ in Europe today is basically a cynical ploy on the part of the Israeli Government to seal off the Zionist state from any criticism of its regular and consistent brutality against the Palestinians. The daily hits carried out by the IDF have wrecked the towns and villages of Palestine, killed thousands of civilians (especially children) and European citizens are aware of this fact. Criticism of Israel cannot and should not be equated with anti-Semitism. The fact is that Israel is not a weak, defenseless state. It is the strongest state in the region. It possesses real, not imaginary, weapons of mass destruction. It possesses more tanks and bomber jets and pilots than the rest of the Arab world put together. To say that the Zionist state is threatened by any Arab country is pure demagogy. It is Israel that creates the conditions, which produce suicide bombers. Even a few staunch Zionists are beginning to realize that this is a fact. That is why we know that as long as Palestine remains oppressed there will be no peace in the region.

5. The daily suffering of the Palestinians does not excite the liberal conscience of Europe, guilt-ridden (and for good reason) by its past inability to defend the Jews of central Europe against extinction. But the judeocide should not be used as a cover to commit crimes against the Palestinian people. European and American voices should be heard loud and clear on this question. To be intimidated by Zionist blackmail is to become an accomplice of war-crimes.

This essay was originally published in il manifesto on February 26, 2004.

Tariq Ali is an author of many books, a film-maker, and a longstanding editor of New Left Review.
The Pandemic Housework Dilemma Is Whitewashed

NICOLE FROIO

Since the start of the pandemic, an old dilemma has been revived: the unequal gendered division of housework in the home. For middle-class workers who have been working from home to avoid the coronavirus, the home now functions as an office, online school, gym, leisure space, and whatever else is necessary, which has doubled—if not tripled—the housework to be done. According to dozens of news reports and studies, this new dynamic has caused the gender gap inherent to household management to widen, overworking middle-class mothers and reducing the issue of housework to personal negotiations between couples.

Though these articles depict a relevant gender issue that shapes some women’s daily lives, they are also, frustratingly, often race- and class-blind, focusing on White, middle-class, heterosexual workers and their frustrations with work-from-home setups. There are many things missing from the picture painted by these articles that seem to be published every couple of months; housework seems to not exist or matter when it comes to working-class women, single mothers, women of color, and LGBTQ couples. But the most egregious erasure these articles perpetuate is the fact that most care and maintenance work—also known as housework—is done by underpaid and undervalued racialized women. According to the International Labor Organization, there are at least 67 million domestic workers worldwide, 80% of whom are women of color, but this is seen as a separate issue to White women’s housework load.

The original feminist critique of housework that animated the feminist movement in the 1970s was not watered down or whitened. Feminist theorist Silvia Federici has long argued that the first example of feminism in the United States was the struggle of Black welfare mothers who mobilized in the 1960s to demand a wage for simply raising their children. This laid the groundwork for the Wages for Housework movement, which was not focused on White middle-class women, but was an internationalist, anti-capitalist, feminist framework that demanded a reimagined structure of waged work and housework. In stark contrast to what passes for gender politics in the home today, the Wages for Housework movement was a radical recognition that unpaid housework means women have less power. “We have never been paid enough for all the work we have already done,” reads a 1977 Black Women for Wages for Housework pamphlet. “We don’t need more work. We need money to work less.” (Emphasis in the original.)

This critique is still crucial today, especially during a pandemic where domestic workers have been suspended without pay, forced to work longer hours if they are live-in workers, and left with little to no safety net due to low wages. But the mainstream coverage of the gendered division of housework has absolutely not reflected these issues and how, in addition to being gendered, domestic work is also racialized—how did we get here?
As scholar Françoise Vergès points out, not all White feminists were unified on the question of housework. Some of them equated liberation with entering the workforce, which called for other people to do the housework they no longer had the time to do. Citing Angela Davis and Hazel Carby, two Black women revolutionaries, Vergès writes that “Black women understood very well what was at stake[…] when some women are freed from cleaning/caring work, other women — primarily women of color — will have to do the job.” The effects of this division can still be felt today, and it explains why feminist perspectives on housework have been watered down to negotiations of division of the work with men; if this is seen as solely a problem of who does the dishes in individual White homes, the critique loses its revolutionary verve. And it creates a roadblock: Many of the women interviewed for these pieces say having conversations with their husbands does not fix the problem, with some exceptions. While this might have worked for many women who are now part of the workforce, the fact is that a collective problem cannot be solved through personal conversations — and that somebody always has to pick up the socks or do the laundry. It is once again an example of how class interests for some women can disrupt a collective demand for a better world.

Working-class single mother of color Leila Raven says that, for her, the pandemic has resulted in overwork to keep food on the table and full-time caregiving responsibilities, with most of the housework falling by the wayside: “Being a single mom without someone who can care for my daughter full time while I work has meant that working full time isn’t an option, so paying rent is one of the household duties that has fallen by the wayside. So many of us are facing eviction in apartments we’re renting in buildings that were barely safe to inhabit even before the pandemic. People like me can barely think about getting the dishes done because we’re focused on just maintaining our housing and staying safe from interpersonal and state violence.”

The cyclical coverage of the pandemic housework dilemma is a continuation of the whitewashing and depoliticizing of housework as a feminist issue. Meanwhile, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that women are still responsible for 75% of unpaid domestic work worldwide, spending up to three hours more per day doing such work than men. The inequalities of housework didn’t go away because middle-class women entered the workforce or because they’ve had stern conversations with their husbands — women still do the bulk of the work that makes the world keep turning, even if some of these women are made invisible by virtue of their race and ethnicity.

“If wealthier middle-class families could be in solidarity with those at the margins, we could be making the kinds of demands that we’ve always needed: defunding the police and investing in care infrastructure for our communities like safe housing for everyone,” Raven says. “And yes, this is a feminist issue, for those of us whose feminism includes people who are Black and Brown, trans and queer, disabled, and housing-insecure.”

It’s about time to admit this approach has not liberated women, and that talking about housework calls for conversations about race, class, and colonialism. Introducing these categories into these conversations makes clear that White women’s upward class mobility has been prioritized over the well-being and quality of life of work-
ing-class women of color cleaning up after them. Women won’t be liberated through simply sharing or delegating the workload; we need a much more imaginative and revolutionary solution that goes beyond individual households.

Nicole Froio is a researcher and a journalist writing on gender, power, identity, pop culture, poems about feelings, and current events. Her work is available to those who sponsor her patron-only monthly newsletter (www.patreon.com/nicolefroio).

This essay was originally published by Zora, a Medium newsletter, on Oct. 2, 2020.

“The neoliberal state is not at the service of humanity. The capitalist logic disregards domestic workers, informal workers, and the unemployed; it promises them the opportunity of success while delivering only increased exploitation, lower pay, and more precarious lives. It cannot support them through hunger and misery. This is a world where all the ‘nobodies’ die, as Eduardo Galeano so eloquently wrote:

The nobodies: nobody’s children, owners of nothing. (...) Who do not appear in the history of the world, but in the police blotter of the local paper. The nobodies, who are not worth the bullet that kills them.”

—Eli Gómez Alcorta, “CoronaShock and Patriarchy” (Nov. 5, 2020)
Class Conflict and the Amazon Union Drive in Alabama

TED MORGAN

“...the most important question: How do workers become class conscious?”
—Michael Yates, More Unequal

Karl Marx identified the central contradiction of capitalism as the antagonistic relationship between workers and their capitalist employers. As Michael Yates has put it, “the essence of this relationship is the exploitation of the workers, the extraction of a surplus by the employers from their labor, necessary to fuel the accumulation of capital in a milieu of intense competition. Unlike other modes of production such as slavery or feudalism, this exploitation is hidden by the market.... [Workers] sell their ability to work in the impersonal market, and it appears that the market dictates their pay.”

Whereas, in the United States, class is almost universally perceived as a function of characteristics like income, wealth, educational attainment, and lifestyle, Michael Zweig reminds us that class “must be understood in terms of power,” allowing us to see it as a “dynamic relationship rather than a static set of characteristics.” Class, in short, is more than and different from an identity, though it is that, too. Thus, the working class “are those with little personal control over the pace or content of their work and without supervisory control over the work lives of others,” whereas the capitalist class are the “corporate elite, senior executives, and directors of large corporations.” The middle class are “professionals, small-business owners, and managerial and supervisory employees”—some of whom are “closely entwined with the working class” while others are “more fully involved in serving the capitalist class.”

US Labor History and the Eclipse of Class Conflict

In their early years, American workers’ struggles against the “dark satanic mills” of industrial capitalism were often framed in Marxian terms of class conflict—notably by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and by labor activists like Eugene Debs, “Big Bill” Haywood, and Mary G. “Mother” Jones. For decades, workers’ organizing efforts were brutally crushed by bloody attacks serving the interests of the robber barons. Over the long, tumultuous haul of US labor history organized labor moved steadily away from promoting class conflict to an accommodation with US capitalism, although some labor leaders and individual unions have diverged from the accommodationist line.

Alex Carey has identified three eras in which the contradictions of capitalism produced an aroused populace that challenged the US economy. Each produced a well-orchestrated mass propaganda counterattack along with Red Scare repression. Two occurred in the aftermath of labor militancy and long-delayed worker raises during the two World Wars and one after the tumultuous era of the 1960s. In Carey’s words, “The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of
great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power.”

The latter two eras are particularly relevant to the Amazon union effort. The progressive and pro-labor initiatives of the New Deal—notably, the National Labor Relations Act (“Wagner Act”) which established the collective bargaining rights of workers and the governing National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)—are often viewed as saving capitalism from the threat of leftist revolt. However, the post-WWII Taft-Hartley act, enacted by a conservative Congress over President Truman’s veto, watered down the protections of the Wagner Act. Perhaps most importantly, it established the right of states to create so-called “right-to-work” laws which allowed non-dues-paying workers to become “free riders” enjoying the benefits produced by union actions. Currently 27 states in the South, Midwest and interior West have right-to-work laws, now legitimized by the 2018 Janus v. AFSCME Supreme Court decision. For its part, the NLRB’s ‘enforcement’ of worker rights has been shaped by the political objectives of the party in power.

Aided by anti-Communist purges, propaganda campaigns and public policies that gave workers greater stake in the growing US economy, the postwar era produced the so-called “social contract” between labor and management in which the AFL-CIO and other unions embraced Cold War ideology and effectively collaborated with corporations. 1955 was the high point of union membership, with 35.7% of private sector workers belonging to unions. By 1974, that figure stood at 26.2%. The leading unions became heavily bureaucratized, with leaders receiving six-figure salaries; many workers were beginning to see unions as little more than a necessary evil.

Even more relevant to the Amazon case is the post-1960s era which brought the New Deal regime and the postwar social contract to an end in the US and ushered in the global neoliberal regime. Triggered by corporatist reactions to the “excess democracy” of 60s-era activism, blamed for the declining profitability of capitalism in the 1970s, neoliberalism loomed as the guiding ideology of both Margaret Thatcher’s Britain and the Ronald Reagan presidency in the US.

The combination of forces consistent with neoliberalism—property tax revolts, direct attacks on unions and collective bargaining, tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, globalization and capital flight of manufacturing industries in particular, investors shift toward more profitable financial speculation, and the internet and high-tech industry—radically shifted the ground for union activity and confirmed most unions’ close collaboration with the Democratic Party. As well-paying manufacturing jobs disappeared overseas and economic inequality soared, worker fears for the future became far more widespread—fears that proved fodder for racist dog-whistle and anti-immigration propaganda by right-wing forces. Private sector union membership fell to 6.2% by 2019. At the same time, new monopolistic enterprises—Amazon and Walmart in particular—gained dominant roles in the changing economy, devastating smaller businesses and local economies. Walmart paved a path forward for Amazon and others with its massive accumulation of wealth, exploitation of workers, and successful campaigns against unionizing efforts.
The Amazon Behemoth

In twenty-six years, Amazon has gone from being an online bookseller to a corporate behemoth that, in Jonathan Rosenblum’s words, “has consolidated extraordinary monopolistic control over our daily lives…. It plays the central role in American capitalism’s distribution and logistics web and also in technology and its control of the internet through Amazon Web Services (AWS).” As documented by Jake Almahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese and others, the “magnitude of Amazon’s influence in the world’s economy” represents a “significant shift in the global political economy” that the authors identify as “Amazon capitalism.”

Indeed Amazon’s market value of approximately $1.5 trillion is the largest in the world and greater than roughly 90% of the world’s nations. Only Walmart among private entities employs more people in the US than Amazon, which has 800 warehouses in the country and employs more than 500,000 workers in the US and 1.2 million worldwide. Over the span of the last decade Amazon paid less than three percent of its $27 billion in US profits in taxes.

Not surprisingly, with an estimated $179 billion in wealth, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos is now the world’s richest individual, and one who refused to appear before a Congressional hearing on excessive executive salaries. As Kim Moody put it, “Bezos and his crew” have done “what the robber barons have always done: raise, spend, and sometimes lose other people’s money, dodge taxes, swindle suppliers, and avoid unions.” In an effort to blunt rising criticism of its monopolistic, anti-union practices, Amazon increased starting wages to $15/hour and added to workers health benefits.

In addition to being steadfastly anti-union, Amazon created a warehouse workplace that verges on totalitarian working conditions. Upgrading classic Taylorist strategies, the corporation uses electronic surveillance of workers (as well as customers) to ensure maximum speed (or, as Rosenblum put it, to “throttle incipient organizing efforts”). It tightly regulates “time-off-task” (TOT), limiting warehouse employees to two bathroom breaks per shift, causing some employees to urinate in bottles. Amazon’s delivery drivers, many of whom are subcontracted out gig workers with no benefits, are tightly exploited by surveillance and management by time-governing algorithms.

Amazon’s inhumane practices were exposed in a four-part investigative report back in 2011–12 by the Morning Call in Allentown, PA. The report documented workers suffering from heat exhaustion in the Lehigh Valley warehouse where temperatures reached 100 degrees; several were evacuated to area hospitals. One worker who was hospitalized found that she had been terminated on her return and later struggled to gain unemployment compensation against the resistance of the company outsourced by Amazon for hiring warehouse employees.

The Alabama Union Drive

In April 2020, as demand for mail-order products was on the rise due to the pandemic, Amazon opened a new “fulfillment center” (corporate-speak for warehouse) in Bessemer, Alabama. By fall, the president of the mid-South council of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) was contacted by a Bessemer
worker inquiring about organizing the plant employees. The union began collecting authorization cards from workers and amassed a reported 3000 cards, sufficient to get NLRB authorization to hold a union vote. The mail balloting spanned seven weeks, culminating on March 29, 2021. Over a sixty-day period, the company hired thousands of additional workers, bringing the workforce to 5800, thereby diluting the potential appeal of union advocates.

RWDSU’s success in gathering so many union cards, along with its own and widespread supporters’ publicity efforts generated widespread media attention to the union drive. Coming at a time when a Gallup poll showed two-thirds of Americans supporting labor unions (up from 50% in 2009), mainstream liberal media were drawn to the union drive’s potential to revive the labor movement, to say nothing of the possibility of bringing the Amazon giant to heel if the successful effort spread. As labor studies professor Janice Fine commented, “This is happening in the toughest state, with the toughest company, at the toughest moment…. If the union can prevail given those three facts, it will send a message that Amazon is organizable everywhere.” Even President Biden made an unusually strong pro-union comment without explicitly mentioning Amazon, and as the media have commented, the House of Representatives passed the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize Act) that would begin to address some anti-union practices and repeal right-to-work laws (though it is stymied by the current Senate).

From a left perspective, the union drive posed the possibility of an even greater shift in American politics. Given the company’s multi-racial makeup at the lower “levels” of field and customer service, a spreading union effort across the range of Amazon facilities could generate powerful feelings of solidarity across racial lines. One could imagine how that solidarity might begin to break down divisions long-fostered by powerful forces on the right, raising the specter of, well, class conflict. However, for now anyway, that was not to be. From the beginning, as expected, Amazon pulled out all the stops to defeat the union effort: hiring union-busting consultants from the notorious Morgan-Lewis law firm, seeking (unsuccessfully) to require an in-person vote during the pandemic, bombarding workers (along with local media) with anti-union text messages and postings throughout break rooms and bathrooms, requiring workers to attend regular anti-union propaganda sessions, and successfully getting the city of Bessemer to change the traffic light patterns in front of the warehouse to maximize the green lights for exiting cars (thereby making it difficult for organizers to speak to workers). Workers were told “Where will your dues go?” “Do it without dues” (which, of course, are not required anyway in a right-to-work state), and “You’ll have to skip dinner and school supplies,” among many other bogus anti-union claims. Defeat and its Aftermath

Given the hype about the union drive and its potential, along with highly visible support in a number of quarters, the vote of 1798 to 738 against the union was a crushing defeat and a telling commentary on the aspirations of many employees. The prevailing side, in effect, voted to work in totalitarian-like conditions in exchange for wages that would place a family of four slightly above the poverty level. Amazon’s tactics were a resounding success, but in addition the union faced broader obstacles: a
younger workforce largely ignorant of the benefits of unionization and an internet-influenced culture which has greatly undermined the idea of solidarity.

For its part, the RWDSU has promised to challenge Amazon’s “illegal” tactics in the courts, but the union appears to be shifting away from plant-based election organizing. For the moment at least, a brighter future for working people seems less likely than it did before the organizing effort in Alabama. We are clearly no closer to an appreciation of class conflict, though that should be part of labor’s message to its organizing audiences. Yet, as Rosenblum observed, “It took more than a generation of failed organizing, most notably the 1919 steel strike, before workers honed the strategic smarts and organization unity to overcome the chokehold of corporate control.”14 And as the brutal effects of neoliberal capitalism become more profound and widespread, the continued work of activists may find more fertile ground for their organizing efforts.


Endnotes
6 I use “regime” in the sense used by presidential scholar Stephen Skowronek, to refer to eras in which a particular coalition of interest groups dominates the aims of presidencies, whether these be Democratic or Republican.
9 Ibid. 10 Quoted from The Cost of Free Shipping by Rosenblum, supra.
11 Rosenblum, Resisting Amazon.
14 Rosenblum, Resisting Amazon
We Must Fight the System, Not Each Other

ELAHEH FARMAND

Once a year on our immigration anniversary, my mother and I reflect on our journey from Iran to the United States. In the past, we would celebrate the freedoms we were given in America, embrace the struggles we endured as immigrants to settle in a new home, and learn not only a new language, but also a new way of living, a new culture, a new dream.

But if you ask me to celebrate this immigration today, I would tell you how bittersweet it is to be an American, how disappointing it feels, and how my heart aches with disappointment and rage. Sometime in late 2019, I began learning about the destructiveness of capitalism: its ravaging of our planet earth, imperialism—its disastrous twin—fighting to keep it from collapsing. Once I saw the connection between domestic and international injustices of our societies and capitalism, I found myself awoken after years of sleeping in the belly of the beast.

While my mother and I had freedoms, we benefited from when we arrived and still do to this day, I can no longer ignore that this freedom is not for everyone, that this freedom kills people, that this freedom is for the few privileged, and certainly not for free.

How can I celebrate this immigration when I learn of women whose uterus is forcefully removed by our government? How can I celebrate when our government shuns and shames a woman for her right to an abortion, but forces another to never experience motherhood simply because of her misfortunate immigration status? How can I celebrate when our government easily deports humans back to the homes they had to flee, cages them because they had no choice but to cross the border and risk their lives in search of refuge? How can I celebrate when capitalism makes the immigrant’s land no longer livable, and extreme poverty leads them to flee from violent gangs and wars? If only the immigrant knew the price of this American dream.

How can I celebrate our immigration when America spends more money on weapons and the military instead of pandemic equipment like masks? How can I celebrate a country that cannot give everyone the basic human right to free health care even with a pandemic ravaging the nation? How can I celebrate this rich nation that fails too many of its own people, as it fails to give them a right to housing, to food, to a livable living wage? How can I celebrate a nation built on violence and stolen land? A nation that prefers to erase its history, that likes to boast and sing patriotism instead of accepting its racism and lack of care and respect for its brown, black, and indigenous persons? How can I celebrate when the white man can walk around with a rifle and hunt down a black man and murder him without punishment? How can I celebrate when black people are imprisoned for life because of racist crime bills and the prison industrial complex? How can I celebrate when property in American capitalism matters more than black life? How can I celebrate when military tanks take over the
streets, and unmarked vehicles kidnap peaceful protestors, and heavily armed police tear gas citizens demanding justice?

How can I celebrate without grieving, without heartache, without wanting to scream from the depth of my gut, because my people are being killed and imprisoned by a government built on the promise of “life, liberty, and justice for all”?

I can’t celebrate the atrocity of the American Empire and its war-machine. I can’t forgive its war crimes. I can’t forgive it for poisoning the children of Flint. But if I am to make use of my one life, I must celebrate my position as a privileged immigrant citizen of this nation. For it is my position that allows me to utter these words and use my voice, to be on the streets, to read and educate myself of the true history of this nation. For it is my position that allows me to not give in, and to not give up, and to join grassroots organizations and people committed to fighting for liberation for all. For it is my position that allows me to give a space to immigrants to share their stories of immigration, exile, nostalgia, and longing. For it is my position that allows me to be open-minded and non-judgmental. For it is my position that allows me to teach my 8 year-young niece this nation’s history.

I hope that we remain strong because we have a long fight ahead. We need to disrupt business as usual, we need to educate the people, organize, and agitate. We need to fight the diseases: the COVID-19 virus, racism, white supremacy, and apathy. We need to light a fire within us. We need to collectively awaken and hold each other accountable. We need to be united in love. We must demand big changes from the new administration and not fall asleep under an illusion of hope. We must find common ground with each other, and remind one another that the two-party system will always choose corporations over people. We must fight the system of capitalism and imperialism, not each other.

I was 11 when I arrived in this nation. I am now 33. I celebrate my immigration for giving me the power to stand with people, for allowing me to connect with them, for my life is fuller with these powerful humans. I am grateful for the love I’ve been shown, the support, and the voice I’ve been given. I can celebrate the strength of our collective. I can celebrate what has been awoken within me. And I will proudly say, all power to the people.

Elaheh Farmand immigrated to the U.S. when she was 11 years-old, leaving her birth country of Iran. In 2016, she founded Immigrants & Exile, a space in which artists can share their feelings of nostalgia, longing, and exile. (www.immigrantsandexile.org)
A Few Comments on the Origins of Great Wealth

GARY OLSON

F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “The rich are very different from you and me,” to which Ernest Hemingway replied, “Yes, they have more money.” Another retort might be a variation on the quote attributed to Honore de Balzac, “The secret behind every great fortune is a great theft.” There are 657 billionaires in the United States whose combined wealth grew more than $1.7 trillion over the past year of the pandemic. And we know that one-tenth of 1% own more wealth than the bottom 90%. Where does that wealth and that of other members of the predator class originate? We know it’s produced by the collective labor of the working class—as has been said, “It takes a village to raise a billionaire”—but there are many related and often overlooked factors.

Off the top of my head, here’s a very incomplete list (add your own) of factors contributing to wealth accumulation under capitalism: Originally, the enclosure acts of the late eighteenth century in England, expropriation of peasants, forceful acquisition (1500s) wage slavery and imperialism; Later, in the United States, extermination of the indigenous population, Black slaves, immigrant Chinese railroad workers, land speculation, police powers of the state, theft, usury, corporate charters and plunder; eminent domain, child labor, taxpayer subsidies, corporate welfare, tax policy, inheritance laws, foreign dictatorships that guarantee cheap labor and raw materials for U.S. corporations.

And more: taxpayer subsidized public schools and universities, communications, the Federal Reserve, Treasury, Defense and Commerce Departments, public investments that created, for example, the internet platform and human genome research; health and safety regulations created and enforced at public expense; laws enforcing contracts; bridges, highways, airports, water treatment plants, harbors and other utilities maintained at public expense; the mail system, public hospitals, police and fire protection, Securities and Exchange Commission, government licenses for broadcast channels and state granted business incentives. Bill Gates and computers are instructive examples. On Gates, I’ll draw upon Malcolm Gladwell’s (no radical) book, “Outliers,” the thesis of which is how external factors play the determining role in individual success. It’s a thoroughgoing evisceration of the great American myth of the self-made man. What do we know about Bill Gates? His father was a wealthy lawyer in Seattle and his mother, was the daughter of a wealthy banker. In seventh grade, they took Bill out public school and sent him to Lakeside, a private school catering to Seattle’s elite families. In eighth grade, Lakeside started a computer club, spending $3,000 for a computer terminal and turned it over to the kids. This was in 1968, when most colleges did not have computer clubs and those that did needed a computer card system.

Lakeside installed an ASR-33 Teletype connected to a mainframe in downtown Seattle whereas only few lucky college frosh did time-sharing in 1971. Gates was in
eighth grade in 1968 and basically lived in the computer room. It was very expensive but the parents contributed all the money and the kids spent it. At that point, the University of Washington in Seattle set up a Computer Foundation and one of the founders was Monique Rona who had a son at Lakeside. Rona invited the kids to come and test the software on weekends and Gates was able to program late into the night. Over seven months, he ran up 1,575 hours on the ISI mainframe or 8 hours a day, seven days a week. He’s 15 years old. Then, he and Paul Allen found a UW computer that was available on off hours. Living only a few blocks from campus, they’d steal computer time. Then, TRW (a huge tech company) got a call to set up a gigantic computer system for Southern Washington state but there was a severe shortage of programmers. Someone at TRW recalled the Lakeside kids and Gates spent much of his senior year in high school writing code at Bonneville.

In sum, for five years, from 8th grade through high school, Gates had extraordinary opportunities available to very few. Gates dropped out of Harvard after his sophomore year, after spending seven consecutive years doing programming. In his own words, “I had better exposure to software development at a younger age than anyone, all due to an incredibly lucky series of events.” Bill Gates acknowledged that Microsoft’s success was accomplished by “embracing and extending ideas developed by others”—what any person with an iota of integrity would term, “the public sector.” I’d go further and say that we know from the history of computers that Microsoft did not make any of the critical technical advances and further still, it only exists because of massive public investment (tax dollars) and from the indirect individual contributions of millions of individuals, from teachers, farmers and nurses to truck drivers, secretaries and sanitation workers.

More on computers: They were born at public initiative and public expense. During the 1950s, the funding came from the taxpayer funded Pentagon and the National Science Foundation. Virtually everything was created a public expense and then gobbled up by enterprising opportunists like Gates. For example, the Pentagon was absolutely fixated on having a communication system that could survive a nuclear attack. The answer? The internet. Kenneth Flamm, in his book “Creating the Computer,” explains that “Key players in the military first tried to convince established businesses and investment banks that a new and potentially profitable business opportunity was presenting itself. They did not succeed and, consequently, the Defense Department committed itself to financing an enormously expensive development program.” As Noam Chomsky has asserted, “Capitalism means, we don’t take the risks. The public takes the risks and we take the profits. As much as possible, risk and cost have to be socialized and profits privatized. That’s the basic principle.”

The Air Force and the Atomic Energy Commission were responsible for initiating data-based software; the genesis of artificial intelligence research was not intrepid entrepreneurs but the military in the 1950s. The U.S. government and especially the military sponsored research were behind video terminals, the drawing tablet, light pen and even the mouse. Flamm notes that more than half of IBM’s R&D budget was in the form of government contracts in the 1950s and 1960s—in other words, from the taxpayer. The vaunted AT&T and its Bell Laboratory was a wholly government supported monopoly. They developed the transistor but because of its prohibitive
expense, for their first decade only the government procured them for military application. Incidentally, Flamm points out that because European governments were reluctant to provide these massive taxpayer subsidies to industry, Europe fell hopelessly behind the United States.

And what has this great wealth been used for? For personal aggrandizement, fantastic comfort and immense privilege. And it permits the accumulation of even more profits, leverage over private and public life and coopting government to do its bidding. Finally, I’ve always been partial to the injunction “To whom much is given, much is required.” If we apply this to the United States, the “much” is rarely given voluntarily while the “required” has neither been requited nor demanded. And although I wouldn’t presume to improve on scripture, I would suggest this corollary: “From whom much is taken, much is owed.” In short, if all production is social—from public investments to our collective labor—where is our dividend?

Photos: Bill Gates often takes holidays on super yachts, preferring to rent them. However, last year, there were reports that Gates was going to purchase the five level, ultra-super yacht “Sinot Agua” with a price tag of $776 million but he apparently didn’t go through with it. (Top) Two of the most expensive personal yacht’s in the world belonged to Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen who died in 2018: “Octopus” at $200 million and “Tatoosh” at $100 million.

Gary Olson is professor emeritus of Political Science at Moravian College. His most recent book is Empathy Imperiled: Capitalism, Culture, and the Brain. Contact: olson@moravian.edu

---

The 25 richest Americans, including Jeff Bezos, Michael Bloomberg, Elon Musk, Warren Buffet and George Soros, paid relatively little—and sometimes nothing—in federal taxes from 2014 to 2018. When they did pay, it was at a rate of 3.4% on $401 billion of their collective wealth during the period. The 25 are worth $1.1 trillion.

—Gary Olson, Facebook post, June 9, 2021
Skylab and the Sit-Down Strike in Space

LENNY FLANK

It was a one-of-a-kind event: in 1972, during a mission on the Skylab space station, a group of American astronauts, frustrated by an unreasonable work schedule, organized their own version of a sit-down strike in space. They won all their demands, but in the end, NASA had its final revenge.

In 1972, NASA launched “Skylab”, a space station cobbled together from the empty third stage of a Saturn V rocket which was intended to study the medical effects of long-term space flight on humans. The project was a disaster right from the start. On launch, a protective cover on the rocket failed—-one of the Skylab’s two solar panel arrays was torn away and destroyed, and the other one was stuck and wouldn’t open. Without the solar panels, none of the onboard equipment would work, so when the first crew was sent to Skylab in early 1972, its primary task was to fix the remaining solar panel at least enough to deploy it, and to jury-rig a “solar screen” that would shade the space station and prevent the interior from overheating (there was not enough electricity from just one solar panel to run the cooling system). The first Skylab crew spent 28 days making the space station habitable (barely). Later in the year, another crew spent almost two months aboard Skylab, completing most of the repairs and then performing a number of medical and engineering experiments.

The third crew, launched in November 1972, consisted of Mission Commander Gerry Carr, Science Pilot Ed Gibson, and Pilot William Pogue. NASA had big plans for them—since this was to be the last scheduled visit to Skylab before the station was mothballed and put into a parking orbit, NASA wanted to get as much experimental data as they could make up for all the earlier delays and problems, and dozens of scientists on Earth wanted to make sure their particular experiments got done. The crew was scheduled for up to 84 days in space, with 6,051 hours of work between the three of them, involving medical observations and data recording, four different spacewalks to inspect and repair equipment on the space station, four days of observing and photographing Comet Kohoutek as it approached the sun, 84 hours of solar observation, and 80 assignments to photograph specific places on the Earth’s surface below. The Skylab crew, however, had already hinted that they had different ideas—this was the first trip into space for all three of them, and during mission training Commander Carr had pointedly remarked several times that his crew would need some time to get used to the unfamiliar surroundings.

Trouble began within hours of docking with Skylab. Pogue, like so many astronauts before him, had gotten space sick and threw up. The three crew members decided that it was no big deal, and didn’t report it to Mission Control. But unknown to them, NASA specialists on the ground were monitoring the astronauts through a set of recording devices, and when they downloaded the audio overnight and heard about it, they were furious with the crew. Things got worse from there. NASA began to send daily schedules by teleprinter to Skylab, specifying every activity to the minute. After two weeks, the crew found themselves falling behind the tightly-structured schedule—whereupon Mission Control began demanding that the Skylab crew cut
their sleep breaks and work through meal periods to catch up. Not surprisingly, the astronauts began to object that the schedule was too tight; NASA responded that the crew was just being “rigid” and complaining too much. Commander Carr, on behalf of the crew, decided that he had to draw the line: the teletyped minute-by-minute schedule was, he told NASA, “no way to do business”, and the demand for more work time was intolerable. Carr declared, “We would never work 16-hours a day for 84 straight days on the ground, and we should not be expected to do it here in space.”

Over the Christmas holiday things eased up a bit, as the crew were given some time off (which they spent making a makeshift Christmas tree out of empty food containers).

But within days, NASA was once again pressuring the crew to catch up, and again demanding that they work through scheduled breaks. By now, even the astronauts on the ground were chiming in, with former Skylab Commander Alan Bean bluntly telling Mission Control, “You have to lighten up and let these guys catch their breath.” Carr’s crew, Bean pointed out, was cooped up in the cramped Skylab for a much longer time than his crew had been, and couldn’t be expected to keep up the same scheduling pace. NASA ignored him.

On December 28, the crew reached their breaking point, and before they went to sleep Carr issued an ultimatum. Over the radio, he announced to Houston that he was sending down a message detailing the crew’s concerns about the schedule, that he wanted to talk about it the next morning, and that no further work would be done aboard the space station until the crew’s concerns were addressed. In effect, the Skylab crew went on strike.

The next morning, for over an hour, the radio crackled back and forth between Skylab and Houston. “We need more time to rest,” the crew declared. “We need a schedule that is not so packed. We don’t want to exercise after a meal. We need to get things under control.” When Houston replied that the schedule needed to be met, Carr simply turned off the radio and the crew took their own unscheduled day off. They spent the next 24 hours sleeping, taking pictures, or just looking out the window and relaxing, while NASA fumed impotently, unable to do anything about it.

On December 29, an agreement was reached. NASA conceded that they would no longer interfere with the crew’s rest periods or meal breaks, and they would no longer assign any major tasks for the evenings after dinner. Instead of scheduling all the tiny routine chores to the minute, Mission Control would simply send a list of tasks that needed to be done that day and let the crew do them as they had time.

With the reduced work load and the astronaut participation in setting the schedule, things got better. The last six weeks of the flight went without any more blowups, and all the work got done.

But NASA did not forget or forgive the rebellion. When the three Skylab astronauts returned to Earth in February 1973, NASA publicly declared that they were happy with the success of the mission, but privately took steps to ensure that none of the three ever flew again.

---

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.
Be Very Revolutionary

FRANCA ROIBAL FERNÁNDEZ

I would like to invite everyone to think and reflect upon the intersectional ways in which so many of us are marginalized, and the ways we continue to fight to abolish the systems of oppression responsible for so much of the injustice that, while many have the privilege of assuming it is a new phenomenon or of having learned about this recently, it has existed for as long as humanity has been around.

You may have heard of some of the terms I will call upon, they have become “trendy” recently after undergoing the process of appropriation and co-opting. They’ve become buzzwords, they’ve begun to lose their meaning as we use them and see them used in superficial, performative gestures which do little to actually advance and get social justice for people who are minoritized in various ways. Terms such as DEI—Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. We use the acronym so much we forget what it even stands for. These three concepts are important on their own and also dependent on each other. In order to achieve true diversity, we must consider what systems we have in place to ensure equitable, not just equal, spaces and institutions, as well as inclusion, will diverse folks have a seat at the table? You cannot have one of these without the other two. We cannot achieve our DEI goals unless we address all three of the letters in the acronym.

In my humble opinion, the key to doing meaningful work towards true progress in regards to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, is incorporating an intersectional framework. Intersectionality is another term that is frequently misunderstood, co-opted and misused. It is a term coined and brought to popularity by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black scholar, lawyer and activist. Frequently the radical original meanings of concepts or the legacy of the marginalized folks who bring them into popular use is white washed or erased, and we must do work to ensure that does not happen.

Intersectionality is the idea that there are levels of marginalization that affect folks in different, intersecting ways, and we cannot ignore those. We cannot be reductionist in our activism and we must take into account that groups are not monoliths. To use Crenshaw’s example, the experience and marginalization of poor Black women is not the same as the experience and marginalization of middle- or upper-class white women. Other levels of marginalization add to the oppression of folks as well, such as sexual orientation and gender identities. One of my favorite quotes from her 1991 article on this topic is: “Intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity [. . .] My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw, 1991) Her case study focuses on women of color who are survivors of abuse, and her work is a critique of white feminism which can be tone deaf and exclusionary to multiple identities. Our feminism must be intersectional in order to truly work for the liberation of all women and femmes and in order to achieve true equality for all genders.

This also means that many of us have varying levels of privilege that must be acknowledged in order to truly address the social injustice that surrounds us. Here are two helpful graphics which you can find on Sylvia Duckworth’s Instagram @
sylviaduckworth) to show how levels of privilege in ways we may not always think of help us have access to power in society and how we might be able to combat injustice by being more inclusive and mindful in our activism and advocacy.

Another term that I believe is important to take into account as we attempt to achieve our goals of diversifying and working toward a more just society, is decolonization. Decolonization is important to do on various levels. It is the attempt to correct some of the historical violence committed against indigenous folks all over the world. The first, small step is acknowledging that we are on stolen land. From there we need to make sure we work to increase visibility of indigenous folks, making sure we are not appropriating cultural and spiritual practices and constantly be unlearning harmful ideas and systems we have been conditioned to blindly accept, for example capitalism, and misogyny. What this means in education is that we can decolonize our classrooms and syllabi by including more authors and scholars who are BIPOC, women, LGBTQ+ folks, any marginalized identity especially those most historically underrepresented, and being mindful of not whitewashing the radical voices that have been doing the anti-imperialist, anti-misogynist, and anti-white supremacist work for generations.

In order to truly be intersectional decolonialists, we must decenter the usually cis, straight, male, US-centric whiteness. We must also decenter the United States and include the global impact of the injustice we are complicit in. All of us here have a level of US privilege. Every space we occupy can be decolonized. One of the ways to do this is to remember that America is a continent, and that we can help to decolonize our language and reclaim the use of the term America which has been appropriated by the United States. We can reclaim it by using the term to refer to the entire continent, from Canada to Argentina, and being mindful about referring to the US and United Statians accurately. We can also work to shrink the spaces where bigots feel safe and bold, and remember that none of this injustice is new. This country was built on genocide and slavery. In the words of Nikki Sánchez, an indigenous activist, filmmaker and scholar, “this history is not your fault, but it is your responsibility.” It is all our responsibility to address our role in these injustices and actively work to unlearn the white supremacist, misogynist conditioning we are subject to daily.
Ijeoma Oluo, in her book, *So You Want to Talk About Race*, addresses the recent wave of discussions around these issues of injustice. Her conclusion is that talking is great, but it is not enough. We must do. We must use our privilege. We must highlight minoritized voices. We must be mindful of the emotional labor it takes to exist as women, as BIPOC, as LGBTQ+ folks in predominantly white supremacist, misogynist, homophobic and transphobic spaces.

Sometimes, folks believe that since they do not belong to a marginalized group, they assume it is not “their job” to advocate for those groups. This could not be further from the truth and is frequently used a cop out. Decolonization is for everyone. Intersectionality is for everyone. When we assume that these issues are for the DEI committees or departments to handle, or for marginalized people to talk about and act upon only, we are imposing emotional labor to the people who carry the biggest burden in society and at institutions. We should all be incorporating explicitly anti-racist, anti-misogynist, anti-homophobic, anti-transphobic practices into our work spaces, into our classroom spaces, and into our personal spaces.

Lastly, I would like to invite you to incorporate radical kindness to and for yourself and others. This includes self-care, compassion and flexibility with yourself and with others. Expectations of perfection are harmful, especially as we are all navigating being more than a year into a global pandemic that has been handled terribly while we are all expected to just act normally. This moment is not normal. The pandemic, the social injustice, none of this is normal. It is ok to acknowledge that. It is OK to take breaks. It is OK to make mistakes when it comes to social justice work. It is OK to call out mistakes. It is OK to forgive mistakes. We are all learning and we are all on a journey. Radical kindness is not superficial niceties. It Is creating spaces of liberation, true safe spaces that de-center the most privileged, where we listen to survivors, where we listen to marginalized folks and do collective work to abolish systems of oppression.

Moravian encourages us to be a little revolutionary. I want to challenge you to go above and beyond, to be really revolutionary, to challenge the status quo, make your voice be heard. It is radical to embrace your identity. It is radical to advocate for people and situations that may not affect you or that you may not relate to, but that you understand and empathize with. Programs like Women, Gender and Sexuality studies are inherently radical and revolutionary, especially in a time where we are seeing the value of education be reduced to a focus on the “moneymakers” or on the practical majors and minors. You are living proof that the humanities and liberal arts are important and play a role in the achievement of social justice. You are the future advocates and activists that will make a real difference. Do so radically. Be very revolutionary.

Franca Roibal Fernández teaches Spanish and Latin American Studies at Moravian University. She can be reached roibalfernandesf@moravian.edu.

This is the text of a speech Franca Roibal Fernández gave at Moravian College (Bethlehem PA) to inductees of Iota Iota Iota, the Women and Gender Studies National Honors Society.
On May 1st, the date Donald Trump signed onto for the withdrawal of the remaining 3,500 American troops from Afghanistan, the war there, already 19 years old, was still officially a teenager. Think of September 11, 2021—the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and the date Joe Biden has chosen for the same—as, in essence, the very moment when its teenage years will be over. In all that time, Washington has been fighting what, in reality, should have been considered a fantasy war, a mission impossible in that country, however grim and bloody, based on fantasy expectations and fantasy calculations, few of which seem to have been stanch in Washington even so many years later. Not surprisingly, Biden’s decision evoked the predictable reactions in that city. The military high command’s never-ending urge to stick with a failed war was complemented by the inside-the-Beltway Blob’s doomsday scenarios and tired nostrums.

The latter began the day before the president even went public when, in a major opinion piece, the Washington Post’s editorial board distilled the predictable platitudes to come: such a full-scale military exit, they claimed, would deprive Washington of all diplomatic influence and convince the Taliban that it could jettison its talks with President Ashraf Ghani’s demoralized U.S.-backed government and fight its way to power. A Taliban triumph would, in turn, eviscerate democracy and civil society, leaving rights gained by women and minorities in these years in the dust, and so destroy everything the U.S. had fought for since October 2001.

By this September, of course, 775,000-plus American soldiers will have served in Afghanistan (a few of them the children of those who had served early in the war). More than a fifth of them would endure at least three tours of duty there! Suffice it to say that most of the armchair generals who tend to adorn establishment think tanks haven’t faced such hardships.

In 2010 and 2011, the Obama surge would deploy as many as 100,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. The Pentagon states that, as of this month, 2,312 American soldiers have died there (80% killed in action) and 20,666 have been injured. Then there’s the toll taken on vets of that never-ending war thanks to PTSD, suicide, and substance abuse. Military families apart, however, much of the American public has been remarkably untouched by the war, since there’s no longer a draft and Uncle Sam borrowed money, rather than raising taxes, to foot the $2.26 trillion bill. As a result, the forever war dragged on, consuming blood and treasure without any Vietnam War-style protests.

Not surprisingly, most Americans know even less about the numbers of Afghan civilians killed and wounded in these years. Since 2002, at least 47,000 non-combatants have been killed and another 43,000 injured, whether by airstrikes, artil-
lery fire, shootings, improvised explosive devices, or suicide and car bombings. A 2020 U.N. report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan notes that 2019 was the sixth straight year in which 10,000 civilians were killed or wounded. And this carnage has occurred in one of the world’s poorest countries, which ranks 187th in per-capita income, where the death or incapacitation of an adult male (normally the primary breadwinner in a rural Afghan home) can tip already-poor families into destitution.

So how, then, can the calls to persevere make sense? Seek and you won’t find a persuasive answer. Consider the most notable recent attempt to provide one, the Afghanistan Study Group report, written by an ensemble of ex-officials, retired generals, and think-tank luminaries, not a few of them tied to big weapons-producing companies. Released with significant fanfare in February, it offered no substantive proposals for attaining goals that have been sought for 19 years, including a stable democracy with fair elections, a free press, an unfettered civil society, and equal rights for all Afghans—all premised on a political settlement between the U.S.-backed government and the Taliban.

Still Standing After All These Years

Now, consider Afghanistan’s bedrock reality: the Taliban, which has battled the world’s most fearsome military machine for two decades, remains standing, and continues to expand its control in rural areas. The U.S., its NATO allies, and the Afghanistan National Security and Defense Forces have indeed killed some 50,000 Taliban fighters over the years, including, in 2016, its foremost leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansoor. In 2019-2020 alone, several senior commanders, also members of the Taliban’s shadow government, were killed, including the “governors” of Badakshan, Farah, Logar, Samangan, and Wardak provinces. Yet the Taliban, whose roots lie among the Pashtun, the country’s historically dominant ethnic group, have managed to replenish their ranks, procure new weapons and ammunition, and raise money, above all through taxes on opium poppy farming.

It helps that the Taliban continues to get covert support from Pakistan’s military and intelligence service, which played a pivotal role in creating the movement in the early 1990s after it was clear that the leaders of the Pakistan-backed Pashtun mujahedeen (literally, those who wage jihad) proved unable to shoot their way into power because minority nationalities (mainly Uzbeks and Tajiks) resisted ferociously. Yet the Taliban has indigenous roots, too, and its success can’t be attributed solely to intimidation and violence. Its political agenda and puritanical version of Islam appeal to many Afghans. Absent that, it would have perished long ago.

Instead, according to the Long War Journal, the Taliban now controls 75 of Afghanistan’s 400 districts; the government rules 133 others, with the remaining 187 up for grabs. Although the insurgency isn’t on the homestretch to victory, it’s never been in a stronger military position since the 2001 American invasion. Nor has the morale of its fighters dissipated, though many are doubtless weary of war. According to a May U.N. report, “the Taliban remain confident they can take power by force,” even though their fighters have long been vastly outmatched in numbers, mobility, supplies, transportation, and the caliber of their armaments. Nor do they have the jets, helicopters, and bombers their adversaries, especially the United States do, and
use with devastating effect. In 2019, 7,423 bombs and other kinds of ordnance were dropped on Afghanistan, eight times as many as in 2015.

Tallying Costs

As 2019 ended, a group of former senior U.S. officials claimed that the Afghan campaign's costs have been overblown. American troops killed there the previous year, they pointed out, amounted to only a fifth of those who died during “non-combat training exercises” and that “U.S. direct military expenditures in Afghanistan are approximately three percent of annual U.S. military spending” and were decreasing. It evidently escaped them that even a few fatalities that occur because a country's leaders pursue outlandish objectives like reshaping an entire society in a distant land should matter.

As for the monetary costs, it depends on what you count. Those “direct military expenditures” aren’t the only ones incurred year after year from the Afghan War. Brown University’s Costs of War Project, for instance, also includes expenses from the Pentagon’s “base budget” (the workaday costs of maintaining the armed forces); funds allotted for “Overseas Contingency Operations,” the post-9/11 counter-terrorism wars; interest payments on money borrowed to fund the war; the long-term pensions and benefits of its veterans; and economic aid provided to Afghanistan by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Do the math that way and the price tag turns out to be so much larger.

But even if you were to accept that 3% figure, that would still total $22 billion from the $738 billion fiscal year 2020 Pentagon budget, hardly chump change — especially given the resources needed to address festering problems on the home front, including a pandemic, child poverty, hunger, homelessness, and an opioid epidemic.

Nation-Building: Form vs. Substance

Now, consider some examples of the “progress” highlighted by the proponents of pressing on. These would include democratic elections and institutions, less corruption, and inroads against the narcotics trade.

First, the election system, an effective one being, of course, a prerequisite for democracy. Of course, given the way Donald Trump and crew dealt with election 2020 here in the U.S., Americans should think twice before blithely casting stones at the Afghan electoral system. In addition, organizing elections in a war-ravaged country is a dangerous task when an insurgency is working overtime to violently disrupt them.

Still, each of Afghanistan’s four presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) produced widespread, systematic fraud verified by investigative reporters and noted in U.S. government reports. After the 2014 presidential poll, for instance, candidate Abdullah Abdullah wouldn’t concede and threatened to form a parallel government, insisting that his opponent, Ashraf Ghani, had won fraudulently. To avert bloodshed, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a power-sharing deal that made Abdullah the “chief executive” — a position unmentioned in the Afghan constitution. (Incidentally, elections to the national legislature have also been plagued by irregularities.) Although USAID has worked feverishly to improve election

As for key political institutions, which also bear American fingerprints, the respected Afghanistan Analyst Network only recently examined the state of the supreme court, the senate, provincial and district assemblies, and the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of the Constitution (ICOIC). It concluded that they “lacked even the minimum independence needed to exercise their constitutional mandate to provide accountability” and aggravated the “stagnation of the overall political system.”

The senate lacked the third of its membership elected by district assemblies—the remaining senators are appointed by the president or elected by provincial assemblies—for a simple reason. Though constitutionally mandated, district assembly elections have never been held. As for the ICOIC, it had only four out of its seven legally required commissioners, insufficient for a quorum.

When it comes to the narcotics trade, Afghanistan now accounts for 90% of the world’s illicit opium, essential for the making of heroin. The hectares of land devoted to opium-poppy planting have increased dramatically from 8,000 in 2001 to 263,000 by 2018. (A slump in world demand led to a rare drop in 2019.) Little wonder, since poppies provide destitute Afghan farmers with income to cover their basic needs. A U.N. study estimates that poppy sales, at $2 billion in 2019, exceeded the country’s legal exports, while the opium economy accounted for 7% to 11% of the gross domestic product.

Although the U.S. has spent at least $9 billion attempting to stamp out Afghanistan’s narcotics trade, a 2021 report to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) concluded that the investment had next to no effect and that Afghan dominance of the global opium business remained unrivalled. The report didn’t, however, mention the emergence of a new, more insidious problem. In recent years, that country has become a major producer of illegal synthetic drugs, especially methamphetamine, both cheaper and more profitable than opium cultivation. It now houses, according to a European Union study, an estimated 500 meth labs that manufacture 65.5 tons of the stuff daily.

As for the campaign against corruption, a supposed pillar of U.S. nation-building, forget it. From shakedowns by officials and warlords to palatial homes built with ill-gotten gains by the well-connected, corruption permeates the American-installed system in Afghanistan. Though U.S. officials have regularly fumed about the corruption of senior Afghan officials, including the first post-Taliban president, Hamid Karzai, the CIA funneled “tens of millions” of dollars to him for years (as he himself confirmed). Investigative reporting by the Washington Post’s Craig Whitlock revealed that many notorious warlords and senior officials were also blessed by the Agency’s beneficence. They included Uzbek strongman and one-time First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, accused of murder, abduction, and rape, and Mohammed Zia Salehi, the head of administration at the National Security Council under President Karzai.

In 2015, a U.S. government investigation revealed that $300 million earmarked to pay the Afghan police never actually reached them and was instead “paid” to
“ghost” (non-existent) officers or simply stolen by police officials. A 2012 study traced 3,000 Pentagon contracts totaling $106 billion and concluded that 40% of that sum had ended up in the pockets of crime bosses, government officials, and even insurgents.

According to SIGAR’s first 2021 quarterly report to Congress, one U.S. contractor pled guilty to stealing $775,000 in State Department funds. Two others, subcontractors to weapons giant Lockheed Martin, submitted nearly $1.8 million in fraudulent invoices, while hiring local employees who lacked contractually required qualifications. (They were asked to procure counterfeit college diplomas from an Internet degree mill.)

And lest you think that this deeply embedded culture of corruption in Afghanistan is a “Third World” phenomenon, consider an American official’s recollection that “the biggest source of corruption” in that country “was the United States.”

Hubris and Nemesis Strike—Yet Again

While writing this piece, a memory came back to me. In 1988, I was part of a group that visited Afghanistan just as Soviet troops were starting to withdraw from that country. After a disastrous 10-year war, those demoralized young soldiers were headed for a homeland that itself would soon implode. The Red Army had been sent to Afghanistan in December 1979 by a geriatric Politburo leadership confident that it would save an embattled Afghan socialist regime, which had seized power in April 1978 and soon sparked a countrywide Islamist insurgency backed by the CIA and Saudi dollars that spawned a small group that called itself al-Qaeda, headed by a rich young Saudi.

Once the guerillas were crushed, so Soviet leaders then imagined, the building of a modern socialist society would proceed amid stability and a shiny new Soviet-allied Afghanistan would emerge. As for those ragtag bands of primitive Islamic warriors, what chance did they stand against well-trained Russian soldiers bearing the latest in modern firepower? Moscow may even have believed that the Kabul government would hold its own after the Soviet military left what its new young leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had then taken to calling “the bleeding wound.” The Afghan president of that moment certainly did. When our group met him, Mohammed Najibullah Ahmadzai, a burly, fearsome fellow who had previously headed the KHAD, the country’s brutal intelligence agency, confidently assured us that his government had strong support and plenty of staying power. Barely four years later, he would be castrated, dragged behind a vehicle, and strung up in public.

The Politburo’s experiment in social re-engineering in a foreign country—no one said “nation-building” back then—led to more than 13,000 dead Soviet soldiers and perhaps as many as one million dead Afghans. No two wars are alike, of course, but the same vainglory that possessed those Soviet leaders marked the American campaign in Afghanistan in its early years. The white-hot anger that followed the 9/11 attacks and the public’s desire for vengeance led the George W. Bush administration to topple the Taliban government. He and his successors in the White House, seized by the overweening pride theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had long ago warned his fellow Americans about, also believed that they would build a democratic and modern Afghanistan.
As it happened, they simply started another, even longer cycle of war in that unfortunate country, one guaranteed to rage on and consume yet more lives after American soldiers depart this September—assuming Biden’s decision isn’t thwarted.

Rajan Menon is the Anne and Bernard Spitzer Professor of International Relations at the Powell School, City College of New York, and Senior Research Fellow at Columbia University’s Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies. He is the author, most recently, of The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention.

This essay first appeared in TomDispatch on April 25, 2021.

“The United States, it appears, is willing to allow the Taliban to return to power with two caveats: first, that the U.S. presence remains, and second, that the main rivals of the United States—namely China and Russia—have no role in Kabul.... No lessons have been learned from this history. The U.S. will “withdraw,” but will also leave behind its assets to checkmate China and Russia. These geopolitical considerations eclipse any concern for the Afghan people.”

As my title suggests, I present what most Americans don’t know and those who do know are reluctant to acknowledge. One percent of Americans have wealth exceeding that which seventy-five percent of other Americans have. This miniscule minority obviously possesses privileges the vast majority of Americans lack. This one percent has political power thanks to their economic circumstances. Their incredible wealth enables them to contribute hundreds of thousands of dollars to political campaigns of persons running for Congress. Implied in this process is the expectation the elected congresspersons will vote for policies advantageous to those whose financial support they took. This process is crass, but it’s the reality of how our system works. Thus, the one percent have political influence not available to those making less than $100,000 a year.

To illustrate I present my forty-four-year-old son’s circumstances. He teaches in Chester Pennsylvania where the student population is ninety-nine percent African-American. He has twenty-six years of teaching experience and earns $60,000 a year. His wife is unable to work because of a recent heart attack and he has two teenage sons. They have a monthly mortgage to pay plus both are still making college loan payments. Obviously, he and his wife are unable to make financial contributions to politicians running for a seat in Congress. Thus, he and his wife are unable to influence politicians to promote policies specifically advantageous to themselves. Likewise, the parents of his students are unable to make financial contributions to politicians running for office and are in circumstances similar to theirs.

I suspect politicians beholden to the superrich aren’t eager to learn about the economic circumstances of those making less than $100,000 a year. Are they aware of the struggle to pay mortgages, health and dental expenses, college tuition costs and, perhaps, financially helping older parents whose social security isn’t adequate for their daily expenses?

I’d like members of Congress to recall Franklin Roosevelt’s message of eighty-six years ago. He said, “The test of our progress is not whether we add to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide for those who have too little.” In President Biden’s first sixty days, Democrats have, to some degree, acknowledged FDR’s challenge. They supported his call for passage of the 1.9 trillion-dollar economic assistance bill. This bill suggests a percolate up economic process as opposed to the Republican “trickle down” economic process.

However, Democrats failed to address the burdensome college tuition debt incurred by my son and daughter-in-law as well as tuition debt incurred by parents of daughters and sons wanting a college education. Senator Sanders wanted college to be free to all who qualified and called for Congress to cancel existing college debts. Of course, his proposals were anathema to Wall Street banking interests. Earlier Wall Street banks had pressured Congress to pass a law prohibiting individuals declaring
bankruptcy with regard to tuition debts. No wonder my daughter-in-law and son favored the candidacy of Senator Bernie Sanders.

Many see Congress serving the interests of banks, especially those making student loans, big pharma, health insurance companies, and, of course, corporations functioning within the context of the military industrial complex. Taxpayers’ money funds a national budget allocating more than fifty percent for defense. Much of what is spent in the defense budget is welfare to certain corporations. How is money spent for two nuclear submarines able to deter a terrorist attack like that which occurred on September 11, 2001? Money spent to build those submarines only enriches the one percent who own millions of shares in the corporations getting Pentagon contracts to build them. What’s in it for the parents of the students my son teaches in Chester, Pennsylvania? This is an example of the bloated military budget serving the superrich. The military budget’s consequences, and implications, was extensively presented in James McCartney’s book America’s War Machine: Vested Interested, Endless Conflicts, published in 2015.

As for the bloated defense budget, one radical proposal, alluded to by Senator Sanders, would reduce the budget by 15%. This reduction would provide money to pay Medicare for all as well as grant college tuition money to all qualified students. The defense budget would still exceed the combined military budgets of the following countries: Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Russia, and Turkey. This information was presented in the book Red Ink, written by David Wessel, economic editor of the Wall Street Journal.

McCartney also estimates near fifteen percent of the defense budget is for nuclear weapons. Apparently, the U.S. has roughly ten thousand nuclear weapons while China has only five hundred. (Again, U.S. nukes were of no help in the war against Iraq initiated by George W. Bush.) China spends more on manufacturing goods which Walmart buys and sells. China knows, as do our presidents as well, it would only take fifteen missiles, each having twenty times the power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, to instantly end all life on earth. The question is: who’s profiting by the U.S. manufacturing these weapons? It’s not the public-school teachers, like my son, or the parents of the children who attend those schools. Those who profit are the one percent who own millions of shares in the corporations manufacturing those weapons. Their profits obliterate any emotional twinges of conscience.

Philip Reiss taught American History from 1967 to 1999 at the S.U.N.Y. community college in Middletown, NY He also served in the Air Force from 1953 until 1959. He may be reached at: pazzetphili@gmail.com
Come join us on Fridays via Zoom from 6:30–8:30 PM to engage in political discussions. (Email fara@sustainlv.org for link.)

Subscribe for only $25 per year and receive the next four issues by mail! Email lefturn@sustainlv.org with your name and address. Donations are also welcome!

We accept articles of 500 – 2500 words in electronic format. Please include a short author bio and email your submission to lefturn@sustainlv.org.

Check out our sister publication!

The Alliance’s Sustainable Lehigh Valley booklet now features creative writing and visual art in addition to essays, plus information about local organizations that help make our communities more sustainable. (Fall and spring editions.)

While the sciences provide knowledge we need to make key decisions, they often fail to capture people’s interest and don’t really help us see the ethical and moral dimensions. Stories, poetry, and visual art can catch people’s attention and make a real difference in engagement and consciousness-raising.

www.sustainlv.org/slv-guidelines
A Letter to Biden On Gaza

Dear President Biden,

I am writing to you about Gaza, a place that I have studied and written about for the last 35 years, a place that I consider another home, filled with the kindest and most generous people you will ever meet—have you ever been there? But I am writing not only as a scholar of the region but as a Jew and one whose parents survived Auschwitz.

I have a question for you, Mr. President: When is the death of a child acceptable? Or perhaps I should ask the question this way: When does the death of a Palestinian child become unacceptable? You have experienced the unspeakable loss of your own children so you are better placed than most to answer my questions.

Last week after 87 Palestinians in Gaza were killed and over 500 wounded you stated that you had not seen a “significant overreaction” on Israel’s part to Hamas’s rocket attacks. Among the dead at that time were 18 children. I did not know any of them but I know people who do. Would you please help me explain to my friends why the death of these 18 children does not constitute an overreaction? This brings up another question I have for you, Mr. President: How many children must die in Gaza before you would consider Israel’s response excessive particularly since you have made human rights the center of your foreign policy? I need to know so that I can explain it to my friends. As I write this, over 60 Palestinian children have been killed by the government of Israel. Is that enough to qualify?

I know people inside our government who work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I need to tell you something I heard from one of them about the death of Gaza’s children. This individual implied that some of the dead were likely the children of Hamas officials so their deaths don’t really matter; that is, their deaths are acceptable. Is this the answer to my first question? Should this be the way I explain it to my friends? Please help me out here.

It is tragic that after more than three decades of research and writing, I still find it necessary to argue for the humanity of Palestinians, even to you.

One more thing before I end this letter if you’ll indulge me. It is about my mom. When she was imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust, she risked her life hiding children who were chosen for deportation to Auschwitz and other extermination camps. The Nazis eventually found the children and sent them to their deaths. But my mom tried to save them even though she knew she was powerless to do so. And I can assure you, knowing her and learning from her as I did throughout my life, she would have done the same for any child under threat, Jewish or Christian or Muslim. She would have been horrified by the senseless killing of children in this terrible conflict, both Palestinian and Israeli, and she would have railed at the injustice of it all. And this is my last question for you: Why haven’t you done the same?

Sincerely,

Dr. Sara Roy
END U.S. AID TO ISRAEL NOW!

From flyer for Protest the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces Gala, 3/10/15