

CounterPunch



VENEZUELA, IRAN AND THE DEMOCRATS BY PAUL STREET

THE GREAT DISAPPEARANCE BY JOHN DAVIS

HOW WAR FUELS MODERN SLAVERY BY TJ COLES

THE BUSINESS OF MASS SURVEILLANCE BY JENNIFER MATSUI

EXECUTING THE MENTALLY ILL BY MARK TAYLOR



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In Memory of
Alexander Cockburn
1941–2012



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Democratic Ideals

Why is Chris Floyd so disturbed by Lisa Page's statement that Putin's goal is to "make us less of a moral authority to spread democratic values" (CounterPunch, vol 25, #6), when, as Floyd demonstrates with multiple examples of America's bellicosity, the US has lost such moral authority as it may once have had? Maybe Putin is doing us all a favor if his aim is to disrupt the Western alliance and thereby impede the spread America's murderous "democratic ideals".

Bill Scoble

Pleasure to Donate

Although I disagree politically and culturally with the vast majority of CounterPunch articles, know also the I find them informative, well written and sincere. I cannot in good conscience agree with many submitted sentiments, however I will defend to the death your right to propose them. Some on the right would seek to stifle your voice; I am not one of those. I find a strange nobility endorsing CounterPunch, especially to my fellows on the right. Call me odd...

*Best Regards,
Robert*

Capitlist Wood

I love that you consistently mention the clear cutting of old growth forests.

I live in a 100 year old house that has wood windows. I've recently developed a love for them vs the disposable variety associated with the superiority of modernity. In Oak Park where I live I see dumpsters filled with windows and doors made with wood from trees

that ranged anywhere from 200-1000 years old. Thinking about it I speculate if we knew what would we have done differently? I would put new wood windows in new construction and definitely preserve the wood windows as part of any rehab, but how to get home owners to think like stewards rather than transients looking to turn a buck. Many layers to this I guess.

Where does the wood from those football size fields of old growth timber go? The wood I see in the home centers and even the wood specialty shops is all crap. I hear the English developed steel ship as they had consumed all of their own wood (to conquer the world) and had run out of reliable sources outside of England.

This is trite but it seems we need to draw these perspective when forming opinions/policies regarding these forests. From the capitalist perspective they are not valued properly. I don't believe tax policy will solve this, we just need to do better, and government needs to lead the way. (not the current type of course)

John Michelotti

All About Him

I think impeachment keeps the focus on Trump. He can't be removed from office, and all the conversation will continue to be about him. And the Dems will look like idiots because they will not really go after him the way he deserves. They'll just draw a lukewarm impeachment bath and then worry about whether they have towels.

Susan Davis

In Trouble

There was a recent discussion on National Propaganda Radio about a doctored video of Nancy Pelosi and the question of whether or not Facebook has the right to censor things that are clearly meant to inflame/sway public opinion. When the alleged "liberal" media challenges the right to free speech, you know you're in trouble.

Kim Carlson

Socialism Lite?

I wonder what people mean by "socialism" ... Do they mean expropriation of capitalist wealth, full worker control of the means of production, etc? Or do they mean "I support Medicare and higher income taxes"? Sadly, most people have been brainwashed to think that "socialism" means the latter.

Jesse Taylor

The Biden Clock

Even a broken clock is right twice a day (as the saying goes), but Biden can't even manage that. He's on the wrong side of literally every major issue confronting us.

Mike Brennan

The New South

In Alabama they say thank God for Mississippi. Only state that keeps them from ranking dead last in multiple social and economic indicators. But they are tied with Tennessee as #1 in church attendance!

Patrick Mazza

Why Warren?

One might wonder why the NYT and other mainstream sources are so kind to Elizabeth Warren. It's almost like they know the rest off the tools they

blatantly promote aren't gonna stick so she's the "progressive" they can hold their noses and get behind. No to Bernie, especially no to Tulsi Gabbard.

Jay Lynch

In Extremis

Extreme homophobes, like Duterte, are always gay. Not participating in gay sex doesn't make you not gay, it just makes you repressed.

Russell Williams

In MBS's Pocket

In her book "Kushner Inc.: Greed, Ambition, Corruption" Vicky Ward cited a senior U.S. political consultant for Middle East saying: "The Saudis are dismayed by how transactional Jared has turned out to be. They think he's just the worst human being they've ever met". (p. 210) Also "According to The Intercept, MBS remarked to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed that Kushner was 'in my pocket.'" (p. 200).

Vladimir Stupar

No Offense, But...

"I'm not a racist" always precedes highly racist comments, just as "No offense, but" always precedes something highly offensive. I really wish people would remove those disclaimers from their discourse and take responsibility for what they say.

Jason Locke

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ROAMING CHARGES

Defender of the Grizzlies

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

Louisa Willcox stumbled across her first grizzly in the Absaroka Mountains east of Yellowstone when she was a teenager. The encounter surprised them both, always a fraught situation. But she eased away, and no harm was done. But that chance moment changed Louisa's life. "The earth just stopped, when I saw my first grizzly." Willcox now knew what she wanted to do and where she wanted to do it. It also changed the future of grizzlies.

In the 1970s, grizzlies were a rare and declining presence in what became known as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. And wolves had been extirpated from the park entirely. Forty years later, the bear population had rebounded, and wolves had not only returned to the park, but had spread across the Northern Rockies to Washington, Oregon and California. Louisa Willcox is one of the primary human agents behind this dramatic transformation.

The 1970s were an opportune time to arrive in the Tetons. A slate of new environmental laws, from the Endangered Species Act to the National Forest Management Act, had recently been passed by Congress. Science was becoming more political and the environmental movement was turning more and more to science as means of protecting wildlife and wildlands. For decades, the conservation movement had tended to focus on the protection of rocks and ice: high elevation landscapes that had little potential for political conflict. But here in Yellowstone and Grand Teton it was becoming apparent that this strategy wasn't bold enough. Yellowstone was the biggest park in the country, but it just wasn't big enough, if the goal was to save wide-ranging species such as the grizzly

bear. Or to bring back not just a wolf or two, but entire packs.

Pioneering naturalists Frank and John Craighead, who had spent decades tracking and studying Yellowstone's grizzlies, began to speak of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, 18 million acres across Montana, Idaho and Wyoming with Yellowstone Park at its core. Louisa was taken under the wings by the Craigheads and two other luminaries of the new ecology movement: Luna Leopold and geologist Dave Love, who taught Willcox how the landscape worked and its points of vulnerability.

The scientists urged Willcox to explore the land she was driven to protect. She took their advice, transversing all 23 mountain ranges, either by car or foot and acquired an intimate knowledge of the region's forests, grasslands, mountains and rivers.

In the late 70s and early 1980s, Louisa got her foot into activism with the Wyoming Wilderness Association. She was recruited to the group by Bart Koehler, who would later become one of the founders of Earth First! She and Koehler went into logger and cowboy bars across Wyoming talking up the virtues of wilderness. One of her inquisitors was Dick Cheney, then Wyoming's sole member of congress.

In 1983, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition was formed, and two years later Louisa Willcox was hired as one of its two professional staff members. "At that time there were only two paid environmentalists in Bozeman," Willcox said. "Now there's an office on every street corner."

In those early days, GYC was a small but feisty group fending off the likes of James Watt, who had put a target on the

Yellowstone ecosystem. Willcox became a key activist and strategist in some of the most fraught environmental battles of our time: fighting off Noranda's huge gold mine, confronting the threat to Yellowstone's geothermal areas, challenging the Forest Service's plans to butcher roadless areas adjacent to the park.

Willcox spent a decade at GYC, then moved on to NRDC and the Sierra Club, working to defend grizzlies and help bring wolves back to Yellowstone. She helped start the Yellowstone-to-Yukon movement, because she had come to believe that the scale of our ecological vision needs to be much bigger and Y-to-Y was a way to help people see the need to protect huge landscapes. But she was never really comfortable inside the big NGOs. "I got tired of being stereotyped and the bureaucratic conformity was stifling," Willcox said. "The bigger and more bureaucratized groups become the less likely they are to explore new approaches. And at this point we need to have a war room mentality. We need to be edgier and more confrontational."

So seven years ago, Louisa left her gig as a professional environmentalist and started Grizzly Times with her husband, the ecologist David Mattson. "It was a declaration of our independence," Louisa says. "We told ourselves we weren't going to be edited anymore." They've used their skills as writers and their years of experience on the ground to begin articulating a more comprehensive vision for environmental activism. According to Willcox, the real hope, in these gloomy times, comes from a closer study of the animals themselves. "Bears and wolves are showing us the way with the tracks of their paws," she said. "And we need to accommodate their range before human population growth and climate changes seals the fate of the Yellowstone ecosystem." **CP**



EMPIRE BURLESQUE

Impeachment Made Easy

BY CHRIS FLOYD

The impeachment conundrum is remarkably simple. As I've said before, every single day of his presidency, Donald Trump violates the emoluments clause in myriad ways, all of them eminently impeachable. We don't need to know how many angels can dance on the spine of the Mueller Report; we don't need to parse every utterance of that grim-jawed investigator as if it issued from the oracle at Delphi.

Again: Trump commits impeachable violations of the Constitution every day, and has done so since he was inaugurated. He could've easily avoided this by making different financial arrangements, but he chose not to. He chose to keep putting the profits of his businesses—with their innumerable foreign entanglements—directly into his own pocket. This is not lawful, not constitutional. And it happens in broad daylight, day in, day out. If you want to impeach Trump, you don't have to deal with Russian collusion or obstruction of justice or indeed any issue investigated by Robert Mueller.

I've said repeatedly that putting virtually the entire focus of opposition to Trump on a narrow probe into the murky world of espionage—where all is inference, indirection and plausible deniability—would end badly, and it has. The 'Resistance' struck the prince—but with a blunt, clumsy weapon. Trump is still standing, claiming victory and martyrdom, and he's now using the power of the state to go after his political enemies.

As I'm writing this, Nancy Pelosi is still resisting impeachment with every bit of backroom guile and chop logic at her command. Of course, by the time this is published, she might well have succumbed to pressure and finally instigated the procedure in the House. (As

always with our stalwart party of Demos, it will depend on what the donor class prefers.) But it's certain that any impeachment process will be based on the Mueller investigation; it will stand or fall on that thin reed. Because the leaders of the 'Resistance' have decided that the only way to get to Trump is through Mueller.

The liberal lionization of Robert Mueller has always been a ring-tailed wonder to behold. Comedians fawn on him; columnists rhapsodize about him; why, his media avatar is no less than Robert DeNiro himself, who portrays him on Saturday Night Live. DeNiro even writes op-eds in the NY Times, urging Mueller to be more like his portrayal. (Of course when he's not helping direct the affairs of the American Republic, DeNiro can currently be seen on British TV screens in a glitzy ad series for a bagel company.)

Many Resisters have expressed—more in sorrow than in anger—some disappointment in their champion for not producing a more forthright report, red-hot with smoking guns. But anyone whose knowledge of US political history began before November 8, 2016, might have suspected such an outcome. After all, Mueller, a longtime GOP apparatchik, played a key role in covering up government complicity in one of the biggest criminal conspiracies in history—the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, as I've noted in stories going back to 2006. In journalist Christopher Bryon's apt description, BCCI “engaged in pandemic bribery of officials in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. It laundered money on a global scale ... engaged in extortion and blackmail. It supplied the financing for

illegal arms trafficking and global terrorism. It financed and facilitated income tax evasion, smuggling and prostitution.” And the Bush I boys, along with a goodly portion of the bipartisan political establishment, were neck-deep in BCCI sleaze.

When a scandal at a BCCI-connected bank in Atlanta forced the feds to act, GHW Bush moved quickly to suppress the probe. Lawyers for the companies involved were appointed to the investigation team, which was headed by a safe pair of hands: Bob Mueller. The investigation was mysteriously botched: evidence got lost, witnesses disappeared. There was some wrist-slapping of low-hanging fruit, but Team Bush escaped with its many ties to BCCI (including Bush's surreptitious arming of Saddam Hussein) left hidden.

A few years later, the family got his reward: Bush Junior made Mueller head of the FBI, where Bob used his safe hands to push the deceptions about Iraq's non-existent WMD that led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. A great progressive hero, you'll agree.

In any case, whatever Mueller did, said or meant in his Russiagate probe has no bearing at all on the other clear, undeniable, easily impeachable violations Trump perpetrates every day. There is no wiggle room for Trump on this score, no murk, no mystery: it's cut-and-dried, cash-in-hand, unconstitutional corruption.

If you really wanted to do something about Trump, to take concrete action to remove this dangerous, addled criminal from office, then why wouldn't you choose this easy, straightforward line of attack, from day one? And now that you have power in the House, why wouldn't you use it as the basis of an impeachment proceeding that needs no Delphic decipherment but can be laid out plainly and simply before the people? This to me is the great mystery of the 'Resistance.' When your enemy hands you a sword—every single day—why do you throw it aside? **CP**



BOTTOMLINES

Like Cancer, Capitalism Must Always Expand

BY PETE DOLACK

I was once in a discussion in which someone asked, “Why do profits have to always get bigger? Why can’t profits stay the same?” I thought that an excellent question.

The proximate cause is the insatiable greed of financial speculators, but the answer goes much deeper than that, and finding those answers in turn helps us understand why capitalism must always expand and why solving global warming is impossible while the world is dominated by that system.

Violence, too, is part of what makes capitalism run. Its birth was in violence—the first enclosures when English peasants were thrown off their land so lords could use the land for sheep grazing to take advantage of demand for wool. It couldn’t have been otherwise. Why would a self-sufficient peasant family choose to give up their land to instead work for 16 hours a day earning starvation wages in a factory where they had no control over their working lives? Draconian laws calling for flogging and then execution of those not working helped these new social relations take root.

Ellen Meiksins Wood argued convincingly in her *The Origins of Capitalism* that the remaining farmers were increasingly entangled in markets, eventually becoming wholly dependent on markets, an unprecedented condition. Markets had always existed but markets prior to capitalism were places where people gathered to exchange items they couldn’t produce themselves. Feudal markets largely consisted of items not available in a given area brought from elsewhere by traveling merchants, Wood argues, demonstrating that merchant capital in itself was insufficient to ignite a transi-

tion from feudalism.

Once capitalism established a foothold, it had to expand. So it has ever since, now covering almost every corner of the globe. But why does it have to expand?

The answer lies in competition. Reliance on markets means bowing to relentless competition. If other farmers raising the same crops or supplying wool are more efficient than you, then you have to become more efficient to stay in business. You’ll have to pay your workers less or squeeze more productivity out of them. This competition never ends; rather, it becomes more intense.

As more competitors drop out, those remaining get bigger. Once the Industrial Revolution took off, this dynamic became more merciless because industrial production doesn’t have the limitations of agriculture, such as the time needed for a crop to mature. With ever fewer people able to retain the means of production—in other words, as artisans found they couldn’t compete with factories and had to become waged workers themselves—and as less efficient companies closed, the remaining businesses steadily got bigger. And the plutocrats who ran them got richer, building astounding wealth.

Those plutocrats could not sit back and proclaim themselves big enough or wealthy enough. Certainly, the immense greed and inhumanity of these robber barons drove their behavior to a large extent. But competition also drove them, and lesser capitalists as well. A struggle for survival never ends. Large sums of money are necessary to make the necessary investments, and when a capitalist possesses so much money that there are

no longer rational places to invest, that excess capital is diverted into financial speculation.

As speculation increases, particularly during bubbles, the interests of industrialists and financiers converge, even when the two groups fiercely fight over which gets the bigger share of the pie. (The employees, who do the actual work that creates the surplus value that is converted into profits, have no say in this conversation.) Large portions of top executives’ salaries are paid in stock rather than cash so that ever-increasing stock prices mean bigger sums of money will be grabbed in the future. This is what Wall Street likes to call “aligning interests with shareholders.” Shareholder value is anything that will make the stock price go up. Layoffs, work speedups, moving production to countries with low wages and ignoring health, safety and environmental standards are all ways to cut costs and thus increase profits.

When shares of stock are bought, the buyer is buying the rights to future profits. The expected profits of the next quarter are “priced into” the stock price, in Wall Street lingo. If profits stay flat, the stock price stays flat. That makes speculators, accustomed to profiting off the labor of others, very angry. The executive possessing stock has the same incentive, and if his or her corporation’s leadership doesn’t boost profitability, speculators will seek to oust them and install a team that will promote higher profits at any and all costs.

Also not to be ignored is relentless competition, now conducted globally instead of nationally. Earning bigger shares of a market and expanding into new places and business lines are necessary to survive the competition. This must be done on pain of going out of business. If one company “innovates” by moving production or cutting jobs, competitors must do the same. A system that must always expand, and use more raw materials, can’t shrink. It must also develop machinery to be more efficient and thus employ fewer. Capitalism is a cancer and can’t be otherwise. **CP**



HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

Cyber-Tech, Snake Oil and the Olympics

BY JENNIFER MATSUI

Israeli tech firms will be largely responsible for the cyber-security measures that are being implemented for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics including “enhanced security measures” for Japan’s nuclear plants. As far as cynical, self-defeating decisions go, it’s up there with granting Saudi Arabia a seat on the UN’s Human Rights Council—only more cynical and more self-defeating.

It seems the melting cores of three reactors in the wake of a major earthquake and tsunami in 2011 is somehow less a threat to public safety than a fictional scenario involving a Chinese, Russian or North Korean cyber attack on an already present and dangerous threat to the planet.

To ensure further failures and increased risks to its toxic infrastructure, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe even appointed as his ‘Cyber-Security Minister’ Yoshitaka Sakurada, a guy, who, in his own words, has never used a computer in his life. Who better to oversee a massive military/PR operation like the Olympics than an unqualified, gaffe-prone, frequently demoted political appointee?

It seems that bad ideas like the Olympics require a heavily militarized response to all the risks the host country incurs to ensure its citizens (and other enemies) don’t get any funny ideas about detonating nuclear weapons during the festivities. The worst case scenarios involving terrorists envisioned by a country’s leadership is usually a pretty good indication of what it’s capable of, or even desirous itself of carrying out. Who better than Israel prevent nuclear Armageddon than a country that is hell-bent on launching a nuclear attack on

Iran? And who better to advise a guy who has never used a computer than a country whose own leader makes the case for nuclear war with a cartoon bomb on a flash card?

I asked a cyber-security consultant recently why Japan was entrusting the most sensitive aspects of its national security to a country that developed and launched malware to remotely interfere with nuclear plants (STUXNET). The expert enjoyed learning a new idiom: “The situation you describe is a classic example of the fox guarding the hen house.” But he went on to assure me that the “air gaps” in place at Japanese nuclear facilities dispensed altogether any concerns of internet-based malware interfering with the operations of a nuclear plant.

The physical isolation of a computer network from the controls of a nuclear power plant is no guarantee that a connection can’t be established, and these “air gaps” have proven vulnerable in recent years. The separation between a computerized system not connected to the internet and one that is can be overcome with acoustic signaling, meaning that a mobile phone has the potential to disrupt—or worse—the operation of a nuclear power plant. What steps has Japan taken to addressing this latest technological challenge beyond inviting a hostile foreign power to take control of its nuclear security? And likely in exchange for Israel’s cutting edge advances in state-sponsored terror. If Israel’s undeclared arsenal of nuclear weapons can’t be trusted to UN weapons inspectors, how can Israel be trusted not to gain access to Japan’s own nuclear power stations for purposes unrelated to

fortifying them against external threats?

The cyber-security expert didn’t have an answer, either, to the question of what measures the Japanese government would take to ensure the Israeli surveillance technology that Japan was importing wouldn’t eventually be used against its client to gain its compliance and vote against any resolution condemning Israel in the UN. As a non oil producing country, Israel has had little influence over Japan’s foreign policy which has traditionally prioritized its relations with the OPEC members that supply the resource-scarce nation its fossil fuels. With the rise of Israel’s tech sector that is about to change. Already the “world’s fifth most innovative country” (according to the Bloomberg Innovation Index) is becoming indispensable as a provider of the technology necessary to shield Japan’s leaders from public scrutiny as they launch mass surveillance on their own citizens under the newly drafted Security Law.

The Olympics are clearly a pretext for showcasing technology that will eventually be used to enhance the ruling party’s nearly 70-year grip on power, and to push through a constitutional revision to replace the war-renouncing clause of Article 9 that will allow its “modernization” to take effect without any legal restraints.

In a country where budgetary restraints prevent local governments from upgrading ancient, leaking software, “cyber security” is a costly smoke-and-mirror solution to a problem that wouldn’t exist if the government hadn’t embarked upon a ruinous, hubris-fueled project like the Olympics. These Pied Pipers should find other ways to finance their scam rather than trying to convince government officials to fork over public funds for the largely snake oil business model they are peddling. It takes real skill to siphon public money away from those it is intended to help and divert it into a mostly made up enterprise that you could compare to rats leading the hoodwinked, blindfolded hordes off to their doom. **CP**

BORDERZONE NOTES

What if We Stopped Fighting Drugs and Started Caring for People?

BY LAURA CARLSEN

Mexico's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador recently made two announcements that could finally close the bloodiest chapter in the history of the United States' global war on drugs. He called for ending the Merida Initiative—the 3 billion-dollar US counternarcotics aid package that has fueled Mexico's drug war—and announced a pivot from prohibition.

“As for the Merida Initiative, we want to completely reorient it because it hasn't worked,” AMLO, as he's known, stated at his morning press conference May 7. “We don't want cooperation in the use of force, we want cooperation for development.” He added that his government rejects U.S. military support in favor of funding for “production and jobs”.

Enhorabuena. On the eve of its eleventh anniversary, few US foreign policies have produced more catastrophic results than the three billion-dollar Merida Initiative. Drawn up by

the George W. Bush administration in 2007 to increase US economic and military influence south of the border, Plan Mexico, later dubbed the “Merida Initiative” to avoid comparisons to Plan Colombia, was a blueprint for increased US security intervention in Mexico—a nation historically averse to US involvement within its borders based on nationalist principles and prior experience.

Since the US strategy began during the Calderon administration, the Merida Initiative (MI) opened doors for US military and intelligence agencies that even the long-standing Party of the Institutional Revolution—friendly to US interests but historically nationalist—kept shut for years. The Pentagon gained unprecedented influence on Mexican security and intelligence and US agencies, especially the DEA, CIA and FBI, gained access and major funding increases under Merida. The U.S. government exported armed equipment, training and intelligence systems that many Mexicans believe compromise national sovereignty. Since it began in 2008 the US Embassy in Mexico City has expanded to become one of the largest in the world. In addition to the

Embassy, the US government occupies a downtown skyscraper as construction continues a nearly one-billion-dollar new complex. US arms sales to Mexico have also skyrocketed.

The MI sent \$400 million to Mexico in the first tranche, most to armed forces and police. No actual money goes to the Mexican government—most of it goes to US defense companies, private security firms, NGOs and government security forces. This means that members of Congress in districts where powerful defense companies and other interested parties are located face a constant lobbying effort to keep the Initiative up and running despite its failure. This in large part explains why it has gone on so long amid so much bloodshed. The Trump Administration reduced funding but continued to support a law-and-order approach to drug use and drug trafficking at home and abroad and heavy border security measures.

The Merida initiative—and the drug war model it supports—has not only been a failure by any standard; it has led to an explosion of violence in Mexico as selective hits on cartels spark turf wars and corrupt security forces take sides. The “kingpin strategy” brought in by the DEA and the Pentagon posits that taking out a cartel leader causes the cartel to wither and cease operations. This has never happened. With El Chapo in a US prison, reports show the Sinaloa Cartel is stronger and deadlier than ever—the largest seizure of fentanyl in history is linked to the post-Chapo cartel. For every high-profile arrest, there is a hydra-like reorganization, usually accompanied by battles for control that turn entire Mexican cities into war zones.

AMLO is right to end this disastrous policy. More than 225,000 Mexican men, women and children have been murdered in the context of this war and 40,000 disappeared, according to the government's underreported count. Some are extrajudicial executions committed by police or armed forces as the rule of law has eroded, rather than strengthened. Thousands of families

have been forced by the violence to flee their homes to other cities or to the United States where Mexican asylum requests have surged.

Every major victims' organization in Mexico, from the aggrieved families of the murdered to the mothers of the disappeared throughout the country and the parents of the 42 disappeared students of the Ayotzinapa teaching college, has pleaded with the US government to end the Merida Initiative. They have wept in Congressional offices and presented testimony in hearings. In late 2017, victims and human rights organization including ours, supported a letter by members of the US House of representatives to conduct a complete review and reorientation of the Initiative.

Mexico is currently working on legislation to regulate cannabis nationwide. The Supreme Court set binding precedent to end prohibition last November. Legislative reform has an excellent chance of passing given the majority of AMLO's Morena party. An end to prohibition was written into the new government's National Development Plan:

On drugs, the prohibitionist strategy is no longer sustainable, not only for the violence it causes but for its bad results in public health... The alternative is for the state to quit fighting addiction through prohibition of the substances that lead to it and dedicate itself to getting substance use under control through clinical treatment and prescription doses and later, personalized care for rehabilitation under medical supervision.

A legal market, production and distribution aids in some of Mexico's greatest challenges by reducing the power and wealth of cartels and relieving prison conditions that reveal the same kind of discrimination based on race, class and gender we see in the United States. Like in the United States, shifting the focus from war to human well-being marks a sea change in policy.

Mexican drug reform groups and congressional members are working

together to develop a state-of-the-art bill that guarantees participation of small farmers in the new market, assures equity, avoids corporate and transnational control, is fiscally responsible and funds reparations and health programs.

Ending the War at Home and Abroad

The Mexican decision comes too late for those killed in the past decade of the US-led war on drugs, but if implemented it could save lives. Lopez Obrador dared to break with U.S. federal policy and should be encouraged to follow through. So far, the Lopez Obrador administration's actions haven't always supported the change in model, as it continues military deployment. The Trump administration has said little about the announcement, in part because its new vehicle for security intervention in Mexico is immigration and in part because the Pentagon is still trying to negotiate a role. Eventually, you can bet there will be strong resistance from the Pentagon, the DEA and the defense industry.

On the home front, although states have steadily chipped away at prohibition through popular referendums on cannabis regulation, the Trump administration continues its war. Measures to restrict and punish the financial and production parts of the new businesses limit their growth and security. Armando Gudino, of the Drug Policy Alliance in California, notes that his organization views the wave of legalization measures as a social justice initiative more than a drug policy. The U.S. government's war on drugs is also not about drugs, but about social control, so the issue has become a forum for justice that encompasses demands against police brutality, racism, militarism, immigrant persecution and violence against women and children.

Recent legislation incorporates this broader view. Illinois's Senate recently passed a bill to legalize marijuana that seeks to repair the injustices of prohibition by expunging the record of those convicted of possession. California es-

tablished a fund "for communities disproportionately affected by past federal and state drug policies" to be financed by cannabis taxes of up to \$50 million dollars a year to support jobs, mental health treatment, substance use disorder treatment, support and legal services, and linkages to medical care.

Studies revealing the mass incarceration and disenfranchisement, primarily of people of color, have shocked society and communities are becoming aware of the deep trauma of prohibition on the collective, family and individual levels. The concepts of transitional justice and historical memory, usually associated with wars and dictatorships, have become part of the drug policy reform movement.

Other states have moved against the federal model. Janet Mills, the governor of Maine, which has one of the highest death rates for opioids in the country, signed an executive order to direct \$1.6 million to harm reduction measures, including purchases of the overdose-reversing drug naloxone, medication-assisted treatment in jails and prisons, and supporting recovery from substance use disorder.

More and more, communities in the United States and abroad are bucking the US government's determination to fight a war against substances and the people associated with them and are fighting for something. They are fighting for healthy people, families and communities. They are fighting for social and economic justice. They are fighting for robust democracies that don't cancel out the rights of certain populations by putting them behind bars.

Every step, large or small, in that direction should be celebrated. **CP**

In Portuguese, *grilagem* refers to private appropriation of land through irregular or illegal means, force, intimidation, or deception. The word comes from *grilo* (cricket), the insect that was used to stain documents to make them look like ancient deeds. So, in Brazil, *grilagem de terra* means falsifying deeds to secure land, but also violent appropriation and environmental devastation symbolized by crushed, silenced crickets, a lot of them because, by 2016, the *grileiros* had acquired one hundred million hectares. The term *grilagem* is more informative than “land grab” because it refers to a situation where law is overridden (*aquí não tem lei*), or overrides itself in something very like a state of exception.

It's not just a matter of sullied statutory law because customary law then becomes its victim. Customary use and ownership amounts to over 50% of the world's land, but indigenous peoples—up to 2.5 billion women and men—enjoy rights to just 10%. The rest is up for grabs. For example, about 90% of farmland, savannah, woodland, forests, marshlands in sub-Saharan Africa is untitled and therefore under state control. Another colonial ploy was to declare traditionally occupied land as “*terra nullius*” (for example in Australia), or classify it as “free” land, thus making the state the legal owner. These tricks are still used today. So, the Guinea Savannah Zone, four million square hectares of grasslands running through twenty-five countries and almost half the size of the United States, is designated by the World Bank as “the world's last large reserves of underused land”. What law gave it the authority to do that? This “underused” land is home to some 600 million peasant farmers, almost 10% of the world's population. Evidently, people don't come into the World Bank's notion of “reserves” when Monsanto's keen to seize them.

Communally owned land governed by traditional or natural law tends to be forests or woodlands, scrub, savannas, wetlands, grasslands, desert, or the

EUROZONE NOTES

Crickets and Crimes in the Land Grabbing Business

BY DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK

Chaco thorn forests covering two thirds of Paraguay. Grave violations of human rights have long been inflicted on their inhabitants. Whole communities, stripped of their livelihoods—“surplus” population herded into refugee camps or “villagized”, as in Ethiopia—are decimated by hunger and disease and, if they ever make it to cities, are exploited in sweatshops, as sex workers, baby machines for the adoption racket, and organ providers. Perhaps this grabbing of land, repository of the most basic human rights, is a clear but not often recognized expression of a state of exception that no one ever told us about.

Land grabs are also water grabs. Saudi Arabia, for instance, is buying or leasing water-rich land in Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria, Egypt, Vietnam, Cambodia, West Papua, the Philippines, and Pakistan. And Qatar has done deals in Vietnam, Cambodia, Uzbekistan, Senegal, Kenya, Argentina, Ukraine, Turkey, Tajikistan, Australia, and Brazil. One thing's for sure: investors won't be worrying about water conservation in the host countries. In Australia, for example, water is being sucked up from ancient aquifers and touted as “new water”.

In June 2012, wealthy *grileiros* met in London at a £3,660-a-head “Agriculture Investment Summit” to discuss how to

“overcome perceived obstacles to investment” when acquiring land in Africa. The local impact of their project was not, of course, “perceived” and the “obstacles” were legal by nature but, when stakes are high and palms well-greased, law wins the day, as Franz Neumann warned in *Behemoth* (1944): “As a device for strengthening one political group at the expense of others, for eliminating enemies and assisting political allies, law then threatens the fundamental convictions upon which the tradition of our civilization rests.”

The practices of international institutions and transnational companies violating the right to food are actually crimes against humanity, as defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998), Article 7. They include murder; enslavement; deportation or forcible transfer of population; severe deprivation of physical liberty; persecution against any identifiable group on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender or other grounds; enforced disappearance of persons; apartheid; and other inhumane acts intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health. In October 2014, a legal brief was filed on behalf of Cambodian victims stating that systematic widespread land

grabbing—involving inter alia murder, forcible displacement of populations, illegal imprisonment, and persecution—by the Cambodian ruling elite for over a decade amounts to a crime against humanity. This means that local and foreign executives, politicians, and other individuals can be prosecuted under international law for grave crimes related with land grabbing. But will it happen?

Today's grilagem can be traced back to the enclosures in England (a process described by Thomas More as "sheep eating men"), the spread of European empires and settler colonialism, through to neoliberalism's version of the enclosures, now used for monocropping and plunder of minerals, water, forests, and jungles. Land isn't only grabbed for outsourced food production, but also for mining, especially of the seventeen superconductive rare earths that are essential for computers, smart phones, wind turbines, high-tech equipment like medical scanners, and military uses like stealth helicopters, lasers, and night-vision goggles. There are other interests, too, like luxury tourism, big game parks, millionaires' private nature reserves, infrastructure, dams, biofuels, timber, and carbon trading.

Past land grabbing has established the political and legal precedents that enable present despoliation, while today's structural Adjustment Programs, privatization of public services, investment de-regulation and trade liberalization, underpin the whole sorry show. One notable feature of today's grilagem is that, far from being confined to the global South, it's a burgeoning phenomenon in Europe where land concentration (2.7% of farms control 50% of arable land) and grabbing equal what's happening in Brazil, Colombia, and the Philippines. Europe is the world's second biggest consumer of land after the USA. About 58% of the land it consumes is outside its bounds, mostly in China, the Russian Federation, Brazil and Argentina. And Europe itself is a case of autophagic grilagem. In recent years, companies from Britain, Sweden,

Denmark, Finland, Switzerland and France have been accumulating land in Eastern Europe, especially the "black earth" areas of Russia and the Ukraine, and also in Spain, France, and Italy.

Most of Europe's food production comes from some twelve million small farms—69% with less than 5 hectares—and about 25 million agricultural workers. Scant attention is given to the fact that these small farms are essential for food production, rural employment, and protection of the environment, and the absence of clear, fair legislation is facilitating grilagem across the continent. Not only abroad but in its own backyard, Europe's overconsumption is driving up food prices, causing species loss, aggravating the climate catastrophe, and exacerbating social inequality.

It's difficult to gauge the real scale of land grabbing, precisely because it's a furtive, lawless pursuit of the rich. The International Food Policy Research Institute estimates that big land deals rose by 20 million hectares between 2005 and 2009, while the World Bank's figure is 45 million hectares since 2007–2008, and OXFAM's, 227 million hectares since 2000, mostly after 2008. This disparity suggests that it's a very hush-hush business indeed. And moving fast. Consequences aren't calculated, especially in terms of people. They don't count. Land is just a surface (with good water supplies) with no villages, no people, no animals, no ecosystems, but just something hanging around waiting to be snatched. The word "territory" is avoided. "Land", more neutral in political content, is closer to the idea of private property ("that sole and despotic dominion", as Sir William Blackstone declared it, a notion fervently embraced by liberalism since the nineteenth century). The clearest sign that these transactions are not innocuous is the contracting of armies and militia to protect many a newly-acquired "property".

Human rights law supposedly protects food security and adequate nutrition as *sine qua non* rights. Most

governments are signatories to documents like the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in which Article 11 (2) encompasses two separate but related norms, the right to be free from hunger and the right to adequate food. States are theoretically obliged to (1) respect the right to food by non-interference with existing access to adequate food; (2) protect food supplies by ensuring that individuals are not deprived of access to adequate food by other individuals or enterprises; and (3) guarantee the right to food with activities intended to strengthen people's access to and use of resources and means to ensure their livelihood, including food security. The state must respond whenever an individual or group is unable, "for reasons beyond their control", to enjoy the right to adequate food by the "means at their disposal". But, as well as land, state structures are also the *demesne* of powerful *grileiros*. The ABC of democratic republicanism says that a state must actively promote its neutrality and when big private powers impose their will on a good part of the citizens, when the oligopolistic constitution of markets means that the public good is hijacked by huge private interests, the state must intervene. Otherwise, it can't claim neutrality. Today's states, opting for supine tolerance aren't neutral, so grilagem is depriving millions of people of the "means at their disposal". Almost 60% of the approximately thirty-six million annual deaths worldwide are a direct or indirect result of hunger-related infections, epidemics or diseases.

In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), John Locke recognized that limits to private property were set by the inviolable rights of all members of society to the earth's bounty.

"All the fruits it naturally produces and animals that it feeds, as produced by the spontaneous hand of nature, belong to mankind in common; nobody has a basic right—a private right that excludes the rest of mankind—over any of them as they are in their natural state: yet

being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other, before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man.”

People who “inclose, without the consent of ... all mankind” create waste, or what Locke called “the perishing,” and part of that “perishing” today—in the literal sense—is the wasting of people. A man or woman “tills, plants, improves, cultivates” the land but is driven away to perish somewhere else because some enterprise wants to take it and accumulate more of the “durable thing” that will bring about “the perishing of [everything] uselessly”.

Two decades into the twenty-first century we’d do well to look back to 1689 and heed Locke’s words because, if we accept terms like “underused land” from enterprises that really mean they’re going to clear people (“perceived obstacles”) off it, we’ll never be able to talk about rights, even for ourselves, for we won’t know what they are. **CP**

Inauthentic Opposition: The Democrats on Venezuela and Iran

BY PAUL STREET

Anyone who doubts that the Democratic Party is deeply invested in United States imperialism would do well to review the Democrats’ response to the Trump administration’s twin provocations of Venezuela and Iran, two oil-rich nations whose resistance to Washington’s dictates have long irked ruling class elites atop and across both the United States’ major political parties.

An Open Air Coup Campaign

The Trump White House has engaged in an open effort to abrogate Venezuelan democracy and sovereignty. Last January, the administration brazenly “appointed” the unelected Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s “interim” president and rallied 50 nations to formally recognize Guaidó as the nation’s real head of state. Senior U.S. officials subsequently held regular talks with Guaidó while the White House applauded and otherwise encouraged violent protests calling for the removal of Venezuela’s freely and fairly elected President Nicolás Maduro.

The Trump administration heaped all blame for Venezuela’s severe economic difficulties on the Maduro “dictatorship,” which the White House absurdly accused of “genocide.” In fact, the main force behind Venezuelan misery has been a brutal U.S. sanctions regime that has so far killed 40,000 Venezuelans. Last May 15th, Trump suspended all commercial and cargo flights between Venezuela and the US, denying many Venezuelans access to scarce medication and food. An effective US oil embargo imposed last January 29th is expected

to shrink Venezuela’s economy by more than a fourth this year.

Last February, the White House has worked with the right-wing Colombian and Brazilian governments to try to whip up support for regime change by staging border clashes in which the US and its allies claimed to be delivering food and medicine to the suffering Venezuelan masses. The “humanitarian assistance” offered for transparently political purposes was tiny compared to the harm caused by the US sanctions.

Last April 30th, the US tried to orchestrate a military coup in Caracas. Washington’s puppet Guaidó was embarrassed when no significant military support emerged to back his call for Maduro’s removal. As the failed putsch unfolded, Trump’s warmongering National Security Adviser John Bolton spoke to “the patriotic citizens of Venezuela” in a video posted on Twitter. “Whether you are civilians or members of the military,” Bolton said, it was time “to regain your libertad, take control of your government, and oust Maduro.”

After the coup’s collapse, Bolton invoked the Monroe Doctrine and triggered memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis by claiming without evidence that Maduro remained in power only because he was militarily and economically backed by Cuba and Russia. In fact, Maduro remains in power because he continues to have the support of the Venezuelan population, which is strongly opposed to the United States’ long and ongoing history of interfering in the internal affairs of Venezuela and other Latin American nations.

The White House threatened new sanctions on Cuba and Russia for alleged “destabilizing activities in Venezuela”—a richly ironic charge from the Superpower that had been openly disrupting Venezuelan political life for many years. The Bolivarian socialism Maduro upholds has been in Washington’s target sites ever since the Venezuelan people elected the socialist anti-imperialist Hugo Chávez president in 1998.

Trump claims that “all options are on the table” regarding Venezuela, meaning that the White House reserves the right to undertake a direct military intervention.

“The International Community Must Support Juan Guaidó”

Where have the Democrats been on Trump and Bolton’s campaign to revoke Venezuelan national independence and popular sovereignty? They’ve jumped on board, holding up the not-so port side of the imperial ship. A Democratic Party establishment that has obsessed for two-plus years about Russia’s supposedly significant and even purportedly decisive outside interference in the plutocratic United States’ mythical “democracy” has had little opposition to offer when it comes to the Trump administration’s war on Venezuelan democracy and self-determination. It’s been about assistance, not resistance when it comes to Venezuela.

Last January 13th United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (net worth: \$72 million) met with Guaidó’s pretend “ambassador to the United States” Carlos Vecchio and voiced support for

what she called “the Guaidó government.” In early February, Pelosi backed US recognition of Guaido as “Interim President until full, fair and free elections can be held” and denounced “Maduro’s regime of repression and impoverishment...During this perilous time,” Pelosi said, “the United States must support the people of Venezuela.” She made no call for an end to US sanctions, the main cause of Venezuelan suffering.

Around the same time, Democratic presidential candidate and US Senator Liz Warren (D-MA) said that “The Venezuelan people deserve free and fair elections, an economy that



works, and the ability to live without fear.” Warren’s statement ignored the free and fair nature of Venezuela’s elections and Washington’s fear-inducing collapse of Venezuela’s economy. By late February, Warren said “I support economic sanctions but ...we have to offer humanitarian help at the same time.” This was like calling for giving band-aids to people after breaking their limbs.

Last February, Democrats, “who pride themselves on leading on Venezuela in Congress” (Miami Herald) proposed four major anti-Maduro bills in the US House. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz’s (D-FL) “Russia-Venezuelan Threat Mitigation Act” instructed the State Department to assess “Russia’s presence in Venezuela.” The “menacing Kremlin influence creates not only a hurdle to restoring a functioning, legitimate democracy to the people of Venezuela,” Wasserman-Schultz said when her bill passed the House last March, “but it also poses an imminent military threat to the entire Western Hemisphere.”

Wasserman-Schultz, a key player in the rigging of the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries against the candidate who would have defeated Trump (Bernie Sanders), had nothing to say about how the United States’ “menacing influence” poses “imminent military threat[s]” to the entire world with a Pentagon budget that accounts for 40 percent of global military spending and maintains more than 800 military bases

across more than 100 “sovereign” nations.

“Restoring a functioning, legitimate democracy” was code language for the overthrow of Venezuelan socialism and the re-installation of a Washington-aligned business class and military oligarchy atop the government in Caracas.

As the failed Guaido putsch attempt was underway, Pelosi tweeted her support for the “peaceful protests” being staged by right-wing leaders against Maduro. Other high-ranking Democratic politicians rallying to the coup included Democratic Senate Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ), Rep. Eliot Engel (head of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs), and top presidential contender Joe Biden, who tweeted that “The international community must support Juan Guaido.”

Against Independent Development

This Democratic support for regime-change in Caracas should not surprise careful observers. U.S. President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton supported a right-wing coup that overthrew the democratically elected left-populist government of Honduras ten years ago, with disastrous consequences. Obama imposed sanctions on the Maduro government, going to the absurd extreme of declaring a “national emergency” to do so in 2015.

Thirteen years ago, then-presidential Obama aptly summarized Washington and Wall Street’s conventional bipartisan wisdom on and against Latin American independence in his campaign autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*. There Obama chided “left-leaning populists” like (Maduro’s socialist predecessor) Hugo Chavez for thinking that developing nations “should resist America’s efforts to expand its hegemony” and daring to “follow their own path to development.” The future regime-change president (in Honduras in 2009 and Libya in 2011) Obama accused Chavez of “rejecting ‘American’ ideas like ‘the rule of law’ and ‘democratic elections.’” Obama did not comment on the remarkable respect the U.S. showed for “democratic elections” and “the rule of law” when it supported an attempted military coup to overthrow the democratically elected Chavez government in April of 2002.

In Latin America as around the world, the US imperial project has always been a richly bipartisan affair.

“People Want to Make This About Capitalism, Socialism”

What about the minority of progressive Democrats in Congress? In a joint letter on Venezuela sent to Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in early March this year, sixteen progressive House Democrats (Ro Kanna, Pramila Jayapal, Mark Pocan, Raul Grijalvo, Hank Johnson, Adriano Espaillat, Ilhann Omar, Rahida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (“AOC”), Ayanna Pressely, Nydia Velazquez, Jose Serrano, Tulsi Gabbard, Karen Bass, Danny Davis, and Jan Schakowsky) expressed “deep concern” about Trump’s “broad unilateral sanctions,” Trump’s threats of military intervention, and “the recognition of an interim president [Guaido] without

a clear plan to hold democratic elections.” The progressive Dems’ main complaint seemed to be that the Trump administration was trying to get rid of the Maduro government the wrong way. Their letter “strongly condemn[ed]” Maduro for “unfair elections,” “repression of civil society,” “disrespect for the rule of law,” “failed economic policy,” and “blocking humanitarian aid.” Their missive to Pompeo warned that U.S. sanctions and invasion threats might “shore up Maduro’s base of support” since polling data showed that most Venezuelans rejected US interference in their nation’s internal affairs.

The Congressional progressives want socialist Venezuelan self-determination rolled back in a more outwardly multilateral and democratic and less transparently brutal and imperialist way. While rejecting Trump and Bolton’s style and some of their methods, they accept the basic overarching narrative the White House used to justify its campaign against the Maduro regime. It is unthinkable that progressive Democrats might acknowledge any positive Venezuelan government accomplishments that might explain why millions of ordinary Venezuelans continue to support Maduro.

Last February 25th, the “democratic socialist” AOC (D-NY) tweeted a self-recording in which she claimed that the Venezuelan crisis had nothing to do with precisely what it was all about. “People want to make this about ideology, about capitalism, about socialism,” AOC childishy mused. “What people don’t understand,” AOC elaborated, “is that this is about authoritarianism vs. democracy in many different ways...” She went on to compare Venezuela to Zimbabwe as “failed states” and to opined “Violence is horrible.”

What AOC didn’t understand, or pretended not to understand, was that the US was and is trying to overthrow Venezuelan democracy and socialism. It is an authoritarian (and inherently violent) policy that is very much “about ideology, about capitalism, about socialism.” To make matters worse, to call Venezuela a “failed state” without mentioning the crippling impact of US sanctions and subversion was to provide left cover for this very policy.

The nation’s top “democratic socialist” Sen. Bernie Sanders (“I”-VT) has balked at recognizing Guaido and rejected US-imposed regime change in Venezuela. But he too has played along with much of the establishment U.S. narrative on Venezuela, denouncing Venezuelans’ former beloved and democratically elected socialist leader Chavez as a “dead community dictator,” accusing Maduro of being little more than a violent authoritarian, and buying into the fake-benevolent pretenses of Trump’s “humanitarian assistance” stunts.

Buying the Narrative on Malign Teheran

It doesn’t get any better with the Inauthentic Opposition Party, the Democrats, on Trump and Iran. Here again, the White House’s aggression is barefaced. One year ago, Trump defaulted on the 2015 Obama deal that curtailed Iran’s nuclear development program and placed Iran under the most

rigorous international inspection regime ever implemented. This was followed by a draconian sanctions regime whereby the U.S. Treasury has blacklisted nearly 1,000 Iranian entities and individuals, targeting most sectors of Iran’s economy.

The Trump administration did not merely re-impose the sanctions that Obama removed as part of the 2015 agreement. It tightened them and added impossible conditions, including Tehran’s complete withdrawal from every Middle Eastern country where it is competing for influence with its bitter regional rival Saudi Arabia. The sanctions are designed to reduce Iran’s oil exports to zero, close off Iranian trade with other nations, and freeze Iran out of global financial markets. The aim is nothing less than economic strangulation.

The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy has massively devalued the Iranian currency and slashed Iranian oil exports. It has cut off Iran’s access to the world financial system and cut off Iranians’ access to critical medical supplies.

Then there’s the military incitement. Even as tear-gas lingered in Caracas following the failed Guaido coup, the Trump-Bolton White House dispatched a giant aircraft carrier, the USS Lincoln, and a strike group of other warships into the Persian Gulf. It placed B-52 Stratofortress bombers in neighboring Qatar, set up a Patriot missile battery near Iran’s border, moved a giant amphibious transport dock into the Gulf, and ordered all “non-essential” US personnel out of neighboring Iraq, citing mythical threats from “Iranian-backed forces.” Bolton (a key architect of the US invasion of Iraq who has long called for regime change in Teheran) said it was all “to send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force.” He ordered the Pentagon to draft a plan for military action against Iran, including the deployment of 120,000 troops while Trump claimed that any attacks on US forces would lead to “the official end of Iran.”

The Democrats’ response to Trump’s reckless escalation with Iran has been mealy-mouthed and two-faced. Numerous Democrats urged Congress to block Trump from going to full-on war. But Democrats failed to confront the key assertion animating Trump’s bluster: the preposterous notion that Iran is a uniquely evil, dangerous, belligerent, destabilizing, and terrorist actor in the Middle East—the region’s top malign aggressor. What this leaves out is that most truly aggressive, destructive, and malevolent state actor in the Middle East beyond the racist occupation and apartheid state of Israel (a US ally and the region’s preeminent military power) and Superpower itself (the US is the murderer of Iraq and the chief sponsor of both Saudi Arabia and Israel)—is the US-sponsored Saudi kingdom.

The Saudis spend four times as much on the military as does Iran and are equipped with far superior US-linked weapons systems.

The regional power that’s wreaking havoc in Yemen isn’t Iran. It’s the Saudi regime, which has joined with the United

Arab Emirates and taken military assistance from the U.S. to impose the possibly the world's worst humanitarian crisis by blockading and bombing Yemen.

The regional power providing the great majority of state support for jihadist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda isn't majority Shiite-Muslim Iran, of course. It's the Sunni-Muslim Saudi regime, along with other Sunni-led Gulf monarchies.

It's the Saudis who have led the charge for regime change in Syria, not the Iranians.

By comparison to the Saudis and Israel, Iran is a defensive power. Its modest interventions beyond its borders are about standard realpolitik defense of regional allies (the Houthis rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Assad regime in Syria, and the Shiite government in Baghdad), not destabilizing regime change and terrorism.

All of this notwithstanding, top Democrats continue to regularly obsess over the supposed supreme and ghastly wickedness of Iran, absurdly calling Teheran the leading source of Middle Eastern conflict and terrorism. It's a dangerous game. By playing along with "the Trump administration's description of Iran as singularly irrational and menacing," the liberal journalist Peter Beinart argues, "Democrats help ensure that normalized US-Iran relations are impossible and that 'the prospect of war...will return again and again.'" By opposing war with Iran while they continue to advance the Evil Teheran narrative, Beinart argues, "Democrats may believe they're splitting the difference. But if they can't describe Iran as a normal regional power...they can't effectively challenge the sanctions the Trump administration keeps piling on the Islamic Republic." And "over time," as in Iraq in the 1990s and early 21st century, "permanent sanctions can become a formula for military conflict," Beinart notes.

That's a good point but if Beinart hopes the Democrats are going to take a rational perspective on Iran he's barking up the wrong tree. Just as Venezuela can never be forgiven by either of the two major imperialist US parties for embracing national independence and social justice, the bipartisan imperial class can never pardon Iran for having the temerity to break out from under Uncle Sam's thumb by throwing off its Washington-backed dictator Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979. Hating and punishing Iran has been a doctrinally imposed duty enforced across major party lines in Washington ever since.

With Iran as with Venezuela, Democrats offer no challenge to the Orwellian White House narratives that fuel the drive toward military intervention and regime change. That's because they join the Republicans in seeing the United States as specially entitled to control the world's critical energy supplies, a leading strategic lever for global hegemony. It is not by mere happenstance that Uncle Sam is simultaneously rattling its sabers against both Venezuela and Iran. The first country is home to the largest proven oil reserves on the planet. The second country contains the second largest oil reserves in

the Middle East. "In an attempt to offset the ongoing decline in its world economic position," the World Socialist Web Site explains, "US imperialism aims to assert its undisputed grip over the world's energy reserves. This would empower it to ration—or cut off altogether—supplies to its rivals, in the first instance China, but also Europe." Such imperial US ambitions have always been bipartisan. They remain so regardless of which party or party alignment holds sway in Washington.

It will take something other than a Democratic electoral victory in 2020 or the impeachment of Trump to change U.S. policy towards Venezuela, Iran, and the rest of the world. It will take a popular anti-imperial rebellion in the United States itself, where domestic and foreign policy are two sides of the same capitalist coin. The unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money and empire are long overdue for radical challenge from the populace. **CP**

PAUL STREET'S latest book is *They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy* (Paradigm, 2014)

War Fuels Modern Slavery

BY T.J. COLES

Slave markets in Libya; child mining in Congo; forced labor in Eritrea. NGOs rightly point out the crisis of modern slavery, but they seldom consider the link between modern slavery and Western-backed wars, militarism, and corporations. This article explores those links. But first, what is modern slavery and how many people are affected?

The Millions Enslaved

Urmila Bhoola is the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Its Causes and Consequences. In 2018, she told the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly that over 40 million people around the world are slaves. Modern slavery takes many forms. It includes: "traditional" slavery, where individuals are considered to be the property of their so-called owners; debt bondage, where individuals are held as collateral against loans; serfdom, where the serf, like the "traditional" slave, is bound by an arrangement from which they cannot escape; forced labor; the "worst forms" of child labor, including intensive agricultural work and mining; sexual slavery, including forms of prostitution and forced marriage; and certain practices in human trafficking, such as the confiscation of passports.

According to data published by the International Labour Organization, slavery for the individual can last anywhere from five days to five years, or longer. Of today's 40 million slaves, 25 million are forced laborers. Slavery disproportionately affects women and girls: 28 million slaves are female. Fifteen million slaves are forced to marry; 84% of whom are women and girls. Ninety-nine percent of sex industry slaves

are female. India has the highest number of slaves, with an estimated 20 million people trapped in bonded labor, child labor, and forced marriage. African and Asian countries have higher proportions of modern slaves than Western countries, though it is estimated in the Global Slavery Index that 403,000 people are enslaved in the United States.

Let's look at the links between Western-backed militarism, corporate greed, and slavery.

Civil War and Slavery in Congo

The pre-European colonial Kongo Kingdom (circa 1390-1857 AD) was a socioeconomic system based, in part, on slavery. Subjects were sold to other kingdoms. The Transatlantic Slave Trade (circa 15th-19th centuries) added to the misery, setting the scene for Congolese wars with Portugal. By the 19th century, Congo was colonized by Belgium. It's therefore no surprise that the modern countries Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of Congo, continue to be influenced by Franco-Belgian corporations and political interests, including arms sales.

Congo achieved independence in 1960, electing the anti-colonial Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba. The British, Belgian, and US intelligence services conspired to murder Lumumba, with MI6's Daphne Park later boasting that she "organized" the assassination. According to the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Britain and the US also played a role in the assassination of UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, who refused to withdraw UN Peacekeepers from Congo, fearing a massacre. Now-declassified US intelligence documents noted that the Katanga region "supplies two-thirds of total value of Congo's mineral production—all Congo's copper (7% of world production), cobalt (60% world production), manganese, zinc, cadmium, germanium and uranium" (1960) and that "[t]he natural resources of [Congo] are enormous, but so are the obstacles to their exploitation ... Over the years the US has delivered far more economic and military assistance to the Congo," meaning its dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, "than to any other sub-Saharan African country" (1968).

Renamed Zaire, Mobutu's Congo signed a Bilateral Investment Treaty with the US in the 1980s, at a time when infant mortality and hunger were high. Today, the Democratic Republic of Congo (as it's officially called) has a population of over 80 million. Its GDP is \$38bn and per capita GDP is just \$460, compared to the neighboring Republic of Congo's \$1,650.

The First Congo War (1996-97) began and ended with the overthrow of Mobutu by Laurent Kabila. At present, many of

Congo's 2,500+ mineral mines are located in the east, near Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. Dozens of coltan mines are located near the Rwandan border. The Second War (1997-2003) was more complicated than the first. It involved national forces, foreign armies, and various militias vying for land, border changes, political power, and control over the lucrative mines. The resources mined there are known by NGOs as "conflict minerals" because they fund rebel groups and all the abuses that go with armed struggle: torture, starvation, rape as a weapon of war, etc.

By the end of the Second War, 5 million people of varying ethnicities and locations in Congo had died; some as a direct result of genocide, others from disease and starvation. Congo continues to be in a state of so-called "low intensity" warfare, as different militias struggle for power. Rwanda's dictator,

Paul Kagame, is a US-British ally. Many Congolese coltan mines are guarded by Rwandan militias (interahamwe), under whose control the miners labor. Both the interahamwe and the Congolese Army tax the miners' labor as they carry the heavy (14 kilo = 15 dollars) bags of the mineral coltan, often for days, along the dirt roads where the bags are sorted in nearby villages. The coltan is packaged in makeshift tins and pots. The sorted tins are flown out of the country, mainly from the tiny Bukavu airport, to bigger towns for refinement and sorting. Their origins do not appear on flight manifests and the refining/sorting companies know not to ask questions.

In 2002, the Security Council published a report containing an annex of 85 companies believed to be in breach of OECD standards over their alleged profiting from minerals in Congo. These included US companies such as Trinitech International, Belgian firms like UMICORE, Canadian corporations including Tenke, and British companies including Anglo-American, Barclays, and EUROMET. Mining and Processing Congo, a British-South African coltan exporter, is alleged by UN officers to have disguised a plane with fake UN markings to avoid inspection when flying coltan out of the country. Once the registered companies have given the goods a stamp of legitimacy, bigger companies like Belgium's Sabena airlines (in the recent past, at least), fly the minerals to Europe where they are exported to China. An Amnesty International report puts the blame on China for being a major coltan importer, but fails to stress that much of the coltan goes into cell phones and computers assembled in China for US corporations, predominantly for wealthier European and American consumers.

By 2011, over 25% of Congolese children aged 5-14 years were



doing adult work in services, agriculture, and other sectors. According to the US Department of Labor, many Congolese children “mine diamonds, copper, gold, heterogenite (cobalt ore) and wolframite (tungsten ore). Children are also forced,” usually by the militias, “to mine gold, cassiterite (tin ore) and coltan (tantalum ore).” In addition, “In mining areas, markets, and brothels, children are compelled to engage in prostitution. There are also reports that children of indigenous persons and pygmies may be born into slavery.” By 2017, the same organization noted an increase of nearly 11% in child labor. It also notes that children are exploited in the “[f]orced mining of gold, cassiterite, coltan, and wolframite, sometimes as a result of debt bondage.”

The State Slaves of Eritrea

Eritrea is a small East African country with a population of just over 5 million and a GDP of less than \$5bn, making it one of the poorest countries in Africa. Western mining companies have profited from forced labor in the Eritrean military. Some state slaves fleeing their fate by seeking asylum and work in Europe get trafficked and enslaved in Libya, Africa’s geographical gateway to Europe, as we shall see.

Historically, inscriptions prove that slavery existed in the region, dating back to 1495 BCE. The Aksumite Kingdom (c. 100-940 AD) profited from the exportation of slaves. The 13th century Law of Kings (Fetha Magast) made “the vanquished [the] slaves of the victors.” Emperor Menilek’s decree of 1899 allowed for “punitive enslavement.” By that time, the Italians had created modern Eritrea as a colony during the European Scramble for Africa (c. 1881-1914). By the 1960s, Eritrea was fighting a war of independence with Ethiopia over the latter’s occupation and annexation of part of the country. Eritrea won independence in the 1990s, but fought another war later in the decade, with a formal peace agreement signed as late as 2018. The war helped militarize the Eritrean economy and enabled the creation of a structure of slavery-based conscription.

By 2002, 40% of Eritrean children were malnourished. By 2013, maternal mortality was high, at 380 per 100,000. Eritrea has a command economy, with conscripts forced to labor in the construction and mining industries. The World Bank says that “revenue as a percentage of GDP move[d] drastically over time, for example from about 50% in 2003 to less than 19% in 2009, partly due to decline in private sector activity and foreign aid.” Asking why Eritrea has such high rates of poverty and malnutrition, the World Bank says that the country was “impacted by political isolation and sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council over the government’s alleged role in the Horn of Africa insecurity.” Sanctions (arms embargoes and asset freezes) were imposed by the West over unfounded allegations that the Eritrean government supported terrorists in Somalia.

By 2016, an estimated 300,000 Eritreans were enslaved by the state, according to a UN Commission of Inquiry. This cor-

responds to the number of conscripted Eritreans. Eighteen to 40 year-olds must give a minimum of 18 months service to the state, including 6 months of military service (which in reality can last up to six years). Conditions are so horrendous that by 2016, nearly 500,000 people (roughly 12% of the population) had fled the country. The UN Human Rights Council says that in Eritrea, “[e]nslavement has been committed on an on-going, large-scale and methodical basis” since 2002. “Imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, reprisals as other inhumane acts, and persecution have been committed ... since 1991.” Systematic rape and murder have also been committed.

Conscripts are forced to work in various sectors, including mining, where the government owns a 40% stake. Foreign corporations profit, if not directly from labor, certainly from the repressive conditions. The British-based company, Andiamo Exploration, mines for copper and gold in Eritrea’s Bisha Belt. The UK-based Ortac Resources owns a 25% stake in Andiamo and its Executive, Anthony Balme, is a non-executive director of Andiamo. Ortac is part-owned by Halifax Share Dealings and Barclays Stockbrokers. This is ironic, given that Barclays made its profits historically in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and, as noted, continues to profit in Congo. Another UK company, London Africa Ltd., mines Eritrea for copper, gold, zinc, and lead. JP Morgan Asset Management’s UK branch owns shares in Nevsun Resources Ltd., a Canadian company sued over its involvement in forced labor.

Nevsun is a giant as far as Eritrea is concerned. Recall that the nation’s GDP is just \$5bn. Nevsun’s taxes and royalties to the state-owned ENAMCO total \$828 million. But in 2014, three Eritrean plaintiffs took Nevsun to court in Canada, alleging that its contractor, Segen Construction (which is owned by the Eritrean government), forced them to work 12 hours a day, tied, and beat them; claims which Nevsun denies.

Recall that half a million Eritreans have fled the country. In December 2006, the US, Britain, and Ethiopia overthrew a stable regime in war-torn Somalia (the Islamic Courts Union) and imposed a dictatorship (the Transitional Federal Government), triggering a refugee crisis of hundreds of thousands; most of whom fled to neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia, others across the Gulf of Aden to what is now war-torn Yemen. In 2009, the British helped the Nigerian military launch an offensive against Boko Haram and later the Islamic State. The operations were so severe that they triggered an internal refugee crisis of hundreds of thousands. In 2011, NATO smashed Libya to pieces, triggering a refugee crisis, as well as turning the country into a gateway for African migrants and refugees, including Nigerians, Somalis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans, to seek work in Europe via Italy and Greece. In late-2015, the US, Britain, and France unlawfully escalated their anti-Islamic State bombing operations in Syria. Each of these events reached a head between 2015 and 2016, with millions of African and Middle Eastern refugees and migrants seeking asylum and work in Europe. Only when it affected Europeans

did Western media and politicians refer to the situation as a “crisis” and in doing so, erroneously labelled each person a “migrant,” when in fact many were refugees.

Many Eritrean asylum seekers fleeing slavery and torture find themselves trafficked in Libya, with some of them ending up in slavery; a point to which we now turn.

The Migrant Slaves of Libya

The Barbary Coast (16th-19th centuries) was a term used by Europeans to describe modern-day Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya; all of which are in North Africa. These lands, inhabited by Berbers, were the site of frequent pirate raids and slave trades. Despite abolition in the mid-19th century, slavery continued in Libya into the 20th century, well into Italian colonial rule. The Italians seized Libya from the Ottomans in 1911-12. By the end of WWII, however, Islamist groups were working with the British to wrestle control of Libya from Italy. Britain’s ally King Idris ruled from 1951 until his overthrow by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 1969.

US cables from the period (September 1969) mention a Colonel Sa’ad al-Din Abu Shuawayrib, leader of the coup. Shuawayrib was reportedly pro-American and trained in the US. But the new Libyan leader, the young Gaddafi, was clearly not pro-American. Libya quickly became an enemy of the US, with Gaddafi nationalizing 51% Libya’s oil, its main financial and strategic asset, in 1971. For ordinary Libyans, Gaddafi’s regime was a mixed bag. It was undeniably violent and totalitarian. But, to help him cling to power, Gaddafi used energy revenues to dole out social security, making Libya Africa’s wealthiest and most debt-free nation, boasting \$14,802 in per capita wealth by 2008. There is no record of modern slavery in Libya under Gaddafi’s regime.

By 2003, with the US invasion of Iraq and its Commander-in-Chief threatening more attacks against Iran, Gaddafi felt compared to disarm Libya’s biological and chemical weapons, and its nuclear weapons program. This proved to be a fatal decision because it left the country virtually defenseless against the impending US-led invasion. In 2004, BP energy won contracts to prospect in the desert. Privatization followed, as did British Special Forces training of the Libyan military. By 2009, however, Gaddafi was threatening more privatization in light of collapsing energy revenues. In October 2010, British agents began training and organizing domestic and UK-based Libyan jihadis to depose Gaddafi. After Gaddafi used force to crush both the peaceful Arab Spring and the violent insurgency, the stage was set for the US-led NATO bombardment in 2011.

The once-prosperous nation of Libya was torn apart. The “humanitarian intervention” pretext for the NATO bombing vanished, as NATO helicopters watched war refugees drown in the Mediterranean Sea. The “ethnic cleansing” lie on which the bombing was based took a cruelly ironic twist, as the Arab jihadis sponsored by the West launched a real ethnic cleans-

ing of Black Libyans. Tens of thousands of people fled their homes, and large parts of the major towns and cities, including Sirte, Misrata, and Tripoli, were reduced to smoky ruins. The decimation of Libya’s infrastructure and the dismantling of its governmental institutions made it easy, as Gaddafi warned, for desperate, Sub-Saharan economic migrants to use Libya as a geographical gateway to Europe. Beginning 2015 and following the US-British-French escalation in Syria, tens of thousands of war refugees, as well as economic migrants from southern and eastern Africa, sought asylum in Europe via Libya. Some encountered the Libyan warlords, jihadis, and people-traffickers who did not exist prior to the NATO bombing; or whose influence was suppressed under Gaddafi’s reign.

Long before the NATO destruction, Western imperial powers expressed concern about “ungoverned spaces,” namely because they want to control everything. But these same powers turned much of Libya into an ungoverned space. In light of the new civil war, beginning in 2014, an academic report describes Libya as “a new slave-holding post along the Mediterranean Sea. Its geographical proximity to southern Europe and its lawlessness make it an attractive launch pad for human traffickers cashing in on migrants hoping to get to Europe.” UN Security Council Resolutions 2331 (2016) and 2388 (2017) recognize that certain kinds of human trafficking constitute modern slavery. In November 2011, CNN broadcast footage and published an analysis of an Arab-led slave market in Libya, in which Black migrants were auctioned as farm laborers. Several of the nine slave-auction locations—Castelverde, Gadamis, Garyan, Kabaw, Sabha Sabratah, and Zuwara—are also routes for migrants. With the exception of Sabha (in the south), these regions are in the northwest of the country, close to the Tunisia border. It was possible that the CNN video was merely atrocity propaganda, but subsequent investigations confirmed the reality of modern slavery in Libya.

In 2018, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published a report based on 1,300 personal accounts of migrants, refugees, and Libyans. Ninety percent of Libya’s one million or so migrants/refugees are from Chad, Egypt, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, and Sudan. In other words, most migrants/refugees are Black. A common Libyan word for Blacks is *abidat*, or slaves. Eighty percent of the one million migrants/refugees are adult males. About half of the 100,000 children are unaccompanied, making them vulnerable to kidnap, disappearance, and exploitation. Eritrean and Nigerian women describe the rape and detention of hundreds of other women and girls in brothels (“connection houses”) by captives who extort money from them. In addition to rape and torture, human traffickers have subjected migrants to forced labor. Regions include Bani Walid, Kufra, Sabha, Shwerif, Sabratah, and Tabu. Gangsters, including “Moussa and Mahmoud Diab,” “Mohamed Whiskey,” “Mohamed Karongo,” and “Gateau,” allegedly hold migrants in makeshift concentration camps (*campos*). One Darfuri

asylum-seeker, was kidnapped and held in a campo in Shwerif with her young boy. She counted 700 to 800 other captives.

Conclusion

Human beings have enslaved and exploited each other since at least the creation of city-states, possibly much earlier. Corporate globalization is a system of exploitation that sets conditions for the continued enslavement of the most vulnerable. The fight against modern slavery is important, but those fighting it should also consider the role of US-backed militarism; be it NATO's bombing of Libya, corporate profiteering from civil war in Congo, or investing in command economies like Eritrea. **CP**

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The Biodiversity Crisis Ecological Beings

BY JOHN DAVIS

What began as simple pecuniary theft in order to accumulate capital has, over the last half-millennium, devolved into the rapacious taking of foreign lands to put that ever-increasing capital to work. Hannah Arendt understood that this process was key to the de-humanization of subject populations and the development of totalitarian governments in the twentieth century. What has been less understood, until recently, is that by this same process we have also alienated the non-human world. We have now awoken to a 'Nature' that has developed an alarming kind of suicidal agency: we are reaping the whirlwind of global warming and the entropic decimation of much of the non-human life with whom we share the planet.

The U.N. recently issued a summary report from their Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The complete 1,500-page report will be issued later this year. The summary notes that, "Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history...but it is not too late to make a difference." That was early in May—and the news cycle has long since moved on. This initial summary, of what is sure to be truly horrifying data, is mostly ignored by an indifferent world and the full report, when it lands, will likely read by very, very few.

That was it—the summary of a definitive report demanding, "...a fundamental system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values"—barely noticed. In Australia, a country highly vulnerable to a changing climate and with much of its

unique fauna already at grave risk, a well-educated and literate population, where voting is compulsory, just elected a government determined to dismiss the impacts of global warming, pollution and habitat destruction—fully undeterred, apparently, by the U.N. report.

Societies and individuals alike fail to take action in the face of a torrent of publications, video, and other media that are unequivocal in declaring the perils the earth faces. Occasional victories, such as the banning of DDT some years after the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the more recent international agreement to limit the use of CFC's are rare indeed. The attempts by the U.N., active since 1988 in the attempt to reduce carbon emissions—the proximate cause of climate change, have failed utterly.

Can we take any comfort from the fact that the language which Anglophones are using to describe these complex, interrelated threats to the health of the planet is changing? That this change may even herald a long-awaited shift in consciousness that can confront climate change? Inevitably, in this age of limited attention spans, the evolution in language has been occurring at the level of the meme—the smallest unit of declamatory communication. Encouragingly, 'Global Warming', the meme, is becoming 'Extinction', the meme, a potentially virulent token that expresses our concern for the condition of the biosphere. The IPBES summary finds that, "about one million animal and plant species are threatened by extinction, many within decades, more than ever before in human history." As the condition of the planet worsens, the language that describes this phenomenon must become more robust. Climate change protest, and all activities directed at slowing the rate of extinctions, resource depletion and pollution have been re-framed as 'Rebellion', at least in the U.K., where overturning the establishment has long been popular (cf. Brexit).

'Extinction Rebellion', has even greater potential memetic power. Its abbreviation is simply XR. For visual reinforcement, there is a sophisticated hour-glass logo, stylized as an 'X' encased within a circle. This is the dissemination of an idea at a level routinely reserved for the marketing of products. As such, it reflects the co-option of the tools of the oppressive, socio-political ideology of neoliberalism that is complicit in our failure to confront the planetary malaise.

The evolutionary arrival of 'Rebellion' (née protest) is an example of punctuated equilibrium, the theory that this process is occasionally roiled by episodes of rapid speciation (or change) between long periods of quietude. This instance of Stephen Jay Gould's concept of rupture in a 'steady-as-she-goes' normality grew out of the campaign 'Rising Up!' in the U.K., which proposed the 'Extinction Rebellion' back in September 2018. Its founder, Roger Hallam, backed by academics, politicians and scientists, claims that, "The world has changed ... A space for truth-telling has been opened up." While the physical protests will likely peter out, its radical coinage may live on.

The history of our inaction since the 'Great Acceleration',

coined by J.R. McNeil in 2014 to describe the geometric increase in fossil fuel usage since 1945, is encompassed in ‘The Great Dithering’—a meme established by Gabriel Metcalf, also in 2014, which he proposed as a name (lifted from the sci-fi author, Kim Stanley Robinson) for, “the period of human history, following modernism and postmodernism, in which humanity failed to act rapidly or decisively enough to avert catastrophic climate change.” The ‘Extinction Rebellion’, together with the global declamations of the young, other-worldly, English-accented revolutionary Greta Thunberg, and the just released U.N. IPBES summary are all attempts to end the dithering and inspire societal, economic, technological and political change. But, as Thunberg says, despite her own frenetic travels, despite the U.N.’s impeccably researched data, despite the availability of ‘Extinction Rebellion’ T-shirts (and the meme), “nothing has changed.”

‘Anthropocene’ is firmly entrenched as an earworm amongst the climatically woke. Proposed, in 2002, by the Nobel prize-winning climate scientist Paul Crutzen, this word/meme is used to define the geological period, now taken to have begun right after the end of World War II, like the ‘Great Acceleration’, when it became apparent that human activity impacts the planet in ways that transcend traditional geologic and biological forces—through the discharge of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, human-caused erosion and sedimentation, sea level rise, increased acidification of the ocean, and extinction levels that are now some 1000 to 10,000 above background rates.

Elizabeth Kolbert popularized the notion of ‘The Sixth Extinction’, in her book of the same name, sub-titled, *An Unnatural History*, published to great acclaim and a Pulitzer in 2014. It inevitably references the previous five extinctions, in all of which climate change was implicated and in all of which a minimum of 75% of extant species were lost. In the last such event, 66 million years ago, the coup de grace was delivered to a climate-changed, vulnerable world by an asteroid. Ancient squid-like ammonites and the mighty reptilian dinosaurs perished alike despite both having been around, at that point, for close to two million years.

And yet, now the world, with the neurasthenic, metronomic gait of a zombie, continues to trudge towards the precipice—over which its inhabitants, it seems, must plunge into a time of environmental feedback, where snow and ice melt produce permafrost methane release, amplifying the processes that lead to a drowned and vastly diminished planet. Evident, in this death march, is a lack of feeling that we humans routinely bring to the issue of carbon emissions and habitat loss which entirely smothers the dramatic exhortations of Thunberg, the passionate leaders of the ‘Extinction Rebellion’ and the U.N.’s painstakingly researched IPBES summary report, with a blanket of profound indifference.

Alexandria Ocasio Cortez is sui generis, a one-woman green-meme-machine. Her recent speech at Howard University, sponsored by The Sunrise Movement, a youth

climate activist organization supportive of the ‘Green New Deal’, had the rhythmic eloquence and emphatic repetitions found in the Black rhetorical tradition. She framed action to decarbonize the economy as a struggle for basic human right, for a living wage, health benefits for all, and a sustainable and just America. She ridiculed the middle-ground beloved of Republican and Democratic centrists. She ridiculed those who claimed the ‘Green New Deal’ was too much, and then blazingly listed the egregious environmental misdeeds of the last half-century perpetrated by Congress that were ‘too much’ for her. She declaimed: “We are at a precipice... We are here to say ‘no more’... Hope will come for us who refuse to settle for less”. Apart from highlighting the fact that we have just reached a historic high of 415 parts-per-million of carbon dioxide in the



atmosphere, there was little regurgitation of data. The speech was heartfelt and inspirational, and while Greta Thunberg has been popularly proclaimed as the Joan of Arc of Europe’s environmental advocates, AOC is now our own visionary heroine, as both women dare to challenge the logic of profit—heresy to the corporate interests that enslave us.

The ‘Extinction Rebellion’ has been effective in clarifying the political terms of the climate debate, the U.N. has issued a damning environmental assessment that explicitly links global warming with extinction, and AOC and Thunberg have added their missionary fervor in the cause of sustainability and justice. But the philosopher of ‘Dark Ecology’, Timothy Morton, in his latest book, *Being Ecological*, 2018, founded on his embrace of object-oriented ontology, suggests that environmental anguishing is but a theistic echo of agrilogistics—the organizing principle of the Neolithic revolution, when agricultural technologies, supported by new religions and newly stratified societies, began to develop more than a millennium ago. We remain, he suggests, locked in patterns of shaming, visions of salvation and eschatological imaginings, while we ignore the reality around us. We remain, at heart, Mesopotamians, confirmed in the habits of mind necessary for civilization, champions of the Neolithic revolution which, “...has been going on for about twelve thousand years, since the start of agriculture,

which eventually required industrial processes to maintain themselves, hence fossil fuels, hence global warming, hence mass extinction”.

The latest U.N. data dump is, he implies, just the thing to further impede the possibility of ‘being ecological’. Greta Thunberg’s rhetoric feeds directly on ancient eschatological traditions, and the intrepid ‘Extinction Rebels’ speak truth to power within ritualized hierarchies long designed to vitiate such assaults. He suggests that our fascination with the latest reports of a damaged world—facts that need constant up-dating—reflect the manic reiterations of trauma experienced by those who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. Our inability to fully understand that we are living in a time of mass extinction leads us to crave what he calls ‘information dump mode’ as a way of confirming ourselves outside of its reality. Instead of an urgent call to action, each iteration of data confirms our paralysis. Immobilized by each new tranche, we remain stuck, he suggests, re-living the trauma. We need, he urges, “to start to live the data”—to initiate an entirely new way to absorb the information that has been washing over us for decades by living it in a manner that actively erodes our ancient, civilizational programming.

The impact on climate of the burning of fossil fuels was first identified by the Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in 1896, and media attention was occasionally drawn to this fateful connection over the next century, but it was not until 1988 that a global focus was brought to bear on the issue when the U.N. formed its Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. There has been a steady stream of jeremiads on climate change ever since, and the issue rose to new levels of public prominence when Al Gore released his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in 2006. Morton attempts to solve the grave conundrum that, while trapped within an atmospheric blanket made ever more efficient because of our carbon emissions, we are burdened with a consciousness that inhibits our ability to change our behavior, and that, the torrents of data that document this crisis are complicit in our paralysis.

He notes that our personal contributions to the problem are statistically meaningless (a little like voting in a large democracy) since there is no feedback loop to register our individual emissions. We have to act on trust. But, he writes,

“...ecological data is so complex, and is about such complex phenomena, that it’s difficult to make that data into facts, let alone start living those facts, rather than repeating truthy factoids...”

And these ‘truthy factoids’ are the very stuff of memes. He points to a radical gap between things and data (the Kantian core of object-oriented ontology) and that, “Ecological things are very complex, involve a lot of moving parts, are widely distributed across Earth and time, and so on.” They congregate in what he describes as ‘Hyperobjects’, one of which is global warming, and which inevitably resist data analysis. Yet data is

all our modern scientific world provides us with, with which to approach things. Now, as the U.N. IPBES summary report bombards us with factoids we crouch before the onslaught, as Morton suggests, “in the fetal position or simple curled up like a hedgehog.”

His alternative, of ‘living the data’, involves a process of what he calls ‘tuning’. First of all, he establishes that living non-violently with non-human beings is at the core of ‘being ecological’, and that the deconstruction of the fire-wall that exists between humans and non-humans is imperative. He writes, “Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it.” He urges that we create living, dynamic relationships with other ‘ecological beings’.

We have a history of fiercely argued texts that attempt an elucidation of the contemporary data and confront the social, moral, and economic issues around global warming. Many of us have any number of memes lodged in our brains that prompt us towards responding to the unprecedented events that attend our age of extinction. Many of us are both armed and armored with data. We feel that there is both a protective and a predictive value in reading the texts and watching the videos. We may even believe that the acquisition of ecological data is valuable in persuading others of our dire circumstance. We may believe that we have a purpose to account for the present condition of the planet—not as prophets of doom but simply as contemporary truth tellers. We may find it exhilarating to imagine that the long arc of environmental awareness is bending towards action. We may even believe that technological progress assures us of a final triumph in our attempts to de-carbonize the economy.

But much of this may indeed be a ‘busy-busy’ recapitulation of the Neolithic revolution, when knowledge was sought for precise, productive ends and data was substituted for the reality beneath the surface of things (a reality that Paleolithic people spent millennia exploring and the knowledge of which still resides today in those few populations untouched by Western Civilization). Morton has taken this notion, argued by Jared Diamond among others, and linked it to a philosophical path that leads him out of Modernity and into the almost impenetrable thickets of object-oriented ontology.

Where does that leave the rest of us? It is difficult, outside of academia, to argue convincingly that we should abandon Modernity. Yet our obsession with facts, the factoids and the mimetic ideation that lives in our brains as memes, may well be standing in the way of our simply meshing with the environment, not as humans uniquely capable of realizing reality through our consciousness, but as ecological beings.

The house that I live in is embedded in chaparral, the flora and fauna community that dominates the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains, a transverse range in Southern California. It’s spring and so it’s time for the annual brush clearance mandated by the Ventura County Fire Department. It’s a time of weed-whacking the invasive oats, brome grasses and tocalote thistles

(*Centaurea melitensis*) and hand weeding the mustard. Late May rains mean that the weeding has taken on added urgency because, for a few weeks, it's possible to pull the mustard rather than chopping it with a Pulaski axe.

Partly because of the late rains, and partly because it's the second year of recovery after the devastating Thomas Fire of 2017-2018, the native wildflowers have been extraordinary. Bird life seems to have recovered with the notable exception of the tiny wren-tit, with its signature chaparralian song. At night, the faint hooting of a pair of greater horned owls drifts through open windows.

I have spent the last ten years informally studying this community, and it is the haunting birdsong, the wildflowers, trees, rocks, mountains and sky that help me explore what it might mean to live as an ecological being: to discover the possibilities of an enmeshment with the non-human world. But, still imprisoned within Modernity, it is the ever growing literature focused on the global warming induced sixth extinction (and its related memes) that gives urgency to my quest. **CP**

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Libya: How NATO Spent Seven Years Entrenching Militia Misrule

BY DAN GLAZEBROOK

By late 2015, the West's Libya policy was in total disarray.

To the untrained eye, of course, it looked as though it had been in disarray from the start. The 2011 intervention had, after all, turned the country into a death squad free-for-all, destroying state authority, and drawing militias from across the region—including Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, and ISIS—to its vast territory to set up camps, loot state armouries, and train the fighters who went on to attack Tunisia, Nigeria, Algeria, Manchester and elsewhere. The 30,000-strong city of Tawergha—the only black African town on the Mediterranean—was completely ethnic cleansed by NATO's proxies; it is now a ghost town, its former inhabitants scattered across refugee camps where they are still hunted down and killed to this day. Thousands of African migrants remain detained in illegal facilities by the country's hundreds of militias, where they face regular torture and rape, and public slave auctions have been reintroduced. The country remains at war, without a functioning government, facing rampant inflation and regular power cuts. The criminal justice system has collapsed throughout much of the country, which remains under the control of ever more powerful and unaccountable armed groups. Per capita income has collapsed by more than a third, from \$12,250 in 2010 to

\$7,820.28 in 2014, whilst the country has dropped 40 places in the UN's human development index, from 53 in 2010 to 94 in 2015. Life expectancy has dropped by three years over the same time period.

If the goal was, as NATO proclaimed, to improve human rights, then, by any standards, the intervention was an utter disaster.

But no serious person ever believed it was really about that. NATO—with Britain leading the charge—was concerned about Gaddafi's growing influence on the African continent, his role as a bulwark against US and UK military encroachment, and the money he was pouring into financial institutions explicitly designed to reduce African dependence on the IMF and World Bank. As with the previous intervention in Iraq, however, the goal was not only to remove this particular thorn-in-the-side but in fact to prevent the country from ever again re-emerging as a strong, unified independent power. The goal was not to change the government, then—but to prevent effective government altogether. To this end the leading NATO powers have consistently acted to ensure the country's hundreds of rival militias are empowered and remain at war with one other. From this point of view, the West's Libya policy has been a roaring success. But by 2015 it had come under serious threat.

Under the tutelage of the NATO-imposed government, the years following the 2011 bombardment saw the power of the militias entrenched. Rather than disbanding them, or attempting to bring them under a unified chain of command, the new regime began arming them and paying their salaries. Faced with few other prospects, young people flocked to join, and the number of militiamen grew from a maximum of 25,000 who fought in 2011 to 140,000 two years later. Naturally, those in charge of these armed gangs—accountable to no one but themselves—grew in power as their numbers and resources swelled, and turf warfare was common. The rule of the gun had become institutionalized.

By 2014, Libyans were sick of it. Seeing as the government was effectively toothless, hostage to the militias it had empowered, elections were largely seen as a waste of time at best, a process with no other function than to legitimize a dysfunctional status quo. Turnout in the 2014 elections was estimated at less than 20%, down from 60% two years earlier. Yet the result was nevertheless a blow to the militias, with their political sponsors—Libya's equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood—the biggest losers. The militias' parliamentary patrons had suffered a decisive defeat; and one they did not accept. In July 2014, they launched an attack on Tripoli to drive the new government out of the capital. By August they had succeeded, and the newly elected House of Representatives was forced to relocate to Tobruk in the east. But the House of Representatives had two major assets on their side. Firstly, the Libyan National Army (LNA), the country's largest and most effective single fighting force—had pledged its allegiance to them. Over the year that followed, the LNA made steady gains, and by the end

of 2015, after almost two years of fighting, were on the verge of retaking Benghazi from a coalition of militias led by the Al Qaeda-affiliated Ansar al-Sharia. Secondly, as the elected parliament, they were internationally recognized as the legitimate government of Libya.

To add to NATO's headaches, supporters of the pre-2011 government were growing in strength. Despite criminalization—the notorious Law 37 had made open support for Gaddafi a crime punishable by life imprisonment—the 'Green Resistance,'



as it became known, was becoming ever more emboldened and popular. The stark difference between the relatively prosperous and stable lives people had led under Gaddafi, and the disaster which they were living now, became harder and harder to ignore. By August 2015, as a kangaroo court handed down death sentences to 8 former ministers, including Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam, the green movement was openly leading large public demonstrations across the country, even in ISIS-occupied Sirte. At the same time, the east of the country was moving towards a reconciliation with the Green Movement, with the House of Representatives allowing Gaddafi's widow to return from exile, and the LNA openly recruiting Gaddafi loyalists, including Gaddafi's Tuareg commander General Ali Kanna, into its forces.

And finally—particularly worrying for the forces of disorder that had unleashed chaos on Libya—an end to the civil war between the two parliaments even seemed to be finally in sight. The two warring sides—Operation Dawn, which supported the General National Congress, the parliament of the defeated militias, and Operation Dignity, the Libyan National Army-led operation in support of the elected House of Representatives—had signed a ceasefire in January 2015, and by November of that year had made substantial progress towards a compromise resolution of their differences.

If NATO wanted to stop these moves towards unity, recon-

ciliation, and defeat of the militias, they would have to act fast. That's where the UN came in.

The UN had created UNSMIL (the UN 'Support Mission in Libya') in 2011, ostensibly to promote reconciliation between the various militias which had emerged, and UNSMIL had then set up the 'Libya Dialogue' in September 2014, following the fall of Tripoli to the Libya Dawn faction. Clearly dominated by Libya's conquerors—its meetings often took place in London or Rome, under the watchful eye of British, Italian, US and IMF officials—it was rejected by Libyan nationalists, who instead favored direct negotiations, without outside interference. Thus, in December 2015, there were two parallel sets of negotiations taking place—the UNSMIL Libya Dialogue (boycotted by the GNC parliament) and the so-called 'Libya-Libya Dialogue' involving direct, unmediated discussions between the heads of the two parliaments. Whilst the UNSMIL version seemed to be getting nowhere—with both sides skeptical of its Western overlord—the direct negotiations were bearing serious fruit. Meeting in Malta and Muscat in December 2015, the heads of both warring parliaments endorsed an initiative to create a unity government appointed by a prime minister and two deputies chosen in turn by both parliaments. But a workable agreement between Libyan parties, based on a principled rejection of outside interference, was the exact opposite of what the UN's controllers were seeking. For over a year, UNSMIL had unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the two parliaments to support their own deeply flawed plan, the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Now, as the Libyans' own process was gaining momentum, desperation was growing amongst Western officials that their plan was becoming marginalized. As one EU diplomat candidly admitted, "the pressure to sign the accord came from Political Dialogue members who feared that the Libya-Libya initiative could gain popular traction". Unsurprisingly, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), "the most engaged Security Council permanent members—the U.S., UK and France—were particularly vocal in pushing the UN to finalise the deal". The very powers who had destroyed Libya four years earlier were desperate that they not be sidelined by an independent Libyan initiative.

Fear of the rival negotiations gaining momentum was not the only thing driving the west's urgency to impose a 'deal', however. There was also real fear that the LNA might actually win the war. As one Western official told the ICG: "Not signing and endorsing the accord would have been a major defeat for those like us who had been advocating a negotiated power-sharing deal as the only solution to the Libya crisis. It would have meant a failure of the principle of negotiations, and that would have allowed those governments that throughout 2015 had advocated direct unilateral action in support of the HoR and its government to declare victory." This is a clear admission that the LPA was aimed at giving a shot in the arm to the flailing militias, to bolster them and prevent their defeat in the face of a unified National Army representing the elected parliament.

The problem for supporters of the western-drafted LPA remained, however, its lack of support amongst Libyan stakeholders. For a start, neither parliament endorsed the agreement; indeed, said the ICG, “A substantial HoR majority opposed the military and security provisions” whilst the GNC were boycotting the talks altogether. Furthermore, the real powers on the ground—the armed groups actually in control of Libyan territory—were not consulted, and were mostly opposed to it. The ICG concluded that “In retrospect, proponents inflated support for the accord within the rival legislatures to justify going forward. The claim of majority backing was factually dubious—many members supported an agreement in principle but differed widely on details—and politically misleading, since key opponents were outside the HoR and the GNC and had military power to intimidate supporters”.

Lacking support for its deal, but anxious to impose it to prevent the possibility of either a LNA victory or a Libyan-led negotiated settlement, the UN simply cobbled together a handpicked group of willing members from each parliament to sign up to their flawed blueprint (It was fitting that the man brought in to do this was named Martin Kobler). Thus, the Skhirat Agreement, as it became known, was signed by an arbitrary group of unrepresentative Libyans in Morocco on December 17th 2015. It was instantly anointed the holy bible of Libyan politics by the Western powers. And yet, “There is no real political agreement”, a senior UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) official admitted. “This is an agreement to support those who seem trustworthy for the sake of saving the country”. Saving it, that is, from unity and independence. This was naked colonialism of the pure and shameless nineteenth-century variety.

Nevertheless, the western-imposed LPA did initially manage to gain some degree of support, or at least acceptance, both within Libya, and amongst non-western powers abroad. Khalifa Haftar, leader of the LNA, whilst not officially endorsing the deal, did cooperate with it at first, meeting Kobler the day before its signing and proposing a close associate, Ali Qatrani, for the Presidency Council it created. Aguila Saleh, head of the House of Representatives, gave tentative support to the deal on 31st December 2015, two weeks after its signing. On the GNC side, the Misratan leader Abderrahman Swehli gave last minute support to the deal, bringing with him a large number of the Misratan militias, a move which, according to the ICG, “changed the force balance in the deal’s favor”. And at the UN, Russian and Chinese support ensured the deal achieved Security Council endorsement on 23rd December.

The LPA’s support from Saleh and Haftar (briefly) and Russia (more long term) warrants closer scrutiny. After all, in hindsight at least, the LPA has functioned effectively to bolster and legitimize the very militias which Haftar’s Russian-backed LNA is fighting. In practice, the sole function of the GNA (Government of National Accord) which was created by the ‘agreement’ has been—much like that of its Syrian cousin,

the erstwhile Free Syrian Army—the provision of international recognition, funding and weaponry to any militia that pledges nominal allegiance to it, without actually having to submit to any unified chain of command. The GNA truly is a Government in Name Alone.

Yet this was not necessarily obvious at the time. Not unlike Security Council 1973 which paved the way for NATO intervention in 2011, the LPA’s drafters made sure to include many tempting concessions to its potential opponents, safe in the knowledge they could simply be ignored once the deal was signed. In the case of UNSC 1973, provisions were made for negotiations to take place before any military action began, and for any intervention which did occur to be strictly limited to a no-fly zone and preventing the Libyan army retaking Benghazi. Much to the humiliation of the African Union, which had predicated its endorsement precisely on these measures, all of them were ignored by NATO even before the ink had dried.

In the case of the LPA, on paper, it looked like it was biased, if anything, towards the House of Representatives, not the militia-backed GNC. This was not entirely surprising, given that the HoR had participated in the ‘Libya Dialogue’ talks which preceded it, which the GNC had boycotted. Under the terms of the LPA, the HoR would remain the official Libyan parliament, and creation of any new government would be conditional on HoR ratification: effectively the HoR was granted power of veto over any arrangements which would emerge. For the HoR, and its supporters in the LNA and outside Libya, then, on the face of it, there was nothing to lose.

As with UNSC 1973, however, these provisions were to be entirely ignored. Under the terms of the agreement, a Presidency Council would be formed, made up of nominees from both parliaments. This Council would then appoint a government, which would be dependent on approval by the HoR. Yet, the UN Security Council itself violated the agreement within a week of its signing, by ‘recognizing’ a government which had not only not yet been formed, but which, according to the terms of the LPA, could not be formed without HoR approval. This approval has never been granted; yet the GNA’s Cabinet was nonetheless created on January 2nd (where, lacking support in Libya, it operated from Tunisia) by the Council President, Fayeze al-Sarraj, triggering a boycott of the Council by two of its (eastern) members. Given that under the terms of the LPA security decisions could only be taken by the Council with the unanimous support of its five deputies, the PC thus no longer had the authority to make these decisions. This too was simply ignored.

Another sticking point emerged in March 2016, when the GNA moved to Tripoli, opposed by both the GNC and the HoR. According to the LPA, to be integrated into state security forces, militias were required to give up their weapons. Lacking any enforcement power of its own, however, the GNA simply ignored this provision too, and effectively paid a cartel

of, mostly Misratan, militias to provide it with protection. Meanwhile British, Italian and German warships were stationed off the city's coast to cow intransigent forces into acquiescence, reportedly sending text messages to the various militias warning them not to attempt to resist the GNA's imposition. Nevertheless, the GNA still only managed to gain control of three of the country's ministries, with most of the 'government' operating from the city's naval base. Unsurprisingly, it was once again "Most notably the U.S. and UK," notes the ICG, who "were lobbying for moving the Presidency Council to Tripoli and recognizing the unity government as the legitimate government as soon as possible, even without formal HoR endorsement".

A report in the UK newspaper *The Independent* later that month revealed why these governments were in such a rush. On 25th March 2016, it reported on a leaked briefing from King Abdullah in Jordan confirming that British and American special forces were on the ground in Libya, working with the Misratan militias. Granting such militias pseudo-legitimacy through their association with the GNA was crucial to provide a semblance of legality to these operations—which were, after all, military operations in support of armed gangs at war with the country's elected parliament.

The following month the takeover of the GNA by the western militias was formalized by the appointment of Abderrahman Swehli, representing a bloc of Misratan militia, as President of the High State Council. The High State Council was created by the LPA as an 'advisory body' to the GNA, to be composed of former members of the GNC, the parliament which had lost the 2014 elections. Swehli, says the ICG, was viewed by "many Libyans... as the architect of the July 2014 "Libya Dawn" operation and the "Libya Sunrise" siege of eastern oil terminals later that year." He was the man, in other words, who had initiated the armed overthrow of the elected government following the 2014 elections.

Thus, what looked on paper like an arrangement favouring the HoR—who would retain a veto over appointments—against the GNC—whose role was supposed to be 'advisory'—came in practice to be a means of transferring legitimacy from the elected HoR to the (electorally defeated) Tripoli and Misratan militias backing the GNA, with the provisions relating to the HoR's role simply ignored.

It did not take long for the US and UK to utilize this transfer of legitimacy to start channeling arms to their favored factions. Within days of Serraj announcing in May that the GNA was ready to start work (triggering the resignation of another four ministers, given the blatant illegality of operating without approval from the elected parliament), the UN Security Council declared it would start arming the GNA (that is, the militias now working under its banner, but not its command). It is worth noting here that the UNSC had consistently refused to lift the arms embargo on Libya when the HoR was the internationally-recognized government, battling Al Qaeda and

ISIS-aligned forces in Benghazi (forces which often had tacit support from the GNA).

Indeed, the very next month, Britain successfully lobbied the UNSC to adopt a resolution mandating existing EU anti-migrant naval operations in the Mediterranean ('Operation Sophia') to also enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya. Now that the embargo on the GNA militias had been removed, this meant specifically cutting off arms to the LNA.

Thus the LPA, and the GNA it created, have served to legitimize the militias that have laid waste to Libya, whilst delegitimizing the Libyan National Army and the elected parliament. Part of the reason for this was the desire to see that the LNA did not take Sirte.

For years, the LNA had been at the forefront of the fight against Al Qaeda and ISIS in Libya, and had completed its liberation of Benghazi from their affiliates in February 2016. The militias aligned to the GNA, meanwhile, had generally been at best ambivalent about such groups. If Britain and the US were to keep Libya out of the hands of the LNA, therefore, it needed to ensure its own favored militias retook ISIS territory, and not the LNA. Top of the agenda was Sirte. The city had fallen to ISIS in May 2015, and, following its successful Benghazi operation, the LNA then began the march to retake Sirte. This was when British special forces were inserted to make sure this did not happen. Ultimately, Sirte did fall to the British-led Misratan militias and not to the LNA, in an operation more or less completed by the end of the year.

Thus, the LPA—and the Government in Name Alone it created—achieved NATO's goals of both scuppering the Libyan-led dialogue then underway, and arresting the progress of the Libyan National Army. It has done so by transferring legitimacy from the elected parliament to the various rival militias vying for control of western Libya—and in the process, it has bolstered and entrenched militia rule.

A recent report by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs gave a stark outline of the impact this has had on Tripoli. Titled "Tripoli's Militia Cartel: How Ill-Conceived Stabilisation Blocks Political Progress, and Risks Renewed War", it is worth quoting at length. The report wrote that, on its arrival in Tripoli, "The Presidency Council rapidly fell under the influence of the militias protecting it and made little effort to reach out to others". Within a year, a cartel of four militias had established themselves as an effective oligopoly, running most of central Tripoli. "The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) backed the militias' expansion with its tacit approval," the report adds, "as well as with advice to GNA officials who liaised with the armed groups... Under the Presidency Council's watch, the militia oligopoly in Tripoli has consolidated into a cartel. The militias are no longer merely armed groups that exert their influence primarily through coercive force. They have grown into networks spanning politics, business, and the administration.... To pursue [their] fraudulent practices, commanders in Tripoli's large armed

groups began placing agents throughout the administration. Since late 2016, new appointments in ministries and other government bodies have been overwhelmingly made under pressure from the militias. Through their representatives in the administration, the networks associated with the militias are increasingly able to operate in a coordinated manner across different institutions. According to politicians, militia leaders, and bureaucrats in Tripoli, the Presidency Council and the GNA have become a mere façade, behind which the armed groups and their associated interests are calling the shots.” By establishing protection rackets, kidnappings, and extorting local banks to help them operate black market currency rackets, these militias are becoming ever more wealthy. Yet these very wealth opportunities—created by the takeover of the GNA—make the ‘capture’ of Tripoli (and the GNA) an ever more attractive prize for the country’s other militias. Thus, concludes the report, “the militia cartel threatens to thwart the UN’s ongoing attempts at brokering a more viable political settlement and risks provoking a major new conflict over the capital”.

Indeed, it is pertinent that the report, published last April, predicted not only the recent bout of violence in Tripoli—when the Seventh Brigade of Tarhouna (also a creation of the GNA), allied to discontented Misratan militias, attacked the capital in an attempt to wrest control from the cartel—but also the very locations from which it would occur:

“The stranglehold over the administration exerted by the militia cartel means that the profits from the pillaging of state funds now benefits a smaller group of actors than at any point since 2011. Unsurprisingly, this is fuelling serious tensions. A handful of Misratan militias are also present in Tripoli and support the status quo there, but the bulk of that city’s armed groups, and many of its politicians, increasingly resent their marginalization by the Tripoli cartel. In Zintan, which hosts the second largest forces in western Libya, after Misrata, such resentment is combined with the long-held desire to return to the capital and efface the humiliation suffered in 2014, when Zintani forces were forcibly dislodged from the capital by a Misratan-led coalition. The recent appointments of Zintani figures in senior positions in Tripoli are not sufficient to assuage these ambitions. Yet another force with designs on the capital is based in Tarhuna. Throughout the first months of 2018, actors from these three cities have attempted to build an alliance to enter Tripoli by force. The complexity of the alliances around the capital and engagement by UNSMIL have, to date, prevented such an offensive from happening. But the longer the current situation in Tripoli persists, the more likely it is that such forces will start a new conflict over the capital.”

The GNA is absolutely not a Government of National Accord. It does not govern, it is not national, and it does not promote accord. Rather, it is a Government in Name Alone, a colonial imposition designed purely to legitimize western support for destabilizing militias at the expense of the coun-

try’s elected parliament and most effective unified force. It is time for Libya’s factions to return to their own negotiations—and to reject, once and for all, the interference of the foreign powers which have destroyed, and continue to destroy, their country. **CP**

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Capital Crime: Executing the Mentally Ill

BY MARK A. TAYLOR

How much mental illness is too much mental illness for someone to face capital punishment?

On the night of his execution, Ricky Ray Rector paced back and forth in his cell, ruminating, gesticulating and even half-smiling. It was as though he was musing or having a conversation with an invisible visitor.

Found guilty of first degree murder and sentenced to die for shooting and killing a bar employee and an investigating police officer in Conway, Arkansas, in 1981, Rector put the gun to his own temple and pulled the trigger in an apparent suicide attempt as police closed in on him.

The blast took-off the bigger part of his brain—the entire frontal cortex—and essentially lobotomized him. At his trial, his attorney, Jeff Rosenzweig, summed up his client’s condition, “Ricky Rector is, in the vernacular, a zombie.” Mental health experts agreed, saying at times Rector had no idea he committed a crime; that he did not understand that the people he killed were not still alive; and he could not grasp the concept or finality of an execution.

For his last supper, Rector ordered steak well-done, fried chicken, cherry Kool-aid and his favorite dessert, an entire pecan pie. When the execution time rolled-around and guards arrived, one commented that he hadn’t touched the pecan pie. He pointed to the pie and reportedly said, “I’m saving that for later,” after the execution. Rector’s 1992 execution was neither the first, nor will it be the last of a severely mentally ill or mentally impaired individual, despite its prohibition, enshrined in the Eighth Amendment of the US Constitution against cruel and unusual punishment. It is clearly against the law to execute someone who is insane but several states including Florida do it anyway.

It is generally accepted by legal scholars that because the death penalty is a form of state-authorized retribution for a crime, it is essential that the condemned prisoner appreciate the significance of the punishment. Without that appreciation, the process lacks any retributive purpose and amounts to a government killing without an accepted justification. This would then violate the Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

Because Rickey Rector's disability was so pronounced and well-documented, it helps fine-focus on a particularly knotty issue that has not been adequately addressed by our moral society and its court system, that is: how much mental illness is too much mental illness for someone to face capital punishment?

So far, this question has not been adequately addressed and has allowed some states and courts to make its own determination about a person's degree of sanity, and then go ahead and execute them. There is little argument that some crimes committed by mentally ill persons have been so reprehensible, so heinous, so repugnant that the outrage is justified, and a few states have worked tirelessly to make sure these individuals receive the full measure of punishment—death. This is undertaken even at the risk of contravening the U.S. Constitution's 8th Amendment against it—and in some cases even flaunting its efforts.

While nothing diminishes or justifies the crimes committed or the need for punishment, today our court system has failed to identify and define with great precision the process for determining whether an accused person was, first, too mentally ill during the commission of the crime to understand its significance, or after his or her conviction, is too mentally ill or impaired to grasp the significance of the punishment to be meted out to them.

Over the last thirty plus years, the Supreme Court has ventured into this arena with decidedly mixed result. In the 1986 ruling of a Florida case, *Ford v. Wainwright*, it held that the Eighth Amendment's Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause bars the execution of individuals who are incompetent at the time of execution, and created a review process designed to assess an individual's current level of disability. But, the dissenting view, written by Chief Justice Warren Burger, created an avenue for aggressive prosecutors and courts to challenge and work around this ruling. He stated that by creating a right for a sanity determination (review) before execution, it "offers an invitation to those who have nothing to lose by accepting it to advance an entirely spurious claim of insanity."

Further, the court left the design and interpretation of this review process to state court judges—in this case Florida—who handed down the death sentence in the first place. The problem is, in many cases, judges are often elected and there-

fore moved by public outrage, current societal views, and self-interest. Also, they have no special training to understand that even highly delusional and mentally ill people can seem normal in many settings.

In the 2007 case of *Panetti v. Quarterman* the Supreme Court's ruling buttressed *Ford v. Wainwright*. In it, the court held that a criminal defendant sentenced to death can not be executed if he or she does not understand the reason for their execution, and that once the state has set an execution date, death-row inmates deserves a rehearing on his or her claim of mental incompetence.

In 1992, Scott Panetti, an ex-navy veteran, shot and killed his in-laws during a marital dispute in Texas. He had strug-

gled most of his life with a schizophrenia-like illness and was hospitalized twelve times for delusions and hallucinations. He pled not guilty by reason of insanity but was convicted and sentenced to die.

His execution was set for early 2004 but his attorney's filed an appeal claiming he was incompetent for execution. When the Texas court gave his attorney's one week to supply medical experts to testify to his incompetency, his attorney's argued that this was unreasonable and did not comply with the procedures defined in *Ford*

v. Wainwright. The state responded by closing the appeal, stating that Panetti had not show his incompetence and moved forward with his execution.

This was appealed to federal court, and again his appeal was denied. However, the US Supreme Court agreed to review the appeal.

Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy, stated, "A prisoner's awareness of the state's rationale for an execution is not the same as a rational understanding of it." Further, the Court said the lower Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals had ignored the reality that "gross delusions stemming from a severe mental disorder may put that awareness in a context so far removed from reality that the punishment can serve no proper purpose." It concluded the lower court had used an overly restrictive definition of what constitutes insanity. The Court also said that the Texas state court failed to provide Panetti with the kind of review guaranteed under the law for claims of mental incompetence.

In July of 2017, after nearly forty years behind bars most of which on death row, the US 5th Circuit Court of Appeals sent

The state of Florida has never found anyone too insane to execute. John Ferguson battled schizophrenia for 40 years, a diagnosis confirmed by 30 doctors. Strapped to the death gurney, his last words were: "I am the Prince of God and I will rise again."

Panetti's case back to district court to take another look at whether his mental illness makes him ineligible for execution. Today, Scott Panetti sits on death waiting for his mental illness to subside so they can execute him.

While these two rulings bolstered the 8th Amendment and guaranteed that mentally ill inmates facing execution might get a fair review, it did not attempt to define standards for defining mental illness, prohibit individual courts from "loading the deck" with experts unsympathetic to claims of mental illness, or from states adopting their own much more stringent and restrictive definitions of insanity.

Florida has never found anyone too insane not to execute them.

Take the case of John Ferguson. When the State of Florida executed Ferguson by lethal injection on August 5, 2013 they knew he was insane but they executed him anyway. They had to know he was insane, his documented battle with severe paranoid schizophrenia spanned forty years and was buttressed by more than 30 doctors who came up with the same diagnosis. Strapped to the gurney, his last words were, "I am the Prince of God, and I will rise again."

Ferguson's mental illness surfaced in 1965 when he was seventeen-years-old with visual hallucinations, voices and then paranoia. For the next ten years, he was in and out of psychiatric hospitals and mental institutions. In 1975, one court-appointed psychiatrist found his mental illness so extreme it "rendered him dangerous," and stated he, "should not be released under any circumstance" from the maximum security hospital he was held.

But three years later, he was back on the streets and went on a killing spree. Along with two accomplices, he committed a home invasion robbery. Unhappy with the take, he and accomplices shot the eight occupants in the head, killing six of them. Months later, Ferguson spotted two seventeen-year-old lovers making out in a car on the side of a remote road. After shooting and killing the boy, he took the girl into the woods where he raped and murdered her.

He was convicted of 8 counts of first degree murder and sentenced to die. Once in prison, his diagnosis was repeated over the years. Suffering from chronic schizophrenia, his competency to assist in his appeals and legal proceedings was, according to his attorney, "questionable at best." "Once on death row, his mental health further diminished. He believed he was God or Jesus. "Just like Jesus," he once told a lawyer, "you'll come and look in my grave and you won't find me there."

During his lengthy appeals process, he was said to believe that his pending execution was a plot by the State of Florida to prevent him from ascending to sit on a heavenly throne at the right hand of God. He believed the state did not have special powers enough to execute him.

Because of the controversy surrounding Ferguson's legal battle against the State of Florida, Governor Rick Scott, appointed a panel of three psychiatrist to evaluate him. Despite a

four decades long history of schizophrenia, hallucinations and delusions, after one 90 minute interview, the panel found him sane and allowed the execution to move forward.

A group of mental-health organizations filed a friend of the court's brief. The National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Florida Psychological Association, and the Florida Psychiatric Society said the Florida courts had applied an unconstitutional standard in the Ferguson case. The brief said, "A prisoner with such a disorder can be highly intelligent and rational in certain respects yet entirely fail to grasp the true reason for his execution. Without this 'rational understanding,' his execution is senseless and unconstitutional".

In last minute appeals before the Florida State Supreme Court, Ferguson's attorney's argued that he was indeed insane because he did not believe the execution would kill him. The court, however, concluded he was eligible for execution because, according to its thinking, Ferguson's belief in his own immortality was shared by millions of other American Christians. The Federal Appeals Court for the 11th Circuit agreed and allowed the execution to proceed. The United States Supreme Court declined to take up the case and issue a stay of execution.

As of July 1, 2018, six states have a moratorium on the death penalty, 20 states have abolished capital punishment, and 30 states still allow it. In March 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a moratorium on executions in the state. Through executive order, Newsom granted reprieves to the 737 prisoners on death row.

Proponents of the death penalty say it preserves law and order, deters crime and costs less than life in prison. The idea of "an eye for an eye" honors victims, helps console grieving families and ensures the perpetrators never have the opportunity to murder again. In a recent Rasmussen poll 57% of Americans support the death penalty, down from 63% in 2009.

After James Holmes conviction for the mass shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, fifty-five percent of those asked believed he should be executed. According to a recent report by the Christian Science Monitor, Duval County, Florida, has the highest per-capita rate for inmates on death row of any county in the country.

However, a recent study and poll by Public Policy Polling found an overwhelming number of Americans, by two-to-one margin, oppose the execution of the mentally ill.

Until the US Supreme Court revisits this issue, further refining and strengthening the review process, and clarifying how much mental illness is too much mental illness for an individual to be executed, one wonders how many pecan pies will go uneaten and how many times real justice will be circumvented and human rights, enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, will be denied. **CP**

MARK A. TAYLOR is an investigative journalist and novelist.

CULTURE & REVIEWS

A Pinhole View of the Venice Biennale

BY ELIZABETH LENNARD

Ralph Rugoff, the American curator of this year's Venice Biennale, limited the number of invited artists by asking them to place works in both the Giardini- the original site of the Biennale and in the Arsenale- the 1000-year-old former shipyard. Rugoff runs London's Hayward Gallery and his previous gig was San Francisco's CCA Wattis Institute. Some artists were requested not to place similar works in both places. For the visitor confronted with a multitude of artists—down to 79 from the usual 120— in theory this seemed like an excellent idea. The visitor to the International Pavilion in the Giardini will get a compressed version of the much more daunting Arsenale, (more than 11,000 square meters of exhibition space in the Corderie alone) and perhaps seek out an artist viewed in the Giardini during a subsequent visit to the Arsenale—or vice versa. The casual visitor who begins with national pavilions in the Giardini and who doesn't make it to the Arsenal, can still get an impression of the ancient Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times”, Rugoff's exhibition title. Warning : this is a biased report. I won't attempt to describe or even list the 79 artists chosen to participate in this year's twin but non-identical venues.

A Carpaccio in Venice, Berma in Phèdre, masterpieces of pictorial or dramatic art which the glamour, the dignity attaching to them made so living to me, that is to say so indivisible, that if I had been taken to see Carpaccios in one of the

galleries of the Louvre, or Berma in some piece of which I had never heard, I should not have experienced the same delicious amazement at finding myself at length, with wide-open eyes, before the unique and inconceivable object of so many thousand dreams.

—*Within a Budding Grove, Marcel Proust, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff*

As the plane landed at Venice Marco Polo airport, we were immediately summoned to the Giardini to deliver a film on soldiers, part of French Algerian artist Neil Beloufa's installation in the Arsenale. Sitting in a café on the Via Garibaldi, as we transferred the 40 minute file from one computer to another—long gone are the days of schlepping heavy film cans—Beloufa's assistant, Hugo admitted his legs were aching—he had never walked so much. Running back and forth between the Arsenale and the Giardini locations proved to be a challenge for most artists in this year's Biennale, dispersing their energies between two spaces, essentially two shows. I wanted to remind Hugo that walking too much is the beloved fate of all visitors to this carless capital, part of the undying charm of Venice. The film transfer completed, we went along our way and succeeded in getting lost in the great Venetian Google Map defying maze. But luck was on our side and we happened upon my favorite art spot in Venice, the tiny Scuola di Schiavoni, filled wall to wall with Carpaccio's 16th Century cycle of St George Killing the Dragon, the viewing of which Marcel Proust likened to his first viewing of “La Berma”, a.k.a. superstar Sarah Bernhardt. A few hours later we were back on the Via Garibaldi, at El Refolo, the one bar open late, overcrowded with artists, curators and their assistants. Nowadays, like Carpaccio,

artists are often surrounded by assistants. Long gone are the days when solitary sculptor Alberto Giacometti or lone abstract painter Serge Poliakoff presented their works at the Venice Biennale. The assistants are bearing down hard on Spritzes and Negronis; the pressure is building for the coming week's opening ritual. I strike up a conversation with Charles, born in the Bahamas, who runs fellow Nassau born, Tavares Strachan's studio in New York. Charles describes Strachan's installation on invisible histories as in the first Afro American astronaut—we've never heard of: Robert Henry Laurence Jr. “who died while instructing a flight test trainee...” I speak to Kelly Jayne Jones: a cheerful redhead from Manchester, England who designed and composed the sound for Cypriot artist Haris Epaminonda's “super 8 movie shot in Las Vegas and forgotten desert museums”. Dylan and Mehdi have almost finished their work on Neil Beloufa's two installations. Beloufa's Skype interviews with soldiers from several countries are installed in finely shaped contraptions: a cross between a workout bench and a phone booth. The viewer is engaged in a one-to-one interaction with a soldier whose candid conversations go into confessional mode as they switch between life in the army and their personal lives.

Tuesday, back in Venice for the pre, pre-opening, we begin our stroll through the Arsenal. The visitor is greeted by US artist George Condo's large-scale double Elvis painting and to the left, are Indian photographer Soham Gupta's striking images of “angst ridden” citizens of Kolkata. The Condo painting hangs on the outer wall of the first of several black boxes that house films/videos in this year's Biennale. Christian Marclay layers war films literally one on top of another, sound and all, produc-

ing a work at once graphically pleasing and aggressively noisy. Ed Atkins' installation of fairytale like CGI videos are full of tongue and cheek British charm and humor. L.A. based painter Jill Mulleady's compositions are reminiscent of Pierre Klossowski's perverse and cruel dreamlike mise-en-scenes. Her paintings stand on their own in the noisy painting unfriendly Arsenal space whereas Julie Mehretu's abstractions look better in the Giardini. Republic of China artist Xiuwen Yin's contribution called "Trojan" is a giant woman in flight crash position seatbelt fastened in an airplane seat. She's made out of recycled sweatshirts and she's big enough for you to "go inside her". Gigantism continues with Los Angeles based artist, Arthur Jafa's "snow chained" tires. On the other side of the room a few visitors are now discovering that Beloufa's installation requires three actions: straddling the pink imitation leather workout bench, looking through a mask concealing amplifiers and pressing a button that activates interviews with military personnel.

Next door is Ryoji Ikeda's sensory journey of sound and images in a huge black box, one of the least claustrophobic of the Biennale. Just beyond you can hear the pleasant tinkling of Lebanese born, Tarek Atoui's interactive sound installation of ceramics.

As we make our way through the Arsenal our fading attention span is revived by the Ghana Pavilion. It contains 6 artists, chosen in homage to the late Ghanaian curator Okwui Enwezor. Here we are struck by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's brushstrokes, reminiscent of Manet or Eric Fischl with some Edgar Degas in her subject matter. Sadly her paintings are nearly hidden from view by the darkened cavern of David Adjaye's architecture. Felicia Abban's 60s and 70s self-portraits in various getups, are a discovery for me: a sort of Ghanaian Cindy Sherman before the letter.

At the end of a row of national pavilions in the Arsenal, the bright Irish pavilion with sculptress Eva Rothschild's Shrinking Universe comes as a welcome

surprise. Is it because we are invited to sit or climb on an uneven blockade of polystyrene rectangular blocks? Either way her work is a friendly confrontation with today's cityscape of "anti-terrorist barricades".

(1911–1969) who was pro-Japanese during the Japanese colonial era and later defected to North Korea.

No crowd—and oddly no bag search—at the US pavilion for Martin Puryear's wonderfully executed large



Neil Beloufa: Global Agreement by Elizabeth Lennard

Day two of the Biennale: the mob scene of press and anyone who managed to get an accreditation makes visiting the Giardini pavilions challenging. We skip the hour and a half wait to get into Laure Prouvost's video installation in the French pavilion and take shelter in the Korean pavilion entitled: "History Has Failed Us, but No Matter" the first sentence of Min Jin Lee's novel Pachinko, about the Zainichi, the 20th century Diaspora of Koreans living in Japan. Of the three women artists chosen by curator Hyunjin Kim, we were most intrigued by Hwayeon Nam choreographic video on the controversial Korean dancer Choi Seung-hee,

and small sculptural forms that stand on their own and yet have enormous political content. Some are inspired by head pieces: a giant Phrygian cap, a symbol of the French Revolution; a covered wagon made from wood on a metaphysical seesaw, called "New Voortreker", in reference to the 19th century trek of Dutch speaking settlers from British ruled South Africa that became a symbol for Afrikaner nationalists in the 1930s; a "Column for Sally Hemmings", the slave turned mistress to Thomas Jefferson. The column recalls the architecture of the pavilion where it's being shown, itself inspired by Jefferson's neo-Palladian Monticello. Perhaps in this one instance,

Puryear becomes too literal.

This year's national pavilions are more nationalistic than ever, a kind of perverse World's Fair. If you enter a pavilion blindfolded, no problem guessing the pavilion's nationality. When at one time there had been some subtlety in a country's choice of artists, the equation of art + politics + political correctness oblige, nations have taken this as a freebee to unabashedly represent themselves. The Canadians show a documentary about their oppression of the Eskimos. At the Dutch pavilion you can see Remi Jungerman's finely constructed de Stijl influenced sculptures in a combine with Iris Kensmil's portraits of overlooked black women artists, writers, activists.

Although I'm an unconditional fan of Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov, his choice of totally blacking out the upper floor of the Russian pavilion made it nearly impossible to see the replicas of the 1848 Atlante figures that hold up the portico of the New Hermitage in St Petersburg and watch Sokurov's war videos. I do recommend the lower floor with Alexander Shishkin-Hokusai's enlarged version of the mechanical Peacock Clock in the Winter Palace and giant Flemish paintings created in old-fashioned theatrical 3D. The black boxes continue in the Giardini with an overwhelming number of films/videos placing the viewer in claustrophobic darkness. I find myself grabbing for my phone flashlight, desperately seeking non-existent exit signs.

The opening of "Mondo Cane" an installation by Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys at the Belgian Pavilion was crowded, perhaps it was the free beer. Mechanized puppets reminiscent of early Disneyland, represent stereotypes of local craftsmen in the apocalyptic wreck of European unemployment. The following day we run into noted Belgian art critic Bernard Marcadier boarding the Vaporetto. I ask him if the artists presented in the Belgian pavilion are well known in their home country. He says "not so much in French

speaking Belgium, but in Flanders, yes". He thought their sensibility was more Anglo Saxon than Walloon. I wasn't sure what he meant.

Apropos to Anglo-Saxon, I enjoyed my brief visit to the Great Britain Pavilion where Irish artist Cathy Wilkes shows ethereal looking pregnant ETs, unequivocally Anglo Irish wall hanging porcelain and a tea set, sculptures of arms literally doing the washing up.

As I leave the international pavilion, (one of the last or first rooms, depending on which way you enter) I am struck by large patchwork paintings by young LA-based Nigerian Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Her autobiographical works incorporate photo transfers and African fabrics creating a flattened Vuillard like perspective.

Everyone in Venice has his or her own agenda and I follow mine. We head to the Cini Foundation on Isola San Giorgio, to the opening of the Alberto Burri show. Burri's matter obsessed "paintings"—from Abstract to Arte Povera—defy categories and this show of rarely lent works deserves far more than this short mention. Also on view on the island, in a former boarding school, are 20th Century French glass maker, Maurice Marinot's remarkable creations in an exhibition organized by Le Stanza del Vetro.

I managed to locate the Indian Pavilion at the very end of the Arsenale, honoring Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birthday. The atmosphere is Lo-tech and calming, beginning with Atul Dodiya's "Broken Branches": old wooden cabinets like the ones in the Gandhi Museum, filled with hand painted photographs, prosthetics and miscellaneous items. On another wall Karnataka born, GR Iranna has hung hundreds of lovely wooden sandals, the Padukas worn by Gandhi, who refused to wear leather. The main problem of the Biennale is TMI and too much to see. Shakuntala Kulkarni's fascinating bamboo body armor and her site specific multi-media performances required more time than this exhausted viewer could give them. There is also

a Hi-tech part of the pavilion: a walk-through misty smoke screen where Jitish Kallat projects Gandhi's controversial July 1939 letter to Adolf Hitler, trying to convince him not to "reduce humanity to a savage state".

On my last day I rush to a converted boatyard on the Giudecca Island for the inauguration of the Estonian Pavilion. Baroque singer Michiko Takahashi is featured in a pagan-like performance orchestrated by artist Kris Lemsalu whose fountains of eagle winged ceramic vaginas spout water from the Venice canals. Surrounded by a crowd of enthralled young onlookers, like a statue of a saint in a Holy procession, Michiko is pulled into a warehouse on a wooden float as she vocalizes in what could be Latin. I'm in a time warp reminiscent of a Stephen Arnold warehouse performance in seventies San Francisco.

We had missed the Lithuanian Pavilion's *Sun and Sea*, where trained opera singers and locals lounge on an artificial beach in a kind of Brechtian opera conceived by Lina Lapelyte, Vaiva Grainyte and Rugile Barzdziukaite. They took home the Golden Lion for the best National participation » while Arthur Jafa, whose enchained truck tires we noticed in the Cordelerie, won the Golden Lion for his film *The White Album*, commissioned by the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley. Haris Epaminonda received the "promising young participant" Silver Lion for her super 8movie with sound design by my new acquaintance Kelly Jayne Jones. We came home feeling that the mood of this year's biennale under the adage of living in interesting times could be post-scripted more precisely by Alexander Cockburn's *Colossal Wreck*. But, the propensity of ideas and talents provided sufficient nourishment for at least two years to come. **CP**

ELIZABETH LENNARD is a Paris-based artist, photographer and filmmaker. Her films include "The Stein Family" and "Talking House."

Born in the USA

BY LEE BALLINGER

Chapman University in California's Orange County has a state of the art film school ranked as America's sixth best by the Hollywood Reporter. For years the film school had posters touting D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* hung in a high foot-traffic area. The posters included a red, white and blue-colored promotion for a showing at Ford's Theatre and an Elks Theatre newspaper ad describing the film as "D.W. Griffith's Stupendous Dramatic Spectacle."

In 2017, film student Kristina Rodemann launched an online petition to have the posters removed. Why would anyone object to a film that the American Film Institute ranks as number 44 on its list of 100 Greatest American Films?

The *Birth of a Nation* (originally entitled *The Clansman*) portrayed black men as ignorant and obsessed with having sex with white women. Slavery is championed. The Ku Klux Klan's birth is depicted, presenting the hooded terrorists as a heroic force. Blacks, played by white actors in blackface, are shown as stealing elections during Reconstruction while whites are denied the vote. Lynching by the Klan gets a thumbs up from Griffith, as does the prevention of blacks from voting by armed Klansmen. All this is shown to be necessary to restore order and civilization in the South.

Rodemann's petition didn't gain much traction but the debate exploded on March 29 of this year after Chapman student Arri Caviness tweeted a picture of several students in front of the *Birth of a Nation* posters. "Why does Dodge College [Chapman's film school] still condone the celebration of white supremacy? #takedownBOAN," she wrote.

When current Chapman University president Daniele Struppa became president in 2016, he said: "I think it's so special to find engaged learners who have the ability to keep asking ques-

tions." However, he didn't seem to find it special that engaged learners were asking questions about *The Birth of a Nation*. Struppa addressed the issue by penning an opinion piece for the school's newspaper.

In that piece, he denounced the idea of removing the poster as "censorship" (a student responded: "Teaching about the technical aspects of this film while ignoring the racism—THAT'S censorship"). Struppa added that taking the poster down would deny students a chance to learn, to "confront a problematic past."

Then he dropped the other shoe: "It is not hard to see the film's nostalgia for a time before the Civil War and resentment against the Reconstruction era. All of this pales, however, when compared to the blatantly racist tone that pervades the entire film." In other words, nostalgia for slavery itself is the good part of the film, compared to the "racist tone" that it produces. Perhaps Struppa was influenced by the fact that the poster was part of a 1997 donation of a movie art and poster collection from the Cecil B. DeMille Foundation, a donation that was accompanied by a monetary gift of \$500,000. Maybe Struppa is touchy because while he's always talking about his achievements in increasing diversity, Chapman has only 122 Black students out of a student body of 8,542.

Thom Andersen, director of the film *Red Hollywood* and a film professor at the California Institute of the Arts, said in an interview with *Inside Higher Ed* that the *Birth of a Nation* posters should never have been put up in the first place.

"It's inconceivable to me that anyone would think that was the right thing to do," he said. "That's not talking about the film. That's honoring the film."

Andersen said that there is no question about the film's significance. "It was the first blockbuster film, it was the first long film. It was in a way responsible for the success of movies in the United States," he said.

But, Andersen added, "I don't think there is a film that has had such a negative

impact on our society. As a film promoting the Ku Klux Klan, it helped lead to a rebirth of the Klan, not only in the South, but in the Midwest and Southern California. And by perpetuating a false sense of history about Reconstruction, the film helped lead to Jim Crow laws, to the disenfranchisement of black people, to lynchings. The film alone didn't do all of those things, but it made a large contribution."

In April, two student groups at Chapman, one of the graduate students and another of undergraduates, requested meetings with faculty and the school administration. Community forums and a protest march were organized as well. Ultimately it was decided that a decision on the removal of the posters would be made by a vote of the film school faculty. On April 22 they voted to take the posters down.

The film itself has received kinder treatment and not just from the American Film Institute. In 1992 the Library of Congress deemed *The Birth of a Nation* "culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant" and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry.

1992 was also the year of the Los Angeles rebellion and Matthew McDaniel was in the middle of it with a movie camera. His resulting film, *Birth of a Nation 4/29/92*, is harrowing, yet an inspiring slice of real life and a direct rebuttal of D.W. Griffith. McDaniel tells the truth by taking the side of those who were in the streets protesting police brutality and taking the food, diapers, and other things their families needed ("Take everything. Fuck 'em!"). While he focuses his camera on the blacks who rebelled, McDaniel also dedicates the film to all 14,000 people who were jailed (51 percent were Latino, 36 percent were black, 12 percent were white).

They said it was for the black man
They said it was for the Mexican
And not for the white man
But if you look at the streets
It wasn't about Rodney King

It's about this fucked-up situation
and these fucked-up police

"April 29, 1992," Sublime

D.W. Griffith and Matthew McDaniel each made a movie about the "birth of a nation." What did they mean by "nation"?

With Griffith, he's describing a country that had existed for nearly a century before the Civil War, with slavery ascendant and the South in almost total control of the country. The post-Civil War nation he describes in his film is one where industry is ascendant and the North is in control. Yet that nation, which Griffith celebrates, is one in which the drive for equality has been beaten back and the segregation and brutality of the past is enshrined in law, custom, and the violent realities of daily life. As an intertitle in Griffith's film puts it, "The former enemies of North and South are united again in defense of their Aryan birthright."

In his film, Matthew McDaniel describes a "nation" which, on the one hand, is coming apart, with much of the black church and academia pushing for peace at any price while the poverty-stricken mass is fighting for its life in the streets. On the other hand, it's a "nation" of the poor of all colors which is, however haphazardly, moving together in pursuit of basic necessities. These were people who had been permanently pushed outside of the economy. Unlike South Central Los Angeles residents during the earlier Watts Rebellion in 1965, they weren't looking for an opportunity to fight their way into some version of forty acres and a mule.

As for the Klan, the 1915 *Birth of a Nation* portrays a powerful group which, partly as a result of the film, later expanded beyond the South and became the dominant political force in northern states such as Indiana. By the time of the 1992 film, the Klan was a

But today the Klan is a mere bit player in the rush to fascism. The government and the corporations now have the leading roles. This escalating drama ranges from the brutal attacks against immigrants on the border to the current felony trial of Scott Warren in Tucson for

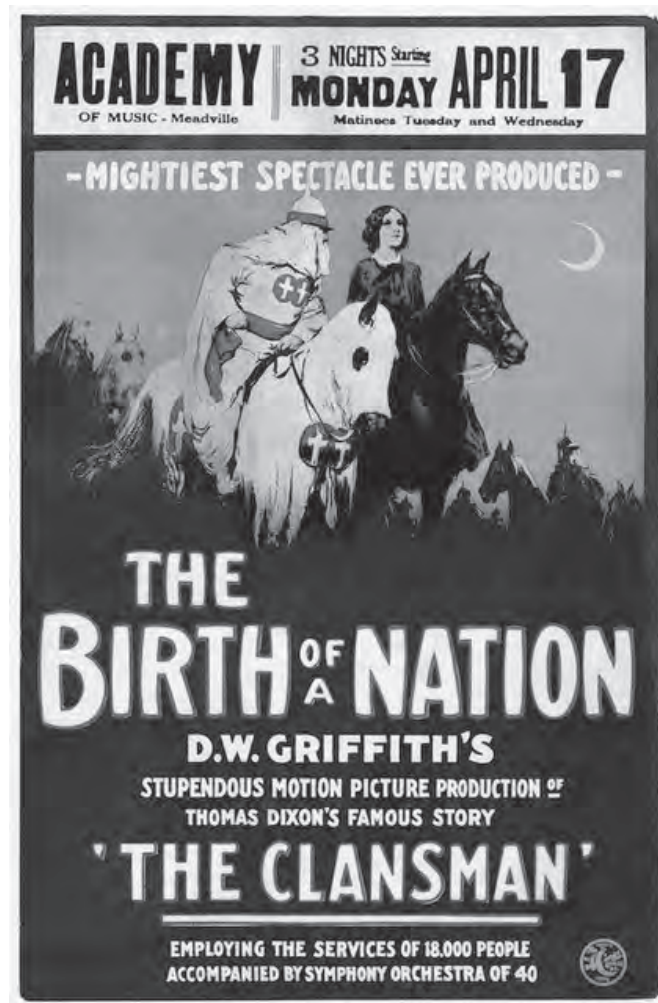
giving humanitarian aid to some of those immigrants; from the criminalization of homelessness to the criminalization of feeding the homeless; from the world's largest prison system to the normalization of police deadly force in the streets; from making protest illegal to giving corporations the same legal rights as people.

Color is a factor in all this but, as African-American scholar Sheryll Cashin noted in a recent radio interview, "Every time you have an assertion of white supremacy today, there's an economic story there." And that economic story is no longer based simply on color, as the LA rebellion demonstrated.

The two *Birth of a Nation* films are now, in spirit, being shown at the fork in the road where America, dazed and confused, finds itself today. We are headed toward a sequel of the 1915 one, a horror film almost beyond description. If we can shoot a sequel to

the one from 1992, a docudrama that expands and makes permanent the temporary unity that was present in the streets of Los Angeles, a happy ending for us all becomes a possibility. **CP**

LEE BALLINGER is *CounterPunch's* music columnist.



mere shadow of its former self, although still capable of deadly violence, as seen in Greensboro, North Carolina or Charlottesville, Virginia.

"I live at Chapman Grand in Anaheim, but just three years ago, in February 2016, there was a KKK rally not far from this apartment complex. There was violence incited and it was pretty scary to know how close they were to campus."--Chapman University student and protest leader Olivia Harden

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