

# CounterPunch

THE GLOBALIZATION OF PLASTIC BY JOHN DAVIS

UNDER CIA EYES BY JEFFERSON MORLEY

THE GHOST OF JIMMY HOFFA BY DAVID MACARAY

TRUMP'S DIVERSIONARY WARS BY LAURA CARLSEN

POLITICS BEYOND IMPEACHMENT BY PAUL STREET



# CounterPunch

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"The plastic harpoon" by Oliver Grant.

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In Memory of  
Alexander Cockburn  
1941–2012



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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VOLUME 26 NUMBER 5 • 2019

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR ..... 5

## BORDERZONE NOTES

### Trump's Diversionary War on the Border By LAURA CARLSEN ..... 10

## EUROZONE NOTES

### Change the System, But How? By DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK ..... 12

## ARTICLES

### Global Plastic By JOHN DAVIS ..... 14

### Beyond Trumpeachment By PAUL STREET ..... 17

### The Ghost of Jimmy Hoffa By DAVID MACARAY ..... 21

### Under CIA Eyes By JEFFERSON MORLEY ..... 25

### What Labour's Loss Means for the American Left By ROB URIE ..... 29

### Lies, Lies and More Lies By MELVIN GOODMAN ..... 31

## COLUMNS

### Roaming Charges..... 6

A Few Good Sadists

By Jeffrey St. Clair

How torture and murder  
went mainstream.

### Empire Burlesque ..... 7

The Hallucination Nation

By Chris Floyd

When the aberration is the system.

### Bottomlines ..... 8

Capitalist Reforms Aren't  
Socialism

By Pete Dolack

Stop trying to reform  
the unreformable.

### Hook, Line and Sinker ..... 9

Liberal Derangement

By Jennifer Matsui

The techno-endgame  
of neoliberalism.

## CULTURE & REVIEWS

Equality

By Lee Ballinger..... 33

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## **FBI Charade**

Of course, we know the Republicans aren't against the surveillance powers of the FBI, just who they were used against. My prediction, if they maintain power over the next four years, the FBI will be made into an even worse political police force than it has been. Steve Bannon's deconstruction continues, as we remain frogs in the slow boiling water.

*Andrew Smolski*

## **The Same BS**

The latest Democratic elite attack on Medicare for All is all about saving the jobs of the poor insurance salesmen. That insurance company worker BS was the same line Obama used to tell the American people to cram it. I was like, "well won't they just work for the single-payer entity in the same capacity?" Answer was likely "yes, but there'll be no bonuses for CEOs and HMOs."

*Theodore Van Alst*

## **Fatal Attraction**

I know I'm stating the obvious here, but, I mean, here's a guy (Bush) that lied to start a war that's cost millions of lives and trillions of dollars and ruined our economy and Michelle Obama loves him?? How does she justify this? This shit isn't even cute. It would spin heads on the Bizarro world. Yet here we are...

*Tim Withee*

## **Thanks Kid**

St. Clair recently wrote about bassist Jaco Pastorius recently and it reminded me of the time I met Jaco in the mid-80s at an after show party of Bernie

Worrell and Friends at the Lone Star Cafe. Starstruck, I told him he was the baddest bassist in the world. He grab me by the shoulder and whispered, Gee thanks, kid. Wanna swig of my beer? I could have died then and there. I shed a tear when I heard he was killed.

*Kenneth Sullivan*

## **The Electability Crap**

Polls and polling being what they are, unreliable and over-rated, it's still fascinating to see how Democrat partisans are clinging to this electability crap and neoliberalism.

*Glenn Kirk*

## **The GOP Scheme**

Part of the GOP scheme is to call Social Security and Medicare "entitlements," instead of benefits that people pay for out of their weekly salaries with the reasonable expectation that they'd be available when needed.

*Scott McLarty*

## **Growing Up Billionaire**

Remember when we were kids and the teacher would ask what we wanted to be when we grew up? There were always a few astronauts and firemen, and then most kids wanted to be president. She never told us that we had to be billionaires.

*Jenelle Green*

## **Poverty, Texas-Style**

Texas is one of the cruelest and stingiest of states regarding social support services such as Medicaid. Back in the pre-Clinton days, Texas' welfare payments were somewhere in the neighborhood of \$400 per month for a family of

four. The state did not vote to expand Medicaid, and now we have 2 1/2 million uninsured people in a state of 28 million. Poverty ain't fun down here.

*David Orr*

## **Living in Trump's America**

My disabled sister loses her food stamps in January. She had a stroke and is paralyzed. Unemployed Husband cares for her. They live on her \$1200 teachers retirement. Social worker helped arrange part-time \$800 income for daughter to help care for her mother. Too much income in Texas, they lose their food stamps and pregnant daughter's Medicaid in a few weeks.

*DeNeice Kenehan*

## **Intractable Moderates**

The rise of Trump and Johnson were both due to bad candidates and intractable "moderate" politicians who forgot their constituents.

*John Blair*

## **The Fix is In**

Let's get real here: Nancy Pelosi and her collaborative crew of Vichy Democrats are incapable and unwilling of presenting a viable alternative to the entrenched power elite. They are merely the other side of the corporate coin that pays the piper and calls the shots. All this blather about an alternative in a binary system is just that. The Fix is in.

*Deryle Perryman*

## **A Party Like This**

OK, let's say you decided to vote for a Democratic candidate (Sanders, Warren, whoever), and he or she wins the presidency and is willing to

do something really positive. What in the world could that candidate (and all we together with him/her) do with a party that votes to reauthorize the Patriot Act and give the Pentagon whatever it wants (even more than it wants)?

*Vladimir Stupar*

## **We're Good**

Since according to the latest polls, Severyone can beat Trump, let's pick the Democrat who won't make waves with the war state. Oh wait, that's all of them. We're good.

*Paul Lacques*

## **Imagine**

Can you imagine what could be done with the \$738 billion the Democratic-controlled House just appropriated to the Defense Department? Can you imagine what could be done with our forces if they were deployed here: building homes for homeless, cleaning up fracking spills, rebuilding infrastructure, rehabbing our ghettos for the people who live there, recovering from hurricane damage, replanting our forests, building bike trails, constructing high speed rails?

*Cynthia Bretheim*

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## ROAMING CHARGES

# A Few Good Sadists

BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

Here's a flashback that may help to explain how we got to where we are: the day was April 30, 2004. Alexander Cockburn and I were sitting by the pool having a gin and tonic at the old Richelieu Hotel in New Orleans' French Quarter. The concierge, an elegant black man from Haiti named Jean-Claud, dropped a sheaf of papers on our table. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, Mr. Cockburn," he said. "These just came through for you by fax with a note marked 'Urgent.'"

Alex looked at the first page. It was the cover of *The New Yorker* magazine. He turned to me and said with a grin, "Can anything from the *New Yorker* ever truly be considered 'urgent'?" He paused. "Unless, they've libeled you again." He was referring to a story written by the late Michael Kelley a few years earlier which had accused me of consorting with eco-terrorists. Back in my room a few minutes later, the phone rang. It was Alex. "Jeffrey, I don't know if the fax qualifies as urgent, but I think it spells the end of the Bush administration. Perhaps we should have another drink and go over it."

The fax was a copy of a 4,000 word story by Seymour Hersh titled "Torture at Abu Ghraib." Hersh's exposé described in harrowing detail the torture, humiliation and sadistic abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghrai. Hersh's story was based on a secret internal report made by the Army's own investigator, Major General Anthony Taguba. The report described Iraqi prisoners being stripped naked, bound and gagged, beaten with clubs, confronted with guard dogs, sexually assaulted with wires, nightsticks and a phosphorous tube. Some detainees were dragged across the prison floor by a rope tied to their penises. Others had phos-

phoric acid poured over their bodies.

The horrors of Abu Ghraib weren't news. Reports of detainee abuse had been circulating in the press for nearly a year. Two lawsuits against the Army had already been filed. What was new in Hersh's story, what both Alex and I believed would doom the Bush administration and probably land Donald Rumsfeld in prison, was the photos. The sadistic guards had taken selfies, one with the corpse of a man who they'd tortured to death. Others of bound naked men stacked into a pyramid. Others of hooded men with electrical wires rigged to their bodies. Photos that couldn't be talked away.

We were wrong. Hersh's story, and the damning photos that illustrated it didn't doom the Bush administration. Rumsfeld wasn't indicted. The real architects of torture almost escaped any notice at all. The blame was laid on guards and low-level officers. A rogue operation we were told. In fact, it didn't even stop the Bush administration's torture program. The public was numb. Congress was impotent. The CIA and its murderous henchmen continued their dirty work at black sites around the world with a sense of impunity: beating, prodding, stress-positioning, electroshocking, starving, sleep-depriving and waterboarding detainees at will, for weeks and months at a time, regardless of whether they had any information at all to spill.

Flash forward to Trumptime: Trump may well be the first presidential candidate to publicly advocate torture on the campaign trail. He won't be the last. Torture has finally found its demographic in the American electorate. It's a wedge issue. And not just for the Fox News crowd.

When it came time to replace Mike Pompeo (another holy roller torture advocate) at the CIA, Trump knew just who to call: Gina Haspel, who had overseen the CIA's torture operations at a black site in Thailand and later played a role in destroying 92 tapes relating to the agency's torture program. Haspel is a grade-A war criminal and as such is the kind of woman who both excites and terrifies Trump.

Enter Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, known as "Blade" to his co-conspirators in Navy SEAL Team 7. During the Battle of Mosul in 2017, Gallagher noticed a heavily sedated teenage detainee, thought to be a member of ISIS, being treated by a medic. Gallagher radioed to his squad, "He's mine." Gallagher then walked over to the immobilized boy, repeatedly stabbed him in the throat with his hunting knife and then posed for a selfie with the child's corpse, holding its head up by the hair. Blade then texted the photo to friends back in the states, noting: "Good story behind this, got him with my hunting knife." When two other SEALs reported the murder to their superiors, Gallagher threatened to kill them. In the end, Gallagher escaped the most serious charges of murder, but was convicted of posing with a corpse. Then Trump intervened, ordering that Gallagher's demotion be overturned and that he remain a member of the SEALs. Trump brayed that he had "defended a great warrior against the Deep State" and vowed to bring along Gallagher to his reelection campaign rallies.

The missing link between the depraved crimes of Abu Ghraib and the depredations of Edward Gallagher is, of course, Barack Obama. Obama's fatal decision not to fully expose and prosecute the torturers of the Bush administration transformed their crimes into US policy. With nothing to restrain him, Trump was free to turn torture and murder into a political spectacle, using the Oval Office to recruit a few good sadists to serve the thirsts of the empire. **CP**



## EMPIRE BURLESQUE

# The Hallucinated Nation

BY CHRIS FLOYD

**O**ne reason why it's so hard to get a handle on American politics, to say anything sensible about it, is that it takes place almost entirely in a hallucination. The country that most Americans feel they are living in does not actually exist.

In this, as in so many other ways, Trump's reign has been a powerful—I would even say unprecedented—rending of the veils. Just as he has shown us the true face of the gangster capitalism that has long lurked behind the mask of law; just as he has revealed the howling, lashing race-hate and Other-fear at the root of American Exceptionalism; just as he has stripped bare our long-proclaimed, utterly hollow pieties about family, fidelity, personal morality, honesty, civility, knowledge and prudence, so has he revealed to us the genuine irreality and freakishness of American actuality.

For where else but in a bizarre and brutal freak show could someone like Trump rise to the pinnacle of power—and what's more, literally be worshipped by millions of people?

"Humankind cannot bear very much reality," as that old Missouri tomtcat, T.S. Eliot, once said. But Americans seem unable to bear any reality at all. Witness the earnest liberals of today, those who tout their "complex"—even "dark"—view of American society. They "know" that the nation was built wholly on the hideous evils of slavery and genocide, sustained over centuries. They "know" that these foundational American systems of rapine and domination have been extended across the face of the earth. They "know" our military has committed (and enabled) sickening atrocities and mass murder throughout the whole of our history,

right down to this very hour. They "know" our "intelligence community" (one of the more sick-making expressions in the American lexicon) engage in surveillance, subversion, coups, assassinations—skullduggeries of every imaginable stripe. (And no doubt some that we proles have not yet imagined.)

They "know" our "law enforcement agencies" have become bristling, militarized occupation forces, gunning down minorities with literal impunity while demanding blind obedience and copious tribute in form of tax money. (As I write this, the Attorney General of the United States has just stated openly that police work in America is a protection racket, not a public service. If certain unspecified communities don't start paying more respect to cops, says Bill Barr, then "they might find themselves without the police protection they need.")

I'm also writing this on the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark at the hands of Chicago police and the FBI.) These good liberals even watch Martin Scorsese movies and "know" that the criminal "underworld" is so intimately and corruptly entwined with the "overworld" of politics and business that there is no discernible borderline between these realms.

But dip into the timeline of any number of these earnest folks and you will find a touching, childlike belief in the essential goodness and rightness of the "American experiment"—however much the noble character of this bold and progressive adventure has been tragically perverted by one's political opponents at any given time.

You will find that despite "knowing" all of the above, they don't actually live in that grim reality but in a dream world,

where the CIA and FBI—known purveyors of murder, lies and gargantuan corruption—have become "heroes of the resistance," moral champions motivated solely by selfless public service and faithful adherence to our "true" ideals. They'll even enthusiastically push CIA agents and imperial warriors for public office.

Elsewhere, you'll see ghastly imperial time-servers like Robert Mueller—who fervently pushed the lies that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Iraq—serenaded by "edgy" comedians on national television and beseeched by the millionaire "journalists" of MSNBC to save us. You'll see Nancy Pelosi—the multimillionaire Speaker who, as I write, has just sneeringly dismissed her own party's belated efforts to begin to address the climate catastrophe as "the green dream or whatever," casually condemning generations of all those outside the cocoon of riches, power and privilege that she shares with Trump to a beastly future in a blighted landscape—treated with fandom gush as a "cool, badass woman," fighting for the common people.

Again, we're speaking here of good liberals, highly educated people "in the know," people who are "savvy," who are proud of their complicated, critical, conflicted patriotism—so much more nuanced than the blind, cartoonish faith of the Right. Yet even they feel there exists some normative, essential goodness in the American character: in the nation's history, society, politics—indeed, in its very teleology, which they believe actually exists and is, like the arc of the universe in the 19th century quote made famous by Martin Luther King Jr., forever "bending toward justice." And thus all the manifest evils that have beset the "American experiment" since the beginning—and are overwhelming it like a tsunami today—are seen as aberrations and terrible distortions of what the country really is.

How can there be a sensible way forward for a people trapped in such a fever dream? **CP**



## BOTTOMLINES

# Capitalist Reforms Aren't Socialism

BY PETE DOLACK

**A**nybody but Bush” didn’t work out so well in 2004, an election in which the prominent anti-war group United for Peace and Justice steered the anti-war movement into supporting a pro-war candidate, John Kerry. The result was another four years of the Bush II/Cheney administration, at the time the worst in history.

That gang has been supplanted as the worst by Donald Trump. So is “anybody but Trump” the path to defeating a president who although not competent enough nor with sufficient ruling class support to be a fascist despot certainly has the desire to be one, which is more than awful enough. The efforts of the Democratic Party establishment to secure the nomination for Joe Biden show that not only has the Democratic National Committee not only learned nothing from tipping the scales for Hillary Clinton in 2016 but nothing from 2004, either.

Ah well, you can lead centrists afraid of their own shadows to water but you can’t make them stop cowering.

Not even those centrists seem confident in Biden, apparently seeing the corporate tabula rasa Pete Buttigieg as their backup, the only viable explanation for his rise to the Democrats’ first tier.

And that brings us to Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. How should we approach the two progressives among the leading contenders? One says he’s a socialist and the other says she’s a capitalist to the bone. There are nuances of differences between the two of them, but nothing that could reasonably be said to be a major gap. They are the best candidates produced by the Democrats this primary season—yes, I know that is

a low bar—but if we insist on stepping into the voting booth, this is the best we’re likely to see from the lesser-evil corporate party.

The real difference between Sanders and Warren is simply this: She is more intellectually honest.

Both are capitalists, albeit capitalists who want much stronger reforms than their party rivals. There is a reasonable argument that Sanders has performed a needed service by popularizing the idea of socialism, augmenting the popularity of socialism among millennials who quite correctly see that capitalism sure ain’t working for them. It doesn’t work for their parents or grandparents, either, but those too young to remember the Soviet Union, and thus immune to its use as a giant bogeyman, are collectively more willing to consider alternatives. That is no small feat in a world in which, in Fredric Jameson’s incisive observation, most people can more easily conceive the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Popularizing socialism can only be a good thing, a necessary first step if humanity is to have a future. But Sanders’ actual policies aren’t socialist. They are simply strong reforms to capitalism and a recreation of the New Deal. Yes, these reforms would be welcome if achieved. But they wouldn’t last.

The New Deal is now a distant memory. That is not a fluke. All reforms under capitalism are destined to be taken away. The reforms of Sanders and Warren would be destined to be taken away and, given the overwhelming power of financiers and industrialists, any reforms would be taken away sooner and not later. We can’t stay in the streets forever.

The massive movement needed to push through significant reforms couldn’t stay mobilized permanently, which is what would be needed to maintain the reforms. Many people would congratulate themselves after initial victories and stand down. Some would have to divert their attention to deal with health, family or other challenges that would inevitably arise.

When people cease mobilizing in massive numbers, the reforms are taken away in a capitalist system with massive inequality built into it. We have the numbers, but industrialists and financiers have the money, power, law, propaganda apparatus and armed force.

If we want a better world, we have to have a different economic system with new social structures and institutions. We can label that socialism or economic democracy. Whichever we call it, it is this: Popular control of production so that enterprises are oriented toward meeting the needs of everyone in a democratic system instead of for the profit of an individual owner or for speculators.

A system in which working people make the decisions in their enterprise and that such decision-making is done in a broader social context so that decisions with social repercussions are made with the peoples and communities affected.

Neither Sanders nor Warren is offering anything remotely resembling that. Warren, then, is simply being honest in calling herself a capitalist, as she indeed is. Sanders is also a capitalist. I don’t suggest he is dishonest; quite the contrary, I have no doubt about his sincerity. Nonetheless, he is putting into many minds the idea that reforming capitalism is socialism, and that is a road that has led to many a dead end and can lead only to more disappointment. If a massive, international movement of movements is the only thing that can lead to a better world—and it is—then that movement needs to strive for socialism/economic democracy, not reforms to a system that is unreformable. **CP**





## HOOK, LINE AND SINKER

# Liberal Derangement

BY JENNIFER MATSUI

**D**onald Trump's presidency has brought about the derangement of his liberal detractors at home, and the empowerment of his right-wing allies abroad, setting the stage for a technocratic takeover of governments worldwide. Even Boris Johnson has imitated his American counterpart's erratic, confusion-sowing antics in order to secure a victory made possible by the same derangement of liberal elites who make up a sizable chunk of the opposition in the UK.

Where Democrats cite Russian influence to explain Trump's shocking rise to power, Labour's own conspiracy-peddling elite blame "anti-Semitism" for the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, their own leader. Confused yet? You should be, after all, that is entirely the point. Still, it's not clear whether it's us or Donald Trump who are some kind of unwitting dupes in a controlled social experiment à la Cambridge Analytica's manipulations of social media. This is not to suggest that DOTUS represents any real bulwark against the forces poised to take out all and any opposition to permanent war, but that he himself is the planted explosive device that will blow up democracy as we know it, and outsource it to Silicon Valley and Wall Street, using publicly funded Pentagon resources to carry out their coup.

The controversial social engineering firm might be officially out of business, but its business model is hardly the kind to be stuffed back into a bottle labeled "Too Evil". Instead, its bipartisan, multinational brain trust might have more ambitious uses for a technology that delivers highly selective and streamlined chaos to better serve the needs of a garrisoned, plutocratic state enriching itself on autopilot. Indeed DARPA (Defense

Advanced Research Projects Agency) develops tools to "help identify misinformation or deception campaigns and counter them with truthful (ha!) information, reducing adversaries' ability to manipulate events"—all done of course, with "ethical restraint". No hamsters were harmed in the course of military interference into your social network.

This time, researchers are tweaking algorithms to yield an answer to "How much democracy are people willing to endure before they voluntarily surrender it to a higher power that will defend them against the scourges wrought by the ballot box"? In other words, fascism without the fascists. Just cast an invisible 'soft power' surveillance dragnet over the whole process of governing, adjusting the outrage levels from time to time, to justify more ruinous military spending, and more strong-armed tactics to deal with free speech by labeling it "fake news". In the meantime, leave the actual fascists to handle the brown-hued peasants when they wander down from the mountains or too close to IDF snipers.

What will it take to just get voters to just yield gratefully to the technocratic forces that already run the show with or without an elected government? Already we are conditioned to blame the toothless remnants from the corn and rust belt who somehow influenced the Electoral College's decision to declare Trump president—as if he really did ride in on a wave of populist support, and not a gold-plated golf cart to run roughshod over the last impediments to concentrated wealth accumulation. It's the same (controlled) mindset that insists lager-swilling Nazi socialists will turn 10 Downing Street into a squat for knife-wielding terrorists if Jeremy

Corbyn has his way.

Thanks to a digitized monetary policy that siphons wealth upwards at the command of a button, they have nothing to fear and everything to gain by a self-driving, surveillance-centered regime. Already our candidates are algorithmically selected from a word soup collated by Google and social media platforms under the guidance of DARPA, so why not just make Siri into her a gay, Israel-first veteran of a Bush war and vote for her? World problems solved!

You might even say that 'The Joker' propagandizes this ideal of governance, warning us all of the risks inherent in a system that endows an idiot with the super-powers that dangerously endear him to the rabble. Top-down and seemingly rudderless, authoritarian governments can exert their control seamlessly. Bottom-up rebellions tend toward unpredictable outcomes, however, managed by external forces plying an unseen hand.

The endgame of neoliberalism is to de-diversify not just economies, but the notion of control itself, streamlining the twin channels of brute force and gentle manipulation, so that "softer", more undetectable weaponry like DARPA's algorithms can replace outdated, heavily manned hardware to deal with potential threats arising from an unregulated media.

The overt and depraved lengths our mostly invisible overlords will take to secure their tentacled dragnet across the globe can be seen in DARPA's mission statement: To control news and information so that inconvenient facts are filtered out, or at least attributable to hostile foreign governments and replaced with software that can detect skepticism and replace it with rescue puppies.

We all want to see Trump impeached, but do we want to relinquish our post-Trump fate to a resentful cabal of spooks, working hand in hand with tech titans and the military to ensure a total lockdown on critical thinking? **CP**

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## BORDERZONE NOTES

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# Trump's Diversionary War on the Border

BY LAURA CARLSEN

**D**onald Trump's announcement that he planned to designate Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations provoked exactly the buzz he was aiming for.

The president seized on the killing of nine members of a Mormon community in northern Mexico, many dual citizens, to tweet that "this is the time for Mexico, with the help of the United States, to wage WAR on the drug cartels and wipe them off the face of the earth". His offer to send in the U.S. Army whipped up the racist, anti-Mexico sentiment and sent shock waves south of the border.

Some members of the extensive LeBaron family that lost three mothers and six of their children in the Nov. 4 attack allegedly carried out by a cartel commando petitioned the White House to declare the cartel as terrorists. Although the petition received only a fraction of the signatures needed to get a response from the White House, Trump responded almost immediately in a carefully choreographed escalation of the attack on Mexico's commitment and ability to fight crime within its own borders.

On Nov. 26, he told Bill O'Reilly, that "absolutely, they [Mexican cartels] will be designated" as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The rightwing press quickly endorsed the message, one they'd been peddling for years and called for intervention in Mexico. Many liberals and so-called experts in Mexico and the United States jumped on the "terrorist"

bandwagon. Many saw the opportunity to slam leftist president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador for rejecting the iron fist approach of his predecessors, supported over the past decade by U.S. drug-war aid.

Trump then sat back and watched as the media echo chambers regurgitated his message and the political consequences fell in line. Ten days later, "absolutely" became "not now" as he walked back his decision to make the designation, supposedly out of deference to the Mexican president and just one day after Attorney General William Barr met with Mexican officials and military chiefs in Mexico City.

We've seen this Trump strategy before: Make an outlandish proposal that changes the narrative and lines up your allies, while distracting your opponents—then withdraw it. The designation of Mexican cartels as terrorist organizations was a bluff from the get-go. The Bush-era anti-terrorism laws went into effect not to fight an identifiable enemy ("terrorism" to date has no clear definition in the laws), but to grant carte blanche powers to the executive to intervene abroad and suspend civil liberties at home. Mexico warned that such a designation threatens their national sovereignty and would erode the bilateral relationship. That probably doesn't concern this U.S. president much. But the laws are so broad that many U.S. interests close to Trump could be swept up in the net of cartel-related "terrorism"

or abetting terrorism charges, including banks and other financial institutions, government officials, legal businesses, investors, and consumers and that's a complication he doesn't want to risk. Members of the security complex immediately warned that the designation would be a nightmare to enforce and could weaken ongoing counterterrorism programs.

Designating cartels as terrorists is technically wrong and could never have been put in practice. But Trump's threat of terrorist designation achieved its objectives. In the public eye, Mexico became associated with not just violence, but terrorism. The Mexican president was forced (again) into a corner as the threat became a sword of Damocles in binational relations and catalyzed rightwing opposition to his administration at home. There is no public information on what the Barr meeting produced in terms of concessions from Mexico to avoid the terrorist designation, but it's not likely to be anything that will benefit peace.

Most significantly, the Trump administration—supported by the rightwing press and organizations—began to position Mexico as a possible diversionary war in the run-up to the 2020 elections. The New York Post explained the strategy appropriately cynical terms: "Now the violent action of the cartels presents him [President Trump] with an opportunity to please the more hawkish wing of his party while grappling for the first time in a generation with the broken nature of the Mexican state."

The Federalist, notorious for its bizarre racist and misogynist views, published an article entitled "If Trump Designates Cartels as Terrorist Groups, He Should Go To War With Them". The article openly calls for U.S. military invasions into Mexican territory, stating, "Unilateral, no-permission special forces raids into Pakistan and Syria took out Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and similar capture-or-kill missions could be launched into northern Mexico against the cartels re-

sponsible for the LeBaron massacre.”

A diversionary war is described as “a war instigated by a country’s leader in order to distract its population from their own domestic strife.” The Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq under the false pretense of “weapons of mass destruction” are examples. A diversionary war doesn’t need to be, and usually isn’t a formal war. Launching one relies on building false or deeply exaggerated risk assessments in policy circles and in the public eye, diverting and sustaining media attention, and mounting support in military circles.

Donald Trump could use a diversionary war about now. As a flailing candidate and polarizing leader, he urgently needs to divert attention from the impeachment hearings, from his abuse of power, from his unscrupulous manipulation of public service for personal gain, and from his mission to establish the unrestricted dominance of wealthy, white males.

In many ways, he has been using border security and immigration as a diversionary war since the beginning of his administration. As Trump portrayed immigrants as an invading foreign army and kept the issue front-and-center in the news cycles, he went about his business of restructuring U.S. society—stripping social programs, eliminating environmental protections, stacking courts and giving billionaires tax breaks. Each new executive order against asylum seekers, refugees and migrants added a brick to the white supremacy edifice, while at the same time diverting attention from the domestic agenda that took power and resources away from the most vulnerable sectors of the U.S. population.

A war to galvanize support for Trump’s leadership has been mentioned as a dangerous possibility this election and the child separation policies and deaths in detention prove that he’s capable of sacrificing human lives for his political ambitions.

One usually thinks of the Middle East

or northern Africa as the most likely spots for military involvement—some-where far enough away and with enough resources to keep the political costs low and the economic gains high. In the Mexico scenario, rather than an occupation, a diversionary war might feature media-based threats and a series of interventions by U.S. agencies with lower-profile military involvement. Rather than a war, it would be portrayed as a “take-control” measure that sidelines the Mexican government and militarizes the cartels.

It would be preceded—and this is the part that has already started—by statements that Mexico poses an extreme risk for the United States due to a weak

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## **Cartel violence—no matter how brutal it is—is not the same as terrorism.**

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government and brutal cartels.

Indeed, Mexico faced increased, rather than decreased, violence and insecurity this past year. According to a recent report by Causa en Comun, the year could close with a record 36,000 homicides. There are as many hypotheses as there are pundits to explain the rise, but ironically a large factor is the failure of the drug-war model in the country. The ‘kingpin strategy’ of taking out drug lords and hoping the cartels shrivel up and die, heavily promoted by the DEA, failed dramatically. Although the Lopez Obrador government says it has abandoned the approach, it continues to be applied and to cause bloodshed.

The capture and prosecution of El Chapo Guzman left the Sinaloa Cartel battling to retain its turf, and unleashed internecine power struggles. Insistence on enforcing a U.S. extradition order against El Chapo’s son, Ovidio, in Culiacan, Sinaloa led to a raid that managed to capture Ovidio, only to then release him when his arrest sparked a

city-wide siege by the cartel. Mexican security forces stated that they chose to let Ovidio go to avoid further violence.

It was a good call to abort the mission, and proof that AMLO is serious about putting public safety above kingpin captures. But instead of learning the lesson that a frontal attack on leaders leaves the public vulnerable and that the kingpin strategy is counterproductive, AMLO’s enemies portrayed it as weakness and called for a strongarm approach to fighting the cartels—the same approach that has failed for the past 12 years. With pressure to continue the militarized strategy from the right and from the U.S. government, and a lack of coherence in the government on an alternative strategy, cartel violence has flared in many parts of the country.

But, cartel violence—no matter how brutal it is—is not the same as terrorism. Terrorists have a political agenda, an important distinction that requires different intelligence and different preventive strategies to defuse networks and avoid attacks. Cartels are above all a business, operating in a clandestine U.S. market. For more than a decade, U.S. military leaders have been trying to sell the concept of “narcoterrorism” to justify further intervention in Mexico and the region. At the outset of Mexico’s war on drugs in 2007, former ambassador John Negroponte cited narcoterrorism to justify the expansion of U.S. security forces in the region and General John Kelly has been a major proponent of the term. But multiple studies have failed to turn up any evidence of terrorism over the southern border under the current definitions.

U.S. counterterrorism programs expanded militarization and intervention throughout the world while trampling international law and diplomacy. Designating a neighbor—Mexico—as harboring “terrorists” would destroy the ability to cooperate and create a war scenario. Let’s hope that’s not what Trump is up to here. **CP**

**T**he cries are getting louder and they're coming from an unusual combination of people not usually given to playing the role of Cassandra. Doctors, a top UN official, school-children, and at least 11,258 scientists from 153 countries are chorusing what everyone should know: despite forty years of global climate summits, business has generally gone on as usual. Irreversible tipping points, cascade effects, melting ice, rising levels of CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and N<sub>2</sub>O, ocean acidity, rising temperatures, wildfire, massive species extinction, and much more, have led them to emphasize that the catastrophe is not only about melting glaciers and killer temperatures but that it's a social and political problem. They're calling for "transformative change, with social and economic justice for all".

Last June, Philip Alston, UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, warned that the impacts of global heating threatened basic rights to life, water, food, and housing for hundreds of millions of people, as well as democracy and rule of law. Another stand was taken by the editor-in-chief of *The Lancet*, who, backing Extinction Rebellion, urged health professionals to engage in nonviolent social protest because "medicine is all about protecting and strengthening the human species". Schoolchildren, stepping in where adults have failed, understand all too well that the crisis isn't only about saving polar bears. They're also calling for system change.

The climate crisis has shown that capitalism is incompatible with the planet's health and that it's essential to move away from GDP growth. Yet, instead of heeding the warnings, governments are turning to violence against demonstrators and, like the Prince of Salina, in *The Leopard*, are opting for gatopardismo ("Things will have to change if we want things to stay as they are"), preferring to protect the status quo than to change a planet-destroying system. This situation is fertile breeding ground for far-right groups which, exploiting people's

fears, are regressing back to fascist-style government in which human rights are even more gravely threatened.

In a recent interview, Srećko Horvat of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) calls for "transnational cooperation because those we are fighting against are working transnationally". In his *Green Strategy* Marc Brodine writes, "A massive movement is needed, worldwide in scope, to fight defensive battles against environmental degradation and exploitative development." Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Bernie Sanders recognize the need for revolutionary reforms. But one essential fact is almost non-existent in the discourse. The climate crisis is a human rights crisis and the most affected are the world's poorest citizens who have done least to contribute to the disaster.

Where are the mechanisms for achieving these reforms? Yes, we need transnational cooperation but about half the world's people can't participate because they're literally struggling to survive. How can this cooperation be opened to everyone? "Human rights" is a universal political narrative but, lacking basic rights, people can't function politically because they don't exist socially. And the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been a dead letter from day one, especially because it didn't come with mechanisms to implement the rights it proclaimed, not even the most basic of all, that of material existence.

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## EUROZONE NOTES

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# Change the System? Yes, But How?

BY DANIEL RAVENTÓS AND JULIE WARK

The only instrument we know of that could feasibly guarantee this right on the global scale is a universal, unconditional basic income above the poverty line (in whatever place it is introduced). And it's more than an instrument. In itself, it's a right that can be traced back to the early principles of the commons. If we want system change and stronger, healthier societies for tackling the universal climate crisis, then guaranteeing this universal basic right would surely be a radical and decent first step.

Without a focus on the poor, the dispossessed whose natural resources have been ravished by a Global North which doesn't give a damn about the destructive wantonness of its "progress", there can be no real system change. The poor in developing countries are bearing some 75–80% of the costs of climate catastrophe. They tend to live in disaster-prone areas, in less resistant housing, and often lose everything they own; have fewer resources to mitigate the effects; get less support from social systems to recover from the impact; have precarious livelihoods; and are vulnerable to disease, crop failure, rising food prices, death, and disability. Responses to the climate-related catastrophe are often in the form of cynical ex post humanitarian intervention. For example, after Cyclone Idai the IMF agreed to a no-interest emergency loan of \$118.2 million to Mozambique—the world's sixth-poorest country where the average inhabitant is responsible



for 55 times less carbon emissions than the average US citizen—but ruled out debt relief for pre-existing loans. Guess who profits. System change requires ex ante measures and a guaranteed basic income would be essential among them as a distribution of resources to improve a population's chances of applying appropriate local knowledge in combatting climate change before disaster strikes. It would, for example, allow women agriculturalists in poor countries to have better tools. Scientists calculate that they could then grow 20–30% more food on the same amount of land and thus avoid two billion tons of emissions by 2050. That alone would seem to be a good argument for basic income.

However, a basic income means quite a few things to quite a few people. One interesting ingredient within (but on the fringes of) the present juncture of calls for system change is Andrew Yang's candidacy for the US presidency promising a basic income of \$1,000 a month for every American over eighteen. Yet his investment to deal with climate change is only about a quarter of what Bernie Sanders proposes. Yang's focus is more technocratic than concerned with poverty. He favors nuclear power and dubious geoengineering solutions like foldable space mirrors, stratospheric scattering of sulfur dioxide, and ocean seeding with plankton. Yang is a telling example of the divisions in the basic income debate, where some enthusiasts are very right-wing. The basic income we refer to is just one measure in the domain of political economy. If it is to be effective it requires strong public policies in health, housing, education, transport, and so on. Why on earth isn't Bernie including basic income in his campaign?

System change requires systems thinking, especially about degrowth, which is no stranger to redistribution. Basic income is obviously a form of redistribution and in Gini terms too since it can easily be funded by progressive taxation. Systems thinking requires taking into account the health of the

whole system, as indigenous cultures have long known. Awareness of this world view would not only encourage cutting consumption but also incorporate a long overdue element of respect for the world's indigenous peoples who have, since the age of imperialism, been seen as an obstacle to be removed from the path of resource exploitation.

So how could a basic income foster system change? Since the poor must be the focus we'll give a few examples from a detailed 2010 study of ours on the hypothetical effects of a basic income in Timor-Leste. We found that a basic income, partially financed by oil and gas revenues, would allow immediate distribution of a regular micro-income (as opposed to micro-credits) received every month without external interference. A poverty-line basic income (then) of US \$20 per month per person for the whole population would mean that a poor family with six dependents would receive a guaranteed monthly income of US\$160. In a hamlet of twenty similar families, this would amount to \$3,200 per month or US\$38,400 per year.

What this could represent in terms of food sovereignty is illustrated by a project of rice cultivation with buffaloes in the devastated rural area of Uatulari with a population of about 20,000 people. Working with a Timorese NGO, the Catalan government financed the project to the tune of US\$142,680 from 2000–2003 (US\$47,560 per year), or roughly US\$2.38 per person per year. The area achieved self-sufficiency in rice cultivation before the end of the period and was able to supply seeds to nearby areas. The buffaloes were the “machinery” for preparing the abandoned rice fields (treading the soil to compact it prior to planting the seedlings) and also produced manure, milk, meat, and hides, besides reinforcing social ties because they are traditionally community property. However, with a change of government in Catalonia, funding stopped and the project never went beyond the successful pilot project stage. A basic income of US\$20 per person per

month would bring a guaranteed US\$4.8 million into Uatulari every year, about one hundred times what the Catalan Government gave. The impact of such a stable source of income in terms of local development would be remarkable.

In human rights terms, an agricultural development strategy consolidating local production with generalized development of market networks is much more beneficial than an export-oriented policy of monocropping, concentration of landholding and systemic inequality, not to mention negative environmental effects. Smallholdings not only contribute to market produce on the local scale but also reinforce food and social security and offer a wider spread of productive livelihoods as well as resulting in better environmental management. Furthermore, massive migration to the capital Dili has created an enduring problem of urban-rural population imbalance, with large numbers of unemployed and disaffected youth with great destructive capacity. Evidently they can't be integrated back into rural communities that don't exist because they have no productive base. Including them in a basic income scheme would go a long way towards their reintegration as citizens and establishing peaceful coexistence.

Then again, the poorest families tend to have the largest number of children. The 2016 fertility rate was 5.5 births per woman, one of the highest in the world. Irrespective of the absence of family planning facilities and basic health education, having more children tends to be seen as a way of replacing siblings who die in infancy and as a kind of social insurance plan for parents. That the mother's health is greatly undermined by many pregnancies is a lesser consideration in desperate circumstances. A guaranteed form of social insurance such as a basic income would lower the birth rate in the long term, correct the skewing towards the young, dependent members of society, improve the health of mothers and children, and get children into classrooms.

A basic income wouldn't solve all of Timor-Leste's problems but it would mean much more widely spread opportunities in the productive field, enhanced social inclusion within reinforced local communities, greater political participation, and a major reduction of poverty and poverty-related problems. The good news is that our basic income model is exportable and some adjustments can be applied anywhere in the world. And so it should be if we really care about human rights and want system change, especially when it comes to combatting the climate crisis and its effects on the planet's poorer inhabitants. **CP**

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## Global Plastic

By JOHN DAVIS

In the beginning, there was no plastic.

Four and a half billion years ago, or thereabouts, there was nothing but a hot, rocky, lifeless mass bathed in water vapor, ammonia, hydrogen and methane. After seven-hundred million years, the Earth had cooled sufficiently for the water vapor to condense and become an ocean. And still there was no plastic. A little over half-a-billion years ago, layers of dead phytoplankton, algae and primitive marine organisms that had begun living in the ocean drifted to its floor and were trapped in mud and sand. Over geologic ages, through heat and pressure, these layers of decayed organic material became oil and liquid gas trapped beneath the earth's surface of rock and clay.

And still, there was no plastic. But its feedstock was now comingled within the seams, pools, shale beds, and seeps of fossil biomass—the hydrocarbons that had trapped the solar energy of an ancient world. The simplest of all the hydrocarbons was methane, encapsulated as a liquid gas from vapors released by the rotting carcasses of tiny sea creatures and, over time, larger, more complex organisms. Out of the simple methane molecule, in those dark, cloacal spaces, with the addition of a single carbon atom, variously configured, were created ethane, propane, and butane.

Today, these feedstocks, sourced from Hydrocarbon Gas Liquids (HGLs), derived from natural gas, are turned into plastic pellets, or nurdles, which are the raw material of finished plastics. The United States is currently undergoing a so-called 'Resin Boom', with manufacturers daily producing trillions of the lentil sized pellets, which are mostly shipped to Asia. Pellet 'loss', in production and shipping, is now a major source of global plastic pollution. Nurdles, likely to be found in their hundreds on the beach nearest you, are but the latest reification of our plundering of the earth's subterranean store of hydrocarbons.

Peat, a coal precursor, formed by decayed organic material lying close to the Earth's surface and partially digested in acidic

and anaerobic peatland ecosystems, has been harvested as a fossil fuel since the human discovery of fire. The unlikelihood of a flammable square of turf cut from a bog, was, much later, matched by the discovery of sedimentary rocks that would burn. The coal then becomes the first hydrocarbon to be mined, and its use as a fuel dates back at least three millennia to China. In Europe, it was used by the Romans to heat, among other things, the water in their elaborate bathing facilities. Today, a large part of its historical notoriety is linked to it fueling, in a very literal sense, Europe's Industrial Revolution.

From the beginning, fossil fuels have been sought out as alternative sources of energy to less tractable resources. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, site-specific water mills were replaced by coal-powered steam engines that could be located in areas of cheap labor, and lamp-oil sourced from whale carcasses was replaced by oil distilled from petroleum. The first widely used plastic was celluloid, which used plant-based polymers. Polymers are large molecules made up of long chains of smaller molecules called monomers. They provide the strength and flexibility, or plasticity, inherent in the cellulose that makes up the cell walls of plants. These natural polymers are also found in hair, silk and DNA.

It was the polymers present in hydrocarbons, however, that held the promise, at the start of the twentieth century, of a vast world of plastics. The first to be made, in 1907, was Bakelite from coal tar, and was initially designed to replace shellac, sourced from Asian beetles, and used in electrical insulation. It was quickly developed as a key material in the burgeoning consumer goods market, used to encase radios, telephones and clocks, and made into housewares and jewelry.

In 1920, Union Carbide (now Dow Chemical) established the first steam-cracking plant, in West Virginia, specifically to produce ethylene, a short polymer petrochemical with a wide range of industrial applications, but none as epochal as the production of polyethylene. Still dominated by Bakelite, the plastics industry was slow to respond. After 1929, development was constrained by the Depression, but Wallace Carothers, working for Du Pont, developed an artificial rubber, neoprene, in 1931, and nylon in 1938—both of which were militarily significant materials. Consequently, the production of plastic metastasized during World War II. Fueled by the post-war economic boom and an excess of production capacity, it quickly became the preeminent material in consumer products, clothing, packing materials and food storage.

Swept up in the 'Great Acceleration'—the post-war decades of excessive consumption, extravagant leaps in technology, profligate waste and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—this consummate material of modern materialism birthed Global Plastic, a circumstance in which, like Global Warming, we, and all other beings, now live and breathe. The Earth's atmosphere had become a dumping ground for its greenhouse gases and the oceans a sinkhole for its discarded plastics.

The evidence mounts of the apocalyptic significance of Global Plastic. As an acknowledged endocrine disruptor, the material penetrates creatures through their skin, in the air they breathe, the water they drink, and the food that they ingest. Yet, the devastating consequences of a material that refuses to decompose, is recalcitrant in all attempts to recycle it (90.5% goes unrecycled worldwide), is being produced in ever-increasing quantities, and in its discarded after-life threatens to colonize the lands and oceans of the planet remains overshadowed by that enclosing cloud of upper atmosphere CO<sub>2</sub>, which is, to coin a phrase, sucking all the oxygen out of the room. For now, Global Warming dwarfs the perceived exigencies of Global Plastic. All the while, the production of plastic, from hydrocarbon to finished material, contributes greatly to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and is expected to reach 17% of the global carbon budget by 2050.

Those in the business of proclaiming ecological disaster have a professional interest in assuring their audience that there is still hope amidst the encyclopedic evidence they present to the contrary—that change can occur without radically re-thinking the world and our place within it; and that state-sanctioned planetary predation, of which the subterranean extraction of hydrocarbons is but a part, can continue without fatally compromising the viability of the world. Greta Thunberg speaks her dark and eerie truth to power, uncompromisingly pure in her walking of her talk. But the single-minded focus on CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, that she and others profess, has shaped our concerns for the environment so that the clearly observable anthropogenic changes to the climate have become the dominant trope in our visions of the apocalypse. The terrestrial threat of a planet wrapped in plastic waste, sourced from the same hydrocarbon plunder that generates CO<sub>2</sub>, has been slow to infiltrate our primal fears for the survival, in recognizable form, of the earth's natural systems.

It is now apparent that our failure to maintain a sustainable, naturally regenerating environment which we share with all other human and extra-human beings is the result of a systemic flaw in the way we have organized our hegemonic, first world, human-privileging societies. It is not just the extinction and the loss of wildlife habitat for those species that remain; the ubiquity of plastic waste on land and sea; the micro-plastics in our bodies, our water, and the micro-fibers

in the wind; the ever-rising levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere; the fires, the rising sea-levels, the pollution, and the droughts and other consequences of extreme weather. These are but the symptoms of a profound misunderstanding of our place in the world.

It is a misunderstanding that has as its consequence the widely touted prediction that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the world's oceans, by weight, than fish.

It is a misunderstanding that has as its consequence seeds, plants and animals washing up on shores where they are not native by inadvertently riding the ocean's currents on wind-blown aggregations, or rafts, of plastic waste and devastating the finely balanced ecosystems where they land.

It is a misunderstanding that has as its consequence the clear plastic bag which strangles birds, asphyxiates small children

and is mistaken for food by marine life, while being freely dispensed at your local Farmers Market to be filled with organically grown fruits and vegetables.

It is a misunderstanding that has resulted in the choking of the San Francisco Bay with micro-plastics generated from plastic waste made brittle by the sun and then abraded by wind and tides, and from rubber and neoprene marbles thrown off by tires on the twisting, vertiginous streets that surround the bay.

It is a misunderstanding that has created the

vast garbage patch of plastic waste in the North Pacific Gyre between California and the Hawaiian Islands where discarded drift nets, called ghost nets, and other commercial fishing gear, swirl amidst the microplastic soup.

It is a misunderstanding that has as its basis the intellectual separation of Nature and Society. The seeds of this toxic binary were planted over five hundred years ago and now, grown vast and enveloping, it is a construct that poisons the way of being in the world for all those who live under the sway of modernity.

Jason W. Moore, in *Capitalism in the Web of Life, Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, 2015, notes that the “New modes of knowledge, bookended by Copernicus and Newton (c. 1470s–1720s) ...unfolded within a historical project that aimed at making nature external—the better that it could be subordinated and rationalized, its bounty extracted, in service to capital and empire.” This new way of being in the world emerged out of the decline of feudalism—that reasonably communitarian system that ensured some level of cooperation

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## **The boom in fracking would not have been possible without new computer-controlled drilling and ballistics technologies, together with innovative chemical formulations, developed with the financial assistance of the U.S. Department of Energy.**

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between lord and peasant, and they with the land on which both depended. This relationship, which lasted in Europe from the ninth century to the fourteenth, limited environmental devastation despite a slowly rising population in the Medieval Warm Period, 950–1250. But escalating class struggles, intensified warfare and cultural destabilization slowly eroded feudalism. Its decay was exacerbated by the Black Death, 1347–1352, which killed a third of the population. In the fifteenth century, Europe's slow expansion of its frontiers beyond its continental landmass profoundly impacted the old comity and after the discovery of the Americas, in 1492, it was fatally wounded.

As Moore reports, "By the end of the sixteenth century, a tipping point had been reached—a new ethic developed that sanctioned the exploitation of Nature." This was confirmed by Francis Bacon's establishment of the empirical scientific method, and later by the Cartesian charge that mankind, "...make ourselves, as it were, the masters and possessors of nature". Thus, was born materialism based on scientific and economic rationalism that demanded the separation of humans from the rest of the natural world. Successive waves of imperialism greatly expanded the territory on which this freshly sanctioned predation could occur, and fueled agricultural and industrial revolutions which, in turn, enabled increased through-puts of labor, food, energy and raw materials. It was in this matrix that the vastly expanded extraction of fossil fuels, after the invention of the steam engine, would become inextricably linked with the development of capitalism.

Moore points out that what he terms 'bio-prospecting,' has been practiced from Columbus to Monsanto and Exxon. These activities are typically supported by states in pursuit, in his lexicon, of 'geo-power,' the control of natural resources that bolster their economic strength. It is in this pursuit that the United States has expended vast amounts of treasure to protect American oil interests in the Middle East, and vast sums, too, in the development of technologies to access this country's unconventional oil and gas reserves.

The plastic pellets produced from HGLs have made the production of natural gas a new focus of the U.S. oil and gas industry and is helping sustain the boom in fracking. Seventy percent of U.S. natural gas is now fracked from shale deposits such as the Marcellus formations beneath Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania along with the Permian, Woodford, Barnett, and Eagle-Ford formations in Texas, as well as North Dakota's Bakken shales. The Monterey formation that runs down the spine of California, from Sacramento to Los Angeles, holds two-thirds of the nation's shale oil and gas reserves. It has, thus far, been saved from extensive fracking by its complex geology, local activism and the fact that much of it is under the state's prime agricultural land. But the Monterey shale and other unexploited formations remain forever vulnerable to advances in extraction technology and increased demand for hydrocarbons.

The boom in fracking would not have been possible without new computer-controlled drilling and ballistics technologies, together with innovative chemical formulations, developed with the financial assistance of the U.S. Department of Energy. The state has, in effect, joint-ventured with private enterprise in plundering the shale that lies beneath the United States. This plunder is founded, as Moore and others show, on debasing the value of the natural world. It represents a strategy of terrestrial violence that asserts our dominion over the planet.

The genocidal impact of colonial exploitation, beginning late in the fifteenth century, is widely understood as a fundamental part of the history of the Americas - but the blowback that impacted its imperial perpetrators, while less often considered, was not inconsequential. The importation of vast quantities of precious metals into Spain and Portugal resulted in massive financial inflation that led directly to several centuries of economic immiseration on the Iberian Peninsula. The blowback from the mining of hydrocarbons is global, and we are beginning to understand that it extends, in this country, beyond the well-documented impacts of the production and burning of fossil fuels. It extends to the fracking, cracking and polymerization of HGLs, which are responsible for significantly adding to the global supply of plastic pellets, and, in turn, for the waste generated by finished plastic products.

While colonialism always relied on the development of new technologies appropriate to transportation, food production, social controls and the building of urban settlements, computerized control systems have now expanded the range and impact of humankind's predation. Moore notes that "At the core of the capitalist project, from its sixteenth-century origin, was the scientific and symbolic creation of nature in its modern form, as something that could be mapped, abstracted, quantified, and otherwise subject to linear control." Computer-controlled fracking operations serve as the apotheosis of this concept, enabling the economically efficient extraction of natural gas from shale and similarly facilitating the production of plastic pellets.

Over 300 new plastic production facilities are currently proposed in the U.S. A giant plant is planned by Royal Dutch Shell for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but it is the Gulf Coast from Houston to New Orleans and up the Mississippi River to Baton Rouge that is currently ground zero of the massive congeries of industrial infrastructure devoted to the processing of the fracked HGLs into synthetic polymers. The distillates run directly from the shale fracking fields through pipelines that riddle the eastern two-thirds of the United States, and through the Cochin pipeline which snakes north to Alberta, Canada. They travel to coastal processing plants, where they are 'fractionated' to separate the ethane, propane, and butane. The separated gas liquids are then pipelined to other facilities nearby where they are polymerized (the process of forming polymer chains) and turned into plastic resin pellets. Packed in 55lb. bags the nurdles fit comfortably, beanbag like, into forty-foot



shipping containers. They are typically shipped direct from the Gulf ports to Singapore, where they are then transshipped to other Asian destinations. Finished plastic goods return from those same destinations, often in the same containers, to the U.S. market.

Annual consumption of the pellets is projected to double in the next decade to over half a billion tons, and production capacity continues to grow in the petrochemical industrial ghettos of Texas and Louisiana. Here, they are interspersed with prototypical, mostly black and brown, frontline communities, in areas vulnerable to flooding and rising sea-levels, where toxins lie heavy in the air and vicious colloidal dispersions paint rainbows on the streets. These are the quintessential environments of slow violence, in which the early-twentieth-century chemical engineering triumphs of Union Carbide are substantiated on a massive scale, and where the poor and middle classes are oppressed by the rabid feeding of nurdles into Global Plastic's supply chain.

Like Global Warming, Global Plastic is a planetary phenomenon, but the U.S. has an outsized responsibility for both. While the emergence of capital accumulation driven by fossil fuels first occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the British Isles amidst Blake's 'dark satanic mills,' America's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions in the twentieth was realized both in the metrics of its oil production and in the grotesque levels of its consumption, to which the rest of the world, then and now, aspires. While the U.S. is no longer the primary global source of greenhouse gas emissions, it has taught the world well, and is now eclipsed by those regions that have fallen under the pall of its cultural influence. The toxic emanation that is Global Plastic results from the exploitation of widely dispersed fossil biomass, yet the U.S.A. remains the singular avatar of those societies of mass-consumption and a throw-away ethos in which plastic is so pervasive.

Crude oil production in the U.S. reached a peak around 1970 of ten million barrels a day. It then suffered a precipitous decline before flatlining until 2008, when the shale fracking revolution radically increased this country's hydrocarbon output. Since 2014, it has been the world's largest hydrocarbon producer, outstripping its nearest competitors, Russia and Saudi Arabia. As a part of this expansion, the U.S. now produces more than 20% of the world's plastic, and its production continues to increase, fueled by ever-cheaper fracked natural gas.

High levels of consumption amplify planetary degradation, and that consumption now comes wrapped in, or is largely made of plastic, and often both. Packaging consumes from between 35%–45% of the global production of synthetic polymers; construction another 16%; textiles 15%; and transportation and electronics a further 10%. Plastic is essential, at this moment, in the packaging of our food, the building of our shelter, the production of our clothing, computers, telecommunications and transport, and in our healthcare

where wellness is dispensed in plastic vials, IV bags, tubes and syringes; our sundered vitals sewn with nylon thread. We are surrounded by the corporeal presence of plastic. Buck Henry's line from the 1967 film 'The Graduate,' spoken by a middle-aged wanna-be career coach, to the eponymous young man, played by Dustin Hoffman, "I want to say one word to you. Just one word. Plastics," is a nostrum, although eschewed by Hoffman's character, that has now been heeded around the world.

Given the time it takes to biodegrade: In the End, there will be plastic. Even if production were to stop today it would still be with us in the fourth millennium. The legacy of the modern world of, let us say, the last five hundred years, is a warming atmosphere preternaturally laden with CO<sub>2</sub>; a planet with a plastic bestrewn surface, plastic saturated seas, and with winds, waves, rocks and tides grinding brightly colored polymers into toxic grains fated to be embedded in the geologic layers of the Anthropocene.

It is a legacy based on the manipulation of those looted hydrocarbons, created in ages past and now, in the modern world, transformed into multiple agents of Biospheric destruction. This tragic inheritance is founded on a misunderstanding of our place in the world - a misunderstanding that now, perhaps, with its consequences fully apparent, we are beginning to comprehend. **CP**

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## **Beyond Trumpeachment: We Need a Popular Movement to Get Rid of Trump and the System That Produced Him**

BY PAUL STREET

There's no great mystery about how citizens humble and even overthrow corrupt and tyrannical governments. They take to the streets in significant numbers, engaging in significant mass civil disobedience for as long as it takes. Look at Algeria, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, and Chile, to mention just six among many recent locations where mass protest and popular resistance have recently proven highly effective.

It doesn't take the whole population to rebel. Five days of insurrection by 200,000 people forced the French government to back down on its regressive gas tax last year. It requires dedicated resistance by just 3 percent of the population to overthrow a regime.

What will it take for U.S.-Americans to reconnect with their

own all-too-hidden history of popular rebellion (e.g., Bacon's Rebellion, the Boston Tea Party, the Eight Hour Movement, the 1936–37 Sit-Down Strike Wave, the Civil Rights Movement, Occupy, Black Lives Matter) and join the wave of mass protest that is spreading around the world?

The United States has inequality and plutocracy problems more severe than those of Western Europe and every bit as bad as those of Latin America. It is widely and accurately understood that the nation's majority-progressive public opinion is technically irrelevant in the making of not-so-public United States policy because U.S. politicians and officeholders atop both the nation's major political parties are essentially bought and paid for by the corporate sector.

Vast swaths of the U.S. population have minuscule net worth and live from one tenuous low-wage paycheck to the next, unable to meet car payments and other chronic debt burdens. Tens of millions of U.S. households are oppressed by exorbitant and regressive health care, tuition, mortgage, rent, interest, and tax liabilities.

The "land of liberty" is plagued by a globally unmatched and militarized police and surveillance state. "The beacon to the world of the way life should be" (then U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson in her October 2002 speech on behalf of authorizing George W. Bush to criminally invade Iraq) possesses the highest rate of mass incarceration—racist mass imprisonment in the world.

Tens of millions of American children go without proper food, clothing, shelter and schooling so that the American government can funnel hundreds of billions of dollars each year to the Pentagon System. The "defense" (empire) budget devours more than half of all federal U.S. discretionary spending, functioning as a great subsidy to high-tech "defense" (war) corporations while maintaining more than 800 military bases across more than 100 nations.

The U.S.-American ruling class attacks livable ecology. It is leading the charge to turn the planet into a giant Greenhouse Gas Chamber and otherwise advance the capitalogenic Sixth Great Extinction, which may soon claim humanity itself.

## **This is Happening Here**

Meanwhile, the U.S. oligarchy has installed an aspiring fascist strongman, the malignantly racist, sexist, and narcissistic authoritarian Donald Trump in the White House. The tangerine-tinted, tiny-fingered, Twitter-tantruming Trump tyrant isn't just another creepy white male Republican president. Donald "Make America Hate Again" Trump:

Proclaims the classic fascist fairy tale of a special, sacred, elite-betrayed white-national past.

Attacks press freedoms, calling journalists the "enemy of the people."

Mocks and disrespects intellectuals and science.

Demonizes, slanders, and scape-goats minorities and immigrants.

Provides cover and "dog whistle" support for white supremacists.

Gave an absurd presidential advance-pardon to the racist and fascist county sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Sparks racist hate crimes with vicious Nativist statements and tweets.

Fills the federal judiciary with hard-right racists, sexists, and classists.

Plays to the rural white "heartland's" fear and suspicions of majority nonwhite cities.

Speaks with disdain about inner-city Black communities.

Cultivates evangelical Christian fascists, one of whom (Mike Pence) is his Vice President.

Separates migrant children from their parents at the southern border.

Detains migrant children en masse.

Abrogates international asylum law.

Drives Mexicans and Central Americans seeking respite from misery and oppression (largely U.S.-imposed) into makeshift, for-profit concentration camps.

Calls African nations "shithole countries."

Failed to properly prepare for and respond to a hurricane that devastated Latinx Puerto Rico.

Told four non-white progressive Congresswoman to "go back to their crime-infested countries you came from."

Declared a fake national emergency to criminally divert taxpayer dollars to the construction of an environmentally disastrous and Nativist border wall that most of the citizenry oppose and Congress refused to fund.

Threatened North Korea and Iran with nuclear annihilation.

Demonizes and falsely conflates liberals and leftists.

Promotes an absurd cult of personality, absurdly advancing his "stable genius" self (who he described to the prime minister of Australia as "the world's greatest person") as the Great Leader.

Absurdly denies climate science and arch-criminally ramps up the eco-extremist war on livable ecology.

Wages a constant Orwellian war on Truth, replete with more than 10,000 documentable false statements since his Inauguration.

Violates the rule of law along with basic norms of civil decency.

Turns the head of the U.S. Justice Department, the U.S. Attorney General, into his own personal attorney.

Conducts a corrupt foreign policy on behalf of his own economic and political self-interest.

Brazenly violates the Constitution's emoluments clause while preposterously calling that clause "phony."

Absurdly threatens to "end birthright citizenship" (the granting of U.S. citizenship to all persons born on U.S. soil under the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment) with an executive order.

Denies and obstructs Congress's constitutional right and duty to investigate his conduct.

Criminally intimidates whistleblowers, calling them "traitors" while demanding their exposure.

Absurdly refers to constitutionally appropriate inquiry into his monumentally corrupt conduct as a "lynching" and a "coup."

Openly flirts with calling for the use of extra-legal political violence on his behalf by his heavily armed backers.

Consistent with his "jokes" about wanting to be "president for life" and his transparent affection for the dictators and autocrats around the world, Trump is the first president in American history to pose a serious threat of refusing to honor a re-election count that doesn't go his way.

The American presidency is occupied by a dangerous, demented, eco-fascist despot. What's holding U.S. liberals and progressive back from working to re-ignite the nation's popular resistance traditions and hitting the streets in numbers and with the dedication and courage required to bring down the deadly Trump-Pence regime?

One key barrier is the American Exceptionalist notion that authoritarian rule and even fascism "can't happen here" (Sinclair Lewis, 1935) in the supposedly exceptionally free and democratic-republican United States. U.S.-Americans would do well to get over that comforting idea. It does not jibe well with the historical record. The nation's lethal and living past includes two and a half centuries of Black chattel slavery (a regime of savage racial torture and exploitation); a century of racist Jim Crow terror; mass racist Black ghettoization, hyper-segregation, mass incarceration, and criminal branding; the genocidal ethnic cleansing and near cultural destruction of the nation's original indigenous inhabitants; the ruthless and bloody seizure of the American Southwest from Mexico; the murder, imprisonment, and deportation of many thousands of radicals and labor activists; the direct and indirect massacre of many millions of brown-skinned people in Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa from the suppression of the Philippines in the early 20th Century to the crucifixion of Yemen today; the diversion of billions of taxpayer dollars to support violently repressive, even Third World Fascist regimes abroad; the development of an ever more lethally militarized and high-tech police and surveillance state at home; a savage eco-extremist assault on the nation's forests, prairies, waterways, mountains, and species; the distribution of tens of millions of military-grade assault weapons to private U.S. citizens; the rise of a powerful, at once Orwellian and Huxleyan

news and "entertainment" industry dedicated to selling empire, inequality, violence, hatred, and police-statism at home and abroad; the rise of the fascist National Rifle Association, which threatens liberal and left politicians, activists, intellectuals and celebrities with assassination.

If all these things, and more terrible to contemplate, have happened and are happening in American history, then fascism too can happen here too. It is happening right now to no small degree in the executive branch and in the venal president's frothing white fan base. Despite or really because of his horrific, fascist-style conduct, Trump retains the fiercely dedicated support of a quarter to a third of the electorate. Trump's white-nationalist Amerikaner supporters fit the basic longstanding profile of fascism's historical demographic base. They are united above all by two interrelated and overlapping characteristics—white racial *herrenvolk* identity and the desire for a strong authoritarian leader who will smite liberal and left elites accused to letting (supposedly) lazy, criminal, and undeserving minorities ("them") get ahead of the (purportedly) noble and hard-working white majority ("us").

Fascism "can't happen here"? To paraphrase the liberal 1930s novelist Sinclair Lewis, "the Hell it can't." The fascist politics of Trump-Pence and white-nationalist Trumpism are happening right now in the United States.

## The Dismal Dollar Dems

A second thing keeping liberals and progressives resistant to serious popular resistance in the streets is the soothing but false notion that the Democratic Party will get us out of this authoritarian nightmare. It will not. The dismal dollar-drenched Democrats, aptly designated as "the Inauthentic Opposition" by Princeton political scientist Sheldon Wolin in 2008, are a central part of the mess. Their demobilizing, corporate-sponsored neoliberal politics and policy record are the main things that put the reactionary fake-populist Trump in the White House in the first place. The Inauthentic Opposition party's big money Wall Street leadership would rather lose to the right-wing party, even to a neofascistic white-nationalist Republican Party, then lose to the left, even to the mildly progressive social-democratic left in its own party. Listen to MSNBC talk show host Donny Deutsch—a silver-spooned advertising executive with a net worth over \$200 million—sloppily yet sincerely speaking against Bernie Sanders' and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's supposed "radical socialism" on his "liberal" Democratic network's centrist "Morning Joe" show last March:

Joe...this is how dangerous socialism is. I find Donald Trump reprehensible as a human being, but a socialist candidate [the progressive neo-New Dealer Bernie Sanders] is more dangerous to this company, umm country [an amusingly appropriate conflation and correction!—P.S.] as far as the strength and well-being of the country, than Donald Trump. I would vote for Donald Trump, a despicable

human being...I will be so distraught to the point that that could even come out of my mouth, if we have a socialist... because that will take our country so down, and we are not Denmark. I love Denmark, but that's not who we are. And if you love who we are and all the great things that still have to have binders put on the side. Please step away from the socialism.

So what if the progressive-populist and self-declared “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders would have defeated Trump in 2016? So what if the highly popular Sanders and (to his right) the leftish liberal Liz Warren are the Democrats’ best shots to defeat Trump in 2020? A recent Guardian report correctly notes that “The core concern of those who consider themselves ‘moderate Democrats’ is not really that Trump might win - it is that Warren or Sanders might win.” Last September CNBC reported that “Democratic donors on Wall Street and in big business are preparing to sit out the presidential campaign fundraising cycle—or even back President Donald Trump—if Sen. Elizabeth Warren wins the party’s nomination.”

The Democratic Party isn’t primarily about winning elections, much less about advancing democracy, social justice, and environmental sanity. It’s about sustaining a Fake Resistance in service to corporate sponsors. And those sponsors don’t want to see “socialist” Bernie or even the self-declared “capitalist” (“in my bones”) Warren in the White House. The party’s bankrollers want to run the doddering right-wing corporatist and racist dufus Joe Biden or (since Biden is too transparently inadequate and centrist hopefuls Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar clearly don’t have what it takes) bring in some other lame centrist Goldman Sachs-, CIA-, and Council on Foreign Relations-approved ringer like John Kerry, Al Gore, billionaire Michael Bloomberg, Deval Patrick, or, God forbid, Hillary herself. If they succeed, they will likely re-elect Trump, giving him and the Trumpified, white-nationalist GOP a clean slate to consolidate Amerikaner neofascist power in the world’s most powerful nation.

## Ruling Class Trumpeachment

A third thing that deserves mention as a barrier to the mass mobilization and popular resistance required in the U.S. is excessive constitutionalist faith in impeachment. Remarkably enough, Trump’s impeachment is distinctly possible. After the seemingly endless Russiagate investigation finally fizzled last summer, Trumpeachment seemed to be a dead letter. “Liberal” cable news shifted from its two-year obsession with Russiagate (with occasional interruptions for mass shootings, hurricanes, war-scares, nuclear summits, and other matters) to its next fixation: the quadrennial presidential electoral extravaganza.

Then came Ukrainegate, like a bolt from the sky. In the last week of September, the world learned that on July 25th, 2019, just one day after special Russiagate prosecutor Robert Mueller gave his unimpressive in-person testimony, Trump called the president of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky. Trump used the threat of withholding anti-Russian U.S. military assistance to

Ukraine to pressure Zelensky into helping Trump’s personal mob lawyer Rudy Giuliani dig up political dirt on Trump’s 2020 presidential rival Biden. Trump wanted Ukraine to find material to validate debunked conspiracy theories propagated for nearly two years by American right-wing operatives. One such theory claimed that Biden had as U.S. Vice President worked to protect his wayward son Hunter from investigation by threatening to withhold a U.S. loan unless Ukraine fired its top prosecutor. Another crackpot claim held that Ukraine was the real source of the Clinton campaign’s hacked emails in 2016.

Trump’s “do me a favor” arms-for-dirt call with Zelensky alarmed numerous U.S. “deep state” actors. It wasn’t a problem for Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), and State Department officials and operatives that Trump had bullied another country. Washington has long pushed other countries around (and done much worse) with cold Superpower impunity. Doing so is standard and bipartisan U.S.-imperial procedure. What set off foreign service and “national security” professionals and led White House operatives to put the transcript of the Trump-Zelensky chat in a special code-word computer file normally reserved for top secret policy documents was the unsettling spectacle of Trump employing arms-supply leverage to compel a foreign nation to assist his domestic re-election campaign. That was an egregious breach of establishment foreign policy and ruling class norms going back to the birth of the American republic.

As of this writing (in early November of 2019), Trump’s impeachment seems distinctly possible, even likely before the end of the year. Impeachment requires just a simple majority vote in the U.S. House of Representatives, where the Democrats hold a significant majority.

What should the American Left (if it exists anymore) make of this remarkable historical moment? It’s hard for hard for any portsider not to want Trump removed from office as soon as humanly possible. Surely there is no public humiliation too great for Donald Trump.

Still, the impeachment of Trump over the Biden-Burisma bribery and extortion scheme is not really the Left’s cause. While it is certainly not something that any self-respecting Leftist would come out in the streets to resist, it’s also not our fight. This is for six reasons:

### #1. Congressional Democrats’ determination to impeach

Trump only or mainly on the narrow grounds that he tried to use the imperial leverage of the White House to force Ukraine into assisting his re-election amounts to a de facto exoneration of his many bigger crimes. An activist Website (“RootsAction”) gives the following daunting list of offenses for which the aspiring fascist strongman deserves impeachment: Violation of Constitution on Domestic Emoluments; Violation of Constitution on Foreign Emoluments; Incitement of Violence; Interference With Voting Rights; Discrimination Based On Religion; Illegal War; Illegal Threat of Nuclear War; Abuse of Pardon Power; Obstruction of Justice; Politicizing



Prosecutions; Failure to Reasonably Prepare for or Respond to Hurricanes Harvey and Maria; Separating Children and Infants from Families; Illegally Attempting to Influence an Election Tax Fraud and Public Misrepresentation; Assaulting Freedom of the Press; Supporting a Coup in Venezuela; Unconstitutional Declaration of Emergency; Instructing Border Patrol to Violate the Law; Refusal to Comply With Subpoenas; Declaration of Emergency Without Basis In Order to Violate the Will of Congress; Illegal Proliferation of Nuclear Technology; Illegally Removing the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

We should add one to the list: the criminal acceleration of Ecocide, the biggest issue of our or any time. Trump has brazenly violated his constitutional oath to serve the General Welfare by doing everything he can to speed up the destruction of livable ecology.

Trump impeachment ala Nancy Pelosi and Adam Schiff lets Trump off the hook for being an ecocidal racist and fascist, very much like how the de facto Nixon impeachment and removal let Nixon off for being a racist police-state henchman and a mass-murderous war criminal.

#2. The ruling class fraction that opposes Trump does so for imperial and capitalist reasons very different from ours. It is using the impeachment drama like it used Russiagate, to legitimize U.S. imperialism, falsely sold as “national security” and “the national interest” within and beyond Eastern Europe. No self-respecting Left wants to be remotely associated with the blood-soaked procession of imperial operatives that the mainstream “liberal” media has been parading on behalf of the cause of impeaching and removing Trump

#3. The impeachment being pursued by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and her colleagues and corporate media beyond FOX is unlikely to be followed by removal in the Republican-majority U.S. Senate. The Trumpified GOP will “exonerate” Trump in the Senate (non-) removal trial, something he may use as an electoral asset in November of 2020. The badly outdated and deeply conservative U.S. Constitution requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate for removal—an absurdly high bar that cannot likely be cleared when that body is controlled by the same party that holds the White House in a context of extreme partisan polarization.

#4. No sane leftist wants the Christian fascist Mike Pence to ascend to the U.S. presidency, as he would under the absurdly venerated 18th Century U.S. Constitution.

#5. Impeachment threatens to become a great rallying point for Trump’s ugly white-nationalist base while encouraging the nation’s all-too-silent progressive majority to stay seated in front of glowing Telescreens to watch House Democrats and liberal cable news taking heads, falsely claim to be collapsing the Trump regime from the top down.

#6. The meaningfully democratic way to remove Trump is not through elite procedures designed by 18th-century slaveholders for whom democracy was the ultimate nightmare. It is through sustained mass civil disobedience — through rebellion by and for those whom the American ruling class fears and hates the most: the working-class majority.

Now that impeachment is underway, popular action is more urgent than ever. Trump is a lethal sociopath with vast means of mass destruction and mass distraction at his disposal. His dedicated base is armed, fascistic, and dangerous. We need Trump and Pence out now, not sometime next year.

The Left must not let the impeachment extravaganza keep (like the quadrennial electoral extravaganza) millions seated in front of television, computer, and smart-phone screens to be told how the nation’s disastrous one/slash two-party system, the ruling class corporate media, the know it all pseudo-liberal professional and managerial class and the U.S. Constitution “work” for democracy and the common good. They do no such thing. The Left’s fight is to build as quickly, deeply and widely as possible a popular grassroots movement against the fascistic White House and the racist, sexist, imperialist and ecocidal system of class rule that gave rise to it. **CP**

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

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## The Ghost of Jimmy Hoffa

BY DAVID MACARAY

*“I may have lots of faults,  
but being wrong ain’t one of them.”  
—Jimmy Hoffa*

Notoriety comes in two basic flavors. There’s your old-fashioned, run-of-the-mill notoriety, the kind that usually attaches itself to politicians, wealthy socialites, and naughty movie stars—and eventually fades out—and there’s your Jimmy Hoffa notoriety, the kind that never goes away.

In the 44 years since Hoffa’s disappearance and presumed murder (he vanished July 30, 1975, was declared “legally dead” on July 30, 1982), the amount of material written about him by journalists—not to mention doughnut shop gossip and crackpot conspiracy theories—is astounding.

And it’s still happening. Martin Scorsese, the gifted movie director with a schoolboy crush on gangsters, has just made a new Hoffa film purporting to solve the murder. As much as we admire Scorsese, his three-hour-long, highly stylized movie, with Al Pacino playing Jimmy, will “solve” nothing.

So let’s start with what we *do know*. Let’s start with the Midwestern organization that set out to represent the rugged men who handled teams of horses and horse-drawn wagons, and eventually became the storied International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT).

At its peak (with 2.3 million members), the IBT was the largest labor union in America. In tribute to those modest roots, the official Teamster symbol is still a picture of two bridled horse heads.

One reason it's appropriate to start at the beginning is to demonstrate that the Teamsters were never *not* a shady organization. Hoffa gets tagged (if not "defined") as the "union president with criminal ties," but in truth, the IBT, as far back as the early 1900s, was already considered a dirty union.

And the Teamsters weren't alone. Back in those rough-and-tumble days, business, politics, and labor were all riddled with corruption. So Hoffa had a valid point when he noted sarcastically, before the Kennedy subcommittee, "It has to be considered damned unusual that no other union was ever investigated."

It's a fascinating history. The IBT was founded in 1903, with Cornelius Shea, a man beset with legal troubles and character flaws, serving as its first International president. Although "Corny" Shea was indicted numerous times, he demonstrated formidable survival and organizational skills.

Under Shea's guidance, the Teamsters adopted a rigid and centralized, top-down leadership model—one which the union would, with mixed results, embrace for the next 80 years. During Shea's 4-year reign, membership increased to almost 50,000.

Despite the indictments and accusations of corruption, it was Shea's personal reputation that did him in. The public and rank-and-file turned against him when it was revealed that he had once lived—actually resided—in a whorehouse, and had kept a 19-year old waitress as his mistress.

But "modern" Teamster history properly begins with Shea's successor, Dan Tobin, who was born in Ireland, in 1875. Incredibly, Tobin remained International president from 1907 all the way to 1952. Put in perspective, Tobin became president six years before Jimmy Hoffa was born, and didn't leave office until Hoffa was 39 years old.

Tobin bequeathed the Teamsters three legacies: (1) jurisdictional disputes arising from raiding other unions (by 1941, dues-paying members numbered 530,000), (2) running the union autocratically, and (3) making sure the top officers were lavishly overpaid.

Shortly before Tobin was to retire, the executive board not only voted to raise his annual salary from \$30,000 to \$50,000, but to pay it to him for life. They also built him, free of charge, a luxury mansion in Miami Beach, and provided him with a car and driver, a full-time maid, and incidental, life-long "spending money." The IBT's celebrated love affair with extravagance and conspicuous consumption began early.

If "modern" Teamster history is said to begin with Dan Tobin, then its so-called "notorious" period began with Dave Beck, who was elected president in 1953, after forcing (with Hoffa's help) Dan Tobin out of office.

It was Beck who boldly moved Teamster headquarters from

Indianapolis to their spectacular new digs in Washington D.C., arguing that staying in provincial Indiana was silly, given that Washington was where all the action was.

That formidable building, made of gleaming white stone (which instantly became known as the "Marble Palace"), still serves as Teamster headquarters, occupying prime real estate on Louisiana Avenue NW, across a plaza from the United States Senate.

Beck was also the first Teamster president to serve time in prison. Like Al Capone, he was convicted of tax evasion. As we shall see with the scheming and avaricious Frank Fitzsimmons, the feds had a vast array of charges against Beck from which to choose but went with the easiest to prove. Tax evasion is simple arithmetic.

Yet, when it came to malfeasance, Beck was probably no worse than dozens of other Teamster officials. As one historian declared, "The Teamsters had suffered from extensive corruption since its formation in 1903." So the IBT was already recognized as corrupt 50 years before Beck even took office.

It could also be said that no union was more brutal or anti-democratic. And none were greedier. Once the IBT reached half a million members, and the pension funds began overflowing with ready cash, the temptation was simply too great. Predictably, these officers—most of whom were street-wise men who grew up poor—became pigs at the trough. And it wasn't long before those pension funds found their way into Mob hands.

One thing about Dave Beck that gets overlooked is that he was the first Teamster to negotiate a "master contract," a stroke of strategic genius that basically handed the union the Keys to the Kingdom. A "master contract" is a collective bargaining agreement that essentially covers *all the workers in an industry*, which, in the Teamsters case, applied to every unionized truck driver in the country.

As even a casual observer must realize, something as comprehensive and all-encompassing as a master contract not only gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "union solidarity," but the leverage a union gains at the bargaining table from such a contract is immeasurable.

It will be recalled that, back in the glory days of the United Auto Workers (UAW), the Big Three automakers (Chrysler, Ford and General Motors) regularly engaged in what was referred to as "patterned bargaining."

This was where one of the Big Three would be "chosen" as the first to negotiate a new UAW contract, with the implicit understanding that the other two companies would agree to the same basic terms when it came their turn. One could say that a master contract is a version of patterned bargaining, but without the specific details and minutiae being included.

Beck also established what became a national arbitration plan for the adjudication of grievances. While Hoffa gets the lion's share of the credit for Teamster success—most of it deserved—it was Dave Beck, who, in his one term as president,

from 1953 to 1957, put the Teamsters in the position to accomplish what they did during the decade of the 1960s.

And what they accomplished in 1964 was remarkable. Hoffa negotiated the National Master Freight Agreement which virtually guaranteed the wages of 450,000 over-the-road truck drivers. It's fair to say that it was this agreement that put the Teamsters in a position to run the table. Arguably, in the entire history of U.S. labor, there has never been a better contract than the 1964 Master Freight (and that includes Reuther's landmark "Treaty of Detroit," in 1950).

James Riddle Hoffa was born February 14, 1913, in Brazil, Indiana. His father, a coal miner, died when Jimmy was seven years old, and in 1924, the family moved to Detroit, where Hoffa grew up and spent most of his life. As a seventh-grader, at the age of fourteen, Hoffa quit school and began working at various manual labor jobs in order to help support his family.

When Jimmy was seventeen years old, working on a loading dock of the Kroger Grocery company, in Detroit, he led a spontaneous strike, protesting low pay and poor conditions. Even at that age and height (as an adult, Hoffa was only 5' 5"), he exhibited preternatural confidence and fearlessness recognizable by men twice his age. While the term "charismatic leader" tends to be over-used, it definitely applied to Hoffa.

Hoffa's union career officially began when he was invited to leave Kroger and become an organizer at Teamster Local 299, in Detroit. The ambitious and competent Hoffa moved up the ladder quickly, and in 1957, when Dave Beck, swamped with a seemingly unending list of racketeering and embezzlement indictments, chose to "step down," Hoffa was named International president at the Teamster convention, held, as always, in Miami.

Back in those days, the membership didn't vote. To be fair, this unassailable, anti-democratic approach was true of most big unions, not only the Teamsters. Because a "one man, one vote" configuration was so unpredictable, it was anathema to big labor.

But the way the Teamsters went about it was more obnoxious than most. Only the delegates were allowed to vote for the top spots. And who appointed those delegates? The sixteen vice-presidents. And who elected the vice-presidents? The delegates. With that set of "circular" bylaws, how could there *not* be corruption?

Although the membership had no voice, many were fine with that arrangement, so long as they were receiving generous contracts. But not every local was getting those good deals. Teamster brass was settling "sweetheart" contracts, receiving kickbacks from the companies to keep the workers down. And

if the membership protested too loudly, they were harassed or, worse, physically beaten down by union thugs.

As a consequence, during the early 1980s two grassroots reform groups were formed. First came PROD (Professional Drivers Council), which was inspired by Ralph Nader, and later came the TDU (Teamsters for a Democratic Union), spearheaded largely by courageous union activists with the United Parcel Service (UPS).

Inevitably, in 1989, the Teamsters were dragged kicking and screaming toward democracy. They were forced to share their authority with the membership. Not all of it, but much of it. Still, it was a watershed moment in labor history. Citing the RICO statute (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), the feds declared war on the IBT.

And the Teamsters knew this wasn't an empty threat. Also, rumor had it that part of that deal included the feds promising



*Al Pacino as Jimmy Hoffa in The Irishman (Netflix).*

not to publicize the fact that Fitzsimmons and Jackie Presser had been long-time government informants. That disclosure would've been dynamite.

As important as Hoffa was to labor history, he was never admired in the way that labor's Holy Trinity was. That trio consisted of Walter Reuther, president of the UAW, Harry Bridges, president of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU), and John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers (UMW). What set Hoffa apart from these labor giants was, essentially, his lack of ideology.

Though Hoffa was intelligent, gutsy and utterly committed, he wasn't given to ideology. By contrast, Reuther, raised by Socialists, came off as a humanitarian. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Australian-born Harry Bridges was a former member of the Communist Party, a true lefty and brilliant tactician. And John L. Lewis was a strict Mormon and life-long Republican, who viewed helping the poor as his moralistic calling.

But Hoffa saw things the way Thomas Hobbes would have



seen them had he been a labor union rep. For Hoffa, economics could be summarized in one sentence: *The only way working people will ever get their fair share is by forcing management to give it to them.* And only a union had the muscle to do that.

So, in 1957, at a garishly extravagant convention in Miami (Teamster décor was a testament to bad taste), Hoffa became fourth president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. But there was another convention being held that same year, this one in Atlantic City. It was the AFL-CIO convention.

The “House of Labor,” led by the cranky George Meany, was then (and now) the largest labor federation in the world. At that 1957 convention, they made the unprecedented move of voting to expel the Teamsters unless Jimmy Hoffa agreed to resign as president. Besides not trusting Hoffa, Meany and the AFL-CIO were under pressure from the federal government to help de-fang the Teamsters.

At the time, the IBT was contributing \$750,000 a year to AFL-CIO coffers, so expulsion was no symbolic gesture. Hoffa is in office ten minutes, and the almighty AFL-CIO is already calling for his head. But not only was Hoffa not going to resign, he was also just getting started being Jimmy Hoffa. The Teamsters were going rogue.

Following his re-election in 1961, Hoffa set to work expanding and strengthening his union. That effort culminated in the aforementioned 1964 Master Freight Agreement, which virtually put all over-the-road truck drivers in North America under one contract. We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of truck drivers who, if they chose to strike, would bring the U.S. economy to its knees.

Indeed, it was the insane prospect of the Teamsters turning the U.S. economy into their own private fiefdom, coupled with organized crime increasing its stranglehold on the biggest labor union in America, that prompted Attorney General Bobby Kennedy to say of Hoffa, “He’s not just the most powerful man in labor, he’s the most powerful man in the country, next to the President.”

Of course, anyone who followed those Senate hearings already knew that Hoffa and Bobby Kennedy loathed each other. Bobby saw Hoffa as a greedy, power-hungry goon with a Napoleonic complex, and Jimmy saw Bobby and the whole Kennedy family—despite their wealth and glamour—as a nest of maggots.

Accordingly, by the mid-1960s, the U.S. government had made it their mission to put Jimmy Hoffa behind bars. Ultimately, what the feds convicted him of was jury tampering, and in 1967, he was sent to prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. While loyal holdouts insist to this day that Hoffa had been framed, they are mistaken.

There is no denying Hoffa committed numerous crimes, any one of which could have landed him in prison. Conventional wisdom tells us that he was “forced” to rely on Mob muscle for leverage in the early days—which was ostensibly true—but Hoffa also benefitted personally from many of these illegal

undertakings.

In any event, Hoffa’s tenure as Teamster president officially stretched from 1957 to 1971. From 1967 to 1971, he essentially ran the union from his jail cell with the help of the man he had hand-picked to run the organization in his absence. Which brings us to the enigmatic Frank Fitzsimmons.

It’s no exaggeration to say that people were staggered when Hoffa named Fitzsimmons as his replacement. Even “Fitz” supporters considered the man unqualified. While many were simply bewildered by the appointment, others were angered and offended by it. Hoffa picking a glorified “gofer” like Frank Fitzsimmons was tantamount to mocking the office of president. And of course, this eccentric personnel move ultimately backfired.

Still, once Hoffa’s associates gave it some thought, the “Fitz” decision made eminent sense. Jimmy wanted a weak, unambitious and malleable person in charge so he, Hoffa, could continue to call the shots from Lewisburg. He wanted a “puppet,” and that’s exactly what he got. For a while.

But two things happened. First, Fitz began to get comfortable sitting in the big guy’s chair, enjoying the many perks that come with being president, and second, the Mob began to get comfortable *having* him there. Unlike Hoffa, who was making noises about phasing out the Mob, Fitz had no such ambitions. The Mob had come to regard the Teamster pension funds as a reliable source of income and intended to keep it that way.

In 1971, with Hoffa still in prison, Fitzsimmons was elected Teamster president. And in December, he persuaded President Richard Nixon to commute Hoffa’s sentence even though he’d served less than five years of a 13-year stretch. Alas, Hoffa’s sentence was commuted on the express condition that he not seek union office until 1980. And that stipulation (which Hoffa abhorred but reluctantly accepted) set in motion all that followed.

During this same period—with Fitz nominally doing Hoffa’s bidding while simultaneously betraying him—the feds compiled a laundry list of things to charge Fitzsimmons with, including election fraud, mail fraud, perjury, extortion, embezzlement, tax evasion, bribery, and racketeering. Potential indictments aside, Fitz won re-election in 1976, despite some spirited resistance from the TDU faction.

Everyone marveled at how lucky Fitzsimmons was at not being prosecuted. The prevailing theories were that the feds either didn’t have enough hardcore evidence to convict or that Fitz was playing both sides. Years later it was revealed that he had indeed been snitching on union leaders to the IRS and DOJ in return for not being prosecuted.

After Hoffa was released, he began promising that he was not only going to re-take the union, but he was going to “clean house,” referring to the criminal element. In the Mob world, a defiant promise of that sort—from someone who appears to mean what he says—is bound to incite fury. Whether Hoffa knew it or not, he had outlived his usefulness and was now



seen as a threat.

Theories surrounding his murder are legion. While no one was ever charged, the FBI's roster of "persons of interest" eventually numbered in the hundreds. If you were to randomly throw a rock in Detroit, you would likely hit somebody who swore "he knew a guy who knew a guy" who'd confessed to it. *Everybody knew a guy*. Conveniently, they were all dead.

Perhaps the most stunning thing about the assassination was its naked arrogance. Despite all the rumors—the rampant speculation suggesting that Hoffa was being set up for a hit—the Mob stuck to its plan. They killed Jimmy Hoffa even though everyone was more or less watching. Of course, the body was never found and never will be. Nor will the murderer.

There's an irony here. Not only irony but a measure of poetic justice. As president of the most brutally violent union in U.S. history, Hoffa likely died a brutal, violent death.

In 1979, and Hoffa still "missing," the chill winds of labor reform gusted. With a stroke of his pen, President Jimmy Carter changed everything. He signed legislation that deregulated the national freight industry, a move that effectively ended Teamster hegemony and resulted in non-union "gypsy" drivers flooding the market, thus causing the price (and accompanying wages) of hauling freight to plummet.

There was more. In 1982, Roy Williams, who, the year before, had replaced Fitzsimmons as IBT president (Fitz resigned for health reasons), was convicted of bribing a public official. Williams had recklessly offered Nevada Senator Howard Cannon money to vote against deregulation. Cannon reported him, and Williams was sent to prison.

And then, in 1983, Jackie Presser, son of William ("Big Bill") Presser, a multi-term international vice-president, replaced Williams as president. Jackie Presser served as IBT president from 1983 to 1988. He died in office at age 61.

It was during the Presser regime that the Teamsters began showing the inevitable wear and tear that comes with 80 years of corruption. The TDU faction grew stronger, the feds exposed the Central States Pension Fund for the fraudulent enterprise it was, and Jackie Presser (an FBI snitch) began a crusade to root out the union's criminal element. The good news? In 1985, the Teamsters were graciously allowed to rejoin the AFL-CIO.

In 1991, Ron Carey was elected president. A UPS activist and TDU favorite, Carey began shaking things up from the moment he took office, and handily won re-election in 1996. But when it was revealed he'd received kickbacks, a "Dump Carey" campaign forced him from office. While the charges were flimsy, the Old Guard wanted this reform-minded president out.

From 1903 to the present, the IBT has had nine International presidents. And since 1998, it's been James P. Hoffa, Jimmy's son. Nostalgically, they've come full circle. Hoffa to Hoffa. By most accounts, James P. is a likable, hardworking guy with a University of Michigan law degree. Hoffa's daughter, Barbara, is a retired judge.

Needless to say, today's Teamsters bear little resemblance to the grandiose Teamsters of the 1960s and '70s. Not only is there no aura of danger or malevolence, but that fabled "Teamster mystique" is gone. No longer exclusively identified with truckers and warehousemen, the union now represents computer programmers, security guards, nurses, flight attendants, and such.

However, there was an instance, in 2005, where the ghost of Jimmy Hoffa appeared to rise up. In an act of defiance, James P. got his members to pull out of the venerable House of Labor and join the newly formed "Change to Win," a labor federation in direct competition with the AFL-CIO. Even sweeter, he took several million members from other unions along with him. Papa would've been proud. **CP**

**DAVID MACARAY** is an author and former labor organizer. His newest book is *How to Win Friends and Avoid Sacred Cows*.

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## UNDER CIA EYES

### A covert operator analyzes the JFK assassination and comes to an overdue conclusion

BY JEFFERSON MORLEY

"I was struck by the intimacy and the smallness of the whole surroundings," said retired CIA officer Rolf Mowatt-Larssen after his first visit to Dealey Plaza in November 2019. Dealey Plaza, a grassy Art Deco entry point to downtown Dallas, is where President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed 56 years ago. Hundreds of thousands of people still come from around the world every year to see the spot where the popular liberal president was ambushed. Many of them have the same reaction to the crime scene: the intimacy, the smallness.

Mowatt-Larssen was not just any tourist. A 22-year veteran of America's clandestine service, he is an experienced secret intelligence professional and a senior fellow in the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. With the binocular vision of an operations officer, Mowatt-Larssen assessed the landscape where JFK was murdered on November 22, 1963 for its action potential, both defensive and offensive.

"Everything was so easy to control, so easy to manipulate," he told a crowd of 150 JFK researchers at a nearby hotel two days later. He described Dealey Plaza as "a setting that was so conducive to everything that happened that day And I wondered if that was accident."

I wondered about Mowatt-Larssen's wonder. This CIA veteran's curiosity about the causes of JFK's assassination, his willingness to talk about it publicly, and his analysis of how and why the liberal president was assassinated is fascinating and compelling. What he brings to the historical record of JFK's

murder, is not new facts, but an original frame of analysis. Mowatt-Larssen does not look at the story of how JFK died as do most Washington pundits: as an anti-conspiracy theorist. He doesn't view JFK's assassination through the lens of investigative reporting (my preferred mode), academic history, cultural criticism, or touristic adventure. He sees Dealey Plaza through the eyes of a covert operator.

I found that intriguing, so I introduced myself to him in the crowded hall outside the room where he spoke. The conference, sponsored by the Committee Against Political Assassinations (CAPA), attracted a graying, mostly male, crowd that debated and discussed the intricacies of a pivotal historic moment. Mowatt-Larssen was mixing amicably with these amateur sleuths when I intercepted him. He told me he liked my biography of CIA counterintelligence chief James Angleton, *The Ghost*. Soon, we repaired to the lobby bar of the Quality Inn to trade spy stories over white wine.

A pinkish, polylingual Norwegian-American with white bangs, Mowatt-Larssen looks younger than his 65 years. He graduated from West Point in 1976 and served six years as a U.S. Army Cavalry officer before joining the CIA in 1982. He spoke of mole hunting in Mexico and investigating Aldrich Ames, the Russian spy who betrayed some of his agents. He humbly bragged that he was one of the youngest station chiefs ever and gained a reputation for speaking his mind. He said I could report that he served as station chief in Moscow. "That's been acknowledged," he said. To provide any more details of his professional resume could get me indicted for violating the Espionage Act. Throughout, he demonstrated a spook's knack for spinning intriguing operational tales devoid of publishable details.

I came to Dallas to hear his presentation because I had some idea of what he intended to say. Mowatt-Larssen first shared his JFK analysis with several hundred retired intelligence officers at Valerie Plame's annual spy conference last May. A friend in attendance texted me. "This guy from CIA just said the agency killed JFK," she wrote. "WTF?"

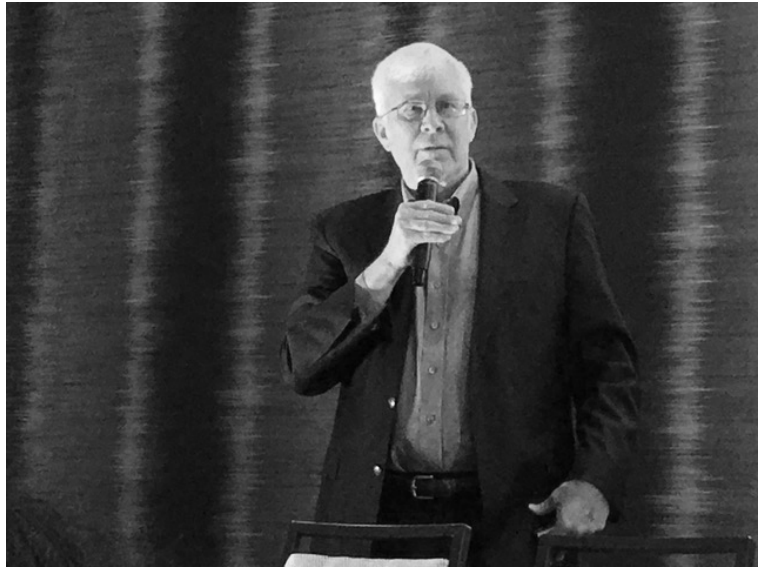
I had the same question. In Dallas, I learned that Mowatt-Larssen embraces the theory that JFK's assassination was the work of rogue CIA officers. He argues that certain officers in the agency's Miami station plotted JFK's death as revenge for his betrayals of the anti-communist forces during the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis in October 1963.

This is not a novel interpretation of November 22. The possible involvement of senior intelligence officers in JFK's death is explored most carefully and credibly in Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan's deeply reported book, *Not in Your Lifetime*. Mowatt-Larssen stake any grand claim to his-

torical truth. He sometimes gives himself an out by saying things like, "If there was a conspiracy, here's how it happened." He says he is not speaking from any knowledge of CIA records on the subject. His method is probabilistic, not evidentiary. "It's based on tradecraft," he said. "How would a conspiracy look?"

While I appreciated this creative mode of thinking, more than one conference participant did not.

"There's 0 percent chance he's not a representative of the CIA cover-up," Dan Storper, a music producer and leader of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, a group of 80 citizens, activists and authors who have called for the re-



*Retired CIA officer. Rolf Mowatt-Larssen. Photo: Jefferson Morley.*

opening of the JFK investigation. Another JFK researcher said that Mowatt-Larssen was a "CIA stooge" whose talk was "the low point of the conference. I couldn't find a brick to toss, LOL. Why he was there is beyond me."

Such suspicions should not blind people to Mowatt-Larssen's central insight: the crime of November 22, 1963 was most likely the culmination of a covert operation, organized by CIA personnel. "They had to be operations officers," he stressed at one point.

Mowatt-Larssen's presentation in Dallas is easily the most significant development in the JFK story since at least October 2017. That's when President Trump agreed to keep secret portions of 15,834 assassination-related files until at least 2021. (The number comes from the National Archives web site and was confirmed to me by an Archives official). Some people say the CIA has nothing to hide on the JFK assassination story. I say, if they have nothing to hide, why are they hiding so much?

While the president acquiesces to the CIA's demands for continuing JFK secrecy, this former station chief questions it. "I'm a big believer in releasing the rest of the records," said Mowatt-Larssen.

## JFK, Watergate and Trump

“Why am I doing this?” Mowatt-Larssen asked the audience at the beginning on his 90 minute presentation. “As a CIA officer it’s a little controversial. What is my goal? My goal is to have an answer [about who killed JFK] for myself and my children.” That may sound ingenious, but most people in the room, myself included, have the same agenda.

Mowatt-Larssen was nine years old when he heard the news from Dallas. “There were three times in my life when I didn’t trust the govt to tell the truth,” he said. “This is hard for CIA officer to say. The Kennedy assassination, where I’m absolutely convinced if nothing else that there was a cover-up. The second was Watergate, and the third is now.” The epic crises of American power—JFK’s assassination, Watergate and Trump’s presidency—have a way of making people rethink their assumptions.

As for the notion that JFK was the victim of a plot among the leaders of the U.S. government, Mowatt-Larssen said, “I will not go there.” U.S government culpability for JFK’s death is a bridge too far for him. “I hope you will respect that,” he told the audience. “I cannot go to a place where I think my government did this. I’ll be convinced if the evidence takes me there but I’m not at all persuaded to take that seriously.”

Mowatt-Larssen went on to make a series of points that I found both cogent and persuasive. These were not the claims of a “conspiracy theorist.” They were certainly not the words of a “CIA stooge.” Mowatt-Larssen’s observations about the causes of JFK’s death are founded in CIA practices. They are realistic and plausible. They can be tested empirically—if and when all of the JFK files are made public.

### ‘The Very Top People’

The JFK conspiracy, says Mowatt-Larssen, was probably quite small, at least terms of the number of people who had advance knowledge of the Dallas ambush. “That’s one of the counterintuitive things about the history of agency,” he explained. “The greatest operations we planned and carried out with wild success....were things that were [planned and executed] by very few people, I’ve done some of those things. I’ve been part of some of those things.”

“Only the very top people in our organization could have done something like this,” he went on. “I mean the best operational minds... the best in terms of capability, competency and expertise. To keep it a secret. To take it to the grave.”

The agency’s professionalism in perception management should not be underestimated he said.

“A rogue CIA operation to kill the president will be indistinguishable from a lone gunman [scenario] to the extent it was planned and carried out flawlessly by experts in the craft of intelligence,” he said.

“That was worth thinking about: A rogue CIA operation to kill JFK would be indistinguishable from a lone gunman [scenario] to the extent it was planned and carried out flaw-

lessly by experts in the craft of intelligence. (emphasis added).”

What this veteran spy wants us to believe is this: The Warren Commission’s narrative of Lee Harvey Oswald, the lone gunman, may well be a CIA cover story, a media legend generated by “experts in the craft of intelligence.” The purpose: to conceal a conspiracy to kill the liberal president.

If Mowatt-Larssen is right, his former employer has been lying about JFK’s assassination for 56 years. But is he right?

### Thought Experiment

The CIA veteran proposed a “thought experiment,” in which he reverse-engineered the lone gunman scenario. He asked a question that was both novel and incisive.

“How can you get away with a really elaborate but very simple plan of deception, to end up in a place where the president is dead and it is blamed on someone else, other than the people who perpetrated it?” he asked. “Not easy.”

Mowatt-Larssen answered his own question with tradecraft analysis. From an operational point of view, at least four people must have been involved, he said 1) A mastermind with a deeply personal motivation to kill the president of the United States; 2) someone with the ability to recruit Lee Oswald into the role of patsy; 3) someone with access to recruiting Jack Ruby to kill Oswald; and 4) a second gunman in Dealey Plaza.

The motivation, he said, “most logically relates to the duel events of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis,” he said. Both times, Kennedy chose not to invade Cuba, prompting men who believed they had “the power and, more importantly, the responsibility, to save the country from the president.” Kennedy is too green, too young. He almost got us into a war with the Soviets. He abandoned people we had trained and sent to Cuba to overthrow Castro.”

“It has to be personal,” Mowatt-Larssen said. “Every spy that worked for the Soviets that we caught had very personal reasons why they betrayed their country.”

The CIA officers who recruited Oswald had a wealth of information in his so-called 201 personality file. This file was controlled by the agency’s Counterintelligence staff, led by James Jesus Angleton. Mainstream defenders of the lone gunman theory, like Harvard professor Cass Sunstein and CNN host Chris Matthews, scoff at the idea that the agency would recruit someone as volatile as Oswald, a 24-year-old ex-Marine who once had security clearance.

Mowatt-Larssen, a former station chief who handled scores of agents in the course of his career, does not scoff at the idea.

“Why would you try to recruit him?” he asked. “Only if he’s going to be blackmailable. To set him up as the person who killed the president. So you can sell the cover story of the lone gunman. [That’s] the only logical reason to bring him into the plot.”

### The Making of a Patsy

When viewed through the eyes of an operations officer,



Oswald's wandering path to Dealey Plaza makes more sense. It is not paranoid craziness to think Oswald was manipulated by CIA officers, Mowatt-Larssen says.

Mowatt-Larssen hypothesizes that Oswald was recruited, wittingly or unwittingly, into a plot to kill JFK in the spring of 1963. Oswald, he says, came to the attention of Jim Moore, a former FBI agent who ran the CIA's Dallas office for many years. Moore's CIA file, not declassified until April 2018, shows that his job responsibilities in 1963 included "exploitation of a source's complete intelligence potential by debriefing thoroughly" and "cultivation of contact to develop trust and confidence in both the Agency and the Contact Specialist himself."

That's exactly what happened in Dallas in early 1963, Mowatt-Larssen says when certain CIA men recruited Oswald into the role of patsy. George de Mohrenschildt, a Russian-speaking geologist befriended Oswald in late 1962 after he returned from Russia with his wife Marina. De Mohrenschildt played the role of "access agent," he says. De Mohrenschildt had been feeding information to the CIA for a year. His friendship provided the agency with access to Oswald so that he could be recruited. A third CIA operative—not Moore, not de Mohrenschildt—would have made the pitch to Oswald, according to Mowatt-Larssen.

He speculates that Oswald, egotistical and prone to flattery, accepted and was immediately induced to leave Texas. "The first thing you do if you've recruited a man like Oswald in Dallas," he explained, "is to get him out of Dallas."

In April 1963, Oswald moved to New Orleans under the influence of his unidentified CIA handlers, Mowatt-Larssen says.

"You want to reestablish his loyalty, his willingness to accept tasking and to try see if you can use him in a broader capacity." The agency's operatives sought to establish Oswald's "pro-Castro connections because that's going to be the cover story. That pro-Castro people were involved in the assassination. That's his tasking."

Mowatt-Larssen's scenario is founded in documented fact. In August 1963, Oswald provoked a series of encounters with anti-Castro exiles in the CIA-funded Cuban Student Directorate. At the time, the group's leaders in Miami were receiving \$51,000 a month from George Joannides, the chief of covert operations in the Miami station. Mowatt-Larssen says Carlos Bringuier, the leader of the Cubans who confronted Oswald, was a "CIA contract agent." As a result of a CIA psychological warfare program, codenamed AMSPELL, Oswald was identified as a Castro supporter in New Orleans newspapers, radio and TV.

At the same time, Oswald was monitored by senior agency officials, Mowatt-Larssen says, a fact which is also well-documented. When Oswald traveled by bus to Mexico City in late September in a failed bid to get a visa to travel to Cuba, the agency was paying close attention.

"Everybody is following him: [counterintelligence chief] Angleton, the chief of station in Mexico," Mowatt-Larssen said.

"Everybody's aware of what's going on. He's on everybody's stove." In his metaphor, the itinerant ex-Marine, scheming for a place in history, was actually getting cooked.

Oswald returned to Dallas in October 1963 and took a job in the Texas School Book Depository overlooking Dealey Plaza. Six weeks later, when JFK's motorcade passed by, a flurry of shots rang out and JFK was fatally wounded. Oswald left the scene and was arrested 90 minutes later, allegedly after shooting a police officer. In custody, Oswald denied he had killed the president, telling a crowded news conference, "I'm a patsy."

"I got chills when I heard Oswald say, 'I'm a patsy,'" Mowatt-Larssen recounted. "That famous clip. I think I know what he meant.... He knew he had been set up and he knew he was abandoned." The next day Oswald was being transferred to a more secure jail when he was gunned down on national television by Jack Ruby, owner of a burlesque club who admired local organized crime figures.

The killing of Oswald is another key to Mowatt-Larssen's case. He argues that one of the conspirators had to have had access to the Mafia bosses who could induce Ruby to eliminate Oswald as a witness. He said he was "stunned" to learn that the CIA had liaisons with organized crime figures in 1963, a claim that many at the conference found hard to believe.

Mowatt-Larssen closed his presentation by quoting an enigmatic comment that James Angleton once made to reporter Seymour Hersh about JFK's assassination: "My father's mansion has many rooms," the counterintelligence chief said. "I'm not privy to who struck John."

Mowatt-Larssen unpacked this gnostic parable for the JFK researchers.

"The mansion refers to CIA," he explained. "The rooms refer to compartments, where we hide information, control information. 'I'm not privy' doesn't necessarily mean 'I don't know,' or 'I don't suspect.' 'I'm not privy' [means] 'I wasn't in the loop.'" He said Angleton's oracular comment "confirms for me at a gut level, if not on an analytical basis, that he had a suspicion [of a plot to kill JFK], if not more than that."

Hersh had the same reaction: Angleton was trying to offload the blame for JFK's assassination on some other component of the agency.

This story, however, tests the limits of Mowatt-Larssen's theory that "CIA rogues" ambushed Kennedy in Dealey Plaza. Angleton was one of the most powerful men in the agency. If he condoned a plot, then complicity in the assassination reached the highest levels of the CIA and was not confined to the Miami station, as Mowatt-Larssen contends. How high the JFK plot went remains to be clarified.

### **'Carried out flawlessly'**

I don't dismiss the possibility that Mowatt-Larssen may be advancing some institutional agenda to shape public perception of the JFK assassination story. The agency has a long



record of deceptive and misleading statements about the JFK story. I disagree with Mowatt-Larssen on some factual points—he thinks Oswald fired the fatal shot, which strikes me as impossible—but that doesn't show intent to deceive. Reasonable people can differ.

Dan Storper says Mowatt-Larssen is engaged in a “modified limited hangout,” that classic Washington maneuver in which a political actor gives up some damaging information to forestall disclosure of something worse. If that's true—and I'm not sure that it is—Mowatt-Larssen's claim that rogue officers killed Kennedy would indicate the Agency is abandoning its long-standing blanket denials of involvement in JFK's assassination in favor of something more honest. If so, that would be a welcome and newsworthy development.

I also think it's possible that Mowatt-Larssen has a sincere interest in the JFK story, and is pursuing it on his own. I've met more than a few retired agency hands unafraid to criticize the agency or stake out impolitic views. Certainly no retired CIA officer has ever publicly offered an interpretation of November 22, 1963 that is so grounded in tradecraft and the documentary record and so incriminating of agency personnel.

That too is newsworthy. Ideally, Mowatt-Larssen would testify before the House Oversight Committee, about enforcement of the JFK Records Act. He could advise the Congress about where the American people might finally find the rest of the JFK story. **CP**

**JEFFERSON MORLEY**, author of *The Ghost: The Secret Life of CIA Spymaster James Jesus Angleton*, is the editor of The Deep State blog.

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## What Labour's Loss Means for the American Left

BY ROB URIE

If you want to understand how far down the neoliberal rabbit-hole the U.S. has gone, try explaining the American healthcare system to Brits. The most common response I've gotten is absolute incredulity. While there is a general awareness that the systems are different, even committed capitalists refuse to believe that if you don't have the money to pay for health care—either through insurance premiums or directly, you don't get health care. The most common guess was that our yearly out-of-pocket health care costs are about two hundred dollars per person.

I mention this because the usual suspects in the American press are putting Labour's loss in the recent British election forward as a lesson for the American left. Boris Johnson, a vaguely Trump-like figure and leader the nationalist right, bested Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party by a substantial margin. The point about comparative health care systems is

made because in terms of social welfare programs, even today the Brits make the U.S. look like a 'shithole country.' The social services expected by the British right would be considered a major win by welfare-state 'socialists' in the U.S.

For Americans who don't know the history, Britain joined the EEC (European Economic Community), which later became the EU (European Union), in 1975. And Britain kept its own currency, the pound sterling, choosing against joining the EU currency union. This has given the Bank of England relative autonomy from the European Central Bank (ECB). The ECB became a point of political contestation when the European periphery was forced into economic depression through austerity measures imposed by the ECB during the Great Recession.

To the reported dismay of Brits who were still reeling from the impact of the Great Recession, the British government likewise cut social spending to reduce the national budget deficit under the Clintonite / Wall Street theory that a balanced budget was necessary to keep interest rates at low levels. Low interest rates, the theory had it, would spark economic recovery. In the U.S., Barack Obama based his own pivot to austerity on this theory, reportedly pitched to him by Clintonites in his administration.

As the facts of national accounts had it, there was no budget constraint. The economics that claimed one were left over from the days of the gold standard that Richard Nixon had ended in the early 1970s. They had been kept alive by Wall Street that earned profits from funding public expenditures. What this means is that the American, British and EU decisions to implement austerity in the midst of recession were political, not economic.

Austerity was a gratuitous infliction of economic misery on large numbers of people at a time when they were already suffering. And it was being imposed while the Wall Street banks that had caused the crisis were still being bailed out. A more perfect formula for alienating millions of citizens from liberal leaders and governments has rarely been conceived. Weimar Germany is the best known precedent. And while the professional classes have now largely recovered from the Great Recession, those who were neglected will likely harbor anger and resentment for some time to come.

The term 'neglected' here implies passivity, while in fact for thirty years active measures were taken by the neoliberal governments of the U.S. and Britain to de-industrialize 'their' economies without much consideration given to what would happen to the towns, cities, and regions that lost their industrial bases. The set-up for the Great Recession in both countries was thirty years of planned deindustrialization facilitated by finance and codified through government trade agreements, of which joining the EEC was one, and NAFTA in the U.S. another.

As with the demographics around the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., the Brits who voted for Brexit (having

Britain exit the EU), and more recently for Boris Johnson, aren't perfectly correlated with the consequences of deindustrialization. And deindustrialization isn't perfectly explained by globalization. But this much is known: a majority of Brits voted for Brexit. Boris Johnson supported Brexit, while Jeremy Corbyn and Labour attempted to triangulate Brexit politics by supporting a second referendum without taking a clear stand on it. Supporters of Brexit voted for Boris Johnson.

Had Mr. Corbyn and Labour opposed Brexit, they could have taken a principled stand and argued their case. Otherwise, the obvious question with a second referendum is: what was wrong with the first referendum? If Mr. Corbyn had supported Brexit, why ask for a second referendum that risked reversing the earlier result? The reported tension inside Labour that led to the policy was between cosmopolitan globalists and anti-neoliberals in the deindustrialized regions. However, another term for cosmopolitan globalists is neoliberals. The most vociferous advocates of neoliberalism in the U.S. have long been liberal Democrats.

A broadly analogous circumstance to this division within Labour can be found in the U.S. when Brexit was tied to Donald Trump's trade program as evidence of a global move hard right. The critiques lobbed by the American left came almost exclusively from the perspective that trade is good and that anything that interferes with it is bad. That theory is called neoliberalism. Many analyses quantified the cost of trade 'war' dislocations without addressing the costs of four decades of economic dislocations caused by neoliberal 'reforms'.

This isn't to argue that either Brexit or Donald Trump's trade policies are in-and-of-themselves well considered and / or constructive solutions to the problems they are intended to solve. But after thirty years of being tossed onto the economic garbage heap, it is fair enough for those so treated to be angry, hostile and suspicious when urban liberals offer the same talking points they were given in their youths as the solution to what ails them in the present. If free trade will make them rich, why aren't they rich? And if membership in the EU will make their lives better, why aren't their lives better?

In theory, trading blocs, deindustrialization and globalization aren't necessarily related—each can be considered on its own terms. But they are contingently related through history. Parsing them as being theoretically distinct is both true and less than constructive if political understanding is the goal. Trading blocs and globalization are logically related through the outward view of the benefits of trade. Globalization is premised on neoliberal trade economics.

Deindustrialization depended on the fungibility of capital, on the capacity to monetize domestic 'capital' in order to build new factories with new equipment (together = capital) away from the power of unions, taxes and environmental regulations. Whatever theory offers, the motivation for neoliberal reforms was / is to consolidate economic and political control. New factories could have been built in Britain and the U.S.

And new equipment could have been placed in these new factories. But this wasn't done. Instead, both the U.S. and Britain were systematically deindustrialized.

The definition of the 'capital' to be rendered fungible was contested before about 1995. After, the pirate-capitalist tautology that everything that was bought with Wall Street financing—including the already paid for pension and health care funds of the workforces being replaced, was available for the taking. Common practice became to can workers with long pension vesting periods—some as long as twenty-five years, a month or two before they were vested so that the new 'owners' could take the pensions for themselves, often to satisfy debt owed to Wall Street banks.

The contemporaneous 'debate' over these policies was remarkably disingenuous, with Bill Clinton selling NAFTA with the promise of new, better paying jobs for displaced industrial workers. What was actually provided was 'job training' for jobs that didn't exist. After a few months of unemployment benefits and a few weeks at the unemployment office learning how to enter data into a computer, manufacturing workers who had been supporting their families were off to French fry stations at fast food restaurants to earn minimum wage with no benefits reporting to 'managers' who attended high school with their kids.

Whatever the rational move forward in Britain and the U.S. might be, it is entirely rational that the displaced working class—which now includes a generation or two of younger workers laboring in the gig economy, want none of the industrialists, finance capitalists, academics, politicians and economic theories that created this mess. That Labour is divided between its professional and working class members illustrates the political conundrum on both sides of the Atlantic.

However, the deeper conundrum of Brexit is real. Had Mr. Corbyn and Labour supported Brexit and won the election, they would now be facing the task of dis-integrating the British economy from Europe after four plus decades of integration. While the establishment press is all over the Tory victory as a political lesson for the left, as the cliché goes, the real work has just begun. The problem for the Tories is that there is no easy path forward. The opportunity for Labour will be in rebuilding a workable society on the other side of Brexit.

Part of what makes capitalism so insidious is that it creates economic complexities that are prohibitively destructive to reverse. Citing the costs of such an unwind has constituted much of the American left's critique of Donald Trump's trade policies. The tradeoff between fragmented and thinly conceived economic nationalism and the continued build-out of neoliberal 'reforms' has been treated as a calculation of the cost of a pair of socks at Walmart. That exercise has been remarkably facile to date. Little of the hard work of figuring a workable path forward has been undertaken.

In fact, what would a well-considered unwind of neoliberalism look like? Assuming the Tories don't figure out what

they just committed to and back away, Brexit is on. A lot of these same issues will be in play should the powers-that-be in the U.S. ever decide that the continued existence of humanity is more important than adding another zero or two to their fortunes. Not only will environmental limits force reconsideration of what is important in life for most Westerners, but substantial majorities in Britain and the U.S. are now four decades into seeing their lots serially diminished.

The question in the U.S. is what direction forward? The political establishment has a ready answer—back into the arms of centrists who will slow the rate of political, economic and societal decay ever so slightly. In this sense, the fact of environmental crises in multiple dimensions helps clarify the issues. Unless prompt, extensive, and politically, economically and socially integrated action is taken, circumstances are about to take on a life of their own. Incrementalism, political centrism and the status quo aren't pragmatic, rational or even feasible. Leaving our futures to the American political establishment is collective suicide.

While conceptions of the American professional class appear to place it between Republican Trumpists and liberal Democrats, the tension in Labour helps illustrate the American conundrum. Since 2016 the American left has shown itself to be, in class terms, composed mainly of bourgeois liberals. This is meant descriptively, not as either an insult or some fabled 'purity test.' Almost all of the American left's critiques of Donald Trump have emerged from neoliberal premises. The lack of awareness of the source of these premises can be described loosely through the cultural category of cosmopolitan globalism.

While anyone paying attention can rightly point out that Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are the ultimate cosmopolitan globalists, the class divide between the economically dispossessed working classes in the U.S. and Britain and their respective professional classes is both real and it has a material basis. The poor and working classes in these countries aren't poor and working class because they are lazy and / or stupid. They are poor and working class because four decades ago a class war was launched by politically connected industrialists and financiers to break the power of organized labor and avoid environmental restrictions and taxation.

While I give Jeremy Corbyn credit for being more intelligent, well informed and decent than I would establishment Democrats, it is the respective professional classes in Britain and America that have refused to come to terms with, and publicly proclaim, the disaster that neoliberalism has wrought in Britain and the U.S. that makes liberalism a very hard electoral sell outside of banker and technology ghettos. Brexit was probably a loser for Labour no matter which side it chose. But the move to assuage its professional class members apparently laid bare its class composition a bit too conspicuously.

In the U.S., Bernie Sanders is playing the electoral politics the only way he can if the left stands a chance of winning the

2020 election. Medicare for All will sell the idea that government can work for the people. A robust Green New Deal with a Job Guarantee to keep the poor and working classes eating and living indoors through the necessary transition will shift resources away from the rich and to the working classes and poor to rebalance American political economy. It is to Mr. Sander's credit that the American professional class hates him. But it makes the road to political power that much harder.

The American left doesn't have Brexit to contend with. But the rush back toward neoliberalism following the 2016 election greatly exacerbated the professional / working class split that has been underway for decades. Not to shock anyone, but Donald Trump didn't pass NAFTA or bail out Wall Street. When I speak with my working class friends in the hinterlands, these are the dividing lines that separate liberal Democrats from them, their friends, their families and everyone they know. I take it with a grain of salt—some political posturing is inevitable. But as Labour just apparently learned, it is a mistake to simply dismiss it. **CP**

**ROB URIE** is the author of *Zen Economics*.

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## Lies, Lies and More Lies

### Inside the Afghan War Papers

BY MELVIN GOODMAN

U.S. administrations have used misinformation and disinformation to justify waging war. The Polk administration did so in the Mexican-American War; the McKinley administration in the Spanish-America War; the Johnson and Nixon administrations in the Vietnam War. Worst of all, the Bush administration resorted to a comprehensive campaign of deceit and deception to justify the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Now, the Washington Post has used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain the lies of the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations to justify the expanded US. role in Afghanistan, the longest war in American history.

The initial introduction of military force into Afghanistan was eminently justified and incredibly successful in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington. Vital U.S. interests were at stake and there was international support for an effort that was waged successfully over a three-month period in 2001. Fewer than 500 Delta forces, CIA operatives, and other paramilitary and Special Forces units, working with Afghan militias, drove al Qaeda from Afghanistan and the Taliban government from Kabul.

The deployment of an additional several thousand American forces would have prevented Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership from escaping from Tora Bora but Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the leader of the Central Command, General Thomas Franks, refused to do so in order

not to “repeat the mistakes of the Soviets.” We have already been in Afghanistan, known as the “graveyard of empires,” nearly twice as long as the Soviets.

The strategic mistake that was made at the outset was to treat the Taliban no differently than the members of al Qaeda. There were Taliban leaders early in the conflict who were willing to conduct negotiations, but the Bush and Obama administrations never gave them the opportunity to do so. Instead of withdrawing U.S. forces in the wake of the initial success, a series of secretaries of defense including Rumsfeld, Robert Gates, Leon Panetta, Ashton Carter, and James Mattis signed deployment orders for young American men and women to pursue what they knew to be an unwinnable conflict without end.

U.S. leaders realized for the past 10-15 years that the goal in Afghanistan was not to win the war, but to avoid losing. Rumsfeld concluded that the “only thing you can do is to bomb them and try to kill them. And that’s what we did, and it worked. They were gone.” If there was never a reasonable chance of success, then we were never engaged in a “just war.” In any event, the Taliban are not gone, and nearly one million Americans have fought in Afghanistan, many on multiple tours.

The “Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War” in the Washington Post, like the “Vietnam Papers” in an earlier era, is shocking, but contains no real surprises other than the persistent effort of our national security leaders to bamboozle the American people and their political representatives in the Congress. Mattis claims that there was no attempt to hide the problems of the confrontation from U.S. journalists, but the U.S. disinformation campaign was directed at all Americans and Afghans engaged in the conflict, even embedded journalists. And like Vietnam, U.S. military and civilian leaders who served in Afghanistan are still trying to justify their actions.

Two of the major defenders of the war, General Mattis and former ambassador Ryan Crocker, recently defended the expanded U.S. role in Afghanistan. In an oped that appeared in the Washington Post on December 13, 2019, Crocker refused to call the Afghan war a disaster and argued that there is no basis for comparing the Afghan War to an earlier fool’s errand in Vietnam. Crocker, one of America’s most prominent diplomats, says that he is “inclined to see the glass as half-full” in the case of Afghanistan.

In an interview with the Washington Post last week, Mattis defended American efforts to rebuild Afghanistan as part of our 18-year-old war there. Mattis cited the number of Afghan women who were educated as a result of U.S. policy as well as the inoculation of civilians against disease. Mattis, who oversaw the war as the four-star head of U.S. Central Command from 2010 to 2013, criticized the Post for running the series, which is reminiscent of general officers who served in Vietnam and then blamed the media for turning the country against the war.

Mattis and Crocker would have us put aside the loss of more

than 2,300 American lives; more than 157,000 Afghan lives; the expenditure of more than a trillion dollars as well as the anguish to hundreds of thousands of American and Afghan lives because of our so-called successes. At the top of Crocker’s list is the opening of schools for girls as well as “infrastructure in the form of roads.” Crocker also cites civilian-military cooperation in Afghanistan, but ignores the fact that American civilians in Afghanistan were the junior partners in the enterprise, and that the military gained too much leverage in fighting the efforts of Presidents Obama and Trump to reduce the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan.

Crocker believes that “we came to Afghanistan and remain there now for one essential reason: U.S. national security.” There are no U.S. national interests at stake in Afghanistan, let alone vital national interests. Moreover, as long as the Taliban had sanctuary and support from their Pakistani neighbors, there was no chance for a successful U.S. effort over the long term.

The sad fact is that the United States has engaged in a mindless use of military power over the past 50 years. The National Security Council, the Pentagon, and the Central Intelligence Agency lacked any institutional view about what needed to be done in Afghanistan in the wake of the ouster of the Taliban. Two years later there was no institutional view of what needed to be done in Iraq in the wake of the ouster of Saddam Hussein. Now, we are witnessing carnage and chaos in Libya, where there was a similar lack of planning in the wake of the death of Moammar Qaddafi. Our Cold War proxy conflicts are replete with examples of institutional and programmatic failures in Angola, Nicaragua, Somalia, and Vietnam.

The militarization of American national security policy is gradually turning the United States into a national security state. There seems to be no place for the conduct of diplomacy; for genuine inter-agency discussion and deliberation of American national security policy, and such essential pursuits as arms control and disarmament. The Department of Defense, not the Department of State has become the main driver of U.S. national security policy. It should not be this way. Those who pursue diplomatic solutions should drive policy, not those for whom the expansion of power and the use of force are the primary approaches.

There may be lessons to be learned from the “Afghanistan Papers,” but the irony is that the very national security managers who were supposed to learn the lessons of Vietnam in Southeast Asia merely doubled down and made the same mistakes in Southwest Asia. So much for lessons learned. We need a full accountability of how deeply the war in Afghanistan failed, particularly the fatal mismanagement of the entire enterprise. Meanwhile, the longest war in American history becomes longer still as U.S. military operations take more innocent Afghan lives. **CP**

**MELVIN GOODMAN** is a former CIA analyst. His latest book is: *American Carnage: Inside the Wars of Donald Trump*.



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# CULTURE & REVIEWS

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## Equality

BY LEE BALLINGER

The United States began with a struggle for equality, equality between the North American colonies and Great Britain. That effort was successful, yet ever since then struggles have been waged over the other inequalities which have defined America. Slave and free. Black and white. Men and women. Immigrant and native-born. We are all familiar with them but relatively little attention has been paid to the battles that unfolded in the latter part of the nineteenth century, an era that holds important lessons for the present.

Historian Charles Postel helps to close that gap with his excellent new book, *Equality: An American Dilemma 1866–1896* (Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux). He writes:

The Civil War, fought over racial slavery, unleashed a torrent of claims to equal rights. Former slaves and women's rights activists, miners and domestic servants, farmers and factory hands, pressed their demands. This contest resulted in extraordinary experiments in collective action as, in their pursuit of equality, millions of man and women joined leagues, Granges, assemblies, and lodges.

Postel adds that:

This wave of combined action runs counter to the Horatio Alger myth of the lone go-getter rising from rags to riches through pluck and luck. The postbellum decades were collective decades, when a farm association or labor collective or similar collective undertaking was widely understood as a means to pursue one's individual social,

economic, and political interests, as well as the social good.

Postel's book focuses on three organizations that have faded into the margins of our historical record: The Grange, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and the Knights of Labor. What were they?

The Grange was founded by a handful of men in Washington D.C. in 1867 in the office of federal bureaucrat William Saunders. Within a few short years, it had grown to a membership of 860,000 farmers and ranchers who belonged to more than 21,000 local Grange organizations. "In agricultural districts across the country, it was not uncommon for the majority of farmers, or at least the majority of white farmers, to enroll as dues-paying members of the Grange." This at a time when nearly 50 percent of Americans had farming as their primary profession.

The Grange was popular because it provided the benefits of a fraternal organization and shared technical information about agriculture, but "the Grange's greatest success was that it had placed notions of economic equality and fairness at the top of the agenda of post-Civil War reform."

The Grange described its mission as "a proper equality, equity, and fairness; protection for the weak, restraint upon the strong."

The WCTU, in which women were the only voting members and officeholders, had 150,000 dues-paying members by 1890 and was the largest women's organization in the history of the United States. The WCTU had more than ten times the membership of the largest women's suffrage organization of the time.

Unlike the Grange, the WCTU organized among racial minorities and had

many black organizers and lecturers.

By the early 1880s the national WCTU had thirty departments that organized each front of its activities. A growing number of these departments focused on issues other than temperance: women's suffrage, child labor, factory conditions for women, narcotics, tobacco, prostitution, prison conditions, and other social questions.

The Knights of Labor began in Philadelphia in 1869 as a secret society of garment cutters. But a decade later at its General Assembly in Chicago, the Knights elected Terence Powderly as their "grand master workman" and, under his leadership, the Knights shed their secrecy and, as one result, "Railroad workers and coal miners became mainstays of the organization, and local assemblies of the Knights took hold wherever the railroads went or the coalfields lay, spreading the organization from coast to coast...The Knights captured the energy of the surging labor movement, gained three quarters of a million members, and by the mid-1880s stood as the biggest and most powerful workers' organization in the country's history to that point."

In the South, the Knights of Labor organized black and white coal miners, timber workers, mill hands, and farm laborers. Southern black farm laborers organized via the Knights while the likes of the *New York Times* and *Atlanta Constitution* endorsed and encouraged the assassination of labor organizers.

In 1886 the Knights launched labor and independent campaigns in some two hundred cities across the country. Knights were elected to city councils, as mayors and state legislatures.

While the Grange, the WCTU, and the Knights of Labor waged their struggles for equal treatment with the corporations, those same corporations

sought to extend their power under a phony banner of equality. In this they were helped mightily by friends in the judiciary such as Supreme Court Justice Stephen Field, who served on the bench from 1863 to 1897.

Regulating the giant elevator monopolies, Field wrote, was “subversive of the rights of private property” and was a discriminatory and unequal law under the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Field decried a tax on railroads as unequal taxation and once even argued that a Louisiana law to protect the drinking water of New Orleans from the pollution of slaughterhouses violated the equal rights of slaughterhouse owners.

In that environment, faced by common enemies, strong strands of unity developed between the Grange, the WCTU, and the Knights of Labor.

Sixty thousand women made up ten percent of the membership of the Knights of Labor by 1887. Black and white women, in urban and rural places, joined more than four hundred assemblies.

In an 1886 meeting in Cleveland of the General Assembly of the Knights, a message of solidarity was sent to the Ohio Women’s Suffrage Association in which it stated that their mission was “the complete emancipation and enfranchisement of all who labor.”

In support of the temperance union, Terence Powderly would not allow anyone who sold alcoholic beverages to become a member of the Knights and mandated that only lemonade, not beer, could be sold at Knights social functions. According to Postel, most members accepted this. Nineteenth-century economist Richard Ely described labor organizations as “the chief power in this country making for temperance.”

The WCTU returned the favor, taking up causes such as child labor, the eight-hour workday, and the elimination of

convict labor.

The clearest point of unity between the three organizations was their populist opposition to “monopoly.” In large part it was driven by the ascendance of railroad capital after the Civil War, concentrated in a handful of giant corporations responsible only to themselves. The farmers in the Grange were at constant war with Big Rail over rates, access, and other issues and the Knights of Labor or-

churchgoing Protestant women, the WCTU’s struggle against booze often fused with anti-Catholic and nativist agendas, directed mainly at immigrant workers who were a big part of the membership of the Knights.

Even worse than points of disunity was a poisonous unity on questions of race.

“Mighty farmer, labor, and women’s rights movements undertaken in the



*Grange Hall, Brownsmead, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.*

ganized a big chunk of their workers. The WCTU also framed its struggle against the big breweries and liquor associations in terms of fighting monopoly power.

Yet despite a significant degree of coalescence, late-nineteenth-century unity was far from complete. The Knights allied with the WCTU but refused to endorse women’s suffrage. The Grange failed to support the strikes and other labor struggles led by the Knights across America.

Many WCTU members were the professional classes—wives of ministers, lawyers, doctors, and managers—and as such they looked to prohibition to control and supervise employees, servants, and other members of the lower classes. Comprised mostly of

name of equality were accompanied by the destruction of political, economic, and civil rights for African Americans and other racial minorities. Decades that had brought forth herculean efforts to overcome the economic inequality of corporate capitalism and the sexual inequality of the late Victorian social order also witnessed the extreme inequities of Indian dispossession, Chinese exclusion, Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, and lynch law.”

This contradiction found its expression in populism, the concept of the little man or woman in battle against the banks, the lawyers, the merchants, the corporations. The angry denunciations of monopolies were important but didn’t extend to the capitalist system itself that

produced the abuses that fueled these movements. The battles of millions of ex-slaves for land and a system of free labor (battles which ultimately included millions of white sharecroppers) were ignored.

Instead, the Grange, the WCTU, and the Knights of Labor agitated for reconciliation between North and South on the basis of restoring the rights of Southern planters. African Americans were not included in the South for which equality was demanded. Meanwhile, Southern Grangers campaigned for new state laws to control black labor and mobilized to help topple progressive Reconstruction governments.

The WCTU proposed a new national political party that would “weld the Anglo-Saxons of the New World into one royal family and give a really re-United States.” WCTU leader Frances Willard dismissed blacks as “locusts,” while the WCTU’s 1894 annual meeting issued a resolution blaming the violence of lynch mobs on the “unspeakable outrages” of black rapists. The WCTU endorsed literacy tests for potential black voters and opposed any law that would ban lynching.

Knights of Labor head man Terence Powderly declared that the Knights had “no wish to interfere with the social relations which exist between the races of the South.” This at a time of escalating Klan terror and widespread lynching. The Knights went on to separate their local assemblies by race.

The essence of nineteenth-century populism was symbolized by the career of James Dabney McCabe, an author who in 1863 had won acclaim in the South for his play *The Guerrillas*, which extolled slavery and the Confederacy. Ten years later, McCabe wrote a history of the Grange subtitled “The Farmer’s War Against Monopolies.”

The WCTU was bitterly anti-immigrant, as was the Knights of Labor, which would not accept Chinese workers and often physically attacked them, while Powderly denounced Hungarians as “a degraded race.”

In the 123 years since 1896—the endpoint of the period covered in Charles Postel’s book—the ongoing battle for equality has retained many features of the nineteenth century (for example, immigration) but it has also shifted. The post-World War II struggles for equality took place in the context of a rapidly expanding economy where the real income of even welfare recipients went up. Postel describes this era as “relatively egalitarian.” That’s certainly true when you compare it to the present situation—CEO-to-worker compensation ratio was 20-to-1 in 1965, grew to 123-to-1 in 1995, and was 296-to-1 in 2013. The four hundred richest people in this country now have as much wealth as the poorest 150 million Americans.

In 2019 the struggle for equality is much different than it was in the nineteenth century. Only two percent of Americans now live or work on a farm. Women now have the right to vote and drive much of the electoral process as candidates and king and queen makers. Many women eagerly participate in the upper reaches of corporate capitalism, as do blacks and other minorities.

In the post-Civil War nineteenth century, second class citizenship was based on color. Today, decades after that post-war expansion, America’s burgeoning homeless population is legally second class, constrained by laws which define where they can sit, stand, or sleep, laws which limit the number of possessions they may own, laws which make it a crime for people to share food with them. The homeless come in all colors.

Today, instead of the twentieth century’s uneven but clear upward direction toward equality, the motion is in the other direction. Despite the continuation of many disparities between men and women and between whites and minorities, the defining characteristic of our time is a large and ever-growing group of poverty-stricken people who are not defined by color or gender or whether they are urban, rural, or suburban.

Meanwhile, the corporate drive for “equality” which originated in the

nineteenth century marches relentlessly onward. The 2010 Citizens United decision of the Supreme Court granted corporations “personhood,” giving them the same rights as human citizens. Corporations, having been made equal to the public sector, are now able to use eminent domain to seize ownership of property belonging to individuals for profit-driven projects such as pipelines or condominiums. Those who control everything decide what equality is, which is inherently unequal. What can we do about it?

“The leaders of the Grange,” Charles Postel writes, “understood that education would be the main function of the new organization. They lived in a world of rapid innovation, with steam power and telecommunications being applied to industry, transport, and trade. Agriculture, they believed, must not be left behind in a progressive era of science and technology. If only farmers would ‘discard their old almanacs and signs of the moon,’ Kelley told his friends, ‘imagine what a volcanic eruption we can produce in this age.’”

We live in an era of exponentially greater innovation than that in the time of the Grange. Yet our thinking is mostly limited to a little more of this or a little less of that, our goals no larger than the Grange’s “restraint upon the strong.”

What if we discarded our old almanacs and signs of the moon? What if we once and for all rejected the corporation as the unassailable end product of human history? The technology we have today can effortlessly feed and house the entire world. Imagine what a volcanic eruption we can produce in this age. Do we want only equality of opportunity, a dubious prize in a world where labor is being permanently eliminated? Or do we want equality of distribution, a goal that modern abundance has placed on humanity’s doorstep? **CP**

**LEE BALLINGER** co-edits *Rock and Rap Confidential*.

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