



## URPE Newsletter

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We are pleased to announce the latest edition of the URPE newsletter. This issue takes seriously the challenge of “political economics,” in a time of polarization, military conflict, and unrest. Our objective is to provide a venue for serious discussion of political issues, beyond the scholarly work of the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, and to supplement the URPE listserv with more deliberative contributions. This issue is interdisciplinary in methodology, reflecting the work of Marx across the modern disciplines of history, political science, economics, and psychology, among others. The growing concern about right-wing extremism and fascism (however defined) is reflected in the articles in this issue.

**We welcome contributions for the May issue, due April 30, 2024, as well as letters to the editors regarding this issue. Click here to submit.**

### **The contributions in this issue include:**

“Report on the Fascism Panel at the American Historical Association National Meeting” , San Francisco, January 6, 2024, submitted by Mike Meeropol. ***Page 2***

“Whatever Happened to the Labor Aristocracy: A Brief Sketch of the State of the US Working Class,” by Dan Lazare. ***Page 11***

“Coalition Building: The Critical Challenge Facing the Left” by Marianne Hill. ***Page 19***

“Marx’s Theory Muted” by Cale Brooks, a review of the book by Soren Mau, *Mute Compulsions*. ***Page 27***

Invitation for nominations for the URPE Editorial Board by Enid Arvidson. ***Page 37***

*From newsletter editor Marianne Hill and Steering Committee liaisons and co-editors Smita Ramnarain and Ann Davis. **We rely on your donations to support our work. Click here to donate today!***

## Report on the Fascism Discussion at the American Historical Association National Meetings

San Francisco, California, January 6, 2024

Submitted by Mike Meeropol, URPE member since 1968.

Introduction of panel by Ellen Schrecker

Ellen Schrecker (a nationally recognized expert on what is mis-named the “McCarthy era”) introduced the panel by noting that when she proposed that specific panel to the American Historical Association a year previously, it seemed appropriate to have a question mark at the end of the panel’s name. She wryly noted that she doubts the question mark is appropriate today. I actually made a decision to join the American Historical Association and go to these meetings specifically so I could attend the panel. (I have always attended economics meetings -- this was my first AHA meeting.)

In what follows, I will intersperse my own comments in separate bracketed paragraphs. Everything else will be either from my notes or direct quotes from the prepared remarks. Recommended readings by the presenters are listed in an appendix below.

The AHA program described the meeting in advance thusly:

Description/Abstract for “Is the United States Turning Towards Fascism”?

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the word “fascism” was little more than a political epithet in everyday discourse and a category assigned to certain regimes, with long-running but arid debates over which governments met that standard besides Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. More recently, critics such as Umberto Eco have stressed that “fascism had no quintessence” but should be understood as “a fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage... a beehive of contradictions.” This roundtable recognizes that fascism is not a fixed category which may or may not apply to a particular historical instance. What matters is that the past decade has seen a remarkable revival of governments and movements displaying many of the tactics and tropes associated with fascism, including appeals to violence, contempt for legal and constitutional requirements, and xenophobic blood-and-soil nationalism. Sociological, philosophical, and journalistic analyses have proliferated about this new model of far-right politics in Hungary, India, Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines, Israel, and Russia, alternatively dubbed illiberal democracy, white nationalism, or authoritarian populism. In the United States, scholars have relied on the concept of white (or white Christian) nationalism to characterize the rise of Donald Trump, while pundits and journalists simply use the shorthand of “MAGA.”

This roundtable goes beyond these topical analyses to ask a more elemental question: **is fascism, however defined, now a real possibility in the U.S., and if so, what are its historical origins?** That a large, highly mobilized movement has pulled the Republican Party sharply to the right is indisputable. Whether that movement is moving towards fascism is an open question.

Our roundtable will interrogate this question as a series of related questions, including but not limited to:

- How did we get to the point that the rule of law is so seriously threatened?
- Is there a legacy of fascism rooted in the Jim Crow South, as W.E.B. Du Bois asserted in the 1930s?
- What is the historical relationship between white settler colonialism and *herrenvolk* democracy, in the U.S. and elsewhere, to fascism?
- Over the past century, the United States has seen a range of explicitly fascist organizations develop—what have been their connections or alliances with mainstream conservatism, whether of the Old or New Rights?
- How would a fascist United States actually function, versus current norms of electoral democracy, independent jurisprudence, and free speech?
- Did the January 6, 2021 attack on Congress embody a fascist impulse, however disorganized?
- Does fascism produce distinctive patterns of gender relations, and how have those developed inside U.S. society?
- If the U.S. turns further to the right but not fascist, how should we characterize it?
- Are there or will there be clear tipping points by which one could conclude the answer to our question is “yes,” or is this a process overdetermined by history, to be known only in retrospect?

[Now it is fair to say that not *every* one of the bulleted questions was addressed --- but many were.]

The panel consisted of Mary “Molly” Nolan of New York University, Carol Anderson of Emory University, Linda Gordon of New York University and David Hollinger of the University of California-Berkeley. [I can truthfully say that what the panel members had to say was worth my trip across the country.]

#### I. Professor Mary Nolan, New York University

Professor Nolan whose specialty is European History began the discussion by noting that the very term “fascism” is a contested term. She wanted us to actually think of what we mean when we “worry” that the United States is “going fascist.” She based her presentation on her knowledge of inter-war 20<sup>th</sup> century European fascism – the “classic” examples being Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany. Among the characteristics she identified as possible descriptors of fascism are: ultra-nationalism, militarism, racism, misogyny, glorification of violence among others --- and of course absence of democratic rights for opposition groups. She argued that from her perspective, fascism has less analytical precision and is more of a “free flowing signifier.”

In the US, the discussion of what constitutes fascism is much more nuanced than in Europe. Professor Nolan referenced two scholars – Geoff Eley and Robert Paxton.

For Eley, fascism is defined by its politics—you do not compete with your opponents, you *kill* them. You establish an authoritarian state, and promote an exclusionary idea of the nation against pluralism and difference.

For Paxton, fascism is propelled by primacy of the group, feelings of victimization, and stress on the beauty of violence. Fascism is a response to a sense of loss (a defeat in war, an economic catastrophe) – It involves adherence to a charismatic leader.

Interwar European fascism does not provide a neat checklist of ideas or practices to determine if fascism is back or not. But fascism remains a good concept to think with. It provides a set of questions to ask and issues to consider in order to understand the particularities of extreme right ideologies and organizations and assess the dangers to a democratic and constitutional order.

She also noted that there is a debate within the people who study fascism as to what distinguished “fascist” violence from the everyday violence of a class-based state. And it is important to remember that neither Mussolini nor Hitler came to power in a violent coup – the political process in both countries led to them assuming power – *after which* , they violently suppressed opposition.

Fascist movements and regimes romanticize particular, ostensibly great, national pasts, and aspire to futures that promise to restore greatness, stability and socio-cultural and political homogeneity. [Anyone thinking of MAGA??]

Just what sort of future do extreme right individuals and movements in the U.S. or in Europe aspire to today? Does it resemble interwar fascist regimes or something more akin to the illiberal democracy Orban has created in Hungary? The skeleton of democracy and the rule of law remain [in Hungary] but the substance has been hollowed out by changing electoral laws, taking over the judiciary, and controlling the media and universities. Anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, anti-migrant, anti-LGBTQ and anti-feminist rhetoric are deployed as a justification.

She concluded with the question: does looking at European fascism help us determine whether the US is turning toward fascism? Eley says yes, and the U.S. is; Paxton was warier of using the term till after Jan. 6. Professor Nolan concluded that she finds fascism useful to think with but she fears applying the label promotes polemics more than critical analyses. [Before her talk she told me she thought Orban’s taking of more and more power and reducing the ability of the Hungarian citizenry to resist is a better model for the changes coming to the US than the comparisons with interwar fascism.]

## II. Professor Linda Gordon, New York University

Professor Linda Gordon’s presentation focused on the US in the 1920s and 1930s. She began by noting that she was focusing not on fascist states but on social movements that promote fascist values. She argued that she found the word “populist” a better descriptor and posed her

task as examining some of the ideology of today's populism, before turning to what she called its progeny fascism.

She noted that historians do not like to use the word "populist" to describe today's right-wing movements as the original populists were a bottom up progressive [in the South temporarily interracial] movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, in the present, the original term accurately describing 19<sup>th</sup> century populism has been overwhelmed by journalistic shorthand which emphasizes the racist, xenophobic elements to which late 19<sup>th</sup> century populism succumbed. (See the career of Tom Watson of Georgia. Watson started out leading the populist movement as an interracial alliance of black and white small farmers but ultimately changed and supported Jim Crow legislation. That "conversion" contributed to the changing conception of populism as it is discussed today.)

Professor Gordon identified a resentment of outsiders ---immigrants, people of a different race or religion. [Today's so-called populists condemn these people as not REAL Americans. Today's populists believe they are being victimized by outsiders and only tough measures can put a stop to such victimization. That is where the chant at Charlottesville, "Jews will not replace us" and the more general "replacement theory" comes in]. These populists stigmatize big cities as cesspools of crime and places where elites look down their noses at everyone else.

There is a selective anti-statism in these populists --- they favor the warfare state as masculine but decry the welfare state. [The work of Arlie Hochschild in Louisiana's oil country bears out the way people who have been harmed by the corporate elite cast their blame downwards]. Because it is not easy to show how outsiders exerted power, they leaned on conspiracy theories as explanations. When there is no evidence for the malign power of these outsiders, the lack of evidence, in this populist talk, is because the conspiracies are secret! --- a "wonderful" example of circular reasoning. They offered a "class analysis" that defines intellectuals, experts, secular people, big-city folk, etc. as oppressing "the people."

Professor Gordon has written recently about the KKK in the 1920s --- in those years, right wing populists engaged in false nostalgia for agrarian communities or small towns. Today, they are willing to reject civil liberties, the protection of minorities, and at times the rule of law because these things let "evildoers" escape condemnation. Today's right-wing populists are typically anti-feminist, condemning alternative family forms, LGBTQ rights and "gender ideology," i.e., the notion that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. They claim that women are victimizing men. They ally often with religious evangelicals or fundamentalists, mainly Christian (in the 1920s Protestant) but outside of the US, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu.

Professor Gordon's current work involves tracing the influence of 1920s KKK activities on 1930s fascists in the US. [An interesting irony -- one of the main supporters of fascism was the Catholic radio priest Father Coughlin --- yet the Klan was decidedly anti-Catholic].

The people involved in the Christian Front in the 1930s were often former Klan leaders. The German American Bund was very large --- they rejected Klan isolationism and took direct

support from European fascists. [This was clearly developed in Rachel Maddow's book "Prequel"]. Also, 1930s fascists did NOT claim to be defending democracy.

[Question – how long before the Trumpists begin to adopt the criticisms of our form of democracy that emanate now from Putin and Orban?]

Fascists abandoned the Klan's anti-Catholicism and focused their ire on Jews --- Meanwhile, Ford and GM hired fascist thugs to attack unions --- there were 50 murders that Professor Gordon could document that stemmed from these activities. And, similarly to Professor Nolan, Professor Gordon cautioned against facile adoption of the labels populist and fascist to deal with the current reality.

I quote: "However useful conceptualizing a populism/fascism continuum may be, neither label is adequate to illuminate current dangers. Labels can stand in the way of specifics, inhibiting close observation and analysis of what is actually happening. My list of populist features, above, is not a checklist from which we can diagnose, categorize and label. New features appear. It is often the particularities of movements that are most revealing principally because the interaction of these particularities, their concurrence and their synergy can move in a fascistic direction."

### III. Professor Carol Anderson, Emory University

The third speaker was Professor Carol Anderson of Emory University. Her message was very strong and succinct – that the Jim Crow South *was* fascism.

[I think the triumph of Jim Crow can be dated from 1898 when the last vestiges of black-white cooperation that had created such hope in the era of Radical Reconstruction – 1866-1868 in Georgia --- 1866 to 1877 elsewhere in the South --- was finally snuffed out in a violent local *coup d'etat* in Wilmington, North Carolina. The violent coup was necessitated because a black-white alliance had elected the mayor (a white populist). The story is fictionalized in an excellent novella "The Marrow of Tradition" – author: Charles Chesnutt.]

With the establishment of Jim Crow and complete voter suppression of African Americans beginning with the Mississippi Plan of 1890 but accelerating after the 1896 election, the reality for black Americans in the south was one of being terrorized without any political recourse. [In Gavin Wright's book "Old South, New South" he notes that the solution for black people was to leave the South. It was only with the Civil Rights successes of the middle 1960s, that we can safely say that the terror under which black people lived had finally begun to abate. (But, of course, George Zimmerman got away with murder in this century!). I believe Professor Anderson is right to call the Jim Crow South fascistic.]

She noted that there is no surprise in the fact that the Nazis studied the Southern laws that established Jim Crow as models for their Nuremberg Laws stripping Jews of German citizenship and rights. The Jim Crow South established unbreakable political power --- the only elections

that mattered were Democratic primaries until 1964 (!! ) --- there was a constant warning about “Negro domination”

[but they didn’t say Negro].

Professor Anderson made clear that there is a through-line from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jim Crow South to the MAGA movement. MAGA people long for the “good old days” – in the South this means before 1964. As soon as the Shelby County decision came down (eviscerating the Voting Rights Act) voter suppression laws proliferated. The cry is to “preserve the purity of the ballot box.” The word “purity” is a dead giveaway. 18 states passed 30 voter suppression laws. Denigrating cities (a recurrent theme in the MAGA political playbook) is code for claiming that these cities with their “corruption” represent the current version of “Negro domination” [again, they don’t say “Negro.”]

Here is some of Professor Anderson’s presentation:

“In 1904, during the brutal rise of Jim Crow, a Texas senator declared “I believe more in the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race than in the principles of democracy.” In his book, How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them, Jason Stanley has identified the importance of racism to the rise of fascism and the way it works its way through rhetoric and policy. In 1937, “Langston Hughes declared: ‘We Negroes in America do not have to be told what fascism is in action. We know. Its theories of Nordic supremacy and economic suppression have long been realities to us.’” MAGA is longing for those bad old days; “they want to have the power to decide which laws will be enforced and who is subject to enforcement and who is not.” That requires having unbreachable political power.

During Jim Crow, stripping Black people of their voting rights achieved that goal. For decades, the South had a racially homogenous dominant one-party rule, whose leaders, defined African Americans as the enemy; a justice system that violated its bedrock foundations of due process, equal protection before the law, and innocent before guilty; a decidedly separate and unequal education system that mythologized American history, treated slavery as a benevolent institution, and considered the Confederates’ attack on the United States as a noble “Lost Cause,” embodied a political system that punished and threatened higher education institutions for enrolling African Americans or having students engage in pro-democracy protests; embraced a wave of violence—murders, lynchings, massacres, bombings -- fomented or approved by the political leadership; and supported by a press that lied about and stereotyped African Americans to sell more papers and inflame racial tensions.

[It is hard to believe that the dominant schools of history up until about 1970 involved following racist Ulrich B. Phillips’ view about the benevolence of slavery and the Dunning school about the “tragedy” of Reconstruction – a period when “ignorant” blacks were manipulated by carpet-baggers and scalawags (white supporters of the Republican Party and equal rights for black people) and introduced a wave of corruption and bad government. The Dunning school view was solidified by the horrible movie *Birth of a Nation* which was shown by President Woodrow Wilson in the White House and given his full imprimatur. --- and Wilson

was a former History Professor and President of Princeton University before becoming Governor of New Jersey!]

Disfranchisement was a key element in this gutting of American democracy. Mississippi, dealing with having more African Americans registered to vote than whites, pulled all of these elements together in 1890. Using the original Big Lie that Black people committed massive rampant voter fraud and that it was time to end corruption at the ballot box, the state enacted a series of measures, such as the poll tax and the literacy test, as well as other policies, that were racially targeted, but linguistically race-neutral. A leading politician proudly admitted, however, that the new Constitution had “no other purpose than to eliminate the n----- from politics.”

The US Supreme Court, ruled in 1898 that the literacy test and the poll tax were constitutional. That was the green light for the massive disfranchisement that engulfed the South. The violence and the Supreme Court-blessed laws worked to create a system with only a thin veneer of democracy. By 1940, as World War II was raging, only 3% of age-eligible Black people were registered to vote in the South. But the power of the Civil Rights Movement brought the United States as close to a democracy as the nation had ever been. The 1965 Voting Rights Act put the power and weight of the federal government, real enforceability, and the law behind the promise of American democracy.

While many welcomed that promise, the right wing in the United States saw a threat, especially as the racial demographics in the nation began to change. That is what January 6 was about. The violent invasion of the U.S. Capitol was fueled by the lie that cities with sizeable minority populations, such as Atlanta, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Philadelphia, as well as Maricopa County, [Arizona] “stole” the 2020 election. Thus, at its core, the insurrection was about white supremacists’ anger that African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans not only voted but did so decisively against Donald Trump.

In addition to trying to violently overthrow a free and fair election, the other response from the right wing was to develop a series of voter suppression laws targeted at African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans to ensure that they will never have the ability to stop a Trump-like demagogue from gaining power again. Of course, this disfranchising effort is not described that way. Instead, it’s cast in terms of protecting democracy, just like Mississippi did in 1890.

As the Brennan Center reported, “Since the beginning of 2021, 18 states have passed 34 restrictive voting laws, which can disproportionately affect voters of color.” That is to say, emboldened, rather than chastened by the attempt to overthrow the U.S. government, nearly half the states have targeted American citizens whose only crime was to not vote for a demagogue. Understand, just like with Jim Crow, there is a multi-pronged attack on democracy, with the right to vote being a key one. There’s also the assault on universities, public schools, books, scientific knowledge, and protests, as well as the denigration of cities. We have the power to stop this slide into fascism, but we first must acknowledge the role that race and racism played and continue to play in justifying the destruction of democracy.”



#### IV. Professor David Hollinger, University of California Berkeley

The final speaker was Professor David Hollinger of UC, Berkeley – He focused his presentation on right-wing “Christian Nationalism.” What was most interesting about his presentation was that he noted that before the 1980s, mainstream Christianity dominated religious news. The extreme right wing was marginalized. His presentation explained HOW that situation completely flipped so that today, the percentage of Christians attending what we would call “mainstream” churches has fallen dramatically and into that void has stepped right-wing Evangelicals --- white evangelicals.

“Long before the era of Donald Trump, evangelical Protestantism as a lived faith in the United States carried strong nationalistic, anti-statist, xenophobic, white supremacist, misogynist and homophobic elements and combined further with a strong sense of entitlement to the land.”

So what ended this marginalization? --- this right-wing version of Christianity “... was catapulted into greater significance when it was adopted as a major constituency by a national political party, the Republicans...[while at the same time there was a]... decline in membership and civic leadership of the old mainline denominations.”

One conflict mentioned by Professor Hollinger was the “difference in missionary outlook.” The evangelicals believed “...that the world was theirs to exploit...” while mainline Christians came to believe that “...the world was to be shared respectfully with people of other faiths and races. .... “

He noted in more general terms that, “Evangelicalism developed as a giant protest movement against the liberalization of American Protestantism. Evangelical churches flourished as safe harbors for white Americans who wanted to be counted as Christians without engaging the challenges of an ethno-racially diverse society and a scientifically informed culture that the mainline leadership said had to be confronted.”

The increasingly secular majority refrained from confronting the RELIGIOUS heresies (my word) of the evangelical reactionaries. Dr. Hollinger noted that “An ironic consequence of the secularization process was ... the loss of a voice that defended a less racist, less misogynist, less homophobic model of what it meant to be a Christian, and a model of the faith that fit quite well with majoritarian democracy.” My impression is that Professor Hollinger strongly decries the weakening of mainline Protestantism. He concluded rather starkly: “When secularists and other non-Christians hear of conflicts between rival groups of Christians, they may say to themselves, “I don’t have a dog in this fight.” But they do!

In looking back over my notes and re-reading the texts of the presentations it appears that a very dangerous triumvirate is working together to erode (completely destroy?) what constitutes “American Democracy” today. It starts with the billionaire beneficiaries of neo-liberal policy which revolutionized economic policy in the last years of Jimmy Carter and the 8 years of Ronald Reagan. But what has created a mass movement that enthusiastically supports a Donald Trump as he pursues the neo-liberal policy agenda and the dismantling of what we call American Democracy is the rise of what Professor Hollinger calls Christian Nationalism and the bubbling

to the surface of the racism that never seems to have gone away --- from the fight to eviscerate the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments after Reconstruction to the new round of resistance to the “browning” of America. This powerful trifecta must be understood if we are to successfully combat it.

### **FOR FURTHER READING:**

Ellen W. Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, (Princeton University Press, 1998)

\_\_\_\_\_, ed (with Phillip Deery), *The age of McCarthyism: a Brief History with Documents*, (Bedford/St. Martins, 2017)

Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890-2010*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

\_\_\_\_\_, *America’s Century in Europe: Reflections on Americanization, Anti-Americanism and the Transatlantic Partnership*, (Gottingen: Wallstein, 2023)

\_\_\_\_\_, “The Troubled Past and Uncertain Future of Academic Labor,” *International Labor and Working-class History*, 102 (2022): 248-59.

\_\_\_\_\_, “Women, Gender and the Radical right: Then and Now,” in *Contemporary Europe in the Historical Imagination*, ed. by Darcy Bueckle and Skye Doney (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023): 79-99.

Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*, (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017)

\_\_\_\_\_, “The American Fascists,” in *Fascism in America: Past and Present* ed. Gavriel Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

\_\_\_\_\_, “Populism and Fascism: Lessons from the 1920s Ku Klux Klan,” in *Destroying Democracy: Neoliberal Capitalism and the Rise of Authoritarian Politics*, ed. Michele Williams and Vishwas Satgar (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 2021).

\_\_\_\_\_, “What Do We Mean by Populism? The “Second” Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s as a Case Study,” *AHA Perspectives*, 2018.

“When the Ku Klux Klan was a Mass Movement,” *BBC History Magazine*, Sept. 2018.

Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018)

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Second: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America*, (Bloomsbury, 2021)

David A. Hollinger, *Christianity’s American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular*, (Princeton University Press, 2022)

\_\_\_\_\_, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America*, (Princeton University Press, 2017)

\_\_\_\_\_, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, (Princeton University Press, 2013)

**Whatever happened to the labor aristocracy?  
A brief sketch of the state of the US working class.**

By Daniel Lazare

Three or four decades ago, “labor aristocracy” was a phrase seemingly on every Marxist’s lips. For Maoists, Third World nationalists, and their various offshoots, it was the key to understanding how American workers had grown so politically somnolent, if not downright reactionary. The answer was that they had been “bourgeoisified,” which is to say bought off. Capitalists were using imperial super-profits to shower them with wages and benefits and thereby insure class peace. “Arise ye prisoners of starvation, arise ye wretched of the earth” – such phrases were no longer applicable. Instead of industrial societies, the wretched of the earth were now to be found exclusively in the under-developed or semi-colonial world.

The same thing had occurred in England during the heyday of the empire. “On horse-racing and fox-hunting alone, Britain annual spends £14,000,000,” Lenin had written in *Imperialism: The Highest State of Capitalism*, in 1916, a document the new Third World movement took to heart. “The number of rentiers in England is about one million. The percentage of the productively employed population to the total population is becoming smaller.” Hence: “Imperialism has the tendency to create privileged sections even among the workers, and to detach them from the main proletarian masses.”<sup>1</sup>

Or as the Weathermen would put it a little over a half-century later:

“Virtually all of the white working class also has short-range privileges from imperialism, which are not false privileges but very real ones which give them an edge of vested interest and tie them to a certain extent to the imperialists, especially when the latter are in a relatively prosperous phase.”<sup>2</sup>

Those “very real” privileges had come at the expense of the Third World masses. Not only had the bourgeoisie benefited from imperialism, but American workers had too, particularly an “upper strata,” to use Lenin’s term, often defined by race and gender.<sup>3</sup> They were also exploiters.

Yet there was a problem. Quickly recovering from the Southeast Asian debacle, US imperialism was not only on the path to recovery by the late 1970s, but poised to scale new heights. The 1980s saw the development of the “Washington Consensus,” a ten-point plan for reorganizing the entire global economy on a new Reagan-Thatcherite basis.<sup>4</sup> The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91 established America as the global hegemon in the fullest sense of the term – political, economic, military, technological, and even cultural. Bill Clinton’s decision to grant “most favored nation status” to China brought the people’s republic into the new US-led international

order. Everyone knows about America as “the indispensable nation,” the Madeleine Albright phrase heard round the world. But what some forget is the degree to which it was accepted. US leadership was beyond challenge. While plenty of countries have set out to conquer the globe, the United States came closest to achieving total global domination.

But if the theory of a labor aristocracy is correct, the US working class should have then basked in the benefits of the US rise to the status of global hegemon. The upshot should have been the old Samuel Gompers slogan of “more” carried to the nth degree, which is to say more money, more benefits, bigger pensions, better healthcare, and so forth.

Yet the reality is the opposite. The statistics are little less than shocking. Wages have been stagnant for half a century, not only for blue-collar workers but for recent college grads, whose earnings rose just two percent between 1989 and 2014 even as employer-provided healthcare plummeted nearly 50 percent. Where Lenin wrote in *Imperialism* that “[a] section of the proletariat [had] permitted itself to be led by men sold to, or at least, paid by the bourgeoisie,”<sup>5</sup> there are now fewer such labor bureaucrats to pay off for the simple reason that union membership since the mid-1970s has plunged a stunning 61 percent.<sup>6</sup> Private-sector union “density” is now on par with the year 1900, if not lower.<sup>7</sup>

The deterioration is equally evident in terms of health and psychological well-being. Beginning in 2013, US life expectancy fell for five years in a row, an event unprecedented in advanced industrial economies during peacetime.<sup>8</sup> Obesity rose 39 percent between 1999 and 2018, while “diseases of despair,” i.e. suicide, drug overdoses, and deaths from alcohol abuse, rose 76 percent between 1970 and 2017.<sup>9</sup> (With 4.2 percent of the world population, America somehow manages to consume 80 percent of the global opioid supply.)<sup>10</sup> Homelessness is up 12 percent in the last year alone,<sup>11</sup> while psychological depression is up as well, with the portion of Americans describing themselves as “not too happy” nearly doubling from 11 percent in 1996 to 21 percent in 2012.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, there is mass incarceration. This is an international phenomenon as countries across the world in an age of neo-liberalism figure out new ways of putting people behind bars. The incarceration rate since the 1970s has thus doubled in Belgium, France, and the United Kingdom and tripled in Greece, the Netherlands, and Spain.<sup>13</sup> But it has quintupled in the United States where one adult in 46 is now in prison, on probation, or on parole and one in three has a criminal record.<sup>14</sup>

Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, who coined the term “diseases of despair,” go so far as to compare the decline to the post-1991 shock in Russia when male life expectancy plummeted 5.7 years in the wake of the Soviet collapse. While conditions may not be as extreme, they say, income stagnation, downward intergenerational mobility, and fractured social and family relations are nonetheless taking their toll.<sup>15</sup>

So how did the US working class go from aristocracy to collapse in a few short decades? And who is to blame for the failure to foresee the turnaround – Lenin or his Maoist, Third-Worldist, etc. epigones?

The answer is the latter. Lenin's *Imperialism* remains a work of extraordinary power and subtlety, an indispensable guide for anyone wishing to understand the interplay between the capitalist center and the colonial or semi-colonial periphery.

Take the concept of a labor aristocracy. *Imperialism* quotes Engels as saying in 1858:

“The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy, and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie.”

It quotes a letter Engels sent to Karl Kautsky in 1882:

“You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy? Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general. There is no workers' party here, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers merrily share the feast of England's monopoly of the colonies and the world market...”

But the emphasis throughout is on the temporary nature of such attitudes. Certain “apologists of imperialism,” Lenin writes, believe “that the rule of finance capital *lessens* the unevenness and contradictions in world economy, whereas in reality it *increases* them” (emphasis in the original). He adds: “...we must not lose sight of the forces which counteract imperialism in general, and opportunism in particular.” But precisely those reasons, he argues that bourgeoisification, which he defines as a variety of opportunism, “cannot now triumph in the working-class movement of any country for decades as it did in England in the second half of the nineteenth century.”<sup>16</sup> Thanks to the war raging on all sides – Lenin wrote *Imperialism* in neutral Switzerland in the first half of 1916 – the relatively happy embourgeoisement of the Belle Époque had given way to a nightmare of mutual slaughter.

So Lenin did *not* say that the industrial proletariat was a lost cause, that western workers were hopelessly corrupt, or that the revolutionary impulse now lay exclusively with the Third World masses. Bourgeoisification was a momentary condition, an illusion. Despite *Imperialism's* repeated use of the term “finance capital,” similarly, Lenin did not say that the problem was a runaway financial sector or that all would be well if proper balance were restored. (See Adam Tooze's *Crashed* for more on this “financialist” viewpoint.)<sup>17</sup> He does not say that the issue is de-industrialization or disinvestment or that imperialism is primarily a “system based on the export of capital to the colonies,” as Alex Callinicos would have it.<sup>18</sup>

To the contrary, what Lenin describes is an all-sided system of exploitation in which advanced capitalist countries use their control of the production process as a whole to extract super-profits from backward countries that are all too easy to dominate. If “[c]apitalism is commodity production at the highest stage of development, when labor power itself becomes a commodity,” as *Imperialism* puts it,<sup>19</sup> then monopoly of the entire labor process of commodity production – a category that now includes films, computer games, recordings, information, software, and arms as well – is at the core of monopoly capitalism and hence of monopoly finance imperialism.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that Wall Street or the Pentagon are extraneous, merely that they are part and

parcel of a larger manufacturing process that includes distribution, marketing, and other ancillary activities in addition to the direct production of commodities themselves.

What does this tell us about the downward trajectory of the American working class? Merely that the same multi-dimensional process that led to dramatic wage growth during the postwar period led to equally dramatic decline once political, economic, and technological changes enabled the bourgeoisie to extend such control overseas and then, conversely, to re-import such new and improved techniques so as to deepen wage destruction back home.

The term “aristocracy of labor” may have indeed been applicable during *les trente glorieuses*, which began in the US in 1940 and continued until 1971-75, a half-decade marked by Nixon’s abandonment of the gold standard, recession, an oil shock, and the fall (or liberation) of Saigon. This was the “volcanic eruption of American imperialism,” to quote Trotsky, [which] that saw real US GDP quadruple and real GDP per capita increase nearly two and a half times. Although foreign direct investment would also quadruple between 1950 and 1965, it still a relatively modest \$50 billion, five percent or less of GNP. This would soon change.<sup>21</sup>

The advent of the Washington Consensus thus marked an industrial transformation that was no less transformative back home. With banks and corporations chasing more profitable investments abroad, high-paying jobs vanished while low-wage, no-benefit jobs in the service sector proliferated. Private-sector union membership began its long sickening slide from a peak of 35.7 percent in 1953 to 24.5 percent in 1973, 16.5 percent in 1983, 11.1 percent in 1993, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Crime soared and homelessness made its first appearance since the 1930s as a mass phenomenon. Just as the United States was ahead of the curve in terms of the boom (which began only in 1948 in Japan and western Europe), it was ahead of the curve in terms of decline. In 1975, US manufacturing wages were still higher than those in Germany, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Yet by 2007, the situation would change:

Hourly wages, manufacturing sector, in current dollars

| 1975:   |         | 2007    |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Sweden  | \$40.79 | Sweden  | \$53.10 |
| Canada  | 36.66   | Germany | 49.02   |
| US      | 35.75   | UK      | 44.48   |
| Germany | 30.25   | Canada  | 42.86   |
| France  | 27.27   | France  | 42.10   |
| Italy   | 26.92   | Italy   | 41.60   |
| UK      | 18.39   | US      | 37.24   |

If the theory of a labor aristocracy had been valid, workers would have fared better at the imperial center than those farther out along the periphery. Yet they did worse.<sup>23</sup>

The economic storm that struck US in the 1970s and 80s was not so much a matter of de-industrialization as an industrial re-ordering on a massive new scale. While vast sections of the

American heartland were left desolate, vast sectors of the less-developed world saw the opposite, not only in China but elsewhere as well. As economists Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin observe:

“...the new division of labor corresponded to something equally crucial to a globalized capitalism: the development of new networks of integrated production. Far from the shift of productive activity from the developed core leading to a fragmentation of production, it was part and parcel of a much greater global coordination of production through a broad range of subsidiaries, suppliers, and distributors. The growing tendency on the part of the multinational corporations to centralize their key strategic and administrative functions in their home country, while decentralizing labor-intensive production abroad ... had become pronounced by the mid 1980s. It especially accelerated through the 1990s in response to the pressures and opportunities brought on by the liberalization of trade and capital flows, the application of new information technologies, the development of infrastructures, and, above all, the growth of new proletarians in the developing world.”<sup>24</sup>

Formerly, the US had staffed its factories and plantations with slaves and immigrants imported from less developed portions of the world – eastern and southern Europe, Africa, and so forth. Now it left its neo-colonial workforce in situ as it exported production. This was no mean feat. Multi-national corporations had to develop new types of containerized shipping so as to speed parts and supplies to the far corners of the globe, they had to construct a new generation of container ports, and they had to develop computer design technologies so as to zip precise manufacturing details from one place to another and make last-minute modifications as well. By 2013, the upshot, according to the UN Conference on Trade and Development, was that multi-nationals could now “fine-slice their international production networks, locating each value adding activity in its lowest-cost location on a regional or global basis.”<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen, the result has not only been to reshuffle the global work force but to expand it. The labor economist Richard Freeman points out that, as of 1980, the total capitalist labor force consisted of 960 million workers in the advanced countries plus portions of Africa and most of Latin America. (and Asia: think of the Asian economic tigers of the 1970s: Taiwan, Singapore, etc...) Twenty years later, the number of workers in those same countries reached 1.46 billion due to population growth, while, beginning the 1980s and 90s, workers from other countries, mainly China, India, and the former Soviet bloc, came on line (??? do you mean became more closely integrated into the multinational corporate world? their production was ‘online’ before then) as well. By the year 2000, their numbers had swelled to 1.47 billion for a total of nearly three billion. The international proletariat had tripled in just two decades.<sup>26</sup> Where unions were already losing ground in US and other advanced countries, their members were now swamped.

This is the backdrop for the deep demoralization of the American working class. It’s also the backdrop for the rise of Donald Trump. Conceivably, workers could have responded to bourgeois internationalism with an internationalism of their own. They could have sought out allies in the Third World, engaged in joint strike action, formed fraternal parties, etc. This is what a revolutionary socialist strategy would have entailed. Instead, they have responded with redoubled nationalism. In Germany, the new buzzword for a variety of elements from Sahra Wagenknecht to the far-right Alternative für Deutschland is “re-sovereignization.” In the US, it’s “Make America Great Again.”) But the results are the same, a push to harden national

borders so as to keep Latin American, Caribbean, or Muslim refugees out and reconsolidate production in the homeland.

The consequence is a class inversion in which growing numbers of blue-collar workers gravitate to the nativist right and white-collar employees cling to the center or center-left. A recent New York Times-Siena College poll thus found that college grads and non-graduates were almost mirror images of one another when it came to Biden versus Trump, with those with a bachelor's degree or more preferring the former by 52 to 38 percent and those without preferring the latter 54-39.<sup>27</sup> The lower ranks of the working class thus exhibit a Trumpist nostalgia for the days when jobs were plentiful, wages were high, unions were strong, and "Made in USA" was the rule. The problem, though, is that you can't go home again. Not only will the protectionism that Trump represents bring with it racism, xenophobia, and other horrors, but it also means trade policies that are all but certain to prove counter-productive. If Trump indeed jacks up tariffs as he is now promising, then the danger is that other countries will respond similarly, thereby triggering the same beggar-thy-neighbor policies that compounded the downturn of the 1930s.<sup>28</sup> Instead of more jobs and higher pay, the upshot will be less, not to mention war and rightwing authoritarianism.

Amusingly, *Imperialism* quotes the English economist J.A. Hobson on the consequences of industrial offshoring. If carried to sufficient lengths, he says:

"The greater part of Western Europe might then assume the appearance and character already exhibited by tracts of country in the South of England, in the Riviera, and in the tourist-ridden or residential parts of Italy and Switzerland, little clusters of wealthy aristocrats drawing dividends and pensions from the Far East, with a somewhat larger group of professional retainers and tradesmen and a large body of personal servants and workers in the transport trade and in the final stages of production of the more perishable goods; all the main arterial industries would have disappeared, the staple foods and manufactures flowing in as tribute from Asia and Africa."<sup>29</sup>

Despite aristocratic strongholds here or there, outsourcing on a massive global scale has resulted in something very different, i.e. a post-industrial wilderness covered with abandoned factories, boarded-up shopping malls, empty parking lots with weeds pushing up through the cracks, plus prisons, desolate inner cities, violence, and thousands of homeless nodding out on fentanyl and xylazine. The consequences of the new industrialism have not been pretty for American workers. But they've acquired vast new allies abroad.

To be sure, recent years have seen a return of class militancy. In terms of "lost" worker-days, strike activity jumped 61 percent in 2021 and then another 41 percent in 2022 before undergoing a whopping nine-fold increase in 2023. But as impressive as the post-pandemic strike wave has been, the 2023 rate relative to the working class as a whole is still 70 percent below that of the 1970s and 98 percent below that of the supposedly placid 1950s.<sup>30</sup> So it is not yet sufficient to offset larger trends. But that may change if Trump is elected and workers get an opportunity to see what life is really like under far-right authoritarianism.



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<sup>1</sup> VI Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International, 1939), 105-06.

<sup>2</sup> Available at <https://notmytribe.com/solidarity/our-resources/weathermen-manifesto>.

<sup>3</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*, 104.

<sup>4</sup> John Williamson, “What Washington Means by Policy Reform,” Peterson Institute for International Economics, Nov. 1, 2002, available at <https://www.piie.com/commentary/speeches-papers/what-washington-means-policy-reform>.

<sup>5</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*, 107.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1357189/labor-unions-density-g7-oecd/>.

<sup>7</sup> Doug Henwood, “Unions had a flat 2023,” LBO News, Jan. 24, 2024, available at <https://lbo-news.com/2024/01/24/unions-had-a-flat-2023/>.

<sup>8</sup> The fall may not seem like much – just seven weeks – but it was the first time it had happened since World War II. It took the United States eight years to make up the difference. For more information, see <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/life-expectancy>.

<sup>9</sup> “Social Capital Project,” Joint Economic Committee, US Congress, September 2019, available at [https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/0f2d3dba-9fdc-41e5-9bd1-9c13f4204e35/jec-report-deaths-of-despair.pdf](https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/0f2d3dba-9fdc-41e5-9bd1-9c13f4204e35/jec-report-deaths-of-despair.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18443641/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/record-homeless-united-states-2023-ef86f904>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2012/08/pew-social-trends-lost-decade-of-the-middle-class.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 88.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/research/>. For information on those in prison or on probation or parole, see <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/12/14/number-of-us-adults-on-probation-or-parole-continues-to-decline>. For the portion with criminal records, see <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/Americans-with-Criminal-Records-Poverty-and-Opportunity-Profile.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence King, Gábor Scheiring, and Elias Nosrati, “Deaths of Despair in Comparative Perspective,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 48 (July 2022), available at: <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-soc-030320-031757>.

<sup>16</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*, 94-95, 104, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Viking, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 153, quoted in Samuel T. King, *Lenin’s Theory of Imperialism Today: The Global Divide between Monopoly and Non-Monopoly Capital* (Victoria Univ., Melbourne, Ph.D. diss., 2018), 130.

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<sup>19</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> King, *Lenin's Theory of Imperialism Today*, 128-29.

<sup>21</sup> Chronis Polychroniou, "Rise and Fall of US Imperialism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, No. 30 (July 29, 1995), 60-62. For US foreign investment relative to GNP, see <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/Q10087USQ243SNBR>.

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Lynn Rhinehart, and Lane Windham, "Explaining the erosion of private-sector unions," Economic Policy Institute, Nov. 18, 2020, available at <https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/private-sector-unions-corporate-legal-erosion/>.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2010/ted\\_20100714\\_data.htm](https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2010/ted_20100714_data.htm).

<sup>24</sup> Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2013), 287, quoted in Samuel T. King, *Lenin's Theory of Imperialism Today: The Global Divide between Monopoly and Non-Monopoly Capital* (Victoria Univ., Melbourne, Ph.D. diss., 2018), 70, available at: [https://vuir.vu.edu.au/37770/1/KING%2C%20Samuel%20-%20thesis\\_nosignature.pdf](https://vuir.vu.edu.au/37770/1/KING%2C%20Samuel%20-%20thesis_nosignature.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 188, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Freeman, "What Really Ails Europe (and America)," *The Globalist*, Mar. 5 2010, <https://www.theglobalist.com/what-really-ails-europe-and-america-the-doubling-of-the-global-workforce/>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/11/07/us/elections/times-siena-battlegrounds-registered-voters.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Greg Ip, "Trumponomics 2.0: Less Tax Tailwind, More Trade Turmoil," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 24, 2024, [https://www.wsj.com/economy/trade/trumponomics-2-0-less-tax-tailwind-more-trade-turmoil-fe705c30?mod=Searchresults\\_pos2&page=1](https://www.wsj.com/economy/trade/trumponomics-2-0-less-tax-tailwind-more-trade-turmoil-fe705c30?mod=Searchresults_pos2&page=1).

<sup>29</sup> Lenin, *Imperialism*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/web/wkstp/annual-listing.htm>.

Daniel Lazare is the author of *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace, 1996) and two other books dealing with American politics and social policy. He writes regularly for the *Weekly Worker*, published by the Communist Party of Great Britain.

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## Coalition-Building: The Critical Challenge Facing the Left

By Marianne Hill

Despite the tremendous efforts that have gone into organizing against capitalist exploitation for more than a century, progress seems to have stalled. Currently trends towards fascism, however defined, are on the rise. The political demands of this moment are urgent and the consequences of failure would be catastrophic. What can we say about how to build the coalitions needed to successfully push back against the rise of right-wing extremists? What have we learned from past efforts to build socialism and from the many theoretical analyses explaining why workers of the world have failed to transform society? The way forward depends on finding answers to these questions.

*Building strong coalitions can be seen as the fundamental problem that now faces the left.*

This brief article looks at where cooperation among left progressives is now, and suggests some steps that can be taken toward building coalitions that can move us past today's largely defensive strategizing and towards transformative change. A strong left coalition would bring widespread popular support for political candidates with progressive platforms and could move us gradually towards the emergence of a third (progressive) party.

In the US today, there are few coalitions that bring together organizations from the major movements (labor, environmental, racial justice, feminist, LGBTI etc.), although there is networking and collaboration, as occurred in support of the Build Back Better bill. Progressive politicians who speak out against corporate domination of the economy and the corporate pursuit of profit at the expense of people and planet cannot expect much support from the Democratic Party or from corporate-funded entities. Nor do they get much financial support from wealthy business people or from liberal, tax-exempt nonprofits, who worry about losing the donations they receive from their corporate sponsors. Still, Bernie Sanders did rather well. And how did Trump get elected? Why don't politicians with political platforms that would lead to clear improvement in people's lives do better than politicians who rely on fear-mongering and vague promises to "make America great again"?

I agree with Chantal Mouffe that a major reason why voters seem to respond to right-wing rhetoric more than to progressive political planks is because left liberals have underestimated the importance of *affect* in the creation of the political identity needed for unified political action. (Mouffe 2018:72-73).

While an understanding of the intricacies of late capitalism is critical to developing strategies for transformative political change, it is just as essential to have an accurate understanding of human nature and human interactions. In addition, of course, there is a need for leaders who have the qualities necessary to activate these understandings. Gramsci, the Frankfurt School critical theorists, and others have integrated a post-Freudian understanding of human psychology and political ideology into their analyses of how change agents can transform society. Their insights

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have been incorporated into recent work on intersectional oppressions and the transition to a post-capitalist society (see e.g. Fraser (2019), Wright (2019), Haslanger (2012), Ferguson (2019)) . The challenges of organizing working people and their allies across differences in circumstances and in understandings are, in effect, the challenges faced in building coalitions.

### ***Building coalitions that unify movement organizations***

Political coalitions are built at very different levels and for very different purposes. Leadership of parliaments in Europe often depends on coalitions formed by political parties while, under very different circumstances, coalitions in small towns are often formed in pursuit of a limited goal such as stopping a corporation from locating an unwanted project in their area. The literature on such coalitions is suggestive of the issues faced by all coalitions.

In this article, I look at building coalitions in the US among organizations with broad grassroots support, especially organizations working for racial justice, labor, women, the environment and the LGBTI community. Currently, while such organizations may unite occasionally in support of a bill, there is no on-going coalition that provides the strong national support that could enable bills such as the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize) to make it through Congress or that could elect significant numbers of left populist candidates to Congress (or the Presidency).

Chantal Mouffe, in *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution (2021)*, argues that the growth and consolidation of left populism is today's political imperative. Europe has seen left populist parties do well in general elections in recent years - Syriza in Greece, La France Insoumise, and Podemos in Spain, for example, have risen to become major parties, and the Labour Party in the UK under Corbyn did well on a left populist platform in 2015.

The US may not have the same potential for the rise of a left populist party, but many left populist candidates have been elected to state and local office, and a strong growth of left populism here would offer a much-needed counter to today's right-wing extremism. At the moment, however, cooperation among movement organizations is generally limited to loose networking. Networking, of course, does precede coalition-building, but it is time for the next step.

### ***Current networking among progressive groups***

I surveyed the websites of several organizations enjoying broad popular support, including the AFL-CIO, Our Revolution (associated with supporters of Bernie Sanders), the Movement for Black Lives (which includes Black Lives Matter), the Sierra Club, Feminist Majority, Greenpeace, [350.org](http://350.org), GLAAD (originally Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), and others (Hill 2022). These were largely not 501c3's (which often depend on corporate sponsors and would lose their tax-exempt status if they engage in too much political activity). I also looked at some political manifestos and agendas.

Based on this cursory exploration and my own experiences with many organizations, I note that today's movement groups, no matter how committed and progressive, focus on a few issues they have chosen and seldom mention coalition work as a priority. In addition, I did not see a single manifesto or other document that addressed the key concerns of each of the five major movements

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(labor, feminism, racial justice, LGBTQ+ issues, environment) except in vague terms scattered throughout their websites. Movement organizations may share the same values, but their agendas, although radical in some areas, are distinctly different. The theoretical underpinnings, be they sophisticated and well-thought-out or more pragmatic and traditional, differ as well.

As noted above, even important bills like the PRO Act have not received much active support across organizations. [The PRO Act would remove roadblocks to union organizing and greatly increase employees' collective voice at work.] This and other important bills are under-reported in the news, and support from progressive groups is scattered at best. Groups that do support a bill often mention it on their website in a way that is well-hidden: e.g. the visitor must first click on "issues", then choose an issue, then choose a sub-topic, then read a paragraph in which the bill may or may not be mentioned.

And, significantly, I could not find any website that provided a list of important bills in Congress this year that had the strong backing of at least one of the five movements I focused on (labor, gender/feminism, racial justice, the environment and the LGBTQ+ community). Yet, besides the PRO Act, there are or were bills aimed at protecting women's right to choose, police reform, the transgender bill of rights and ending greenhouse gas emissions. A united focus by a left coalition on a few bills would usefully counter the common feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. Relatedly, I spoke with several members of organizations that support the PRO Act, and not too surprisingly found that most of them had not heard of it. Even the leader I spoke with, when asked, did not know what the stand of their organization was.

**This could change.** Most activist groups have education and outreach as part of their mission. It is strategically wise that they extend their outreach to other progressive groups. Some concrete suggestions about how this could be done are given in concluding remarks. But first let's consider the motives for working collaboratively and why creating united efforts across organizations is difficult.

***Shared goals: deeper democracy and a healthy planet***

Mouffe (2022) looks towards movement organizations with radical projects as the organizations that could unite in coalition towards progressive and then transformative change. She argues that it is possible to build unity on the basis of a shared commitment to deeper democracy and the survival of the planet. A radical project is one that cannot successfully be completed under the current capitalist system - a transformed hegemony is a requisite. Deep democracy includes the democratizing of the economy.

Not all movement organizations recognize that their goal, e.g. of justice and equality, cannot be achieved under capitalism. Or they limit their goals to ones that can be achieved within the current system, although the values underlying their goals may demand more. However, after years of struggle and setbacks, experienced leadership will recognize the advantage to be gained by having a political party in power that is not dominated by the wealthy, one that is more representative of the interests of the general population and accountable to them. This untapped support for deeper

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democracy can lead to the recognition that the hegemony associated with today's capitalist society is oppressive and must be challenged.

The shared desire for deeper democracy - for a transformed polity that recognizes and supports the validity of their demands - is one requisite to the creation of a shared political identity. A successful coalition must also excite a passionate response and inspire trust and commitment. Gawerc (2021) explores the central role of trust and commitment in coalition work and examines what has been learned about how they can be achieved.

Based on her review of the literature, she identifies five processes and practices that have been found to be imperative to cultivating solidarity across difference and inequality. They are (Gawerc p. 1): "(1) uniting around shared principles while engaging difference; (2) acknowledging and managing inequalities; (3) making space for each other; (4) attention to managing conflicts; and (5) actions that confirm the shared commitments and negotiated identity."

### ***Overcoming difference and inequalities***

A shared political identity is the critical glue holding a coalition together. A successful coalition must be able to handle the misunderstanding arising from differences before they cause serious division. The work of understanding and respecting difference has several aspects.

Differences in circumstances within and among organizations include differences in race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, income, and other factors. Differences in understandings of the world also vary widely within and between groups. Building coalitions, then, requires adapting to differences, but also remediating the inequalities that disadvantage some organizations within the emerging coalition.

Education and consciousness-raising are part of building understanding of the values, practices and perspectives of each group. Leaders as well as members of each group should know the basics of racism, patriarchy, other forms of discrimination, imperialism, the role and place of the military, climate change, and the environment. Coalition members should be willing to respect and respond to criticisms made by other members. There should be processes in place so that such disagreements can be worked through with mutual respect. Understanding needs to continually grow over time, as Yates (2018), Matthaai (2017), and others discuss. Without this, internal divisions are likely in coalitions and success will be limited accordingly.

### ***Respecting differences implies a need for inclusive, democratic processes***

Inclusivity, transparency and accountability build unity and enable progress. In this regard, I address two points:

*\* Majority rule not sufficient; consensus not always feasible.*

Majority rule is not inherently equitable and democratic. Human rights and the rights of the earth are not determined by majority vote. Reliance on decision-making by majority vote puts

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minorities at a disadvantage. For these and other reasons, there has been great interest in consensus-building, but that too has its limitations. Workshops and informal meetings that encourage brainstorming to address an issue have proven to be fruitful in crafting successful proposals and resolving issues faced by a group. The MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program provides some best practices for building consensus or at least for building consensus on a process to be used when approaching an issue (see their website, <https://publicdisputes.mit.edu/bestpractices> ).

However, glaring differences among coalition members in resources, both in monetary value and in human capacities, require more direct effort at remediation. Insights from true interests theory are illuminating and give indication of how this can be done.

*\* Implications of the theory of true interests.*

Identifying a group's best interest with respect to a proposed policy is often not straightforward; it involves defining well-being and determining a policy's impact on that well-being. The theory of true interests clarifies the points to be considered. The self-organization of the group in question is needed. Without some organized cohesion, a group cannot discuss its true interests with respect to any given proposal. Hamilton (1999) points out that: 1 - An assessment of a group's well-being from different positions is required, using both internal and external valuations. This same process should be followed in assessing the impact of a proposed policy. It may be the case that the needs of a group have been unaddressed for years, as happens with worker safety. Workers often lack channels for meeting and discussing their needs together. 2 - When a power imbalance exists, as at the workplace, greater democratization of relevant decision-making processes offers a partial remedy. 3 - Public conversations can better enable a group to identify, refine and decide upon their interests. The media has a role to play in seeking out and presenting the standpoints of all groups impacted by a proposal. 4 - In addition, I would note that research may be needed to determine the costs and benefits to different groups impacted by a proposed policy. The funding of research projects addressing the impact of policies on under-funded groups in a coalition, then, helps to advance equity and justice. Similarly, research is required in the crafting of policies to address the priorities of these groups. The perspectives of the disadvantaged should be reflected in the choice of researchers. The capability approach to well-being associated with Amartya Sen (e.g. 1999) is consistent with a true interests approach.

*\*Priorities not determined a priori*

Some on the left interpret the Marxist emphasis on the working class as implying that work-related demands should have priority when agendas are set. However, a democratic coalition process respects its members - their self-identification and their concerns. The coalition's jointly-decided process will likely set priorities that align with the political moment, in times of war perhaps a cease-fire or a stance on military aid. Those self-organized in a grassroots coalition will work to improve the lives of ordinary people; in the long-run, this left populist movement may indeed lead to a changed hegemony and eventually the overthrow of capitalism.

Note also that engagement with currently existing parties is indispensable in the articulation of (national) political identities. People locate themselves politically in reaction to those

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parties. Without collective confrontation of dominant parties, resistance to those parties will be fragmented and less effective. That is, vertical engagement, as well as horizontal organizing efforts, is critical to transformative change (Mouffe 2009).

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Coalitions bring together a variety of organizations. Coalitions impact the self-identities, institutions, and knowledge creation of each member organization. A coalition, then, can be understood as a social innovation that creates new relationships. Skill in building relationships, then, is absolutely critical to a coalition's success. This aspect of social change has not been adequately incorporated into economic analyses of the processes leading to a transformed society.

Preventing and addressing divisions is a major challenge coalitions face. One important and hopeful observation countering the all-too-frequent negativity regarding the possibility of unity is the fact that differences in perspectives are not intractable. Understandings continually evolve as a result of both shared experiences and of discussions and debates that shape opinions. Debate and compromise are in fact basic to the creation of the shared political identity needed to unite and solidify coalitions. Mutual respect and shared goals may be just the starting point in working together. The actions of each organization are also critical.

The strength and unity of a coalition, in fact, depend more on the values each organization embodies, than on the values it may profess. Trust and commitment, vital to long-term cooperation, must be consciously sought by all member organizations. Trust is built through actual practices of members. Actions that show commitment to shared values and the shared agenda cement the relationships that are the foundation of coalitions.

At the same time, the success of a strong coalition, once formed, is limited by a number of factors: the number of members, the strength of their commitment, the resources they command, the difficulty of the obstacles faced and the clarity/accuracy of the ideas that guide them as circumstances change. But know that connection and cooperation among progressive organizations are sorely needed if we are to move towards deeper democracy, regenerative economies and more caring societies. We need coalitions that can bring clarity and courage to the struggle to create a post-capitalist society in which all can thrive.

### ***Appendix 1: A possible starting agenda for a national coalition***

The shared interest in deeper democracy and a healthy planet can bring organizations together. But each movement organization has its own priorities. Accordingly, a transformative agenda will emerge organically from a collective designed to be inclusive, democratic and accountable. One possibility would be that the coalition initially agrees to back a bill or resolution currently before Congress that has the strong support of one of the five major movements. So, to open discussion, the five bills could be: the PRO Act (if this is the bill put forward by labor organizations), the Transgender Bill of Rights (if this is the bill put forward by LGBTI organizations), the Women's Health Protection Act (if this is the bill put forward by women's organizations), the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (or other bill put forward by racial justice organizations), the Earth Act to Stop Climate Pollution by 2030 (if selected by environmental organizations).



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There is an abundance of literature on setting priorities within groups. See for instance, <https://www.top-network.org/set-priorities-collaboratively>. Initial organizers will provide only the starting point for collaboration, not action agendas. Safeguarding values and processes that are agreed upon by all members, along with on-going self-assessment, may be the best that can be done to ensure inclusivity, transparency and accountability over time. The principles and processes guiding a group should not be set in stone, but should be continually examined and revised through careful and deliberate processes provided in founding documents. See criticisms of the World Social Forum on this:

<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1441768/FULLTEXT01.pdf> p. 38

Demands for policies that increase the voice and power of working people and disadvantaged groups are of particular importance. Support for unions, for example, and protection of voting rights and voter initiatives enables pushback against right-wing trends.

### ***Appendix 2. Suggestions for building stronger networks across the left***

What is to be done? Relatively few organizations now place priority on networking across the five major movements of labor, gender/feminism, racial justice, environment and LGBTQ+ issues.

Here is one suggestion: Having names and contact information for each of these five is step one. This information is essential for responding to events like the killing of George Floyd. There are several factors to be considered when choosing which organizations to network with. How long has the organization been in existence? How broad is its support? What is its activist record? Is it dependent on corporate support or big money?

Even 501c3 organizations can network. Although they are limited in the political work they can do, they can urge their members to vote; to be informed voters; to find out more about legislation that will affect them. They can provide links to summaries of important bills that have the strong backing of progressive movement groups. The non-profit need not even take a position on the legislation— it can simply urge members to educate themselves about it.

And it is incumbent on every progressive organization to understand the basics of how inequalities have been institutionalized. This requires study of racism, sexism, and other biases that are behind much exploitation and suffering. The educational effort within organizations requires more than simply having members listen to a few talks, or having token representatives from different disadvantaged minorities included at meetings. The different forms of oppression are systemic, and an understanding of this requires both in-depth study and on-going involvement. This understanding will do much to ensure that each disadvantaged group has adequate voice when decisions are made.

Marianne Hill, Ph.D., has been an URPE member since 1971. She has served on the URPE steering committee and the board of the International Association for Feminist Economics. She

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writes frequently for *Dollars and Sense*. Her latest book is *Building a Solidarity Society* (Palgrave 2022).

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Some relevant websites:

<https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/build-back-better-support-and-opposition-a-running-list/>

<https://participedia.net/method/174>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97863-7>

### **Marx's Theory Muted**

Author: Cale Brooks

DEK: The positive contributions of Soren Mau's *Mute Compulsions* are lackluster, and the philosophical version of Marxism it is built upon, by rejecting the economic basis of Marx's critique of capitalism, results in a dubious political dead-end.

Review of Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).

In his new book from Verso, *Mute Compulsion*, Søren Mau cites seemingly the entire corpus of the Marxist philosophical tradition to do what he purports has never been done before: develop a theory of the mute economic compulsions inherent within capitalism. It's a work of remarkable breadth, including several hundred unique books and articles. But while his book is undoubtedly a result of his studies, Mau's contribution illuminates the weaknesses of a variant of Marxism propounded by English and Philosophy departments. This is because *Mute Compulsion* is hobbled by a peculiar strategy for a work of Marxist theory: it rips out and abandons the economic skeleton of Marx's project and replaces it with a political theory of domination

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revolving around the so-called “value-form” that leaves a Left interested in applying theory to politics with nowhere else to go. This is a Talmud Marxism for grad students, not a Marxism that can guide actual workers. Fortunately, Marx’s actual economic theory is far clearer and more effective.

Mau’s contribution sets out to elevate *economic power* to the same analytical importance as *violence* and *ideology* for the long-term stability of capitalism. The importance of the latter two has long been recognized, while the former, we’re told, hasn’t gotten the attention it deserves. The distinction is that violence and ideology impose direct coercive force on a person, while economic power shapes an individual’s choices by transforming their social environment. Mau’s argument is intended to show the *primacy* of economic power, which enables us to see “how the power of capital is operative even when ideological and coercive domination is absent” (2023, 18).

This is meant to elaborate how “the silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker,” as Marx (1976, 899) described vaguely within *Capital* (the particular language is taken from the Penguin translation, but “silent” can be substituted for “dull” or “mute”). This concept is most clearly mobilized as a capstone to Marx’s historical retelling of how English peasants were proletarianized into the English working class. These new economic compulsions are birthed from the historic transition into capitalism and take over the structural primacy that violence and ideology wielded in pre-capitalist societies. Mau considers his argument to be an explicit answer to how human beings are transfigured into workers: “The radical separation between life and its conditions... is the most fundamental level of economic power of capital” (2023, 132). The book is structured to take us from these conditions through the relations specific to capitalism and its “value-form” and finally to the macro-dynamics the system generates.

Central to this theoretical reconstruction is the concept of power. If people are “forcibly articulated” into their social places within capitalism through what “appears to the individual agents as an inner law ... as a blind natural force,” then an explanation of power must transcend the intentions and actions of individuals (Marx 1981, 1020). Through his searching, Mau rejects many conceptions of power within and outside the Marxist tradition, ultimately landing on Michel Foucault’s work. But while Mau finds both much to appreciate within Foucault’s theoretical insights as well as some critical shortcomings, his own contributions to the theory of power quickly peter out. Instead, he pivots to *the power of capital*, which, in his definition, amounts to

“capital’s capacity to impose its logic on social life; a capacity which includes and ultimately relies upon, yet is not reducible to, relations among social actors in a traditional sense, such as the relationship between capitalists and proletarians or the relationship between an employer and an employee” (2023, 46).

But “power” is never actually defined—a pretty significant omission if you intend to develop a theory of the economic *power* of capital. And after this survey of power theories (as well as

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theories of ideology and economic power), we also get long journeys through the social ontology of human beings, metabolic domination, and social difference and oppression. Mau apparently regards many of these topics as unnecessary for addressing the stated aim of his book (2023, X). In his attempt to address nearly every aspect of Marxist research, cataloging literature takes priority over articulating a clear theoretical throughline.

Mau does, however, try to bolster his account of the economic power of capital through a number of sporadic “power of capital mechanisms”, which make the “radical separation between life and its conditions” possible. They include the market, competition, the real subsumption of the labor process to capital, and crisis. These are no doubt integral to capitalism, but their irregular introductions throughout the book mean that we are unable to know how Mau links or orders the strength of these mechanisms.

The heart of the book comes to light when Mau says that “the power of capital is an impersonal form of power” that generates horizontal relations and vertical class relationships (2023, 136). Vertically, capital reproduces the capitalist class structure through the continuous impoverishment of the masses, thus making them dependent on labor markets in order to meet their basic needs. Horizontally, members of both classes are subjected to the “value-form” and competition, which for Mau capture “different levels of abstraction.” Workers compete in labor markets for adequate wages and capitalists compete in commodities markets to gain greater profit and secure larger market share. However, everyone is ultimately subjected to value.

It’s ironic then that Mau’s particular concept of value ends up being one of the weakest threads within the book. This is because he builds upon a theory of value overly steeped in philosophy rather than one coming out of Marxian economics. Aside from a few superficial citations, Mau declines to engage with Marxist economists at all, even going so far as to question Marx’s economic bona fides! He tells us that

Marx was not an economist, *Capital* is not a work of economic theory, and the theory of value is not a refined version of the classical labor theory of value found in Smith and Ricardo. Marx’s project was a critique of the entire field of political economy, and the theory of value is a critical analysis of social relations in a society in which social reproduction is mediated through the market (2023, 179)

This is a misunderstanding. Of his 64-year life, Marx spent 40 building on classical political economy through a careful study of the most advanced economic writings of his day (the distinction between “political economy” and “economics,” although meaningful, is in this case pedantic). Engels defends this work in his introduction to *Wage-Labor and Capital*, describing Marx’s theory as a successful “way out” of the blind alley that the classical understanding of labor as a cost of production had run into (1935).

Furthermore, the notion of *critique*—so near and dear to value-form theorists—didn’t mean *rejection* for Marx. He regularly showed where he agreed and disagreed with other economists, as evident within his reading notes, *Theories of Surplus Value*. Moreover, his most explicit

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positive theory within works presented to comrades, like *Wage-Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price, and Profit*, make it more than clear that his theory was a development of the same questions pursued within classical political economy. This was the only way his critique could say anything actually meaningful about really-existing capitalism.

When it comes to value, Mau's work highlights quality over quantity in order to communicate that "the concept of value is meant to capture a specific form of socialization of labor" (2023, 180). What's important about value is not the amount produced in production or realized in exchange, but the fact that value extraction exerts social relations that *dominate* workers and compel capitalists to extract ever further. Through the influence primarily of Moishe Postone, Michael Heinrich, and William Clare Roberts, who have all reduced value to simply an "abstract form of domination", this analysis, which is certainly within Marx's critique, has taken center stage to the detriment of so much other Marxian economics.

Value in this form becomes a tautological argument. We're told that value is a mechanism that keeps individuals dominated by capitalist social relations. Dominated by what within capitalism? The process of value extraction. The concept of value becomes presupposed within this "value-form" analysis and therefore converted into an utterly vague, redundant notion meant only as a way to appreciate the class relations "beneath the surface phenomena," as Paul Sweezy remarked in his classic work (1942, 129). In other words, value in this framework exists merely to offer a political critique of exploitation within the workplace while not connecting it to anything about the specific quantities of things—the meeting of the two is where all economic explanatory content lies. Otherwise, we're left with mere generalizations, such as *capitalism is dominating*, which, however true, doesn't get us very far in explaining *how* capitalism dominates.

A better place to locate the source of capitalist domination is within the social-property relations generated by the class structure. The unequal ownership and control over economic resources leads systematically to situations where those who own the means of production can be said to dominate those who must work for a living by having unilateral control over their labor within the workplace. Nicholas Vrousalis has provided a useful framework for thinking of exploitive class relations as domination: "A exploits B if A benefits from a transaction in which A dominates B: exploitation is the dividend A extracts from B's servitude" (2023, 30). When these relations are created, the economic system can then be said to be driven by the creation of surplus value above the value of costs. It should then be clear, however, that it's the relations that create domination, not "the value-form".

Ultimately, Mau's emphasis on "value as domination" obscures what fundamentally drives the economic power of capital and capitalist development over time: Is it class struggle? Or the competitive compulsion placed on capitalists to reduce costs and pursue greater profit? How can these be parsed or organized within Mau's theory of value? Based on Mau's formulation, the critics of Marx would therefore be right to ask: why not just look at the world through *prices* instead of *values*? Through an emphasis on domination, we lose sight of what we can get out of a Marxian theory of value and its relationship to prices and profit.

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## A Marxian Theory of Value and Price

Mau's articulation of Marxism is as critical philosophy. But there's another, far more fruitful tradition that sees Marx's intellectual contribution as a critical extension of classical political economy (CPE). According to this tradition, Marx's labor theory of value is, as Ronald Meek notes, "a theory of price in the traditional sense" (1973, xiii). Seen in this way, it is capable of explaining real economic phenomena and data.

So why even bother using "values" as something distinct from "prices"? Mainstream data collection makes no distinction and identifies value as equal to "price x quantity," (Pritzker et al.) but Marx and others within CPE go through the trouble of examining these as separate phenomena with specific determinants. If "the real world is one of price calculations," as Paul Sweezy said, "why not deal in price terms from the outset?" (1942, 128). The answer is that *precisely because capitalism is reproduced through the surface "movements of wages, prices, and profits,"* (Shaikh 1984, 45) it means that we need a structural theory to determine what underlies price magnitudes and movement.

A price is not a natural property inherent to a commodity, like physical weight or dimension. Instead, a price is a social property created and recreated by exchanging dissimilar (sets of) use-values. To generate that recreation, a producer must "hang a ticket" (or stick a barcode) on each commodity when they put it out on the market (1976, 189). Market prices are then set by individual capitalists, each striving to make as much profit off of their price offers as they can get away with at the expense of others. And yet, prices for commodities of a similar kind usually aren't erratic. Instead, they tend toglom together around an average price over a long period of time. Marx's theory is constructed specifically to answer what determines that average and what structurally limits the variation.

In Marx's theory of value, a commodity's costs in terms of labor time (meaning, the value newly produced per unit of output) are the underlying determinants that govern typical price regulation. As capitalists attempt to attract customers away from their competitors, they set prices that approach their costs plus a competitively viable profit. This viable profit tends to be equalized across capitalists of different sectors through the entry and exit of new investment, and thus a center of gravity develops for prices that include average cost and normal profit—what Marx calls *prices of production*. These prices are the persistent anchors for market prices in real capitalist economies, but are only manifest when production exists within a state of general competition. With an emergent general rate of new profit, the cost-structure of production provides the fulcrum for relative price levels.

A society is subjected to "the law of value" therefore when the labor time involved in the cost-structure is what determines the price of a good or service—this specific confrontation between price setting and the division of social labor endogenous to the class structure is what sets capitalism apart from other societies. Standing behind a thing being sold in a market is a process of production organized (and reorganized) around the exigencies of effectuating sales in said market. This means that only production creates value, and commodities with value are things

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*produced for exchange*, even though their value is determined in production. This also means that a definite amount of labor time is expended in production that may or may not (usually not) match the prices assigned to the products put up for sale.

This process of regulation by value occurs because of how essential social production is in constructing commodities. The limits and breakthroughs of a single production process would have no bearing on the price of a thing if that production were isolated. Even if the goods or services were produced for sale, if done without the pressure of competition, the price could be set however the seller wished (or could get away with). However, once commodities are produced in a state of generalized competition, even when those producers don't make the same commodities as one another, then the limits and breakthroughs of production weigh heavily on the possible price offerings. The way to understand this is through a theory of production costs.

Value theory is the principal way of explaining production costs for Marx and the CPE tradition. Understood this way, the material inputs to production are a combination of direct, new labor costs (variable wage costs) and indirect, old labor costs (constant machine and fixed-investment costs). The different ratios of these inputs give rise to structurally different prices between kinds of commodities. As Piero Sraffa states in his classic work of theory,

the relative price-movements of two products come to depend, not only on the 'proportions' of labor to means of production by which they are respectively produced, but also on the 'proportions' by which those means have themselves been produced, and also on the 'proportions' by which the means of production of those means of production have been produced, and so on (1960, 15).

In other words, the total living and dead labor of all the production processes that went into a given commodity, along with all of the commodities that entered into that commodity as an input, make up the total, vertical cost (Pasinetti, 1967). In this way, all costs are ultimately determined by labor-time.

However, not all labor guarantees a socially viable price or constitutes a socially viable cost structure. Marx refers to what is socially viable as *socially necessary labor-time* (SNLT). This SNLT defines the magnitude of value in each commodity and the new “weight” that production attaches to market prices is the labor time socially required for production and reproduction. (It should also be clear that some labor that may be socially necessary from a broader social perspective, such as domestic labor, is not recognized by the market price as a cost.) To measure this social production, Marx uses the unit of value. The labor under consideration is not *all* laboring activity but the many concrete laboring activities abstracted as labor in general through their involvement in producing (sets of) use-values meant for exchange (1976, 172). Laboring activity becomes abstract labor, or “social labor,” through general, recurrent exchange (1976, 168). However, this abstraction does not occur *in* exchange but in production as soon as it is *produced for exchange*.



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The labor input is abstracted from all specific, concrete laboring activity into its common property of being human labor through the necessary process of commodity production. What constitutes “social necessity” is a direct clash between the expectation any given capitalist has in his head of what he can get away with selling in the market and what he can actually get away with selling in the market. How much labor time is “socially necessary” is determined in *two ways*, as pointed out by Isaak Illich Rubin, Ronald Meek, Anwar Shaikh, Roman Rosdolsky, George Catephores, and others.

In the first “sense” in which value socially determines price, the labor costs that enter into production set the “socially-necessary,” or competitive average, of what a commodity’s price can be (ex-ante) before the particular commodity’s entrance on the market. This effectively sets the regulating price, or price of production, that establishes a center of gravity for market prices which capitalists discover through price competition. Marx’s concise definition reads, “[SNLT] is the labor-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labor prevalent in that society” (1976, 129). In other words, “the average labor-time required per *unit* of product... expended under given conditions of production” (Shaikh 1981, 277).

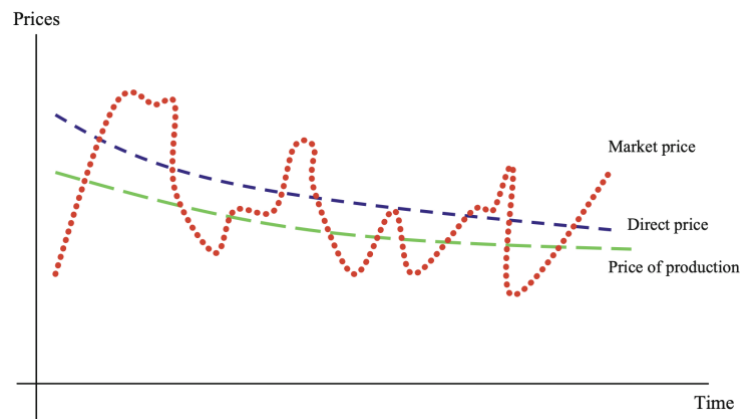
But that’s not all. Marx announced later in Volume 1 that the concept of SNLT was only looked at “abstractly, as one aspect of the immediate process of production,” in order to prove the existence of exploitation and surplus value, and would need “concrete conditions” of heterogeneous economic sectors analyzed in Volume 3 to develop the concept further (1976, 710). The first usage is transformed then to include a second meaning, “according to which labor can only count as ‘socially necessary’ if it corresponds to the aggregate requirements of society, for a particular use-value” (Rosdolsky, 89).

Labor costs then also anchor prices in such a way that they determine the reward (profit) relative to the “social need” of a commodity (ex-post). Notably, costs regulate price when supply can change to new demand. If, instead, the supply is fixed, the price will be entirely determined by demand and not by costs. But, under normal conditions, if effective demand for a commodity is relatively greater (lesser) than the supply being offered, then the price will be determined by the costs of production plus a normal profit rate, and the prices set by capitalists can therefore stand above (or below) the social need, leading to market prices making the adjustment (Marx 1981, ch. X). This second “sense,” therefore, “specifies the relation between the regulating price and the [actual] market” (Shaikh 1981, 277). Meek illustrates this in a useful example, saying,

if a diminution in the demand for, say, linen, brought about a situation in which the total quantity of labor actually allocated to the linen industry was greater than the total quantity which society required to be allocated there under the existing technical conditions, then the effect upon the price of linen, according to Marx, would be the same ‘as if each individual weaver had expended more labor-time upon his particular product than is socially necessary’ (1973, 178).

The regulation of market prices by labor-time (value) is ultimately why there's an incessant drive on the part of bosses to get as much out of workers as they possibly can. Because the wage-rate is typically set before a period of production, Capitalists try to extract labor effort to an extent and at an intensity that is consistent with competitively determined standards of maximizing profitability. But workers, who typically have an interest in staying employed, will only work as hard as is necessary to keep their job. Profit maximization attempts to stretch the labor effort from what the worker needs to do to keep their job to a maximum extent of exertion. This is done either through sweating more absolute labor-time or by accruing greater relative labor-time via increases to labor productivity. If a capitalist can get better bang for their buck on their production costs, they can survive longer or conquer greater market share vis-à-vis their competitors.

The actual production of commodities to meet expected demand in the market and to realize as much profit as possible is not guaranteed to match either the prices that give normal, competitive profit rates nor the quantities that meet the real market demand. Value is realized through a price as sold commodities through mismatched trial and error as capitalists go to war with other capitalists for as much profit as they can obtain by reducing the labor costs of their production. And ultimately, therefore, this shows that “what is important to the theory is that... conditions of exchange are shown as governed by *conditions of production*” (Dobb 1961).



Direct and indirect labor-time regulates the price center of gravity, the price of production, which in turn regulates market prices through competition. Source: Tsoufildis & Tsaliki 2019.

However, this analysis is not what guides contemporary Marxism built around the “value-form.” Whereas Meek (1973, 181) made clear that Marx’s method within *Capital* meant that “the assumption that commodities sold ‘at their values’ under capitalism was of course made quite deliberately and with full consciousness of the fact that it would later have to be removed” as his theory became more complicated and realistic, William Clare Roberts holds to a theory of value equivalent to price, thereby rendering value a redundant category. Clare justifies this by commenting that he does “not think Marx is at all interested in explaining price formation” (Roberts, 78). Value for this crowd remains nothing but an abstract form of domination, disconnected from specific explanation of how capitalism operates.

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But to say that value isn't price determination is to not only misunderstand the point of value but, worse, to misunderstand what motivates the entire labor process within capitalism. Michael Heinrich's work, a major source of inspiration for Mau, completely removes the significance of value-extraction within the labor process when he argues that value *only* becomes objective through the process of exchange: "objectivity of value is quite literally a 'spectral objectivity'" (2012, 54). *Why Capitalists* place so much effort into reducing their direct and indirect labor costs so as to lower their prices and be more competitive becomes completely lost when we say value is merely a mental abstraction.

Heinrich claimed in his *Introduction* to Marx's Capital that the argument he's advancing "is not always made clear by Marx." This is because Heinrich's value theory is not the same as Marx's (Lietz & Schwarz 2023). His theory ironically has more in common with Adam Smith's pre-Marxian command theory of value, whereby "the measure of value must be sought not in the conditions of production of the commodity, but rather in the conditions of its exchange" (Meek 1973, 63). This demand-led theory of prices completely removes any need for value as something distinct from prices within production because it removes the social role of costs in determining prices.

But for the classical political economic tradition and Marx, which sees labor-time as both the limitation and the source of wealth in production, the central political implication of value theory is that a redistribution of wealth necessarily has effects on costs and prices (Dobb 1973, 116). To be a "scientific socialist" is to take seriously the implications of redistribution once the cost-structure of production is understood to be principally determining wages, prices, and profit. Where wealth comes from and where it goes to are structurally connected. The history of social democracy demonstrates most obviously how tenuous the process of redistribution is (the openings, the backslides, the unceasing struggle over the new surplus) and the stakes involved in getting the Marxian micro-theory right if we're to ever affect the macro-dynamics. These political implications simply cannot arise if, like Mau, value extraction is treated only conceptually and not as a concrete process within the capitalist economy.

Marxist scholarship should not be dismissed. It is in many ways underdeveloped, and serious work is welcome, even if its current iteration is plagued by the latest fad schemas like social reproduction theory or riddled with Marxological pursuits to decipher every last one of Karl's words with precise definitions. Mau's *Mute Compulsion* is a welcome scholarly effort. But because the tradition it emerges from rejects the micro-foundations of Marx's actual economic theory, it contorts Marx's political critiques into domination through the so-called value-form.

Mau and other scholars that share his philosophical form of Marxism are no doubt right to point to the systematic domination inherent within capitalism. His work is also commendable for its emphasis on the primacy of economic power. But beyond simply misrepresenting Marx's major intellectual project, the value-form folks have constructed a form of dead-end Marxism with nowhere else to go, suspended in midair on philosophical lacunas that Marx sought to move beyond 150 years ago. Instead of developing his theory of competition or interest rates or growth or other real "surface" phenomena, all of which could advance both our theory and politics,

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Marxists have gotten obsessively stuck on a political critique only to completely misunderstand what it can say analytically about capitalism.

Luckily for us, Marxian economics has a life outside the tradition Mau represents. Unfortunately, however, we still have a lot of work to do to build a coherent, effective anti-capitalist economics. For all its valiant philosophical work, *Mute Compulsions* has little to contribute to those efforts.

*Cale Brooks is a contributing editor at Jacobin and a graduate student in economics at John Jay College, City University of New York.*

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### **Invitation for nominations for the URPE Editorial Board**

By Enid Arvidson

If you are interested in working as part of the RRPE's Editorial Board, please contact the Managing Editor, Enid Arvidson at [editor.rrpe@urpe.org](mailto:editor.rrpe@urpe.org), by no later than April 15 2024, and plan to send your election statement of no more than 250 words by no later than June 1.

Please review the RRPE Aims and Scope (<https://journals.sagepub.com/aims-scope/RRP>) to ensure you can contribute to the journal—candidates should have expertise, and an emerging or established scholarly record, in at least two or three areas of radical political economics. You must be a member of URPE to stand for election. Editorial Board members are elected by the URPE membership—only members of URPE may vote in Editorial Board elections.

The journal, and Editorial Board, function collectively. Duties of Editorial Board members include: reviewing an average of one manuscript per month (12 manuscripts/year); serving on Special Issue Collectives; serving on various sub-committees; attending three meetings a year (a mixture of zoom and in-person meetings).

Serving on the Editorial Board is a major commitment, but is also rewarding since it is an important way to contribute to URPE. Additional information is here:  
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