

CounterPunch

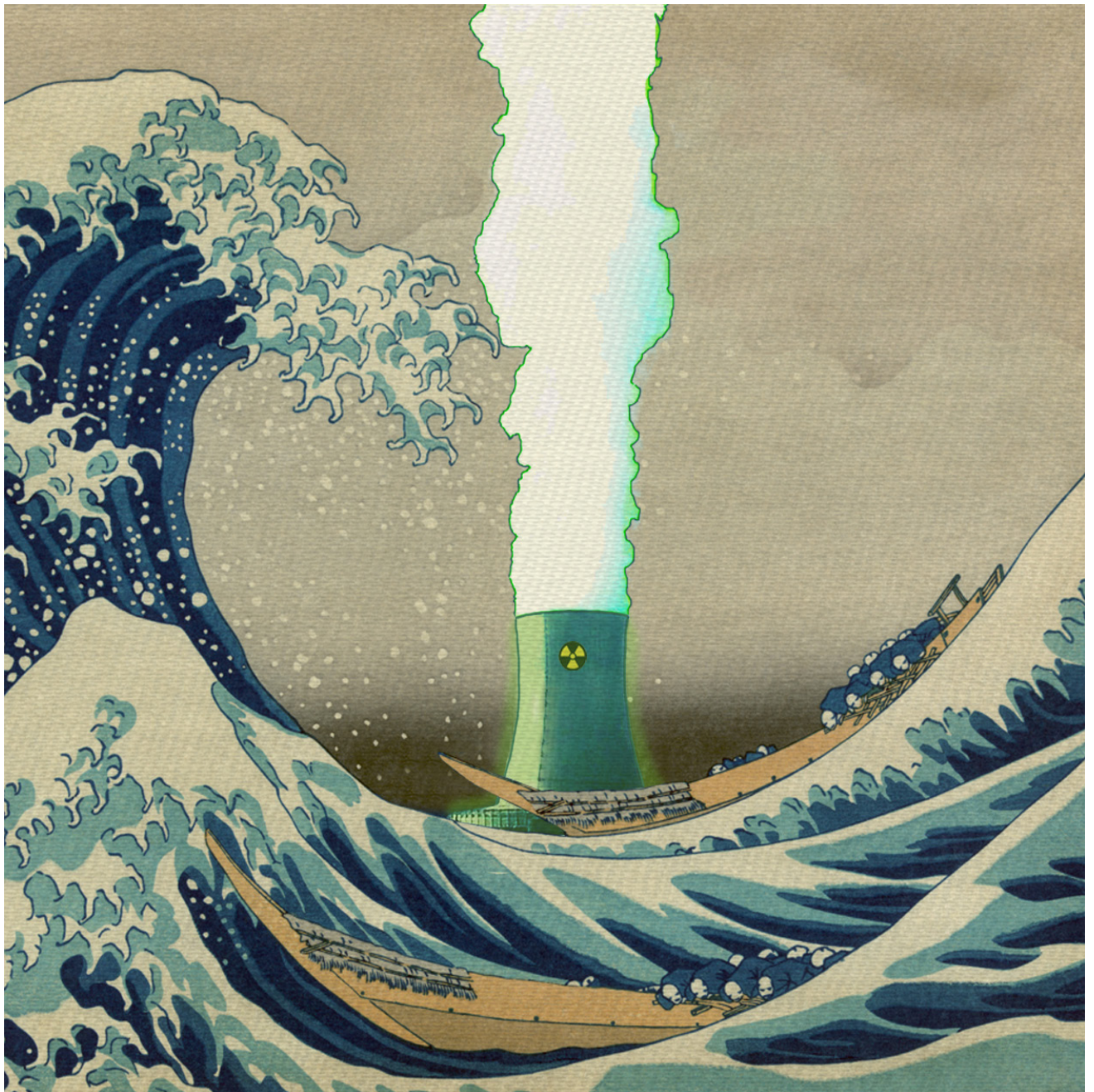
NUCLEAR POWER: DEAD IN THE WATER IT POISONED BY JOHN LAFORGE

CAMUS IN THE TIME OF DRONES BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

LEFT BEHIND: THE LATE, GREAT MIDDLE CLASS BY DAVID MACARAY

MANNING TRUTHFEST BY HARRY BROWNE

NOW THEY WANT TO KILL THE ELK BY LEE HALL



CounterPunch

www.counterpunch.org
CounterPunch Magazine, Volume 21,
(ISSN 1086-2323) is a monthly journal
of progressive politics, investigative
reporting, civil liberties, art, and culture
published by The Institute for the Advanc-
ment of Journalistic Clarity, 631 Cham-
bers Road, Petrolia, California, 95558.
Visit counterpunch.org to read dozens
of new articles daily, purchase subscrip-
tions, order books, plus access 18 years of
archives. Periodicals postage pending at
Eureka, California.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:
CounterPunch
P.O. Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558

ISSN 1086-2323 (print)
ISSN 2328-4331 (digital)
www.counterpunch.org
All rights reserved.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Jeffrey St. Clair

MANAGING EDITOR
Joshua Frank

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Lee Ballinger, Melissa Beattie, Darwin
Bond-Graham, Chloe Cockburn, Windy
Cooler, Chris Floyd, Kevin Alexander
Gray, Steve Horn, Lee Hall, Conn Hallinan,
Barbara Rose Johnson, Binoy Kampmark,
JoAnn Wypijewski, David Macaray, Chase
Madar, Kim Nicolini, Brenda Norrell,
Vijay Prashad, Louis Proyect, Martha
Rosenberg, Christine Sheeler, Jan Tucker,
Mike Whitney

POETRY EDITOR
Marc Beaudin

SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR
Nathaniel St. Clair

BUSINESS MANAGER &
DESIGN PRODUCTION
Becky Grant

SUBSCRIPTIONS & ORDER FULFILLMENT
Deva Wheeler

DESIGN CONSULTATION
Tiffany Wardle

Contact Information

CounterPunch Business Office
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558
Toll Free 1 (800) 840-3683
1 (707) 629-3683

EDITORIAL:
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
BUSINESS: becky@counterpunch.org
SUSCRIPTIONS AND MERCHANDISE:
counterpunch@frontiernet.net

Submissions

CounterPunch accepts a small number of
submissions from accomplished authors
and newer writers. Please send your pitch
to counterpunch@counterpunch.org. Due
to the large volume of submissions we re-
ceive we are able to respond to only those
that interest us.

Advertising

Advertising space available in Counter-
Punch Magazine. Media kit available upon
request. All advertisements are subject
to the publisher's approval of copy, text,
display, and illustration. CounterPunch
reserves the right to reject or cancel any
advertisement at any time.

1 (800) 840-3683
becky@counterpunch.org

Address Change

Please notify us immediately of email and/
or mailing address changes for uninterr-
upted delivery of issues.

BY MAIL:
CounterPunch
Business Office
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA 95558

BY PHONE:
1 (800) 840-3683
1 (707) 629-3683

BY EMAIL (preferred):
counterpunch@frontiernet.net

Donations

CounterPunch's survival is dependent
upon income from paid subscriptions,
donations and book and merchandise
sales. We are a non-profit, tax exempt
organization under The Institute for the
Advancement of Journalistic Clarity, DBA
CounterPunch. Donations are welcome
year round. Donate by mail, telephone or
online: www.counterpunch.org.

Subscriptions

1- year hardcopy edition \$55
1- year digital edition (PDF) \$35
1- year email & digital edition \$65
1- year institutions/supporters \$100
1- year hardcopy edition
student/low income \$45
1-year digital edition
student/low income \$30

For speedier (and less expensive) delivery
of issues, especially if you live outside the
US, we encourage you to consider the
email version of the magazine, which is
sent as a PDF and will reach you within a
day of press time. With the email edition,
you'll also get bonus articles and discount
codes to use when purchasing books and
gift subscriptions.

All subscription orders must be pre-
paid—we do not invoice for orders. Renew
by telephone, mail, or on our website.
For mailed orders please include name,
address and email address with payment,
or call
1 (800) 840-3683 or 1 (707) 629-3683.

Add \$20.00 per year for subscriptions
mailed to Canada and \$40 per year for all
other countries outside the US.

MAKE CHECKS OR
MONEY ORDERS PAYABLE TO:
CounterPunch
Business Office
PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558

COVER IMAGE:

The Great Wave Over Fukushima
by Nick Roney (After Hokusai)

In Memory of
Alexander Cockburn
1941–2012



TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR 4

ARTICLES

Nuclear Power: Dead in the Water it Poisoned
BY JOHN LAForge 10

Left Behind: The Late, Great Middle Class
BY DAVID MACARAY 14

The Manning Truthfest: Artists take the Boat to Wales to Support Chelsea Manning's Family
BY HARRY BROWNE 19

Now They Want to Kill the Elk: Brucellosis and the Urge to Kill
BY LEE HALL 22

CULTURE & REVIEWS

Paint it Bright: The Art of Tiffany Gholar
BY LEE BALLINGER 25

COLUMNS

Roaming Charges 5
Camus in the Time of Drones

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR
The death penalty, drones and the absurd quiet of the Left.

Diamonds and Rust 6
The 12th Man

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI
Is it time to take pop culture seriously?

Empire Burlesque 7
Tarnished Icons and Imaginary Friends

BY CHRIS FLOYD
The many lives of Bob Dylan.

Grasping at Straws 8
Crappy Mortgages Return

BY MIKE WHITNEY
The move to privatize Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

Daydream Nation 9
The New Pornographers

BY KRISTIN KOLB
The *New York Times*' poverty porn club.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Voce Cockburni

Thanks for the reprint of Alexander Cockburn's piece on the Twin Towers. It reminded me of how much I miss his voice.

Kirk Hill

Obummer

Obama really is just so phenomenally disappointing. I think that will be his line in the history books, if any: "Barack Obama, first black president, neoconservative Democrat. Championed modest improvements to health insurance system." There won't be anything else to say about him.

Ben Tripp

Altadena, California

AIPAC's Power

Very Good info. on the enormous power of the Israeli agents/operatives AIPAC outfit. s/b sent far and wide. This cabal is not alone and has big connections to industry and finance as well in the US, UK and EU ... also big /huge \$\$\$ connection to BOTH Dems. and GOP!!!!

Neil Chertcoff

Why I Read CP

Dear Eamon McCann,
Thank you for penning a well-researched and well-written essay on only one dastardly crime committed by Britain against innocent Irish people who had the temerity to ask a brutal occupying force for human dignity. The list of British crimes against humanity is far too long to list and will require several volumes.

As a child, I heard many stories from my elders about the British occupation of Palestine. As a businessman, my father travelled all over Palestine and witnessed first hand what the Brits did to the farmers, including burning their fields just before harvest time, mass arrests, forcing all males ages 15 and above to kneel in the open for hours at a time, frequently forcing them to hold their arms in the air for sustained periods. And the Brits were excellent teachers. They taught the Israelis these same methods. The students surpassed what the Anglo-Frenchmasters taught. The same colonial lessons were also taught to the thugs who rule the Arab world and most of Africa. Thank you for giving dignity to the death of the Irish victims, and for preserving their memory. This is precisely why I read CP religiously; it sheds light on and exposes the crimes of those who wish to whitewash and re-write history.

Sincerely and Salaam,

Raouf J. Halaby

Professor of English and Art

Anti-Christis

You play into the hands of anti-Christis like Pat Robertson when you accept their self-label as "Christians". "Evva-boddy talkin' 'bout hebbn ain't gwine dere."

Mason Gaffney

Ridgeway in CP

Becky,

It is so neat seeing James R. writing for CP. My memories of the Voice when Alexander,

James, and so many other fine writers, which made that paper worth its weight in gold, will never fade. I hope he continues to write CP. Interesting, at one of the hospitals (Waupun Memorial) in the system I am employed we have a Corrections unit. Very unusual. We worked with the State to make this happen, and I do think it is working out well for the inmates/patients. There are several DOC facilities in Waupun. The critical access hospital and its clinics are very good resources for them.

John Gormican

Dispatches from Lamb

Dear Franklin Lamb,
I am senior journalist and anchor with channel 4 News in London and anxious to Tweet your latest missive - 'a Fauz Humanitarian Pause in Homs?' Your communications on the war in Syria have a rare authority and I'd like to spread them further. I was in Geneva for the first round of talks and intersected with the delegation - particularly Bouthana Shaban, whom I have known for many years.

Best regards, and thank you for your work,

Jon Snow

Right On, But....

Michael Brenner is absolutely on point and his arguments are generally ones that radicals in education would agree with. However, how about a little optimism of the will or, more appropriately, strategic discussion of how to defend and transform public education

under those conditions? There is some modest but important work being done in major and minor settings that demands further analysis.

Avram Barlowe

What About Israel?

A fantastic article by Jeffrey St. Clair on the CIA and South Africa's bio weapons program, but why stop at the CIA? Israel also had close relations with apartheid South Africa. What was their role in these experiments and were they embedded in the CIA?

Regards,

Ray Jureidini

AIPAC Uber Alles

Jeffrey Blankfort's piece on the history of AIPAC was one of the most courageous and informative pieces you've published since Cockburn left the planet. More of this type of stuff and less of the other. You know what I mean...

Mary Ellen Randle

Burlington, Vermont

Math Hurts

I liked John White's piece on inequality. Very well written for a math professor. He made a lot of sense with no painful equations. Now, if only economists could write like that!

Katherine Alexander

Omaha, Neb.

**Send Letters to the Editor to: CounterPunch
PO Box 228, Petrolia, CA
95558 or email
counterpunch@
counterpunch.org**



ROAMING CHARGES

Camus in the Time of Drones

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

The man rises from bed in the early morning. He dresses quietly, careful not to awaken his wife and infant son. He walks briskly across the city of Algiers in the pre-dawn light to a square that is already thick with people, their gaze fixed on a wooden platform and rising from it the stark shape of a guillotine.

The man has come to watch the execution of a notorious killer of an Algerian farm family. The man is curious and wants to see justice done. The prisoner is brought to the scaffold, blindfolded, then trussed to a plank and slid beneath the grim killing machine. The blade drops, severing the head and unleashing a surge of blood from the quivering torso.

The man rushes back across town. He runs all the way to his house, brushes past his wife to the bathroom. He locks the door and vomits, again and again. He will not go to work this day or the next. Instead he lies in bed, tormented by what he has witnessed. He tells his wife what he has seen and refuses to speak of it again for the remainder of his short life.

The man is Lucien Camus, father of Albert. The story was told to Albert by his mother years later and it haunted the writer all his life. The gruesome scene appears in his novels *The Stranger* and *The First Man* and became the centerpiece of his masterful essay "Reflections on the Guillotine," perhaps the most forceful denunciation of the death penalty ever written.

Camus' essay on the barbarity of the death penalty was written in 1956, against the backdrop of the executions of hundreds of dissidents during the Soviet crackdown in Hungary, as well as the execution of Algerian revolutionaries condemned to death by French tribunals. He notes that by 1940 all ex-

ecutions in France and England were shielded from the public. If capital punishment was meant to deter crime, why hold the killings in secret? Why not make them a public spectacle?

Because, Camus argues, deterrence isn't the purpose of state murder. The real objective is vengeance through the exercise of extreme state power. "Let us recognize it for what it is essentially: a revenge. A punishment that penalizes without forestalling is indeed called revenge. It is a quasi-arithmetical replay made by society to whoever breaks its primordial law."

Public executions became a threat to the state, because the dreadful act tends to provoke revulsion in ordinary citizens, like Camus' father, who see it clearly for what it is: a new form of murder "no less repulsive than the crime." A form of murder that is performed, in theory, in the name of the citizens and for which they are complicit. This kind of state-sanctioned killing, Camus reasoned, leads only to more murder, a vast panorama of murder. "Without the death penalty," Camus writes, "Europe would not be infected by the corpses accumulated for the last twenty years on its soil."

So what would Albert Camus, the great moralist of the 20th century, think about the latest innovation in administrative murder, Obama's drone program, a kind of remote-control gallows, where the killers never see their victims, never hear their screams, smell their burning bodies, touch their mutilated flesh?

The conscience of the killer has been sterilized, the drone operator, fully alienated from the act he is committing, can walk out the door after his shift is over and calmly order an IPA at the local microbrew or play a round of golf under the desert sky. He is left with no

blood on his hands, no savagery weighing on his conscience, no degrading images to stalk his dreams.

Drone strikes, Camus would argue, are not just meant to kill. They are programmed to terrorize. In this regard, whether the missile strikes its intended target or incinerates a goat-herder and his flock is incidental. In fact, the occasional killing of civilians may well be a desired outcome since collateral deaths intensify the fear. This is punishment by example, not for any particular crime or impending threat, but merely because of who you are, where you live, what you might believe. These new circuitries of death are meant to humiliate, subdue and dehumanize.

As more and more evidence of Obama's secret killing operations in Pakistan and Yemen began to leak out, public squeamishness over the deaths, especially of civilians and targeted American citizens, began to mount. Uncomfortable questions were raised, even on the political right. To salvage his program, Obama announced that new guidelines would soon be imposed on his high-tech assassinations.

But Camus would be the first to warn us that such regulations should be viewed with grave suspicion, since they will likely only serve to legitimize and normalize state murder, by making lawless killing legal.

Camus stresses that in the long run such killing regimes can only sustain themselves if they are indulged by a nation's elites: its press, its intellectuals, its political movements. And here we must confront the torpid moral character of the American left, which has been flaccid in the face of the drone killings, insensate to the mangled bodies, suffering and fragmented lives on the far side of the world.

Our task is to burst open this indifference, to condemn and resist the killing done in our names, to reassert the primacy of individual life over state authority. Otherwise, we become accomplices of the long-distance executioners. **CP**



DIAMONDS AND RUST

The 12th Man

BY JOANN WYPIJEWSKI

My friend Ishmael came to Times Square before the Super Bowl wearing a blazing blue boxer's robe and, around his neck, a pair of Everlast gloves with "Legion of BOOM" on the punching end. We plunged into Mall Manhattan – a playground of dreamers trying to kick field goals in a cage, whooping down a giant toboggan while a machine spewed tiny snow-like puffs, waiting hours to spend a few seconds with the Lombardi trophy in a plexiglass cube. Here was Candyland meets Lourdes, a workless, balmy Friday for throngs of workers showing team colors. It didn't matter what team. "Next year, next year!" two men from Buffalo assured me of our star-crossed Bills.

In football there is always next year, but not for fans that day whose teams were still alive. Denver was an imagined powerhouse on Friday, its Sunday collapse unfathomed by the sports press cossetted in seemingly impermeable security at the Sheraton. Seattle was seen as a band of loudmouths, tricksters, typecast kids – thugs or holy-rollers – in a man's game. On the street side of this costume drama, Ish became a magnet for anyone wanting a picture, a dap, a hug, a "Hey, man; you got it, champ." It seemed the entire black working class favored the Seahawks: the kids hawking CDs on the corners, every cop, every waiter we met, security guards dashing out of tall buildings with a prediction. A few people asked, "Who is he?"

"He's the 12th Man," I said. They didn't always understand. "He's nobody and everybody; he's a fan." I kidded one woman that I was his manager. "I knew it," she whispered. "I smell money on you."

Money is the Super Bowl's subtext. Some say the text, but among the working class, with money so familiar

a preoccupation it's like wallpaper, the game is still the thing: the scale balancing a fancied victory against fear of annihilation.

I could've said, "He's a wild-eyed seafarer." How many would get that? we wondered. Seafarers are the invisible workforce, part of the global cargo chain that modern life depends on, though rarely recognizes. Ish grew up rugged in Seattle and worked three months on and off the water, for decades. In New York, he stays at the Seafarers International House, a hand-out-to-the-lonely kind of place the Lutherans run for "seafarers and sojourners," its basement a grid of metal lockers secreting the worldly goods of men and women on ships.

I met him in the 1990s, with an ILWU delegation at the founding conference of the Labor Party. The party was doomed from conception; the longshore workers and associated seafarers knew it. Unions exist in a situation of contest: you try to win to keep from losing. A party that abstained from the contest (in this case, elections) and defined politics as an ideological exercise, would never cut it in their ranks.

The ILWU was the imagined Broncos of unions then: an offensive powerhouse, able to silence every West Coast port. The union kept alive the history of the great waterfront strike that began when every West Coast docker walked out 80 years ago this May 9, and mushroomed into something unfathomed when sailors and all San Francisco joined them. Seattle's unionists kept alive the history of an older shipyard walkout, which prompted the Seattle General Strike, 95 years ago this February 6. They would become soldiers in the Battle of Seattle, which shut down the WTO 15 years ago this

November 30.

1934, 1919, 1999... It's tempting to be miserableist now; to cry, like the raven, "Nevermore." Along the cargo chain – the network of sea lanes, docks, warehouses, rail lines and truck hubs – capital is on the offense. Workers are in a dangerous spiral of catch-up defense and concessions. The ILWU faces negotiations for its Pacific master contract at a time when unions have been buckling, raiding, crossing picket lines, shredding the flag of solidarity before a mute AFL-CIO, now minus the ILWU. On the ships, union seamen like Ishmael are vanishing. A Babelogue of seafarers culled from the poorest countries increasingly toil for diminishing wages, mustered under Flags of Convenience, without benefit of standards or law, where ship owners are anonymous and "life at sea is like being in jail with a chance of drowning." The thought made Ish feel a little guilty just for having fun.

Everyone knew the 12th Man by Super Bowl Sunday – the popular force that confounded Denver and broadened the meaning of 'team'. One can dismiss the game etc. as but a circus for those who still have the bread.

It was that, as all corporatized popular culture is. But football no more ordains zombie-fans than "If I Had a Hammer" ordains revolutionaries. Pete Seeger died a rich man singing of the poor.

I've always loved left labor's reverence for history, but we don't always take popular culture in the here/now seriously enough.

What if we did?

What would it mean for worker associations to confine competition among themselves to sporting fields; to organize clubs for play as both a social rite and a school for strategy; to study solidarity, discipline, unity of purpose and action not just in rhetoric but in reality; to run one-on-one, zone and rushing patterns for the joy and tactical utility of it; and, then, dazzling in defense, like Seahawks but without the brain damage, to defy expectations? **CP**



EMPIRE BURLESQUE

Tarnished Icons and Imaginary Friends

BY CHRIS FLOYD

O the horror, the horror. To see the “shameless descent” of the “one-time countercultural figurehead” – who had made his name as a bold stylistic innovator and powerful voice of authenticity – now reduced to a corporate shill, parading himself, hussy-like, in a national advertisement.

How it had happened? He had been a rawboned kid from the Midwest, a seeker and searcher who burst out of the stifling confines of bourgeois life and made his way to the very heart of the revolutionary artistic ferment, raging in one of the world’s great centers of countercultural bohemia. He had thrived there, magpie-like, picking up tricks of the trade, learning from mentors, stealing riffs from rivals; a little seedy, a little needy, passionate, faithless, bursting with talent.

In the end, he forged an original voice that made him a towering figure in American culture and one of the most famous people on the planet, influencing generations of artists who came after him. Every year, there was serious talk of him winning the Nobel Prize – and now this.

There he was – posturing for the camera, an aging, taxidermy caricature of his dynamic younger self. There were his words – *his own words!* – once regarded as blazons of truth, now gummed into dim banality just to push some product to the rubes.

Sad, surreal, shameless – yes, who can forget that awful moment when they first opened their new copy of *Life* magazine and saw Ernest Hemingway’s ad for Ballantine Ale?

Surely, all right-thinking people condemned this act of crass hucksterism, an ugly spectacle that cast a tainted shadow over all his earlier achievements

-- which could now be seen merely as sly ploys on the way to the inevitable sell-out ...

In fact, literary history does not record any such reaction to the 1951 ad. Or indeed, any reaction at all. (Except perhaps from John Steinbeck, who obviously thought, “How can I land *me* one of them Ballantine ads?” – and did so a couple of years later.)

But such has been the blowback in many quarters to Bob Dylan’s recent Super Bowl ad for Chrysler. In some ways, it’s sort of sweet; who knew Dylan could still touch such a nerve? But mostly the imbroglio has itself been a “surreal tableau,” as one of its more scathing respondents called the ad.

It’s as if an historical moment frozen in amber – the “Dylan/Judas sell-out to pop music” scandal of 1965 – has suddenly been melted by the Super Bowl klieg lights, releasing its undiluted fury into the present day.

Of course, people are free to despise Dylan for doing an ad, on whatever grounds you please: moral, political, philosophical, aesthetic. But reading the fresh shock and angry surprise of the denouncers, one has to wonder: where have they been for the past 50 years?

For a full half-a-century, Dylan has been insisting that he is not a protest singer or a ‘countercultural figurehead’ or anything of the sort. And he has behaved accordingly.

Where was the rage when he did a Cadillac commercial a couple of years ago? Or the lingerie ad before that? Or the Fender guitar ads he did at the height of his countercultural figureheaddom in the mid-60s?

As a “Columbia recording artist”

(which is how he is always introduced in concert), Dylan has been taking money from – and making money for – corporate interests since 1962. He is no more or less a “sell-out” in 2014 than he has been throughout his entire career. Again, dismiss him for that if you like. But why rage at his “betrayal” of a media-hyped, fantasized “countercultural figurehead role” that he has spent a long lifetime refusing? You’re not angry with Bob Dylan; you’re mad at an imaginary friend you’ve created in his image.

Dylan’s “shameful sell-out” has been contrasted with the moral integrity of Pete Seeger, who died just before the Chrysler commercial aired. Fair enough -- although Seeger himself didn’t mind appearing with Harry Belafonte last year after the latter’s “shameful descent” into corporate ads for Gap. Perhaps Seeger, in his wisdom, took a broader view of such matters than the angry Amberists.

Perhaps he didn’t dismiss an artist’s output or idealism or authenticity just because they did the occasional spot for commercial sponsors – as Dylan hero Hank Williams did throughout his career (at one time even calling himself the “Ol’ Syrup Sopper” in ads for a Shreveport company), or as Woody Guthrie did on occasion, even having one of his songs adapted for a tobacco ad.

In 2008, another Dylan TV ad appeared across Europe. This time the shameless huckster was shilling for an international mission to “make water safe and clean for every human being living in this world” and head off the looming conflicts over resource scarcity due to climate change.

The next year saw ads for his much-hooted Christmas album, with all proceeds, in perpetuity, going to homeless charities in the US and Europe. But thank god we don’t have to listen to this syrup sopper anymore. We’ll stay pure in our amber. **CP**



GRASPING AT STRAWS

Crappy Mortgages Return

BY MIKE WHITNEY

The nation's biggest banks want to rev up the mortgage securitization market and they want you, Mr. Taxpayer, to cover the losses.

Here's the scoop: The brainiacs in Congress want to euthanize mortgage finance giants, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, so private capital can take over. The reason for this is, well, because private capital does everything right and government does everything wrong. Got that, so far?

Anyway, congress is convinced that our current government mortgage finance system is fatally flawed and has got to go. The problem is, however, that no private lender has deep enough pockets to fill the hole left behind by the two agencies that currently finance roughly 85 percent of all mortgages. So how exactly is this new plan supposed to work?

Ahh, that's where the magic comes in, the magic of the market, that is. You see, the moneybag lenders who want to do-away with Fan and Fred, think they can resuscitate the moribund securitization system if they just get a little help from Uncle Sam. They figure that investors will be only too happy to load up on their mortgage-backed securities (MBS) if the US Government stands behind them.

But that doesn't sound like we're getting rid of Fannie and Freddie at all. It sounds like we're just transferring the profitmaking part of the business to private capital while Joe Taxpayer is on the hook for the losses.

Au contraire; in fact, private insurers are going to pay for the losses out of their own pockets...up to 10 percent, that is. The rest of the red ink will be dumped onto the USG.

You think I'm kidding, don't you? Or maybe you just can't believe that congress would be stupid enough to push

through a bill that creates incentives for the banks to blow up the financial system again?

Well, it's true. Draft legislation by Senators Bob Corker (R-TN) and Mark Warner (D-VA) would wind down the GSE's (F and F) and replace them with a new government agency, called the Federal Mortgage Insurance Corporation. The FMIC will guarantee mortgages that meet the government's "Qualified Mortgage" rule and are pooled with similar loans and sold in the secondary market as bonds.

According to economist Dean Baker, "The Corker-Warner bill...would allow private financial institutions to issue MBS with a government guarantee. The only protection is that the investors would have to eat the first 10 percent of the losses."

10 percent? Well now, that doesn't sound very fair. But if it's such a bad idea, then why is President Obama supporting it? Check out this clip from a speech he delivered in Phoenix last year:

"The thing I'm here to talk about today (is) laying a rock-solid foundation to make sure the kind of crisis we just went through never happens again. That begins with winding down the companies known as Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac...For too long, these companies were allowed to make big profits buying mortgages, knowing that if their bets went bad, taxpayers would be left holding the bag. It was 'heads we win, tails you lose.' And it was wrong.

"The good news is that there's a bipartisan group of Senators working to end Fannie and Freddie as we know them. I support these kinds of efforts, and today I want to lay out four core principles for what I believe this reform should look like. First, private capital should take a bigger role in the mortgage market...I

believe that while our housing system must have a limited government role, private lending should be the backbone of the housing market."

Obama is lying through his teeth. He knows that Fan and Fred were not raking in "big profits" making "bad bets". That's ridiculous. He also knows that the GSEs played no part in the meltdown. According to Forbes: "More than 84 percent of the sub-prime mortgages in 2006 were issued by private lending institutions."

It was private-label subprime mortgages that crashed the financial system, not Fannie and Freddie. The vast majority of the mortgages they financed held up because they hadn't been financing every Tom, Dick and Harry who could fog a mirror.

Obama not only has his history wrong, he's also on the wrong side of the issue, which should come as no surprise since – according to Bloomberg, "The measure was written with technical input from the Obama administration."

How do you like that? So the Obama team actually huddled with industry toffs to iron-out the details? Cozy.

Here's Obama again:

"No more leaving taxpayers on the hook for irresponsibility or bad decisions. We encourage the pursuit of profit – but the era of expecting a bailout after your pursuit of profit puts the whole country at risk is over."

Talk about irony? If Corker-Warner passes, it will be impossible to stop another housing bubble because investors will know that MBS are as safe as US Treasuries. That will create another finance boom which will push down rates and lending standards paving the way for another catastrophe.

It's crazy, just like dismantling Fannie and Freddie is crazy. It was private capital that precipitated the last crisis and it will be private capital that precipitates the next one. The only difference is that Fannie and Freddie won't be there to clean up the mess. Maybe someone should tell Obama that. **CP**



DAYDREAM NATION

The New Pornographers

BY KRISTIN KOLB

Whenever I move, I rediscover something I love covered in dust. This time, it's my once obsessive trove of big, heavy art books from a decade ago. I needed something desk-like to prop my laptop on my legs, and, behold, from the stacks, appeared the volume, Walker Evans - a tome to accompany the grand retrospective at the Met some 14 years ago.

As I flipped through the pages, I recalled Evans' Depression-era project, with writer James Agee, documenting poverty in the rural South. There were the Alabama Tenant Farmer portraits of 1936, which merged with Agee's sensual and relentlessly descriptive prose, some of which became the forgotten classic of New Journalism, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. More from the series, happily, was published last year as *Cotton Tenants*, by *The Baffler* and Melville House Books.

Here are majestic photographs of three families - despite their debilitating circumstances - clear-eyed, resilient, and direct. They are fighters.

That same day, I watched a short video, "Sarah's Uncertain Path," from *The New York Times* "Op-Doc" series about poverty in the place where I grew up, rural Missouri. But instead of sparking compassion and respect, it was quite the opposite.

A 15-year-old girl is pregnant in an undisclosed location - somewhere near Kansas City. She has a beautiful, round face and kind smile, but she constantly looks down and away from the camera. She's one of seven kids. And her mother - a single mother, of course - fat, frizzy hair, ruddy, with no teeth aside from her canines, is shown with no dignity, mumbling under a sheepish grin.

"Do you want to be like your mom?" *The Times* reporter prompts Sarah.

The girl, sitting among mounds of

dirty clothes, with penciled graffiti of "Sarah Loves" various boys on the walls, replies, "Um, I don't know."

Devoid of feeling, imbued with judgment, choreographed for derision, Sarah's story was just the latest in the *Times*' fixation on poverty porn, emphasizing condescension over compassion and resilience. This one was the white trash version.

Poverty porn assuages liberal guilt by pointing out the character flaws of those who don't make money. The point is to pity their choices, not to respect and identify with their pain, let alone find some way to organize and connect.

A month prior, at Christmastime, it was Dasani, a 12-year-old, black, homeless girl living, ironically, in Brooklyn's hipsterized Fort Greene neighborhood. The *Times* published a gigantic piece, some of it striking, but the narrative fell on the same theme - irresponsible mother - this time, because it's the black version, she's addicted to crack and wears a grill on their teeth. One of the most snickering snips of the five-part marathon is how we learn of Dasani's namesake: Her mom, Chanel (named for the perfume), chose it when she saw a bottle of water at a store. She liked the sound. Of course, it's a Coca-Cola product. Isn't that sad?

The New York Times' Poverty Porn Club could not be complete without its officiator, columnist Nicholas Kristoff. Darling Nicki flew to the ultimate location - Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in 2012. He said it himself in the title of his piece, "Poverty's Poster Child" - the "child" being a Sioux reservation with 85 percent unemployment - the poorest place in the country.

Again, we hear that we must blame the poor for their circumstances, it's a matter of broken families and drugs.

He mentions an Oglala Sioux man in recovery from alcoholism, but he's still, according to Kristoff, obese, disabled, and, therefore, hopeless. His conclusion: "My hunch is that these Indian reservations will have to shed people."

That coming from a Harvard and Oxford alum, standing on blood-soaked ground - the locus of the Wounded Knee massacre and one of the most horrific acts of genocide ever conducted by the United States government. The hubris.

Even Timothy Egan, the *Times*' Seattle correspondent, has joined the club. He recently praised, with a straight face, Bill Gates for stating that poverty would be eradicated by 2035. Gates did so at Davos, for the annual World Economic Forum. But the Forum itself released a report, with contributions from 700 experts, stating that the greatest threat to the global economy is the chasm between the very rich and the rest of us, "raising the risk of social unrest."

I kid you not.

Back at Poverty's Poster Child, Pine Ridge, we could learn a thing or two. In partnership with the University of Colorado and a local non-profit, the Sioux are building energy-efficient, straw-bale affordable housing, and employing people on the rez to construct them - the unemployable, the hopeless, the broken, according to Kristoff.

And, the Oglala Sioux Nation announced on February 7 that they will block the Keystone XL Pipeline if Obama approves it. A Lakota Sioux group called Moccasins on the Ground is organizing a direct-action training near Pine Ridge for those willing to stand with their nation, if push comes to shove. And if anyone is used to a shove, it's Pine Ridge. So much for that hopeless poster child, Kristoff.

Let us now praise the infamous men, women and children, the poorest of the poor, who have nothing left to lose. **CP**

Nuclear Power

Dead in the Water it Poisoned

By JOHN LAFORGE

On Feb. 11, 1985, the cover page of *Forbes* thundered, “The failure of the US nuclear power program ranks as the largest managerial disaster in business history, a disaster on a monumental scale...”

Fourteen months later, reactor No. 4 at Chernobyl exploded and burned for 40 days, spreading radioactive fallout across the entire Northern Hemisphere, depositing cesium-137 in Minnesota’s milk and Japan’s topsoil.

So how is it that Congressional representatives, TV network pundits, FOX ditto heads and even CNN program directors still promote nuclear power?

Part of the answer comes from American University researcher Judy Pasternak and her students. According to Pasternak’s 2010 study, the nuclear industry spent \$645 million over 10 years lobbying Capitol Hill, and another \$63 million in campaign contributions over the same period. Between 1999 and 2008, these millions manufactured the canard that nuclear power is “carbon free,” “clean” and can “help fend off climate change.” Prior to this spending blitz, the US nuclear power program was, because of the shock of accidents at Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986, “pretty well dead in the water” – in the words of economist and author Jeremy Rifkin.

The lobbyists and check writers worked hard spinning the yarn that the richest and most pollution-intensive industrialists on earth were concerned about climate change and wanted to cut carbon emissions – but they didn’t convince everybody.

Independent scientists, free of corporate blinders and the market imperative of short term profit, scoff at “green nuke” propaganda. Arjun Makhijani, President of Institute for Environmental and Energy Research, Amory Lovins, co-founder and Chief Scientist of the Rocky Mountain Institute, and Rifkin have all demonstrated how a nuclear “renaissance” – to replace the 400 old reactors now rattling apart worldwide and get to the total of 1,600 that Rifkin says are needed for a minimum impact on climate disruption — would require that we build three new reactors every 30 days for 40 years.

The impossibility of such a reactor-building offensive is evident all around the US.

Reactors at Vermont Yankee, Kewaunee in Wis., and San Onofre in Calif. are all down to dismantlement long before their licenses expire. Last November, TXU, Inc., owners of the Comanche Peak station 40 miles southwest of Fort Worth announced the cancellation of their long-awaited expansion. TXU intended to double its poison footprint and add two new reactors, but as Univ. of Texas engineering professor Ross

Baldick told *Dallas Morning News*, “Currently, it’s just not competitive with gas. Nuclear’s capital costs are so high you can’t win on it”

Exelon Corp., the largest commercial reactor operator in the US with 22, announced last June that it would scrap plans to expand production at two sites. The firm said it was cancelling construction at the La Salle station in Illinois and its Limerick site in Pennsylvania. In August, Duke Energy Florida cancelled its two-reactor Levy County project after estimated costs had rocketed 400% about \$5 billion each to \$24 billion. “It turns out,” *Time* magazine reported, “that new [reactors] would be not just extremely expensive but spectacularly expensive.” Duke previously suspended plans for new reactors at Shearon Harris, NC.

Switzerland will phase out all five of its reactors by 2034, and Germany will mothball its 17 by 2022. Italy has renewed its pre-Fukushima promise to go nuclear-free, and Taiwan is on the verge of a phase-out announcement. Venezuela and Israel, both of which had reactor plans, have cancelled them.

The “clean nuclear power” corner notably won the backing of a few VIPs, notably James Hanson, formerly of NASA, and *Whole Earth Catalogue* founder Stewart Brand. Less well noted is Amory Lovins’ scathing deconstruction of the nuclear chapter of Brand’s 2009 book *Whole Earth Discipline*. Lovins sums up “Four Nuclear Myths” this way:

“[E]xpanding nuclear power is uneconomic, is unnecessary, is not undergoing the claimed renaissance in the global marketplace ... and, most importantly, *will reduce and retard climate protection*. That’s because ... new nuclear power is so costly and slow that ... it will save about 2-20 times less carbon per dollar, and about 20-40 times less carbon per year, than investing instead in the market winners: efficient use of electricity and what *The Economist* calls ‘micro-power,’ comprising distributed renewables (renewables with mass-produced units, *i.e.*, those other than big hydro dams), and cogenerating electricity together with useful heat in factories and buildings.” [Emphasis in original]

Plumes of Disinformation

Another part of reactor greenwashing is the powerful influence of mis- and disinformation following the Great East Japan Earthquake, the resulting tsunami, and the catastrophic Fukushima radiation gusher that began March 11, 2011.

In reporting on the contamination of soil, tap water, rain water, groundwater, breast milk, vegetables, fish, baby food, animal feed, beef, and incinerator ash, radiation was and is almost always said to pose little or no “immediate” danger. This minimization is designed to and quite successfully does ease public concern and push Fukushima’s ongoing radio-contamination from public consciousness.

Contaminated spinach and milk “do not pose an immediate health threat,” NPR’s Giles Snyder reported April 19, 2011. The Agence France-Presse reported October 6, 2011, “An ex-

posure of 100 millisieverts per year is considered the lowest level at which any increase in cancer risk is evident.” However, as the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission says, “...any increase in dose, no matter how small, results in an incremental increase in risk.”

An April 11, 2011 *Forbes* report flatly misstated the US EPA’s published public warning about radiation. Noting that a Phoenix, Arizona, drinking water sample contained 3.2 picocuries per liter of radioactive iodine-131 from Fukushima, and that the EPA’s maximum contaminant level is 3.0, the writer concluded, “EPA does not consider these levels to pose a health threat.” In fact, the EPA officially warns that “there is no level below which we can say an exposure poses no risk.”

This pattern of misstatement and official falsehood went to the very top of the food chain. Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano famously declared March 11, 2011, “Let me repeat that there is no radiation leak, nor will there be a leak.” He later asked the public not to overreact to reports of radioactively contaminated food, saying, according to the BBC, “Even if you eat contaminated vegetables several times, it will not harm your health at all.”

President Obama followed suit. Six days into the Fukushima disaster, he said, “We do not expect harmful levels of radiation to reach the United States...” Obama’s carefully-worded lullaby was immediately translated by Mike Viqueira of NBC News into, “The president said there was absolutely no danger whatsoever,” and the by NBC’s news anchor who said there was, “no reason to be concerned on the west coast.”

If only a president could stem the tide. Seventeen days later, *Forbes* reported that iodine-131 from Fukushima was found in drinking water in dozens of US cities from California to Massachusetts, from Washington to Alabama. The EPA found either iodine-131 or cesium-137, and even strontium-90, in milk from Washington, Arizona, California, Vermont and Hawaii.

A classic example of the trivialization of radiation risk is a 1989 *New York Times* report on a study of cancers caused by low doses of radiation previously thought to be harmless. Under the headline, “Higher Cancer Risk Found in Low-Level Radiation,” the story said, “... [T]he new estimate that radiation is a more potent carcinogen than previously believed should cause no concern for the average person, experts said, because the public is not exposed to enough radiation to exceed levels considered safe.” This is perfectly untrue. What should be reported is that the public is not usually exposed to radiation above *permitted* levels because *safe* exposures don’t exist. Official government assessments make this clear.

No Safe Dose

Authoritative warnings by the agencies that regulate radiation exposure are worthy of a detailed listing because of the literal consensus that’s been reached *i.e.* There is no safe dose, and as Dr. Arjun Makhijani says, “Only zero exposure results

in zero cancer risk.”

- The National Council on Radiation Protection (NCPR) says, “...the Council assumes that, for radiation-protection purposes, the risk of stochastic [random] effects is proportional to dose *without threshold*...” (Emphasis added) In other words, “... every increment of radiation exposure produces an incremental increase in the risk of cancer.”

- The EPA says, “...any exposure to radiation can be harmful (or can increase the risk of cancer)... In other words, it is assumed that no radiation exposure is completely risk free.” Further, “Radiation is a carcinogen. It may also cause other adverse health effects, including genetic defects in the children of exposed parents or mental retardation in the children of mothers exposed during pregnancy.”

- The Department of Energy says, “[T]he effects of low levels of radiation are ... a very slight increase in cancer risk.”

- The Nuclear Regulatory Commission says, “This dose-response model suggests that any increase in dose, no matter how small, results in an incremental increase in risk.”

- The National Academy of Sciences in BEIR-VII, its latest book-length report on the biological effects of ionizing radiation, says “... that low-dose radiation acts predominantly as a tumor-initiating agent,” and that “... the smallest dose has the potential to cause a small increase in risk to humans.” The committee further judges it unlikely that a threshold exists for the induction of cancers...”

As science has come to understand the toxic, carcinogenic, mutagenic and teratogenic properties of even the lowest radiation exposures, the officially permitted dose – not a safe level – has dramatically decreased. In the 1920s, the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) set the permissible dose for radiation workers in medicine and industry at 75 rem per year. In 1936, the limit was reduced to 50 rem per year, then to 25 in 1948, to 15 in 1954, and to 5 in 1958 – where it remains to this day. (A rem is a measure of the biological damage of a given absorbed dose of radiation.)

Today, the permitted radiation exposure for the public has been reduced to one-20th of what’s permitted for nuclear workers, or 0.25 rem per year. However, the ICRP’s 1990 recommendation to again reduce worker exposures – this time *by three-fifths* – from 5 to 2 rem/year, has never been adopted by the United States, even after 24 years.

Worst Ever Radioactive Pollution of Pacific Ocean Hasn’t Moved US to test seafood

Radiation exposure and contamination should concern everyone because by all accounts the volume of radioactive materials discharged to the Pacific Ocean by Fukushima is the single greatest radioactive contamination of the sea ever observed. An estimated 27 “peta-becquerels” (27 million billion becquerels) of cesium-137 had already leaked or been deliberately dumped into the Pacific by October 2011. A becquerel represents one atomic disintegration/second.

Last July, Tokyo Electric Power Co., which owns the Fukushima wreckage, acknowledged that an additional 300 tons-a-day of highly contaminated water is leaking into the Pacific from the six-reactor station – and has been since the beginning of the disaster almost three years ago. The American Medical Association – following the revelation of massive ongoing leaks – called on the US government to “monitor and fully report the radioactivity levels of edible species sold in the United States.”

Yet at present, US seafood is not regularly tested for cesium contamination, in spite of the large numbers of fish and other foods that have been found contaminated by Fukushima isotopes – including blue fin and albacore tuna caught off the US West Coast, grapefruit from Florida, and prunes, almonds, pistachios and oranges from California.

In this context, a coalition of public health and environmental groups petitioned the FDA in early summer demanding a drastic reduction in the amount of radioactive cesium allowed in food. The petition by members of the Fukushima Fallout Awareness Network (FFAN) declared that the arbitrarily high 1,200 becquerels-per-kilogram (Bq/kg) US limit is “ridiculous.” The standard is between 120 times to 24 times weaker than Japan’s.

The petition demands that US foods have no more than 5 Bq/kg of cesium-137 and -134, and that all food be tested and labeled with its cesium content. The FFAN reports that the devastated Fukushima reactors continue to leak more than 10 million becquerels of cesium-134 and cesium-137 per hour into the environment, “with no sign of stopping.” The network said it was “alarmed” at the lack of testing currently in place to meet the threat of radioactive contamination in food. Because cesium-134 has a hazardous life of about 10-20 years, and cesium-137 has a hazardous life of about 300-600 years, the FFAN said, the threat of food contamination “is a long-term issue that deserves immediate attention.”

“Nuclear can’t compete today”

Well before Fukushima’s triple meltdowns staggered nuclear’s future, Congress and the industry were struggling to ignore its abandonment by important players around the world and public condemnations made by former supporters, and since March 2011 major figures the world over are saying “No nukes.”

Speaking in New York City Nov. 27, World Bank President Dr. Jim Yong Kim said, “The World Bank Group does not engage in providing support for nuclear power. ... [O]ur focus is on finding ways of working in hydroelectric power, in geo-thermal, in solar, in wind... and we don’t do nuclear energy.” A week earlier, Kim said governments weren’t doing enough to confront climate change, revealing that the WBG well knows that nuclear power is no answer.

World Bank directors may have adopted the recommendation of the US Commission on the Prevention of Weapons

of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, which concluded in 2009 that governments can and should help stop nuclear weapons proliferation by “... discouraging ... the use of financial incentives in the promotion of civil nuclear power.”

More pointedly, Gregory Jaczko, who was Chairman of the NRC when Japan’s Fukushima-Daiichi catastrophe started in 2011, warned in 2012 that “All 104 nuclear power reactors now in operation in the US have a safety problem that cannot be fixed and they should be replaced with newer technology...” When he left the NRC, the *Times* editorialized that “the country is losing a strong advocate for public safety who was always willing to challenge the nuclear industry and its political backers in Congress.”

John Rowe, recently retired chairman and CEO of reactor-heavy Exelon Corp., said “unequivocally” in March 2012, “that new ones [reactors] don’t make any sense right now... It just isn’t economic, and it’s not economic within a foreseeable time frame.”

Germany’s gas and electricity giant RWE Corp. announced in June 2012 that it would exit the nuclear power sector altogether and invest in solar power. As Germany’s largest utility, RWE had been one of the most vehement defenders of nuclear power.

Even the president of the Nuclear Energy Institute, Marvin Fertel, told *Scientific American*, “We won’t build large numbers of new nuclear in the US in the near term ... Today, you ought to build gas.” Bill Johnson, CEO of Progress Energy, one of the utilities filing for a reactor construction license but with no plans to actually build, said in the same issue, “Nuclear can’t compete today.”

A year earlier, Siemens, the largest engineering conglomerate in Europe, fired a shot heard round the world, declaring that – following Germany’s decision to close its reactors by 2022 – it would stop building new ones anywhere in the world. Siemens built all of Germany’s 17 units. It was the first industry giant to announce such a departure. “The chapter for us is closed,” said chief executive Peter Löscher.

Calling new reactors “too expensive,” Jon Wellinghoff, the chairman of the US Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, said in 2009, “We may not need any, ever.” Wellinghoff directly countered the industry’s oft-heard complaint about meeting “base load” needs, saying that renewables “like wind, solar and biomass would be able to provide enough energy to meet base load capacity and future demand,” since the US can reduce energy usage by 50 percent.

According to Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of the ubiquitous reactor engineering firm General Electric and one of nuclear power’s staunchest defenders, “If you were a utility CEO and looked at your world today, you would just do gas and wind. ... You would never do nuclear. The economics are overwhelming.”

Asked about Duke Power Florida’s August decision to cancel new reactor plans, Peter Bradford, a former NRC com-

missioner, told the *Tampa Bay Times* that a nuclear construction boom “was just this artificial gold rush. And yes, it does show the renaissance is dead.”

Wind and Solar Power Sprint, Nuclear Crawls

The US installed 9,922 megawatts of wind power genera-

ating nuclear power during the first three months of 2011. One reason that solar power expansion is sprinting ahead of nuclear, is that its cost has plummeted. Duke University researchers found in 2010 that, “Electricity from new solar installations is now cheaper than electricity from proposed new nuclear.”



Workers at Fukushima nuclear plant site. Photo: Japan Times.

tion in 2009 breaking all previous records. The one-year increase was equal to the building of six large power reactors, or three times the giant 2,700 MW South Texas Project – and all in one/tenth the time it normally takes to build a single new reactor. And wind is now cost-competitive with natural gas for new electric generation. Wind power is being buoyed by an extension of the Investment Tax Credit for renewable energy.

According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), a research group within the Energy Department, wind power generation increased by 17.7 million megawatt hours between 2012 and 2013, while nuclear power generation grew by a mere 2.2 million MWh. On the sunny side, roughly \$13 billion was invested in solar power projects in 2013, a tenfold increase over 2007.

This renewable clean power production in the US crossed a major milestone in January 2011, exceeding the amount of electricity generated by nuclear reactors, narrowly out-pro-

Gunning the Engines While Weakening accident Cleanup Regulations

Reactor “power uprates” boost the output of operating units beyond what their licenses first allowed by packing in more uranium fuel and running them harder. Uprates usually require replacement of giant pipes, pumps, valves, transformers and generators so the additional heat, pressure and steam can be controlled. Some reactors allowed to gun their engines are over 40 years old.

The NRC’s record of approving uprate applications is alarming. Since 1977 the NRC has approved 149 uprate applications and has denied exactly one. Nick DiFrancesco, a project manager at the NRC – where the cookie cutter evidently meets the rubber stamp – told Nukewatch Jan. 7, “We don’t have a lot of denials.”

More frightening still is that of the 23 reactors now operating in the US that are Fukushima clones (GE Mark 1 boiling water reactors, long known to be vulnerable to containment

failure during a severe accident). Fifteen of them have been granted power uprates. In fact, seven of the 15 have been granted a *second power uprate*. Sesquehanna's GE Mark II reactors in PA were granted a hair raising three power uprates.

Does your 1971 Caprice run pretty well with the original motor? With the industry and the NRC working overtime to fight or delay post-Fukushima safety improvements, how do you feel about the operators of GE Mark-Ones stomping the accelerator? Are you living within 50 miles of one of these rattle traps?

As the nuclear industry struggles against financial collapse, government regulators seem to have capitulated to political pressure to weaken radiation exposure standards after accidents and thereby save the industry hundreds of billions of dollars. On April 15, the EPA issued new Protective Action Guides (PAGs) for dealing with large-scale radiation releases – like Fukushima. The proposed PAGs represent a preemptive government bailout, because they would save reactor owners the nine-figure costs of currently required decontamination following large radiation releases. Eerily, the new PAGs seem to presume the premeditated inevitability of catastrophic releases that the industry can't afford to withstand. The likelihood of such events was cold-bloodedly conceded by NRC Commissioner James Asselstine who testified to Congress in 1986: "[W]e can expect to see a core meltdown accident within the next 20 years, and it ... could result in off-site releases of radiation ... as large as or larger than the releases ... at Chernobyl."

Now that Fukushima has tripled down on Commissioner Asselstine's radiation roulette wager, real players in big electricity are running for the exits. Unlike Congressional hogs feeding at utility lobbying buffets, or commercial television executives who devour utility advertising checks, Wall Street isn't buying bank-busting liabilities like Fukushima which will cost Japan a minimum of \$350 billion and which is relentlessly salting the entire Pacific Ocean with long-lived radioactive materials.

Big investors must smirk at sloganeering about "safe reactor designs" spouted in documentary hoaxes like "Pandora's Promise." They read headlines from Japan and recall the stinging deception purveyed by Lewis Straus of the Atomic Energy Commission who said electricity from reactors would be "too cheap to meter." And they can't forget *Forbes'* 1985 denunciation of nuclear power as industry's "largest managerial disaster."

Only add to *Forbes'* prescient epitaph that nuclear is also history's broadest and most and persistent health and environmental catastrophe.

**Only applied to items produced within the EU. When Japanese agricultural products are imported to the EU, Japan's provisional limits are applied.*

***Codex is a part of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. CP*

JOHN LAFORGE has worked on the staff of Nukewatch, a nuclear watchdog group in Wisconsin, for 22 years and edits its *Quarterly* newsletter. His articles on nuclear weapons, reactors and militarism have appeared in CounterPunch.org, *The Progressive*, *Z*, *Earth Island Journal*, the opinion pages of the *Miami Herald*, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and elsewhere. He has testified before British and Dutch parliamentarians on the outlaw status of depleted uranium weapons used widely by the United States.

Left Behind

The Late, Great, American Middle Class

BY DAVID MACARAY

"We the people. They refute last week's television commentary downgrading our optimism and idealism. They are the entrepreneurs, the builders, the pioneers, and a lot of regular folks—the true heroes of our land who make up the most uncommon nation of doers in history. You know they're Americans because their spirit is as big as the universe, and their hearts are bigger than their spirit...America isn't finished; her best days have just begun."

—Ronald Reagan, State of the Union Address, January 27, 1987

"Statistical evidence already suggests that the American dream is fading."

—*The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 1989

There's been much concern over the decline of the American middle class, but there hasn't been much written about how we define it. What precisely is the "middle class"? How long has it been in existence? Is it an economic category based entirely on one's income, or does it also take into account one's life-style and social status?

In truth, there has never been a satisfactory, all-purpose definition of the term, other than, perhaps, the understanding that the "middle class" lies somewhere between the "working class" and the "upper class." But one can argue that, because there is such a disparity among people who claim to belong to the "middle," even that definition is insufficient.

For instance, can a person earning a modest \$25,000 a year, and a person earning \$125,000, both belong to the middle class? That spread seems too wide. Yet I heard an attorney, who earns \$300,000 a year, tell a television audience that he considered himself to be a "middle class guy." Besides succeeding in making the rest of us feel that much "poorer," his self-assessment was indicative of just how elastic and malleable the term is.

The distinction between "working class" and "upper class" goes back to feudal Europe, where you had the peasantry at

By 1974, things had changed. The economic balance had begun to shift, and for the first time since the end of the war, the average American worker's wages stopped increasing... Not only did wages stop increasing, they began to slowly decline.

one end of the socio-economic spectrum, and the nobility at the other end. The noblemen *owned* the land, and the peasants *worked* the land. But there was also an emerging intermediate group, consisting of a mercantile, bourgeoisie "class," that fell somewhere in-between.

Still, if we choose to make "economics" our sole criterion, those rigid distinctions tend to fall away at the edges. Take America's post-World War II working class, for example. During that period, segments of the "working class" came close to resembling the "middle class," with working men and women now having incomes that allowed them to purchase homes, send their kids to college, and take family vacations.

In fact, by the mid-1950s, America's blue-collar workers were not only the envy of the industrialized world, they were boldly poaching on middle class terrain. One obvious reason for that was the ascendancy of labor unions. During the affluent 1950s, roughly 35-percent of the workforce was unionized (compared to barely 11-percent today). Indeed, the case can be made that it was organized labor who "invented" the middle class.

But what if the distinction between working class and middle class has a "social" component as well, one that transcends economics? In other words, what if it ain't just the money? If that's true, then we've found a snake in the woodpile, because the public has always insisted there are no "social classes" in America, only economic ones. American sociologist C. Wright Mills, tangentially explored this dynamic in his book, *The Sociological Imagination*.

By some fussy standards, blue-collar workers (those who work with their hands and didn't go to college) are never going to be considered full-fledged members of the proud and noble "middle class," at least not in the way white-collar workers are, regardless of their respective incomes. Under these restrictive standards, firemen, policemen, social workers and nurses would be admitted, but welders, millwrights and bricklayers probably wouldn't.

This "snob factor" is fascinating. Take a man with a Ph.D. in English Literature, who runs a tiny poetry magazine and scrapes by on a measly \$19,000 a year. In what category does he fit? Is it okay for this guy to go around calling himself "middle class"? Some would argue that it's perfectly fine, that, given his background, he has every right to regard himself as "middle class." A literary person? A guy who understands poetry? A doctorate degree? Hell yes.

So this \$19,000 a year magazine editor living in genteel poverty, who drives a beat-up Volvo and belongs to Mensa, is considered "middle class," but a grungy, \$50,000 a year pipefitter, who drives a beat-up pick-up truck and has dirt under his fingernails, can't quite shed the pejorative label of "working class"? It's a paradox.

Obviously, because we have to draw the line somewhere, this is where we draw it. Social status is irrelevant. The "middle class" is and always has been a purely economic construct, and any discussion of it that doesn't take place within the narrow context of comparative wages is meaningless. You can be a splendid man or woman, but you can't be a member of the middle class unless you possess the necessary prerequisite: middle class purchasing power.

Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich has referred to the American middle class as, "The most powerful consumer engine the world has ever known." It's the *middle*, not the *upper* class, that keeps the economy chugging along. That's because the rich don't buy enough "stuff." There simply aren't enough of them. And, like it or not, purchasing "stuff" (ideally stuff manufactured in the US) is what fuels the economy. Simple as that.

Because political pundits and election pollsters regularly use terms like "dinks" (dual-income, no kids), "working-class neighborhoods," "blue-collar voters," "white-collar professionals," etc, and because the "middle class" is purely an economic construct, we need to come up with an acceptable dollar figure for a middle class income.

In their book, *The Betrayal of the American Dream*, Donald Barlett and James Steele, define the "heart of the middle class as those wage-earners who reported overall incomes between \$35,000 and \$85,000 on their tax returns." Presumably, people earning above \$85,000 would fall into the "upper-middle class," and people earning what? – \$180,000 and above – would fall into the "lower-upper class"? These numbers won't satisfy everyone, but they seem reasonable.

Median household income in 2009 was \$50,599, meaning that half the wage-earners in the US made more than that, and half of them made less. As Barlett and Steele note, "That figure has since fallen below \$50,000 as the United States went through its first full decade of declining incomes when adjusted for inflation. Only the poor and the middle class went down. The rich tracked sharply higher."

They go on to say, "All told, there were 34 million individu-

als and families in the \$35,000 to \$85,000 range who reported wage and salary income on their tax returns. They accounted for 30-percent of the more than 116 million returns filed by working Americans. By far the largest group with job income, *58 million individuals and families*, [my italics] fell below our middle class definition.”

Here’s a surprising fact. The American middle class is a fairly recent phenomenon. While there has, of course, always been a “statistical” middle, the “mass” middle class, the “affluent” middle class – that vibrant, evergreen category which most people have in mind when they discuss prosperity – didn’t really begin until about 1947, following the end of World War II.

By all accounts, the 1950s were the most prosperous decade in US history. As for economic self-confidence, we’ve never had a decade like it. But by 1974, things had changed. The economic balance had begun to shift, and for the first time since the end of the war, the average American worker’s wages (in real dollars) stopped increasing. Somehow, the brakes had been applied. Not only did wages stop increasing, they began to slowly decline. Alas, wages have been in a state of stagnation or gradual decline ever since.

Which is stunning. Because it means the “glory days” of the mass middle class lasted only about 27 years, barely one generation. Granted, a big part of that can be attributed to inflation, which ate away at real-dollar earnings and ravaged those people living on fixed incomes. In the mid-1970s, labor unions were getting 15-percent wage increases yet still falling behind in cost-of-living. It’s hard to believe, but the prime interest rate in 1980 reached 20-percent.

But once inflation eased, things didn’t get any better. In fact, they got worse. Even with runaway inflation now behind us, the middle class faced another menace, one whose toxic legacy still haunts us. That menace was the so-called “Reagan Revolution.”

Ronald Reagan – former actor, former pitchman, former governor, and former New Deal Democrat – could be said to represent the political fulfillment of a conservative ideology first articulated by Barry Goldwater, in 1964. And arguably, no former Democrat, including the infamous red-baiting Senator Joe McCarthy, has ever done more harm to the middle class.

It’s ironic that one of the things Reagan gets credited (and blamed) for is having dramatically reduced the tax rates on millionaires. The way the story goes, when Reagan became president one of the first things he did was study the tax code, and after noting with horror that the marginal income tax under Republican presidents Eisenhower and Nixon had been exorbitantly and unfairly high, vowed to change it.

According to Republican lore, Reagan didn’t simply lower the maximum rate, he slashed it, he eviscerated it, he ground it up like hamburger and then did his devil-dance on the remains. He lowered the rate because he knew that if you

give rich people an incentive to become even richer, they will invest in the economy, create jobs, and keep America strong. (He was partly right. The rich did invest in the economy.... foreign economies.)

While that’s a wonderful story, it’s not true. For seven of Reagan’s eight years the maximum rate remained *higher* than Obama’s current maximum (a base of 39.6-percent), and for six of those years the marginal rate on millionaires stood at 50-percent or more. While a 50-percent tax rate in today’s greedy climate would be grounds for impeachment, if not insurrection, it was a big improvement on the 70-percent tax rate under Republican president Richard Nixon.

But when Reagan finally got around to lowering the marginal tax rate to 38.5-percent, he ushered in a whole new mindset, one that has plagued the country ever since. Because of Reagan, taxation was now viewed not only as confiscatory and counter-productive, but as almost “un-American.” And when, in 1987, he repealed the FCC’s Fairness Doctrine (established in 1949), it unleashed a flood of venomous, right-wing talk radio, which provided a perfect platform for anti-tax, free market fundamentalists.

Still, when it comes to kowtowing to millionaires, Reagan wasn’t the chief culprit. All Reagan really did was put that plutocratic idea in play. It was the men who followed him who did the real damage: George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Indeed, by the time President Clinton left office, this leader of the so-called “Party of the little guy,” was eating out of Wall Street’s hand.

And let’s be clear about how “low” these low taxes are. While Obama’s current top rate is 39.6-percent, that’s merely a starting point, the place you begin before applying all your deductions. The very rich pay far less than we think. As Robert Reich noted in his book, *Aftershock*, the top twenty-five Wall Street investment bankers, in 2007 (all of whom made more than *one billion* dollars), averaged 17-percent in federal income tax.

But even the super rich don’t have a fully developed, conscience-free sense of entitlement. They realize their libertarian “tax philosophy” is little more than a glorified intellectual excuse for clinging to as much of that money as they can, which is why, instead of boasting about their low tax rate, they try to conceal it.

Many will recall the 2012 presidential campaign where candidate Mitt Romney, arguing invasion of privacy issues, strenuously resisted making public his previous years’ tax returns. When, in the heat of the Republican primary, he was finally coerced by Rick Santorum into revealing them, people were staggered to learn that, in 2010, on earnings of more than \$21 million, Romney had paid a minuscule 14-percent in federal income tax.

With the rich now paying less than half as much as they had under Eisenhower, the resulting short-fall was debilitating. That lost tax revenue kept money away from public

education, health care, vocational training, science research, medical research, badly needed rebuilding of the infrastructure, plus a hundred other things that contribute to the common good. Instead, that money remained in the pockets of the wealthy.

Something else Reagan did that had a negative effect on the middle class was promote a fierce, almost maniacal, opposition to government regulation. Reagan so admired the “free enterprise” system, he gave corporations enormous freedom when it came to regulating themselves, which was tantamount to putting the inmates in charge of the asylum. And nowhere was this infantile, hands-off policy more destructive than in our rapidly growing trade deficit.

A trade deficit is what you get when you import more goods than you export. Broadly speaking, a large trade deficit hurts the middle class this way: fewer exports mean fewer manufacturing jobs at home; fewer jobs mean more unemployment; sustained unemployment means a surplus of workers; a surplus of workers leads to a “buyer’s market”; and a sustained buyer’s labor market eventually leads to wages across the board (outside the manufacturing sector) being suppressed.

And because those manufacturing jobs tended to pay well, the damage to the middle class was especially severe, resulting not in only fewer net jobs, but fewer good jobs. Also, when you stop producing goods to sell to the rest of the world, but encourage the rest of the world to continue selling their goods to you, you energize a new “investor class,” which, while still investing in manufacturing enterprises, is now committed to foreign economies.

Our trade deficit has made investors rich. While Warren Buffet is not your “typical” investor, he plays for that team. In fact, he bats clean-up for them. In 2013, Buffet increased his wealth by \$12.7 billion, which is about *\$37 million per day*. Contrast that absurd figure with the government’s monthly “job reports,” where they announce how many new jobs have been created. People scoff at those numbers because they know the majority are low-paying jobs. Not “entry-level” low-paying, but categorically low-paying.

The US has a gargantuan trade deficit, the largest in the world by far. By contrast, Germany (with a highly unionized workforce) and China, among others, have healthy trade surpluses, where they export more than they import. Fun fact: The country with the largest trade surplus is Saudi Arabia. The Saudis don’t have to worry about manufactured goods because they sit atop an ocean of oil.

Of course, Reagan didn’t invent trade deficits. They began under Nixon, continued under Ford and Carter, and have been with us ever since. In fact, we’ve had a net trade deficit for 40 years, ever since 1973. But what made Reagan’s role so critical was that once the deficit reached the point where politicians and economists had become alarmed, he refused to act. He refused to push for higher tariffs or reciprocal trade

guarantees because, philosophically, he viewed government interference as “anti-free market.”

The subsequent effect on the middle class was devastating. The industries we’ve lost or had decimated are too numerous to mention : cameras, watches, medical equipment, tools, toys, furniture, steel, paper and pulp, chemicals, rubber, shoes, textiles, jewelry, electronics, and every manner of household appliance and gadget. The year 1979 was manufacturing’s last hurrah. In 1979, there were 19.5 million Americans engaged in manufacturing, the most in US history. By 2011, that number had shrunk to 11.6 million.

Say what you will about Ross Perot, but when he said, in 1992, “That giant sucking sound you hear will be our manufacturing jobs leaving the country,” he wasn’t wrong. Erasing 8 million good jobs from the economy was not only a tremendous blow to the middle class, it led to an increase in the number of “working poor,” a relatively new category referring to people who have full-time jobs, but whose paychecks are unable to lift them above the poverty line.

Another destructive thing Reagan did was convince the public that government was “evil,” that you couldn’t trust it, that the government made things worse, not better. His mantra: Not only can’t the government FIX the problem, the government IS the problem. According to Reagan, we can trust only business executives, rich people, entrepreneurs, and trickle-down economics. Under Reagan greed became not only legitimized, but institutionalized. American CEOs make roughly 350 times what the average worker makes. In Japan the ratio is 67 to 1. In Australia it’s 93 to 1.

With Reagan in office, an anti-government, anti-regulation fever was set loose upon the land. When the President himself more or less announces that the accumulation of wealth is now the nation’s chief objective, he is declaring that everything is for sale, which is going to cause Wall Street bankers not only to perk up, but to mobilize. Of course, they didn’t go after poor people because they knew there was no money there. They came after the middle class.

The Dow-Jones Industrial Average didn’t reach 1,000 until 1972. Compare that to earlier this year, when it hit 16,500. What raised the market to such dizzying heights was the rise of multinational corporations, tech companies, and the systematic “harvesting” of the middle class. Look at the results of that harvest: stagnant wages, lower headcounts, shrinking benefits, more productivity, and less government interference. All of which translates into two words: increased profits.

There has also been a profound shift in perception. In the 1960s, when a company announced a layoff, its stock price was likely to drop a bit because of concern that customer orders had shrunk or there were problems with a product line. That logic no longer applies. When a company announces a layoff today, its stock price is likely to rise because, even with employees now on the street, it means the company is clearly reducing its overhead.

Also, companies have decided that investing in foreign ventures makes more sense than pouring money into the good ol' USA. Too many problems here; too much bitching, too much calcification, not enough fresh, fertile ground. Best to hook up with a foreign oligopoly where the workers realize they're poor, but can't do much about it. Those foreign investments are not only profitable, they help prop up the stock market. And who's left to sift through the wreckage? The American worker.

It's no exaggeration to say that, while "globalization" has been a panacea for corporations, it's been a dagger in the heart of the American worker. Competing in this "global market" reminds one of what it must have been like working in the US textile industry in, say, the 1920s, before there were codified safety standards and strong unions, and before there was a minimum wage law, which established a floor below which workers couldn't sink.

There is no such thing as a "global minimum wage." No one controls it, and no one regulates it. It's like a reverse-auction, where the jobs go to the *lowest* bidder. Yet, incredibly, American workers have been told that if they wish to keep their jobs, they're going to have to find ways of competing with the Third World. This absurd threat is not only insulting, it's a cruel hoax.

As productive as the American worker is (and we're among the most productive in the world), there's no way we can compete with Third World labor. The US federal minimum wage stands at \$7.25 per hour, and even that pitifully small amount dwarfs Asian wages. Textile workers in Bangladesh earn \$1.85 per hour, shoemakers in the Philippines earn \$2.40, and motorcycle and automakers in Punjab, India, earn \$3.75. Forget about it. It's no contest.

Not to rattle the bones of a dead Gipper, but there's another hideous thing Reagan did to the middle class. He attacked the one institution dedicated to the welfare of working people: labor unions. And given that Reagan himself was a former union president (Screen Actors Guild), one has to believe he did it intentionally. By firing those 11,345 striking PATCO workers (air-traffic controllers), in 1981, Reagan released the hounds. Suddenly, it was open season on the country's unions.

With a stroke of his pen, Reagan proved to Corporate America that unions were not only vulnerable, but could be cracked like a walnut, provided the proper mallet was used. Anyone who claims that this shift in perception didn't hurt the labor movement wasn't paying attention. Perception is everything, and that PATCO wipeout was perceived as apocalyptic. Even though labor unions have always been the sole source of resistance to corporate greed and muscle, Reagan now had them on the run.

Then there's that matter of old-fashioned American hypocrisy. One of the contradictions embedded in Reagan's anti-government, anti-regulation ideology is the appalling be-

havior of US corporations. On the one hand, they rail against government interference, arguing that commerce should be allowed to function independently and unimpeded, and on the other hand, they're the first ones in line when it comes to government hand-outs.

If the corporations were honest in their desire to stay clear of the government, to be self-reliant and autonomous, one could almost respect them. After all, we've all known stubbornly proud people who, even when facing a crisis, have eschewed charity or any other form of assistance, and vowed to fight their way out of it by themselves.

But that's not our corporations. Because the rich have infinitely more access to the government than the general public has, they use that access to get self-serving legislation passed by a venal and subservient Congress. Instead of avoiding the government that Reagan so vividly described as "the problem," these corporations do the opposite. They have their snouts buried so deep in the federal trough, they can barely come up for air.

Access is everything in Washington. Those one-way, job-killing trade agreements that crippled the middle class—those oligopoly-serving agreements that Congress felt obliged to pass—were the direct result of access by multinational corporations. It's how Wall Street works. It's how Wall Street lobbyists (with the help of Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin) got President Clinton to repeal the Glass-Steagall Act. It's all about access.

Corporations may preach fiduciary self-reliance, but that's pure bunk. America's corporations are as dependent upon the support and largess of the US government as babies are on mothers' milk. Also, for what it's worth, according to *OpenSecrets*, in 2012, for the first time in US history, the majority (which is to say, more than half) of the members of Congress – our elected leaders, chosen from the community – were millionaires.

A summary: If we're looking for a specific year to mark the onset of the decline of the middle class, it's 1974. This would be the first post-war year that wages dropped. After that, it was all downhill: wages and benefits continued to erode, Reagan was elected, manufacturing jobs disappeared, the trade deficit soared, union membership declined, US companies went foreign, the government capitulated, and the rich and the super rich wantonly manipulated the system.

A decade from now, someone will ask a member of the new ruling class, "Hey, why'd you guys do that? Why'd you have to go and wreck the middle class?" He will reply: "Because we could." His answer will be infuriating and soul-crushing. But because our expectations and hopes have already been so drastically pared, it will make total sense. **CP**

DAVID MACARAY, an LA playwright and author ("It's Never Been Easy: Essays on Modern Labor," 2nd edition), was a former union rep. He can be reached at dmacaray@earthlink.net

The Manning Truthfest

Irish Artists and Activists Take the Boat to Wales to Support Chelsea Manning's Family

BY HARRY BROWNE

You can't take your eyes off Susan Fox. A slight, bespectacled, middle-aged woman in blue jeans and a white sweatshirt with 'Zoo York' in fancy script running down it sideways, she has been the object of shy glances since she walked, with a slight limp, into Shamrock's Bar.

It is not (only) the history of stress and ill health written on Susan's face that keeps drawing us back to it, as she sits with her sisters and brother enjoying a night of Irish music on a damp mid-January evening. It's her resemblance to the younger of her two children, the face on the poster, the reason we are here, Chelsea Manning.

We have been told that Susan is somewhat delicate, socially awkward. But there is little sign of it tonight in this plainest of plain pubs, next to the Town Hall in the small port of Fishguard in southwest Wales. She drinks very little and chats with family and friends, including some new ones.

I hear she is shy of journalists, with good reason, so I don't approach her, except to pause momentarily in front of her chair and mouth "thank you" when I've finished making a short between-song speech.

Maybe she likes my speech, which calls for journalists who, like me, have written stories based on Manning's revelations to campaign for their source's freedom: as she is leaving the session an hour or two later she takes it upon herself to come kiss me goodnight. She speaks one or two emphatic syllables, but the noise of the place, my bad ear and her Welsh accent mean I don't understand them.

Joe Staples, the husband of Susan's sister Sharon, doesn't seem to mind that I'm a journalist. He will be off with Sharon to the United States in a few weeks to visit the relative he still calls Bradley – he says Chelsea has given the family a dispensation to stick with what they know for the time being – and Joe is offering to ask a question on my behalf. My mind goes blank at the possibility of such a scoop, but he assures me I can get in touch by email when I've thought of something.

Meanwhile Joe regales me with frank, humorously affectionate stories of the strong-willed, challenging child who lived among them here in Pembrokeshire for several difficult years as a young teenager, and of the movies and TV shows Chelsea is most attached to in Fort Leavenworth. I silently decide with regret that none of these details, from a guy talking to another guy over a pint, are on-the-record for publication.

A baker's dozen of us have arrived on the boat from Ireland

over the course of this Friday. A couple of activist friends have made their way from British locations. One of them is Ciaran O'Reilly, an Irish-Australian who has been imprisoned in several jurisdictions but acquitted in Ireland for his part in damaging a US navy plane at Shannon Airport. These days Ciaran lives in London mostly doing solidarity for Julian Assange, who is still effectively a prisoner in the Ecuadorian embassy.

Ciaran decided last year to swallow his self-consciousness about his conspicuous, dreadlocked persona as a radical Catholic Worker activist and introduce himself to the patently unradical, unactivist (unCatholic) relatives of the Wikileaks whistleblower. That decision, along with the remarkable, dedicated activism of Genny Bove, our Welsh contact point, is the catalyst that has brought about this event, the first Manning Truthfest, a weekend series of performances and discussions.

Tonight we've settled into Fishguard, a ferry port and proverbially a place for just-passing-through, to sing and play and speak and raise a few pounds to help the family travel to the US. Susan has stitched a stunning wall-hanging of a tiger in the jungle as a raffle prize.

It's the very first time there has been any public event of this nature involving the family here in their home region, where Susan grew up, met Brian Manning (stationed locally with the US navy), had her first child Casey and returned from Oklahoma with Bradley after her marriage broke up. It's only six weeks since Susan's sister Sharon made the first public speech of her life, on a visit to Dublin organised by Ciaran, Genny and the Irish global-justice group Afri (Action from Ireland), and less time than that since she talked about her connection with Chelsea for the first time to her friends at her regular bingo night. (Susan still refrains from public speaking.)

Tonight the family are surrounded by dozens of local friends and even in austerity-hit south Wales the fundraising bucket is filling up. By 11pm the stunning collective chords of Welsh choral music, led by a bearded security guard, are filling the bar and the Irish songs scarcely stand a chance in the harmonic din. It's more than any of us could have hoped for.

The Manning Truthfest is the brainchild of playwright and actor Donal O'Kelly. He was so moved by the visit to Ireland in late November by Susan, Sharon and their siblings Mary and Kevin, that within a few days he had put together a plan to lead a group of musicians, performers and activists across the Irish Sea to support the family on their home turf – and to celebrate the courage of Chelsea Manning.

Donal thought that by following the migration route taken by Chelsea's maternal grandfather, Dubliner Billy Fox, in 1948, we could encourage support for Susan and the other family members among their own neighbours, while underlining the Irish connection and establishing a core of Irish people committed to solidarity with Chelsea and some of the people

closest to her.

Donal, and Joe Murray of Afri, which is funding this trip, understand that such solidarity is not an abstract principle: it's an active practice. To that end they've included in our travelling party the small bundle of energy that is Nuala Kelly, who for years led the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas, helping families to help prisoners, including the likes of the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four, innocent Irish people tortured and framed by British cops for IRA crimes.

Kelly knows the importance of prisoners' families both for prisoners themselves and for campaigns for their release; and she also knows how to help families participate without exploiting or instrumentalising them.

Ciaron O'Reilly too knows something about how those outside can help those inside. "The system wants

to bury you, to make you feel you're alone," he says. When O'Reilly was locked up in a county jail in Texas in the early 1990s for his part in the disarming of a B-52 that would have bombed Iraq, his broad six-foot-three frame wasn't sufficient to stop guards and fellow inmates from bullying the peace activist.

But then the bags of supportive letters started to arrive and the bullies backed off. "The letters got me in with the Mexican stamp collectors and I built my alliances from there," he jokes.

To date, active support for Manning in Britain and Ireland has been, strangely, almost invisible. Forget about her Irish grandad for the moment and think of the fact that Wales is where Bradley lived when the war started! Even activists who are happy to use her name freely on social media have failed to highlight Manning's local background. A few journalists have come calling, to be sure, but nearly four years after Manning's arrest in Iraq, Genny, Ciaron and now the Truthfest contingent are the first activists to come here, chat to Susan, and meet with aunties and striking blonde cousins who uncannily resemble Chelsea and vividly remember the

unique teenager.

South Wales is a beautiful region that was devastated by Margaret Thatcher's destruction of the coal industry in the 1980s. The peninsular county of Pembrokeshire is a place apart, its 120,000 people struggling to cling to livelihoods in a rolling wind-swept landscape. Sharon and her husband Joe make their living in jobs related to the tourism industry,

Sharon in a house-cleaning company and Joe designing kitchens long after any building boom has left the county.

We Irish visitors have been set down for the weekend, with Sharon's help, in a comfortable set of well appointed vacation 'cottages' that have rather despoiled the tiny seaside village of Broad Haven near Haverfordwest.

From the back of one, we can see a little nature reserve, so on the sunny Saturday morning I set out to explore it. It's a



Chelsea Manning, age 8, with his motehr Susan and aunt Sharon.

pond and reed bed, and though the sign at the entrance says the wooden 'boardwalk' through it has been closed for safety reasons, someone has made short work of the council's barricade, tossing it into the bushes.

So in I go. Sparrows peep, a moorhen glides across the water, and the signs explain that this "Slash Pond" is the site of an abandoned open pit where culm, a type of coal more useful as pigment than for burning, was mined in the 19th century. First nature, and then 'Nature' as a mode of tourism infrastructure, reclaimed the space, though now the latter can't be sustained well enough to be pronounced safe by the cash-strapped local authority.

The coastal walk down by the lovely seafront is in better shape, though climbing the cliff head reveals what is otherwise hidden by the hills behind the village: an enormous series of skyscraping gas refineries, processing materials that come in at the docks near here from Nigeria and beyond. Four workers were killed in an explosion at a Chevron plant in 2011, and locals talk darkly of ill health among residents near the plants. This gives me a new context to understand

the insistence of a couple of signs in the nature reserve, which explain that the lichens growing there signify the purity of the air in the vicinity.

Chelsea Manning's uncle Kevin has cancer in four parts of his body, but as everyone says, "you wouldn't know it now, would ya?" He is an inveterate smiler, and he has taken charge of much of the organising of our Irish group's visit to Wales. Like the rest of the family, he appears to be growing accustomed to the political verities and pieties we visitors are prone to spout on demand, and with several other Foxes he sits tolerantly through the speaking part of the Saturday-afternoon session in a community centre in Haverfordwest, the market town of Pembrokeshire and the family's home place.

This afternoon gig is the one event of the planned three we've been most unsure of beforehand – who will want to come out to hear a bunch of foreigners, myself included, talk about a local child who has grown up into a global figure? And the rare sunny weather doesn't boost our confidence. Thankfully, the family, including Susan, turn out again in good numbers, and another 20 or more people, mostly of an activist-looking ilk, turn up for a lively session.

Irish writer, actor and singer Sorcha Fox opens it by reading Chelsea's great Thanksgiving letter from prison, the one that praised MLK and Malcolm X, followed by an evocative flute solo from Ellen Cranitch. Then there are 70 or so minutes of talking, including, once intrepid techie Andy Cummins has fixed the sound, a video from the great English lawyer Gareth Peirce. Finally there is more music, beautifully performed, in a setting that lacks the chaos of the Shamrock the night before – that gig, a musician said, "was as loose as a bag of marshmallows".

Our accordion player, Robbie Sinnott, is a garrulous come-all-ye singer, a blind man who smiles even more than Kevin Fox and is almost as loved by Kevin's sisters. Robbie accompanies ageless Joe Black, in his trademark black bowler hat, on a couple of Joe's own compositions; then Imogen Gunner, surprisingly risen from her sick bed, strolls up mid-song to accompany them beautifully on fiddle. Young RoJ Whelan sings his own sweet tribute song, 'I Am Bradley Manning', and does, with Robbie's help, as devastating a version of Dylan's 'Masters of War' as I've ever heard from anyone, Dylan included. I've never heard Dylan do it in Chelsea Manning's home town, in the presence of her mother, to be fair.

"You can't beat an old Irish music session, boy," says Chelsea's aunt Joan, and she's dead right. The musical gang, lifted by the quality of their playing in the quiet Saturday-afternoon session, have been conferring to ensure they reach something like the same standard in the more challenging environs of a Saturday-night hooley in the Labour Club in Haverfordwest, for their third and final set of performances here. As a mere speaker, my work is done – apart from lugging the occasional accordion – and this night is in the hands of people who know how to throw a party.

My shyness with Susan has subsided, and she tells me she was up at 5.45am to start cooking chicken drumsticks. I think guiltily of how virtuous I felt taking a late-morning walk along the seashore.

Between the endless supplies of food from the family and the endless supply of music from the visitors, plus a club jammed full of affectionate friends and neighbours, this party has what it takes. None of us pushes the political issues very hard here, nor do we think to get offended when the Foxes break out the leprechaun costumes and other Paddy's Day paraphernalia to complete the Irish theme for the evening. Kevin's red beard suits him and he's got his shiny green collar turned up like an Elvis of the little people.

When my new 'Kiss Me I'm Irish' tie finally succeeds in getting me a smooch – after a barter in which I must agree to part with the tie after the kiss – my new friend tries to grasp what precisely a non-musician like me is doing here from Ireland. "So, you're here to talk about Kevin's nephew, right?"

No one here rejects Chelsea's gender identity, but it's hard to break the habit of a lifetime. Susan tells me proud, funny stories of Bradley's successes in school quizzes and science fairs and even basketball games back in the US. We go silent, though, when percussionist Brian Fleming is performing. Susan was transfixed on Friday by his solo piece, 'The Day the Apaches Rode Into Vietnam', a virtuoso display of the incredible range of sounds that can be coaxed and beaten out of a bodhrán, the traditional Irish drum.

Tonight Brian is also performing part of his one-man show, 'Have Yis No Homes To Go To?', the funny, true story of a trip to Rwanda with Clowns Without Borders. The audience laps it up – it helps that he juggles, balances a feather on his nose and takes off his trousers – and when he is done Susan, like the rest of us, is agog at the range of Brian's talents. And his Muppets underwear.

Haverfordwest is not short of its own remarkable characters. We meet 'Brandnew', a Scot proudly wearing the jersey of his beloved Glasgow Celtic Football Club. His real name escapes us, because everyone (including himself) calls him by the moniker he picked up when presenting a gift to Kevin in the depths of the latter's illnesses: "Brand new," he boasted as he handed Kevin a sweater, and a name was born.

Then there's 'Dai the Rat', a skinny five-foot-nothing septuagenarian who shuffles through the crowd in a white woolly hat: he is, the locals assure us, a successful male stripper. Aunt Joan can lift him by the shoulders in the middle of an Irish set-dancing extravaganza coached by the multi-talented Brian.

Ciaran O'Reilly, former political prisoner, and Susan Fox, mother of Chelsea Manning, are dance partners, swinging around the floor in defiance of everything, including the tricky knees from which they both suffer. "You've got to have fun, haven't you, boy?" says Joan. "You'll be dead long enough."

Well, indeed. But Andy Storey, chair of Afri, has earlier quoted Shelley's sonnet, *Ozymandias*, and its reminder that it is the most arrogantly powerful who truly vanish in death, whose glories are wiped from the earth by the sands of time. (Alexander Cockburn's brilliant final book, *A Colossal Wreck*, takes its name from that poem.) The values of truth and justice represented by Chelsea Manning are the things that last, like the values of warmth and hospitality represented by her family. When we have a better world, Chelsea Manning will be one of its enduring heroes.

Her family in Wales have read some of the documents she leaked and seen the famous 'Collateral Murder' video: they understand why Manning did what she did. Still, they don't necessarily share our version, or hers, of what a better world might look like. Chelsea's uncle-by-marriage Joe, making one of the few speeches of the Saturday-night hooley, refers obliquely to "whatever our political differences". We hear some family members may vote Tory – the MP hereabouts is a Conservative these days.

Those are not the politics of the whole family; we are partying in the Labour Club, where Kevin is active and the women attend the Wednesday-evening bingo. But we certainly don't find it discouraging. On the contrary, this is familiar boundary-crossing for Afri, and the rest of us enjoy the descent from the rarefied air emitted by our more typical left-wing companions, the evidence of where we can go by directing our activism at the humanity that unites us.

On Sunday morning Kevin leads us to breakfast at a simple cafe in a busy market at the county showgrounds. Next to the cafe there's an enormous shed with live poultry for sale, ducks and geese and chickens of every conceivable plumage making a racket in cages stacked in aisles. One can't help but think of Susan's reaction to visiting her child in the Marine brig in Quantico: "You wouldn't keep an animal in the sort of conditions they're keeping Bradley."

Now Chelsea is in better conditions, able to communicate with loved-ones, getting more visitors. Susan plans, "fingers crossed", to go to her child in the autumn. As we hug her and her family by the docks near Fishguard, we feel hopeful that they will go to Fort Leavenworth, and wherever else Chelsea's needs take them, strengthened by our support and by the celebration we shared. **CP**

For more information and to make a contribution, visit: manningfamilyfund.org.

HARRY BROWNE lectures at the Dublin Institute of Technology and is the author of *The Frontman: Bono (In the Name of Power)*.

Brucellosis and the Urge to Purge

Now They Want to Kill the Elk?

By LEE HALL

The Western cattle industry has found a new demon in the elk.

The issue is brucellosis, a malady caused by the *Brucella abortus* bacteria that causes stricken animals to miscarry. According to the US Centers for Disease Control, the disease – which originated with farmed cattle imported from Europe and spread to infect free-living animals – has been nearly eliminated from US farms. But the CDC warns it could be on the rise in some elk populations of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. And the ranching sector is reacting to the perceived threat by exerting pressure over the movements, and the very existence, of free-living animals.

The discovery of the disease on ranches in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana over the past decade have presented problems no rancher wants – lowered milk production, trade restrictions, the fear of having to kill their herds in order to guard a state's brucellosis-free status. Last October, two brucellosis findings cropped up on a ranch in Madison Valley, Montana, coinciding with new restrictions on animals exported to Texas. And Wyoming Game and Fish officials announced that "several *B. abortus* infections have been recently discovered in cattle near feedgrounds, leading to expensive testing requirements and trade sanctions."

Elk feedgrounds, they mean, run by Wyoming Game and Fish agents. Yes, agribusiness interests cause free-roaming elk to be farmed as well as the cows. Historically, the purpose of feedgrounds is to keep hungry elk from raiding ranchers' haystacks. Elk numbers can reach 34,300 to 205,500 elk per square km on the 65 to 164 feeding days. As animals pressed to congregate are vulnerable to disease exposure, brucellosis in parts of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is sustained by these sites. Mass feeding also goes on in Oregon, Utah and Washington.

Wyoming implemented a pilot project subjecting the Pinedale elk herd to "test and slaughter" at three feedgrounds from 2006 to 2010. This operation, costing well over one million dollars, has involved training the elk to come to hay at a certain time of day; building elk traps; establishing contracts for snow removal for miles leading up to the traps and in the traps themselves, so the elk can't climb the snow to escape up the walls; running blood tests on scores of captured elk; sending the elk to slaughter; and shipping the bodies to Wyoming food banks. None of this solved anything.

But instead of calling a halt to the unnatural feeding, the US agriculture department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has funded the vaccination of elk at these grounds. APHIS recently demanded \$35 million



Rocky Mountain Elk in Yellowstone. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair

through the federal farm bill to expedite disease eradication by targeting free-living animals throughout Greater Yellowstone. Do agribusiness interests aim to control them all?

“I think it is a genuine concern, that we’re moving more and more toward managing wildlife in more domestic-animal ways,” retired Boulder veterinarian Tom Roffe told the *Billings Gazette*.

Montana’s Fish and Wildlife Commission approved a 2014 elk management plan to separate elk from cattle by hazing and fencing, with “lethal elk management removals” as backup. The state has established local working groups focused on Designated Surveillance Areas (DSAs) in the northern Yellowstone ecosystem. Small groups of elk have been killed in “dispersal hunts” where ranchers want them gone. The groups “could recommend reducing wolf numbers in elk winter range,” according to the *Billings Gazette*. All this, though the northern elk population has dropped from 19,000-strong before wolves were reintroduced into

Yellowstone in 1995, to just 3,915 in early 2013, according to an aerial survey by the state and the National Park Service. There are only 20 wolves in their range, so other predators are also afoot. Human interference to diminish elk communities makes no sense.

None of this is really new to anyone who has followed the continent’s last remaining community of free-living bison. Officials from the US Forest Service, the National Park Service and the states have long bullied, captured, probed and killed bison, and hazed any who unwittingly roamed outside the borders of Yellowstone National Park, within which they are essentially confined. Managers claimed that most of Yellowstone’s bison tested positive for brucellosis, but, as they now acknowledge, the bison weren’t transmitting it to farm animals.

A vaccine approved for cattle was tested on captive bison calves, male bison, and pregnant bison; but now the focus has turned to elk, and the idea of vaccinating all the elk is absurd.

“And,” veterinarian Tom Roffe has asked, “why are we

peeing away money on vaccines that in 30 years haven't shown any success?"

Meanwhile, our own actions heighten the very threat we're paying to prevent. While Idaho wildlife managers have phased out food-based control – lowering the number of dependent elk from about 2,000 to just 150 – the Wyoming feedgrounds set elk up for a panic situation that would turn tens of thousands of animals into a public enemy. Other maladies, such as chronic wasting disease (CWD), could also show up at any of the 22 state-run feedgrounds. Along the lines of mad cow disease, CWD causes loss of body control and death.

Wyoming is also home to the National Elk Refuge, where the US Fish and Wildlife Service feeds more than 7,000 elk in winter – though under a 2007 plan agents are slowly reducing the number to 5,000. But according to retired US Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Bruce Smith, feeding has to stop, and: "The only way you can phase out feeding is to reduce the population of bison and elk to the capacity of the habitat that can support them."

Yes. But it's not up to the human ape to do that. It's up to the wolves.

The Importance of Understanding Wolves

The agriculture department's APHIS is likely, if anything, to expand its controlling reach: its "Brucellosis and Yellowstone Bison" fact sheet warns that "predators can serve as mechanical vectors by dragging infected tissues" so these animals too are at risk of management in the name of brucellosis prevention.

Wolves, of course, are among the most capable predators of elk. Since their reintroduction into the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, they have met constant human persecution—the key impediment to wolves reestablishing themselves as apex predators over the western landscape. And officials have singled out the activities of wolves in brucellosis reports. Some field biologists believe elk are congregating in larger herds in the northern Paradise Valley due to wolves. And the Centers for Disease Control names the reintroduction of wolves as one possible reason for brucellosis in elk, citing a 2009 publication by Kelly M. Proffitt, *et al.* in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*.

The cited article assessed the reactions of elk to both wolf and human hunters on a winter range in Greater Yellowstone, and found that elk moved more as predation risk increased. The study indicates that pursued elk may leave public-land winter ranges and go to private ranches; but it also suggests that predation on winter ranges may disperse elk grazing impacts and lessen elk impacts on any one area.

If anything, evolving science is likely to find the presence of wolves encourages the health of bio-communities—making a case for encouraging, not containing, wolf reestablishment. The best current science tells us elk will congregate

in large numbers on their own if we remove their predators, and that this leads to degraded ecosystems. Indeed, a US Geological Survey study found some unmanaged elk populations lingering in groups as large as those on the Wyoming feeding grounds. The wolves who naturally keep elk moving in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming have been removed from federal Endangered Species Act protection – thrown to the states whose ranchers and hunters want them dead.

The quiescence we have created in elk by suppressing their predators also means the loss of key vegetation where they linger; and artificially reducing the elk herds does not replicate the variety of effects wolves have on elk and their surrounding bio-communities. To heal western ecosystems, according to trophic cascades specialist William J. Ripple and watershed conservationist Robert L. Beschta:

In addition to restoring large carnivores such as wolves, it may be important to recover historical ungulate migrations as much as possible, especially in situations where ungulates tend to avoid natural migrations in an effort to lower their risk of predation or other impacts from humans and, as a consequence, reside inside park or reserve boundaries.

Ranchers may resent wolves and wolf advocacy, but they have no business making the public pay the bill for forcible reduction of them all – the elk hanging around ranches, and the wolves that would naturally disperse them.

We're All Implicated

Bison and elk, with or without disease, vex the cattle ranchers who want water and lands, public or private, for the grazing of their owned animals. Climate change, expected to intensify droughts in the West, will only increase tensions as animals seek sustenance where they can. Is the answer to step up our control of free-living animals, creating more fences that fragment their lands, and treating them as enemies?

A saying attributed to Confucius – "The way out is via the door. Why is it no one will use this method?" – applies here. But many nonprofits still encourage their members to support animal agribusiness while simultaneously fundraising to battle the cattlemen. The Sierra Club's "Sustainable Consumption Committee" urges people to distribute a flyer stating, "Buy grass-fed, free-range, or pasture-raised meat and dairy." Yet the US population is 314 million people and rising. Where do they think that pasture comes from?

The control and killing of free-living animals and the destruction of bio-communities at the behest of an unnecessary industry can't be justified, and a key part of phasing it out will implicate us – our committed refusal to buy what ranchers sell. **CP**

LEE HALL is a candidate for Vermont Law School's LL.M. in environmental law (2014). *Lee has taught animal law and immigration law, and worked for more than a decade in environmental and animal advocacy. Lee thanks Steve Kelly for factual support with this writing.*

CULTURE & REVIEWS

Paint It Bright The Art of Tiffany Gholar

BY LEE BALLINGER

In almost any café or other artist hangout in America, you can guess what the groups of two or five or ten are talking about without even hearing them. Day jobs. The need to get one, the need to survive one.

Tiffany Gholar, a Chicago painter and writer, explores this in her book *Post-Consumerism: Paintings, 2007-2010* (tiffanygholar.com), which features prose as much as paint.

In this retail environment, I was disposable and replaceable, not unlike the cardboard boxes that the merchandise was shipped in, or the plastic bags that the customers carried out of the store. It was a brutal existence, yet all these things were made necessary by consumerism. I felt as though we were all being judged on our ability to sell people things that they did not need.

Among other things, Gholar worked in a furniture store and then sold carpet, all the while trying to develop as a serious artist and get her work exhibited. She even auditioned for television, the first season of Bravo's *Work of Art*. When that didn't work out, she had to sell many of her personal possessions.

Even with two college degrees, I felt like no human resources person outside a department store would let me get my foot in the door because I lacked experience. So many entry-level jobs were being outsourced overseas or eliminated completely and it seemed my options for employment were dwindling every day. And so I felt an empathy and a kinship for those with no place to go, because that was how I felt as well.

The problem with the day job isn't

just that it takes up most or even all of the day, time when an artist needs to be at the easel or the computer or the microphone, but that the deadening routine can sap the will to create.

There is no music. There is no natural light. There are clocks, but they all display the wrong time. Nobody wants to be here. One of my goals, a dream that seemed far-fetched to me at the time, was to be an artist.

While the artist looks at the day job as something merely to be endured, employers have a different outlook. Capitalism waits for no one.

I was dealt a final coup de grace when my new job fired me after less than two months for "not making connections with the customers."

For any financially successful creative artist, the day job of days past becomes a joke, part of the standard biography, the punch lines delivered with a laugh: "I used to work at McDonald's, used to trim trees, used to walk rich people's dogs." The mere absence of a day job conveys a status of success, even though nine out of ten artists with a career in their chosen field have no health care and face the same problems as anyone else, from child care to foreclosure to cars in need of repair.

Why should we feel sympathy for artists? In the main we don't, because we have been conditioned to think of artists of all kinds as strange creatures, self-absorbed and selfish, who refuse to grow up and instead spend their lives in pursuit of a hobby. Unless, of course, they somehow make it to the top and become wealthy. Then, like all other wealthy people in America, they are no longer portrayed as selfish.

This message is reinforced by the wholesale elimination of art and music classes from our schools, a crime against the future which is being committed with little response from any

point on the political spectrum.

Sometimes, even amongst my peers I felt out of place because I was more interested in art and creative writing than math, science, and computers – the three subjects that seemed, to some of my teachers and the world at large, to be the most important interests that a gifted student should have.

The clichéd term "starving artist" conveys the acceptance of that condition as though it's the natural, ordained fate of anyone seeking to creatively inspire his or her fellow humans. We condescendingly pat the artist on the head, as we do a child who says "When I grow up, I want to be President." If it's natural for an artist to starve, then why should society provide grants or fellowships or music and arts programs in the schools? The starving artist certainly isn't considered to be among the deserving poor (seniors, disabled veterans) who receive government aid without being shamed for it. Instead, they are lumped in with immigrants and welfare mothers as undeserving at best and a threat to civil society at worst.

The problem with living on a shoestring is that it will eventually fray, and then break, and who will be there to help you when the federal poverty line has been drawn so low?

The caste-like status of artists in America leads many of them to doubt their life choice, to question their self-worth and, worst of all, to wonder if they have anything to say.

Quite honestly, I am afraid to be an artist. I am afraid it just wouldn't work out.

There is good reason to fear being an artist. While artists inspire and nurture the world, in return they are marginalized and ignored. Stressed by work, trapped by doubt, too often they just stop.

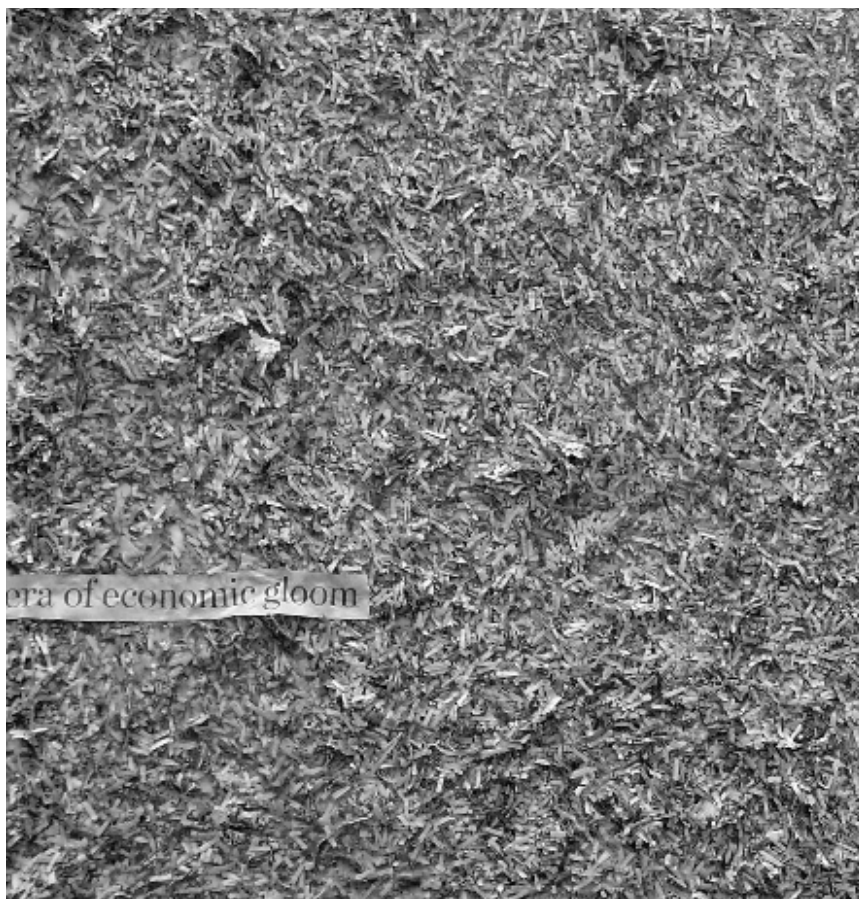
I can't paint today. Today I feel exiled. Today I feel sequestered. Today I feel trapped. And all I can do is write about it.

All I can do is write about it. In this, Gholar echoes Lynyrd Skynyrd's Ronnie

Van Zant, who wrote a song in defense of the environment called “All I Can Do is Write About It.” The similarity isn’t just that they are two artists who care about the planet and are frustrated, but that they express themselves as individuals. As individuals, all they *can* do is write about it. The connections with others, necessary to heal the earth or to nurture the artist, aren’t there. But they could be.

the gatekeepers. This is even more true for a visual artist than for a musician, as the number of places to exhibit paintings is finite and controlled compared to all the ways that music can be shared. If things don’t go well, it’s easy for the artist to blame themselves.

Should the materials I have used to create my work be mysteriously hidden or should they be obvious? Do the bottles in Adaptive Reuse 2 even belong



What I really wanted to do was to study art full time, be a part of a community of artists, and have my own studio space.

The burning desire to be seen or heard can lead to a search for “rules,” a quest to understand the guidelines which supposedly can steer an artist to success. Beset by insecurity and the demands of the marketplace, even the most iconoclastic artists can be bent or even broken by the need to please

there? Is what I am doing so banal and ordinary that anyone can do it? Do all my pieces need to be the same size?

Yet against all odds, Tiffany Gholar has managed to create an excellent body of work, much of which is presented in her book *Post-Consumerism*. For her, post-consumerism means making use of the “cultural residue” of our manic drive to consume. She takes boxes, packing materials, strips of cardboard and puts them on canvases

and then emblazons them with paint. She calls it “building a painting.”

I had been wanting to make paintings with a more sculptural quality, something approaching bas-relief.

Her paintings are tactile (although you’d have to go to a gallery to actually touch them and that might be frowned upon) but filled with ideas. Abstract art can be difficult to convey ideas with because, well, it’s abstract.

When I created my first body of work, I came to embrace abstraction. From the very first day of class, when I opened my new tubes of oil paint, I found myself enamored of the materiality of the paint. I liked its scent, I liked its texture.

One way around the limitations of abstract art is by the use of titles. Gholar’s work “Smother” is a group of white plastic shopping bags discarded artfully onto a canvas. The title says it all – consumerism as an agency of death for small children and for large environments (like the earth).

Another piece of hers is cardboard backing and waterfalls of cerulean blue paint called “Katrina,” a designation which changes everything. Instead of just vibing on the vibrancy of the color, we are left with the equation of blue equals water equals Katrina equals New Orleans equals death and we look for victims and for hope among the brushstrokes.

The intensely orange color scheme of “Fever Dream” may seem obvious but it’s also a trap to pull you in, to get you to think about the things you dream about when you’re tired and hot and sick, to catch you before your defense mechanisms kick in.

Gholar plays with the definition of recycling with an assemblage entitled *New City* which features a toy bulldozer clearing the way for condominiums to be built. Gentrification is a form of recycling, albeit a hideous one.

Chicago was nearing the end of an era in which it seemed like every possible vacant structure – be it a factory, hospital, school, or warehouse – was being converted into condominiums that I

could not afford.

Tiffany Gholar is enamored with bright colors, bold and striking enough to overcome a gray consumerist culture or, for that matter, weather that is often equally gray.

[I] create art in colors that nature was still waiting a few months to reveal. The antidote to the gloomy gray skies and formidable gray buildings were cadmium orange and permanent red violet.

But as this savage American winter of the polar vortex has confirmed, we may be entering an era where the colors will not return.

That's what a winter sky is—defeated.

It seems that the rhythms of the earth are now so out of kilter with the planet's natural music that they can no longer find a place to be heard and felt. Gholar's works warn us not just to wake up, but to dream of something different. Art such as hers tells us not what a world in natural harmony would look like or be like but what it might *feel* like.

Gholar defines her work as reflecting "post-consumerism." But what is consumerism? First of all, it means spending a ridiculous amount of America's resources on things that people do not need, egged on by a gigantic and utterly useless advertising industry. Consumerism deserves all the criticism that Tiffany Gholar or anyone else can sling at it.

Eventually you will become aware of the widening distance between what you'd like to do and what you can afford to do. But it will remind you of how long your dreams have been deferred. Not all deferred dreams dry up, fester, or sag like a heavy load. Some really do explode. And so it is with this in mind that I come to the studio and create images with shredded money. I am a recessionist painter.

But the catchphrase of too many critiques of consumerism has become simply that "In America, we consume too much!" Who, exactly, is "we"? We have tens of millions of people here

who, despite their frantic efforts to do so, are unable to consume *enough*. They are poor, they are hungry, they are homeless. If consumerism means excess, then the antidote cannot be just *less*, it has to be *enough*. For all.

Like consumerism, recycling can mean many things. In the hands of Tiffany Gholar, recycling is a means to artistic expression and to making a statement about abuse of the environment. To many people, recycling is an important part of their lives as they seek to live in harmony with a planet that is being destroyed. Recycling can also serve as a spiritual statement – Gholar quotes John 6:12 from the Bible: "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost."

But recycling has also become a con job, a way of blaming the average American for the ravaging of nature that only those with way above average income and power are truly responsible for. It has become another meaningless morality play, in which the question "Do you recycle?" carries with it an implied test of political correctness.

For corporations and politicians, recycling is yet another marketing device and a tool to divert us from the death sentence that fossil fuels represent. The Arrowhead Water bottle sitting on my desk trumpets that it is a "ReBorn Bottle Made With 50% Recycled Plastic." In Compton, California, a city that barely functions because local politicians like it that way, the one thing that is vigorously enforced is placing recyclable waste in the proper trash bin. This in a city where middle school band classes have been taught without instruments and where the Sheriffs Department is a trigger-happy occupation army.

It is our political and economic institutions, not our own individual failings, which have to be overcome if we are to prevent the death of our planetary home. The sustained mobilization required to carry out that Herculean task can only be accomplished with the

clarity and confidence that artists can bring to the process. But we can't place culture in the forefront if we allow those who create it to be marginalized or treated like circus freaks.

This is no small matter. Some years ago I heard Southside Johnny being interviewed on the radio. The DJ asked about Southside's tune "Little Calcutta," a savagely beautiful song about homelessness in New York City. Southside hemmed and hawed, made some self-deprecating remarks, and started joking around. Wasn't he serious about what he'd created? Even a casual listen to the song (You pray to God but he never seems to hear / You're in the mayor's prayers "Lord make them disappear!") reveals a composer of great skill and insight. But for Southside Johnny, or any artist, to stand up on their hind legs and say "I am intelligent and creative and my work is important to society" is to step into the line of fire of a 24/7 hurricane of noise. From all corners of official society, that hurricane pushes artists through the debilitating filters of the mass media while talking heads everywhere proclaim that nothing to the left of TMZ gossip means anything.

Tiffany Gholar and Southside Johnny and their legion of peers deserve our respect and deserve to be able to concentrate on the work that is meaningful to them. This raises and indeed begins to answer another question. Shouldn't we ensure that *everybody* is able to concentrate on work that is meaningful to them? Well, why not? That would be post-consumerism at its very best.

At some point experts may suggest you take antidepressants to help you better adjust to the world, when actually it is the world itself that needs to be readjusted.

LEE BALLINGER co-edits Rock & Rap Confidential. Free email subscriptions are available by writing rockrap@aol.com.

CounterPunch

ISSN 1086-2323 (print)

ISSN 2328-4331 (digital)

www.counterpunch.org

1 (800) 840-3683

\$5.00 per issue

P.O. Box 228

Petrolia, CA 95558

Presort
Standard
U.S. Postage
PAID
Eureka, CA
Permit No. 76

Address Service Requested

 **AVAILABLE SOON FROM COUNTERPUNCH BOOKS**

Michael Arria exposes the machinations of every liberal's favorite network

MEDIUM BLUE

The Politics of MSNBC

Available as e-book and paperback
visit counterpunch.com for more info