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Farewell to Democracy?

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I

As recent events demonstrate so dramatically, the spirit of democracy, the universal impulse to self-government and equality, lives on and thrives, generating mass uprisings against autocratic domination, even in areas where democracy has heretofore had little purchase. However, the reach of global capitalism and the burgeoning debt crisis impose overwhelming constraints and an essentially subaltern status on most late-comers to democratic development. Given also the effective monopoly on armed force of autocratic governments, institutionalized misogyny, the potential divisiveness of ethnic nationalisms and repressive religions among the popular forces, and the consequent fragility of civil society, it is not clear in the early Twenty-First Century that even the most robust democratic institutions will be able to maintain themselves. Still, if unbridled optimism is hardly in order, hopefulness is certainly possible.

However, in the traditional heartland of democracy–Western Europe and its offshoots–the long, world-changing democratic upsurge appears to be coming to an end. After three hundred and fifty years of advance, the counter-revolution is well under way, and there do not appear to be any long-term countervailing forces moving to successfully oppose it. In any event, my concern here is chiefly with the United States, where democratic decline is more advanced, and seemingly unstoppable, than anywhere else in the democratic world. To see how and why this has come about, we have to briefly trace the progress of modern democracy both generally, and in the U.S. in particular.

Historically the rise of representative democracy has been a story of two symbiotic movements. First is the progressive broadening of the scope of active citizenship; of the notion of democratic consent, of every person to count for one, and no person for more than one. We can begin that story at many points, but the Leveller spokesman Thomas Rainsborough's revolutionary defense of universal manhood suffrage at the Putney Debates is as good a starting point as any: "For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under." What is more interesting perhaps is the reply of Cromwell's son-in-law, Ireton, that "no man hath a right to an interest or share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom… that hath not a permanent fixed interest in this kingdom." Despite the fact that Ireton's argument was that of conventional opinion for almost three centuries thereafter, during that period there were only advances in the extension of suffrage, as workers, peasants, the poor, the unemployed, ex-slaves, immigrants in general and immigrants from colonies of European empires, indigenous peoples, and finally women

joined the polity, culminating with the Swiss women's suffrage referendum in 1971. In all that time until now there has not been a single case of suffrage permanently denied, nor a single case in which suffrage once granted has been withdrawn. Only in the ex-Slave States of the United States was suffrage once extended temporarily rolled back, but this was forcibly imposed by the losers of the Civil War.

This movement, moreover, has entailed not just the universalization of voting rights and the civil liberties consequent on their attainment, but their extension, in more or less attenuated forms, beyond the ballot box. In the constitutionalist and Federalist United States, which through most of the democratic era has been a leader in this progression, this has meant the proliferation of levels of elected officialdom, the ultimate accountability of both governmental and non-governmental entities to elected officials, the right to a jury of one's peers, the various rights of speech, petition, and association guaranteed by the First Amendment, and above all the right of workers to organize, to strike, and to picket peacefully. With variations here and there, this has been a story of steady advance. Only in the Communist sphere was representative democracy rolled back, but always, tellingly, in the name of some more pure form of *democracy*, as in the people's democracies. And after the fall of Communism, the so-called transition to democracy in that sphere has in most cases been to a more democratic polity than existed earlier. On its Continent of origins and colonial off-shoots, the democratic movement was in principle unopposable: only the Fascists succeeded in governing, briefly, in the name of anti-democracy.

The second trajectory of progress has meant incorporation of the economic realm–the potentially anarchic arena of capitalist accumulation–into the notion of democracy, in recognition that formal political opportunity may be and probably will be empty in the absence of economic rights. The regulatory welfare state, or social democracy, is not some gratuitous add-on to political democracy, but rather the culmination of the democratic movement in its liberal, representative version. It constitutes a partial transcendence of oligarchical capitalism: the admission of persons without capital into not just formal political citizenship but at least some of the possibilities of equal citizenship. In the polity of citizens, everybody counts for one, nobody for more than one, so that at least occasionally voters rather than dollars constitute the majority. Thus the extension of the rule of law to encompass governance over the destructive powers of the free market for labor has often been the most important arena of all for the protection of democratic citizenship [1] If the dogma of the market rules over all, there can be no democratic political equality: One law for the Lion & Ox is oppression.

To be sure, this cursory invocation of democratic progress is an over-simplification: a prescription as well as a description, though a prescription grounded in the actual history of popular demands. Democracy has hardly been everywhere or even anywhere triumphant. The arc of its development, always at least a slow advance, has also always been a struggle, a creation slowly–at times very slowly–in the making. The conventional story that capitalism and democracy arose together, and that the latter was the precondition of the former, is just that: a story–a story that with the rise of China's authoritarian capitalism has lost all credibility. The two movements were certainly coterminous; but they were often opposed, not happily

entwined. Except in the United States the demand for universal suffrage has been everywhere resisted by capital. Even more crucially, from Peterloo through Adalen or Republic Steel, the class conflict of capital against labor has been a history of violent repression even in the capitalist democracies; and perhaps most brutally in the U.S. But the Postwar settlement of the 1950's–the compromise that traded acceptance of welfarism for the exclusion of Communism in Europe (and of any radicalism in the U.S.)–ended that version of conflict. It presided over what momentarily seemed liked the final acceptance of the Western working classes into full citizenship–although in most of Europe and certainly in the U.S., far from equal participation in rule with corporate power.

This actually existing regime, then, has two defining characteristics that render it less than simply a democracy. First, though the lawmakers are freely elected they have a source of power distinctly separate from those to whom the laws are addressed and on whose behalf they are nominally made; and second, though the state is not merely its police force or public relations agency, capital usually calls the tune and a culture of secrecy consequently envelops the state. Properly such a regime should be called not simply a democracy nor a representative government, but rather a "representative oligarchy."[2]

In the practice of representative oligarchy, the sovereignty of the people exists, but only notionally. Though the *de jure* rulers in the United States are not rulers in virtue of wealth or economic power, the de facto rulers are, because no one can become a ruler without their support and approval. At the same time, it's important to understand that the U.S. regime has not always been one simply of oligarchy, representative or otherwise. Rather, over the past three centuries capitalist economies and democratic or quasi-democratic political institutions have in fact developed side by side. This is a case not of mutual support, but rather of a very fragile and often temporary compatibility. The result is that in any capitalist society oligarchy and democracy coexist in a barely concealed struggle for dominance. As long as free and fair elections exist–a circumstance no longer to be taken for granted in the U.S.–so does the potential for majority representation. As long as capital is amassed in the hands of a minority, so does the potential for oligarchy; for the offsetting or overcoming of votes by money. Where the determining power of voting and thus of political party conflict is extinguished we call the result oligarchy; where money cannot buy votes or more importantly policies, there is representative government, the modern version of democracy.

What determines the balance of the opposed forces at any historical juncture is a question that is not easy to answer, for it is not self-evident exactly what is at stake. Just as the ideology of political democracy was triumphant for more than three centuries, so too was the ideology of capital accumulation. Fascism challenged it not at all; Communism only to the extent of asserting that a classless society would be more efficient at achieving the universal goal of economic progress. Neo-Malthusians and communal anarchists aside, even in the midst of intra-capitalist warfare no one doubted that capitalism (or its Communist successor) would ultimately be a material cornucopia (especially in the U.S.). Both authoritarian and liberal capitalisms had the boom-bust crises that Marx described, but these were supposedly endogenous to the system: an institutional or political but not a *natural* limit. As for the pre-

capitalist world, it existed almost entirely (Japan aside) as a source of loot; not as a competitor in the race for production and profits. After World War II, global capitalism meant little more than the North exploiting the South (or the West the East).

II

Now all that has changed. With the coming energy crisis, the onrush of climate change, and the development of full-scale capitalist production in much of what was once the Third [or Second] World, the regime of accumulation through exploitative competition is for the first time truly global and foreseeably finite. What Lenin described as the labor aristocracy of the imperialist nations, its standard of living supported by exploitation abroad, can no longer feel secure about its relative place in the world. Instead it is just one participant in the "race to the bottom"–a race in which China's ability to extract absolute surplus value from oppressed workers stands as a shining example to capitalists everywhere. As though to underline a reality that the commentariat prefers to ignore, the invasion and occupation of Iraq was followed by the abolition of all Ba'athist legislation: except for the outlawing of unionization in the dominant public sector–including the nationalized oil industry–which the American occupiers left in force. Capital's class war knows no boundaries. Nor can labor's domestic regimes offer it much protection even if they so desired, as the requirements of the international capitalist class, enforced by institutions such as the World Bank and the I.M.F., are sharply at odds with the traditional modes of state protection or regulation. In this situation, then, the working class–any working class–is disposable; and the political parties that it once identified with are all either dead or dying. In the United States, e.g., where the role of wealth is much more transparent than in most European economies, this year corporate donations flow to the G.O.P., whereas two years ago they flowed to the Democrats. But it's the same money from the same sources doing the same job of ensuring support for their comparative position–but most definitely not that of *their* workers–in a hyper-competitive world. Even the debate over "out-sourcing" has become irrelevant, as capital relocates itself to wherever labor is most exploitable.

Moreover, the nature of representative oligarchy today is such that policy differences have narrowed almost to the point of non-existence; or where they do exist, as in say the field of financial re-regulation, the economic power of the sector that is supposed to be regulated ensures that no Party will really do that job, or even discuss how it might be done best. Everyone knows this; and everyone who pays attention also knows the material outcome of the inequality squeeze. Put simply, the wealthy won't pay for public goods or collective welfare, and the declining middle class can't. To take but one of many examples: the aging of the population is a pending demographic and policy disaster, yet the only approach ever discussed publicly is the destructive idea of cutting back or worse, privatizing social security–presumably so it can share the same visible fate as private pension-dependency and home ownership.

That is to say, democracy has always been heavily contested terrain, and the balance of power has not always or even most of the time favored it. Still, *more democracy*, the drive for political equality, has always been high on the agenda of popular movements.[3] Now, this description is

seriously questionable. At the beginning of the 21st Century, the condition of democracy in the United States has changed drastically. What is new at this historical juncture is that representative oligarchy itself only barely mimics the institutions of representation. The American polity is foundering in a perfect anti-democratic storm created by, in combination, a depth of inequality that appears unyielding to any prescription and that is maintained by a sclerotic political system; a state that can be mobilized only for self-destructive imperial adventures; a dangerously irrational subset of the citizenry fed toxic propaganda by an hypertrophied mass media; and a financial plutocracy that seems to have outreached all possibilities of containment. If this tendency continues, democracy will become less a contested terrain and more a land of myth and legend.

Today, everywhere in the West the unstoppable mass migrations of labor and the popular response to them call into question the very foundation of the democratic revolution. Anti-immigrant activity (often aimed at long-time citizens), has set its face against the last frontier of inclusion, and the present constellation of U.S. politics suggests the prospect that millions of law-abiding residents will be permanently excluded from the polity (many of them incarcerated for long periods of time in a secretive prison system). In the same vein the classic reactionary turn against "internal enemies" is again unleashed: now against Muslims, in the name of preventing "terrorism": the new version of "Communism," and even more menacing for its very abstraction. Resistance to the full acceptance and integration of both groups is the final, potentially unbreachable barrier against the centuries-long democratic surge.

As for broadening and deepening the nature of citizenship, the advance of financial and corporate power in the US and of central bank finance in the Eurozone signal the end of that process as well. Most policies relevant to the structural continuation of globalized capitalism cannot possibly be set in legislatures except as rubber stamps–capital desires certainty, not uncertainty and risk, and there is no anti-capitalist mass movement anywhere in sight in the Western democracies. Worse yet, both the turn against inclusion and the surrender of democratic agency are made particularly more poignant in the U.S. by the continuation and extension of unchecked American imperialism, 21st Century style. Six years ago I argued that: ". . . there is no such thing as a democratic empire. . . . The doctrine of permanent warfare that is integral to the new imperial conception [entails that] government establishes itself as (in Charles Tilly's words) a protection racket based on fear that it itself creates. Moreover, permanent war is not just a doctrine but a reality, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Empire creates its own violent reaction, out of the volatile mixture of uneven development and consequent cultural rage. As well, the bloated 'defense' budgets it demands for its activities abroad make the egalitarian politics of democracy unaffordable at home; and the opacity that oligarchy demands is further entrenched. At the moment, both major American parties are effectively committed to the militarized politics of empire, and seem especially loath to retreat in the face of that reaction."[4]

It is not yet clear what impact the newly aroused democratic forces in the Mideast will have on the suddenly obsolescent partnership of the U.S. with its autocratic allies. Still, at the moment the situation is even worse than before, as the decision-making process spirals further out of

control, the political economy of unmitigated recession and budget-tightening puts all non-military government activities at risk, thus promising to worsen the poisonous effects of gross class inequality. Indeed, without the sopping-up effects of the behemoth military/private contractor complex and its domestic counterpart the swollen carceral state, as well as the exclusion of many women from the ranks of those conceptualized as seeking work, real unemployment in the United States would be near Depression-era levels. And what of opposition to the imperial state? The coordinated campaign to destroy WikiLeaks is a clear portent. To put it succinctly, in the wake of 9/11 the American politics of endless enemies has turned into endless war (including the proxy wars of Israel, the tail that wags the oil-saturated American dog), producing yet more blowback in the form of yet more enemies. Foreign policy becomes a question of how much the generals will ask for, as the costs of empire spiral beyond redemption and those who can least afford it pay those costs. These are the real political and budgetary trade-offs of imperialism: say farewell to civilian control of the military; civil liberties; and a renewed pursuit of equality of opportunity.[5] Beyond this lies something much worse: a people that accepts, as a normal course of events, the bombing of civilians, torture, kidnapping, indefinite detention, assassinations, secret governments at home and covert wars abroad, has lost touch with the moral basis of civil society. In explanation of this state of affairs, it is sometimes suggested that the shock of 9/11 caused the U.S. as a society to "lose its moorings." Perhaps: but the extent of the delusions and lies that led up to the politically inspired, geopolitically irrelevant, and self-destructive invasion of IraqBan open secret to anyone at all interested–suggests that the moorings were not very tightly tied to begin with.

Thus it isn't surprising that the fig-leaf populists of oligarchy's right wing make no attempt to combat the expanding democratic deficit. They have no objection to growing inequality, whether political or economic, racialized or gendered. They care only about their own taxes: a concern which, as its loyal lapdogs, they are perfectly willing to hitch to the runaway wagon of the plutocracy. As well (with some libertarian exceptions), rather than constitute themselves a check on imperial militarism (as earlier populists did at the turn of the 20th Century) they enable it further by stigmatizing as "unpatriotic" any who oppose it. Rather than extend the arena of participation and access to strengthen the national economy by the mobilization of its human resources, they try to constrict it. Their activism exists only to empower their own ability to choose or defeat candidates for elective office; their ongoing effort to restrict the voting potential of those whom they disfavor is a rare effort to turn back the clock in latter-day democratic societies. As for opposition to "big government," this has always and only referred to extensions of the social safety net, of the possibilities of truly equal opportunity, never to the bigness of militarism and empire; let alone "the enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized and controlled intervention" that made the free market for labor possible.[6]

Similarly, its goal is not to bring bureaucracy under popular control via the extension of workplace or community activism, but rather to eliminate or weaken those efforts, further entrenching the economic power of the forces that work to permanently replace democracy with oligarchy; and to enfeeble the democratic elements of the polity in the face of worldwide competition (much of it from U.S.-owned corporations). Indeed, the organizations it most despises are those that attempt to defend or extend the civil liberties, civil rights, and policies

for equal opportunity, that lie at the heart of political equality. The program of cutting taxes, shrinking government, and destroying public education during a time of gross inequality has everything to do with the protection of self-interests and nothing to do with the recognition or advancement of that immense number of Americans who live in poverty, or one paycheck away from it; who are subjected to workplace tyranny; and who are effectively excluded from democratic participation. In every way imaginable, the Right opposes both the inclusiveness and expansiveness that characterized the last three centuries of democratic advance. It is not coincidental that its two great avatars, Thatcher and Reagan, confirmed their political position by breaking strikes.

In this respect there has been much confusion on the Left in the U.S. about the meaning of contemporary populism, as in Tea Party revanchism, most of whose major spokespersons are committed and professional liars or ignoramuses. As though either to retain a tottering optimism or to explain the actions of what is supposed to be a democratically inclined populace ("we elected Obama, after all"), uneasy apologists for the new populists talk about "frustration," and "mass unemployment," and the failure of the Obama Administration to deal adequately with the wretched state of the economy. But however true, this is an explanation without an excuse. The continued defection of the Democratic Party from its working-class base may explain the short-run shift in voting patterns in the mid-term elections of 2010, but it has nothing to do with the leaders and activists of the Right-wing movement. Nowhere on the activist Right, that is, does one see the face of deprivation, of exclusion from the polity. On the contrary, these activists encountered no systemic obstacles at all as they stormed the barricades, meeting only the kind of mass media coverage that has become their best recruiting tool. Thus though it may have originated as a spontaneous movement of *people* (this is very doubtful), the Tea Party entered the electoral arena and remains as a movement of *money*.[8] Some of its troops may be among the permanently unemployed, but overwhelmingly those of whom that is true have not joined the Right. Why would they? The hatred and contempt visited by these "populists" not just on so-called "elites" or public servants but on any powerless persons who deviate from their conception of goodness; and their vindictive collaboration, once in office, with its all-out class warfare–raising taxes on the poor while cutting them for the wealthy–speak for themselves.

That is, this populist Right is transparently not about material suffering or social exclusion, or the state, whose benefits it happily accepts for itself. It is about Power. Its primary frustration, expressed over and over in interviews with journalists, is that someone else governs according to some other public philosophy: this is unacceptable. It rejects the foundational values of democracy: that winning elections and only winning elections conveys legitimacy on government; and more crucially, that the legitimacy of winning elections entails, equally, the legitimacy of losing them. Instead, the Right's angry voice is the voice of unreason, of not accepting the truth of any proposition it wishes not to believe in; and its strongest desire is not to express itself in, but rather to end, the reasoned debate on which democracy depends. Thus under its aegis a large part of "the people" has turned against the discourse of reason: the very essence, both politically and epistemologically, of democracy. How else can peaceful majority rule or even democratic revolution take place, policies be chosen in place of other policies,

leaders be preferred to other leaders, except under the aegis of rational argument?[7] In its absence, only force or fraud can rule. In this respect, not only is reason the language of democracy, but democracy itself, however dependent for its origination on exceptional moments, and however incoherent in its instantiations, is the politics of reason.. As the combined attack on science and public education continues unabated, lies dominate and democracy withers.

The proper name for this movement is neither conservatism nor populism, but Authoritarian Populism: the guise fascism takes in liberal democracies. Huey Long's remark that if fascism comes to the U.S. it will come in the name of democracy seems finally apt. The purpose of the authoritarian populists is not to preserve democracy from the intensifying class warfare of corporate and plutocratic wealth, but to overthrow both liberalism and representative democracy while hijacking the democratic language of "the people" and "equality."[9] The emotive language that the Right's spokespersons use–real men, the real nation, "taking it back," along with the fetishization of guns and violence, is the vocabulary of classical fascism. In the US this takes the specific form of substituting anti-governmental agitation for representative government; denouncing any version of constitutionalism that both enables the majority to govern and protects minority rights; and in many cases advocating a public religiosity that is close to theocracy. Politically, this means not simply running for election against incumbents, which is the normal democratic process; but first discrediting them as illegitimate decision-makers, unless they carry out the will not of elected representatives and those who voted for them but of the dedicated minority, to whose dogmas and fanaticism they must at least give lip service. Even more, as has become clear in the behavior of the Republican Party, it entails attempting to prevent its elected opponents from governing at all: not to mention issuing barely concealed calls for violence, as in the wake of health care reform, unregulated immigration, or legalized abortion. The pseudo-populist movement culminates in the unabased attempt of the GOP to disenfranchise millions of low-income Americans in the name of an invented threat of "voter fraud"–the first attempt to repeal universal suffrage in modern history. As though illustrating the psychoanalytic concept of projection, the Right treats its opponents' legitimate electoral or legislative victories as seizures of power, calling for violent self-defense against imaginary enemies.

At the same time, the forces of irrationality and impotent rage are not going to go away, for the response of authoritarian populists to the conjuncture of a never-satisfied demand for political equality *and* apparently irresistible institutional decline is perfectly logical: sweep the pieces off the board and change the rules of the game so that the unpleasantness of not being history's chosen winners will simply vanish. Redefine the real world into a fantasy world, in which getting rid of the not-quite-human obstacles to progress–depending on time and place Jews, homosexuals, Mexicans, Gypsies, Communists, liberals, single mothers, women on welfare, whomever–will restore the rightful order of things. As a Seattle man who had assassinated a family he believed were "Communists" told movie-maker Sam Keen, "I'm a skilled welder and I've been out of work for two years. It has to be somebody's fault." But not that of those who actually disemployed him.[10]

In a similar vein, though much less dramatically, just before the 2010 midterm elections *New York Times* reporter Matt Bai wrote sympathetically of a Tea Party activist who became a vigorous opponent of "socialism" and "statism" while visiting Poland, where he saw the government lay off 20,000 auto workers. It didn't occur to the reporter or his subject that this happens all the time in the United States–except that giant corporations, not "the government," are responsible for such layoffs (and in fact Tea Party spokespersons are all for laying off masses of government employees!). Marx's epigrammatic comment, in *Wage Labor and Capital*, that "battles in [the industrial war of capitalists among themselves] are won less by recruiting than by discharging the army of workers," is unknown to both of them. In this respect the most well-known spokespersons of the Right no more wish to invade or diminish the prerogatives of the upper class or the leaders of finance than do Carly Fiorina or Meg Whitman. This is the economic elite that looted public and private pension funds while complaining about welfare cheats and Medicare frauds; who lobby for giant tax breaks and subsidies and avoid paying their own taxes, all the while complaining about the deficit. A daily reading of *The New York Times* Business Section of *The Wall Street Journal* over any period of time reads like a police blotter and makes quite clear that contemporary American plutocracy is a kleptocracy as well, giving new meaning to the old saw: "The law locks up the man or woman/who steals the goose from off the common/but lets the greater villain loose/who steals the common from the goose."[11] This is the real "Tea Party."

This perfect concordance is what makes this modernized version of fascism, once an historical oddity of the transition to democracy, now its most serious contestant for power. The populists provide a fig-leaf cover for oligopoly and finance capital, which in turn underwrites their fruitless dream of political power while pursuing its own barely hidden and steadily advancing agenda of institutionalizing plutocracy. Unable or unwilling to help create a mass base with those who are truly deprived or persecuted, their search for scapegoats among the latter is logical: who else is available to fill the helpful role of the enemy? This peculiar kind of political logic, in which the least are blamed for the worst, was best described almost a century ago by Wallace Stevens: "I followed his argument/With the blank uneasiness which one might feel/In the presence of a logical lunatic." The "totalitarian contempt for facts and reality" of today's counter-revolutionaries, their mass hysteria (e.g., the "Birthers") their fixation on fanatical religiosity or free-market mythology, is precisely the affair of logical lunatics: who cannot be argued with because they have not made a serious argument. And with their numbers, entrenched economic power, and ability to dominate public discourse in the absence of a countervailing mass movement or cross-sectoral solidarity, they can abort any effort to escape the rule of unreason. The continually embarrassing attempt to treat them as just another political movement and the GOP as just another political party, is eerily reminiscent of how the political class and economic elite of Weimar responded to the National Socialists.[12]

The assault on public reason, moreover, is enabled by and enacted through the final crucial addition to the alliance of authoritarian populism, the plutocracy, and the Republican Party. This is the *mediacracy* that is more advanced in the U.S. than anywhere else. By "mediacracy" we refer to more than just the corporate oligopoly that has taken over the American public sphere, though the impenetrability of that oligopoly to anything but wealth is horrendous.

Primarily centered on the structure and practices of television, mediacracy is a regime in which profit-making, ideological theory, and institutional practice become one, all driven by the same unique vision. The owners of the system–and they are very few–strive to make its version of reality so central to our lives that ultimately it should replace the life-world with itself: so that, for example, "equal opportunity" has come to mean not so much social mobility through careers open to the talents as, more visibly, victory in the televisual world of "reality shows." But above all, this is true of the political system, which the mediacracy has thoroughly colonized, ultimately eradicating the former's traditional values and practices and replacing them with its own. These include the cult of celebrity; the voracious appetite for money; an unyielding preference for the ad and the sound bite in place of the public address and for one-sided propaganda in place of public discussion and debate; and most importantly, an unstated presumption that it–the mediacracy–is the only acknowledged source of "facts" and "truths."[13]

It is the mediacracy that plays the decisive role of naturalizing and normalizing the discourse of contempt for reason and intelligence (wanting us to "listen to both sides of the argument" in the presence of shameless lying, or always finding two equal and balancing "extremes," only one of which engages in violent and anti-democratic rhetoric), while excluding from public space any discussion of social needs, human values, and the shortcomings of surplus inequality that might go beyond the boundaries of ruthlessness on the Right and silence at the Center.[14] Among the mainstream media, only in the "Business Section" of *The New York Times* is there serious coverage of the kleptocracy and its accomplices in the Federal government, or some contemplation of the extent to which the capitalist economy is embedded with moral hazard, as industrialists and bankers flit happily from one rewarding position to another, and their companies get the full protection of bankruptcy law, while workers and ordinary citizens bear all the risks of the risk society. On crucial issues the gate-keeping function of the mass media is no more a neutral one than, to use Lenin's notorious phrase, is a pistol in the hands of a policeman.

If we imagine a sort of linear scale of discourse moving from Right to Left, there is a barrier well before we get to serious Left discourse that is no more permeable than the Great Wall of China. Conversely, the rise to predominance of Rupert Murdoch's–and the GOP's–Fox News also drives the Rightward drift of most of the conventional mass media. Following the logic of "rational" economic man, they strive–with the honorable exception of MSNBC–to take up the vacant space next to Fox and, consequently, they extend the Chinese Wall even further to the right. In this situation there is almost no lie big enough to be challenged as such by the mainstream media. Nor is the mainstream itself immune to the threat of monopoly. Comcast is now attempting to buy NBC; success in this endeavor will put together a powerful–and in many markets monopolistic–cable provider with a major source of content. It would have the power to block NBC's competitors from Comcast's customers, as well as further strangling the independence of a network that already, in its ownership of G.E., can be counted on to ignore or denigrate any critique of the media/corporate order. The more the media oligopoly tightens, the further it narrows the public sphere within which democratic debate is supposed to take place and the more the public sphere is hollowed out. Voices of dissent may appear once or twice; the voices of power are everywhere.

To take just one of what could be endless examples of how an unalloyed even if still faintly competitive mediacracy can build public opinion out of hot air (bricks out of straw), Hendrik Hertzberg of *The New Yorker* reported that "an illuminating Bloomberg poll, taken the week before the election, found that some two-thirds of likely voters believed that, under Obama and the Democrats, middle-class taxes have gone up, the economy has shrunk, and the billions lent to banks under the Troubled Asset Relief program are gone, never to be recovered. . . . Reality tells a different story."[15] Indeed, different in every respect. So the Right's predilection for ideological warfare over any acknowledgment of scientific fact and empirical knowledge has become the carefully cultivated ignorance of the populace. While the self-protectiveness of the mediacracy edges out any possibility of contrary critique entering the public sphere on equal terms, the big-money propaganda barrage of the Right generates rarely challenged disinformation for anyone listening. What this means most crucially is that the fantasized "liberal bias" of "elites" who supposedly dominate the media comes to be seen as manifesting itself simply by expressing any opinion, or any allegation of fact, that is not that of the organized Right. This bullying, which taken seriously makes the exchange of viewpoints simply impossible, is tacitly accepted as though it were gospel by almost all but hard-and-fast liberals.[16] The fundamental notion that a statement may be true even if made by the wrong person, disappears. Closing this vicious circle, there is almost no version of Right discourse that will earn the mainstream media's uncompromising opprobrium, so that racial, religious, and sexual bigotry are now commonplace in political life, not just in Washington and in Republican-controlled state legislatures, but even among the Party's presidential hopefuls . Now one of the Right's most prominent spokesmen can recycle language from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*–George Soros the Jew as "puppet-master" of a subversive Jewish conspiracy–without reproof from his employers. Where do we last find such a condition at the center of a polity?

III

Superficially there is nothing new in all this. There has always been a strong, anti-democratic right-wing in the United States, heavily invested in and crucially undergirded by white racism and anti-immigrant fervor; and at times, as in the alliance of Republicans and Southern Democrats, it has been dominant. Too, there have certainly always been crudeness and mendacity in the mediated public sphere. But there have also been periods of democratic resurgence, the most recent–the New Deal–lasting for three decades, and witnessing the high point of union membership as well as the Civil Rights Movement and, at the end of the period, the feminist revolution. Both the rise and the fall have the same cause. The labor actions of the 30's underwrote the liberal era in the U.S.; the Socialist and Communist parties of the early 20th Century, and the outcome of World War II, produced the social democratic successes in Europe. The post-War settlement seemed like a permanent institution; even Richard Nixon paid homage to it, all the while undercutting its grassroots base with the "Southern Strategy" of Kevin Phillips and Lee Atwater.

But the moment of success was an illusion. In the U.S. that same period was witnessing the decomposition of labor, and the decline of heavy industry and technological innovation as the

basis for growth in working-class incomes and capitalist profits. All this entailed deindustrialization: the outsourcing of domestic production, the unprecedented rise of non-productive financialization, and a renewed assault on the working class and its organizations by capital, in order to protect threatened levels of domestic profit. Organized labor was forced to shift more and more to the defensive stance of business unionism, and ultimately relegated primarily to the public sector: where its social status is different and, in the U.S., easily racialized, feminized, and denigrated by white opinion; or perceived–as with teachers' unions–as self-serving. Though plutocracy has not yet reached Europe, even there labor's power in France has declined drastically into fitful general strikes that neither produce legislation nor reverse working-class decline, while such bastions of social democracy as Sweden and Germany contemplate–or in the latter case seek to enforce on others–the kinds of anti-welfarist legislation and attacks on the social wage that are commonplace in the U.S. but startling on the Continent. The post-2008 scene has allowed conservatives everywhere "to transform a crisis of the banks into a crisis of the welfare state."[17] As the inhabitants of Europe's Southern rim especially can testify, the "democratic deficit" of the Eurozone is never too great for capital's ruling class.

As for the U.S., though the labor movement, the Civil Rights movement, and feminism have brought about great changes, the contemporary beneficiaries of both the trade-union and Civil Rights movements are now isolated minorities (often the same persons); the only successful war that the U.S. has prosecuted in recent times is the war on African-American men. Meanwhile, feminism has lost much of its constituency, while women's and children's welfare needs succumb to political marginalization or–as in the case of authoritarian anti-abortion legislation–all-out misogyny; and prominent women participate in the strident remasculinization of public discourse. Now the conjuncture of failing political and economic structures with a critical mass base wedded to an anti-democratic ideology and institutions that produce and reproduce systemic failure, is over-determined. Any potential coalition trying to recapture public power and reinvigorate political equality simply lacks the resources needed to combat the accrued power of non-state actors. The political system, always hostile to popular government, has been decisively turned against majority rule, the principle of one person one vote. No one who matters, it seems, has the will to frontally challenge this state of affairs. Thus "change" is both the mantra of popular but wholly abstract discourse, and at the same time impossible to achieve in any meaningful degree. In that stasis only the power of oligarchy and plutocracy can be, and are being, advanced.

In short, the power of capital has reached an historical zenith in the contemporary U.S. precisely at the moment when independent state power is at a nadir. As recent events show (if anyone doubted it before), no reformist public policy is possible without the negotiated participation and explicit or tacit approval of the sector whose behavior is to be "reformed." Whatever Party may have formal power, legislation to control banking monopolies is written to conform to the needs of bankers; energy policy (including nuclear) answers to the energy industry; Big Pharma's profits must be protected if medical progress, as contemporarily defined, is to continue; any change in health care delivery must primarily deliver profits to the medical/industrial complex; agribusiness sets food policy; environmental legislation must not

interfere with the profit levels of industries that challenge environmental integrity. As for confronting the effects of the enduring economic crisis, nothing that threatens the total primacy of capital can be considered. The simplest fix for the grossest inequality of any democratic/capitalist society, progressive tax reform–and tax collection–that might reverse the decades-long redistribution of income to the wealthy, cannot even be discussed.[18] Above all, again because of the confluence of big money and an ill-adapted political framework, the American State is unable to perform the first duty of any legitimate regime: regulating the procurement and possession of instruments of deadly violence.

With the devastating triumph of plutocracy in *Citizens United* vs. *Federal Elections Commission*, and the deliberate repudiation of political equality in its successor case, *Alabama Free Enterprise Club vs. Bennett*, this condition has reached its apogee. The conservative punditry makes a desperate attempt to prove that nothing has happened, that free speech has been preserved, and anyway some Democrats raised more money than their Republican opponents, and some billionaires with no credentials other than their wealth were unable to purchase victories in Senate or gubernatorial races. But this is just apologetics: it ignores the fact that the next step in this dance is to defund the Democratic Party through a concerted attack on trade unions, its main source of funds and foot soldiers, particularly in statewide elections. In any event, plutocracy is not simply a matter of who wins elections, though the 2010 midterms actually showed that targeted expenditures are able to purchase seats in the House of Representatives. Rather, access first to the electoral arena itself (not to mention the judiciary) and then to the victors once in office, is purely for sale; the agenda is set long before any election has occurred. Winning votes is a side issue; money talks, all else is whispers.[19] "One dollar one vote" replacing "one person one vote," proclaimed shamelessly by democracy's enemies in the judiciary, instantiates what we must finally call "*representative plutocracy*." Plutocracy is no longer merely one element in a mixed regime along with oligarchy and democracy; it now defines the regime.

IV

Though total cynicism often seems warranted, this has not always been the case. In the U.S. the Wagner Act, precipitated by the great wave of strikes and sit-ins of the mid-30's, redefined labor relations. The Fair Labor Standards Act did the same for workplace conditions, while establishing what was at the time a progressive minimum wage; the Social Security Act, later in concert with Medicare and Medicaid, changed the lives of most (though not all) working Americans. But since then, the minimum wage has fallen into desuetude. Beyond that, under the aegis of the anti-Communist crusade and working through its political arm in the Republican Party, capital negated the legal liberation of organized labor, so that today union-busting, which rivals pornography as one of the nation's leading "service" industries, has become the signature issue of Republican-controlled state legislatures. It has gutted the FLSA, turning "OSHA" into a curse word; continually strives to eviscerate Social Security; and despite recent crocodile tears over an alleged plan to roll back Medicare, reveals every moment that that "plan" is actually its deepest desire. That is what happens when reforms stop at the edge of the flood without attempting to cross over it: eventually all that is left of them is a shell of

performance that begins to disillusion their supposed beneficiaries, and a declining will to prevent their further submergence. The welfare state in the U.S. never had the depth of its European counterpart; race was always the deadly weapon that limited its scope. But the temporary redefinition of labor relations combined with a minimal welfarist and regulatory state did produce a significant reallocation of national income from capital to labor. In the past several decades that shift has been reversed. Now in the U.S., even more so that in Western Europe, in the wake of headlong privatization and the manufactured debt crisis the welfarist regime has become nothing more than the resistance of an obsolete past against an enfeebled present and an onrushing future: crumbling dikes of social policy that in the U.S. match the crumbling infrastructure of the physical nation and the collapse of state and local governments.[20] We are witnessing the degradation of civil society, while the (disproportionately non-White) poor and almost-poor, by the millions, are left to find a place on the scrap-heap.

Of course we do not want to forget that organized resistance to the collapse has finally manifested itself. But it would be a major mistake to confuse resistance with transformative political mobilization, even when, as now in Wisconsin, it inspires mass support. Against violent oppression, resistance may be a mobilizing tool leading to a general uprising; even non-violent resistance may force the oppressors to withdraw. But against a legitimately elected government, however plutocratic, oligarchical, or unrepresentative, resistance even when successful makes nothing happen. Its goal is to keep things from getting worse, to preserve rights that have not yet been totally abolished, or simply to express opposition. Worse yet, angry “resistance” is now often the shoe on the other foot; it stands for discrimination and majority tyranny against immigrants, not for the enlargement of the democratic polity.

It is still barely possible for the organized forces of progressiveness in the U.S.–the liberal wing of the Democratic Party chiefly–to overcome their timidity, impotence, and dependence on big money, to the extent that specific situations can be kept from getting worse than they already are; public opinion polling often shows majorities for some progressive reforms. But “public opinion” is not a political force. To countervail against the resources of capital, only a mass movement that through some combination of force and persuasion brings the ruling elite to the table can go beyond palliative reforms and bring about necessary structural changes. That would require an historical mass of political actors confronting the logic of overweening private capital accumulation and the domination of the social world that accrues to it, head-on. Those same actors would have to comprehend that the truism about absolute power tending to corrupt absolutely is as true of economic power as it is of the state; and that the contemporary crisis is the result of top-down class warfare rather than the inordinate demands of subordinate classes. To have any chance of bringing about such a vision, the American Left will have to learn to speak a different language from the reformism that is now its only recourse. The defensive, hectoring language of meliorist liberals who cannot imagine a genuine alternative (“we’re no longer # 1!”) often only fuels nationalistic fury.

In the absence of new understandings, and of a new language that would give those understandings a political context as Marxism once did for the Western working class, a temporary reprieve is the best that can be hoped for. If the democratic forces cannot roll back

the reign of unrepentant inequality, as they now appear unable and unwilling to do, then eventually the dam will break and the sea of discontent wash over it. A class "compromise" of what Senator Estes Kefauver once called "horse and rabbit stew" is on hand to do the job. This is the equalitarian stew of one to one: one bloated horse for the wealthy, and one limp rabbit for everyone else. The promise that the party of plutocracy makes to the masses whose support it solicits as the price of this compromise is not at all purely symbolic, as Thomas Frank has suggested it is in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*[21] What it is, rather, is relatively costless–it doesn't cost anything (anything immediately evident, that is) to deprive people of rights, to refuse to govern, to lower taxes so much that nothing different can happen. Along with the psychic income (and access to necessary raw materials) of empire and war, that is what plutocracy promises authoritarian populists: a cheap obedience to their self-assertive and disdainful rage, of whom the already downtrodden are the most immediate target. And since the immediate material costs of contemporary warfare are borne only by a volunteer armed force and mercenary private contractors, widespread disillusion about particular conflicts–even among some on the Right–has not yet translated into a general repudiation of imperial nationalism and a significant reordering of the place of "defense" in budgetary priorities.

From this perspective finally we can see that the critiques of President Obama by disappointed supporters, though all too richly deserved, miss the historical point. The laboristic liberals who fill in the space marked "Left" on the American political map have nothing to offer a president; they constitute a null set. To insist that if only he, or they, had done this, or that, is to ignore the unhappy facts. To adapt Gunter Grass's pungent description of German Socialist Party conferences, *The Nation* editorial board meetings (for example), "are places where we discuss what would have been the case had the opposite happened."[22] There are two hard truths about this politics of the opposite. First, if it could have happened it probably would have; and second, if it had happened the results would probably not have been very different, because the historical forces actually at work are just that: historical forces at work. Admittedly, nothing is once and for all determined; conservative over-reach may yet breed counter-mobilization. What I have pointed to here does not add up to a prediction; it is merely a projection, with emphasis on the negative forces. But to forestall its realization will not be easy. In this sense, "the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overcome by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses."[23] At the moment, what has seized a critical mass of Americans is historical amnesia and intellectual vacuity, and an overweening sense of individual and national entitlement. It is not yet clear how this politics of social self-destruction can be halted at the gates.

Notes

1. The classic discussion of this movement is Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). Speaking of the Industrial Revolution and the consequent rise of "the free market" in England. Polanyi wrote that "human society would have been annihilated but for protective countermoves which blunted the action of this self-destructive mechanism. . . . Society protected itself against the perils inherent in a self-regulating market system. . ."; and "the principle of social protection (aimed) at the conservation of man and nature as well as

productive organization. . .” (pp. 76, 132).

2 For an extended version of this argument, see Philip Green and Drucilla Cornell, “Rethinking Democratic Theory: the American Case,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, v. xxxvi no. 4 (Winter 2005), 517-535. The paragraph which follows is adapted from that essay.

3. On competing ideologies of democracy and equality in the U.S., see Michael J. Thompson, *The Politics of Inequality: a Political History of the Idea of Economic Inequality in America* (New York: Columbia, 2007).

4. Green and Cornell, *op. cit.*, 528-29. See Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Reuschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 170-71.

5. See Jonathan Kwitny, *Endless Enemies: the Making of an Unfriendly World* (New York: Congdon and Weed, 1984); and Chalmers A. Johnson, *Blowback*:: *The Costs and Consequences of American Empire,* 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, 2004). Anyone who may still believe that the Empire’s enemies aren’t “endless” might read *The New York Times*’ article by Thom Shanker, “News of the Week in Review,” Dec. 12, 2010, p. 3: “Rare minerals. Food and water. Arable soil. Air-cleansing forests. In the intellectual heart of the American military and policy-making world, these are emerging not just as environmental issues, but as the potential stuff of conflict in the 21st century.” So much for those who scoff at the word “Empire.”

6. Polanyi, *op. cit.*, note 2 above.

8. As Ishmael Reed nicely put it, capturing the true nature of the Tea Party in a nutshell, the belief that “the Tea Party is a grass-roots uprising against Wall Street (is) a curious reading since the movement gained its impetus from a rant against the president delivered by a television personality on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.” *The New York Times* “News of the Week in Review,” Dec. 12, 2010, p. 10.

7. Marx’s Third Thesis on Feuerbach–“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and *rationally* understood only as revolutionizing practice”–places rational debate in the context of class struggle but hardly dismisses it, as my underlining makes clear.

9. On authoritarian populism, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: “Mugging,” the State and Law and Order* (London: MacMillan, 1978); and Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso Books, 1988).

10. *Faces of the Enemy* (1987), a documentary for PBS, produced by Bill Jersey and Sam Keen, written and directed by Sam Keen.

11. For current and often little-known examples of plutocracy (and kleptocracy) at work, see the Jan./Feb. 2011 issue of *The American Interest*, especially the section on Plutocracy &

Democracy: Law, with articles on the courts, lobbying, and tax evasion. The best account of the great financial crash, and the criminal activities that led up to it, is Matt Taibbi, *Griftopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That Is Breaking America* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

12. The wonderfully descriptive phrase is Hannah Arendt's, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, with new Prefaces (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Evans, 1973), p. xiv. For more examples, see Jonathan Schell, "And Now: Anti-Semitism," *The Nation*, Dec. 20, 2010, 20-22. But here scholarly footnoting is pointless. Tune in to any television or radio outlet of the Right at any time, and you will soon discover a parallel world of non-factuality.

13. For lengthier discussions of television's colonization of the life-world, see Jeffrey Scheuer, *The Sound Bite Society: Television and the American Mind* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999) and Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), and my own (overly complacent) *Primetime Politics: the Truth about Conservative Lies, Corporate Control, and Television Culture* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), especially ch. 4, pp. 121ff. Overall, the best and most compelling of the many works exposing the real nature of the mass media structure are Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communications Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 2000); and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). Like my own, both these works have been somewhat overtaken by the ferocity of the contemporary Right's invasion of the public sphere.

14. For an extended explication of the concept of "surplus inequality," see Philip Green, *Equality and Democracy* (The New Press: 2000), pp. 69ff.

15. Hendrik Hertzberg, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, November 15, 2010, p. 32.

16. On this, one of the grossest of all the Right's big lies, see *Primetime Politics*, *op. cit.*, and especially Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Media: the Truth about Bias and the News* (New York: Basic Books, 2003). Alterman's as yet uncollected bi-weekly articles in *The Nation* are an essential compendium of the pernicious nonsense that passes for conventional beliefs about and on the media.

17. Ross McKibbin writing about the Tories in the *London Review of Books*, 18 November 2010.

18. None of this happened by accident; billions of dollars have been spent to make it happen. For an indispensable history and analysis, see John Ehrenberg, *Servants of Wealth: the Right's Assault on Economic Justice* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

19. See *Money Talks: Corporate PACs and Political Influence*, by Dan Clawson et. al. (New York: Basic Books, 1992). The authors note (ch. 7, p. 191), that if the determinative influence of corporate PACS and their front organizations disappeared, "they might start running it

strictly for the votes." This one-time definitive account of democracy for sale it is now almost obsolescent in the wake of *Citizens United*.

20. As is evidenced by the recent establishment of an executive dictatorship in the state of Michigan, everything that past generations of political science graduate students were taught about "state and local government" has about as much relevance to "democracy" today as an institutional analysis of the Hapsburg Monarchy.

21. For an elaboration of this argument, see Philip Green, "Cultural Rage and the Right-Wing Intellectuals," in Michael J. Thompson, ed., *Confronting the New Conservatism: The Rise of the Right in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), pp. 31-55.

22. To be fair, *The Nation*–of whose editorial board I am member–is an absolutely necessary source of expose and resistance; see the issue of Dec. 27, 2010, for example, or Johann Hari's Feb. 21, 2011 report on "The UK's Left-Wing Tea Party." But its reach is sadly limited compared to Rupert Murdoch's.

23. From the "Introduction" to the "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*."

Goodbye to all that? The Very Uncertain Future of the American Welfare State

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The American welfare state, at least in the form that we've known it since the New Deal, is under siege. Tax phobic voters, Tea Party governors, deficit "hawks" – all are trying to tear it down. All repeat the same mantra: "we" can no longer afford "out-of-control" entitlements spending. Worse, few Democrats seem willing to defend publically one of the signal achievements of 20th century liberalism. Should we be preparing for life without the social safety net?

There are good reasons to think so. For one, changes in the ratio of labor to capital worldwide are creating a very strong headwind. The simultaneous opening up of the once closed or isolated economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China, and the development of new, information technologies that make it easier for capitalists to access labor worldwide, are creating enormous downward pressure on wages everywhere. And as wages fall, so do incentives for employers to offer the kinds of benefits, or to support the kind of expanded public benefit programs, that were once were deemed necessary to attract and keep workers, and to maintain social peace.

This is not only an American problem. It's hard to find a Western capitalist nation that is not trying to rewrite the fundamental contract between society and the individual. There is, of course, resistance to retrenchment. Parisians have turned out in mass demonstrations to protest Nicolas Sarkozy's cuts to public pensions. Londoners have greeted David Cameron efforts to slash state-support for higher education with massive street demonstrations. Nor have European employers aped American corporations decision to rely almost exclusively on cutting labor costs to maintain corporate profits during the most recent recession.

Still, conservative governments would not be so bold in their challenge to public provision everywhere where it not for the powerful economic and political winds at their backs: nearly everywhere, the political power of capital has grown mightily since the 1970s, and the power of labor, organized or not, has withered.

For several reasons having to do with the peculiarities of the political system itself, the American welfare state is especially at risk. For one, neither the ideology nor the institutions of social democracy took root in the United States to the same degree that they did on the European continent, in Scandinavia, or even in Great Britain and Canada. Unions have never been as politically important here as they are in other Western democracies. Nor has either of the two major political parties been willing to commit fully to the left's policy agenda.

The ideological problem is longstanding, but it has become much worse since the 1970s: the

curious but undeniable hold of neo-liberal ideas about individual choice and economic competition on the American imagination. Certainly, we need to step lightly when we trade in cultural explanations of political phenomena. But it's hard to deny that the way that many Americans think about government helps the right by calling into question any political program that builds on notions of community, cooperation, and social equality. The well-documented American tendency to view government as "the problem," to prefer individualistic solutions to social problems, to favor "opportunity" to "redistribution" – together, these ideas and prejudices make it that much easier for conservatives to demonize the very public programs upon which so many people depend.

The American institutional problem is also familiar: the extraordinarily complex, divided, and disorganized political system makes it difficult to adopt or implement social policies that actually challenge the status quo. There are so many veto points, so many levers that must be pulled, so many interest groups that must be bought off, that real redistributional reform is unlikely. Rather, the policies that do emerge from this legislative gauntlet are simultaneously oversold and underperforming: they rarely solve the problems they purport to address, and if they make any headway at all, it comes at such great cost that even the beneficiaries feel cheated. This institutional morass is uniquely hard on progressives, because they are typically the ones who actually want to use the government to do something positive. The right relishes inaction – at least on domestic policy.

These long-standing problems have only been compounded in recent decades by the steady decline of the organizations that supported the American left. From organized labor to the civil rights movement, the major drivers of social reform in the U.S. have all been profoundly weakened, if not eviscerated. Few people join or even identify with them.

Interestingly, the right draws the opposite conclusion from recent history. They see Barack Obama's successful expansion of health care benefits to millions of uninsured Americans as well as the creation of a Medicare prescription drug benefit under George W. Bush as two signs that the welfare state is alive and far too well. But this indicates just how far the debate has shifted to the right. Just a few decades earlier, Democrats would have denounced both programs for what they are: moderate, Republican-style initiatives designed to reward entrenched interests corporate interests while warding off real change. Instead of forcing the insurance and pharmaceutical industries to pay their fair share of health care reform, both created captive, tax-subsidized markets to be further exploited by two of the most profitable industries in America.

It is possible that the success of the attack on the welfare state is "conjunctural" – that the economic crises that are wracking Western economies will recede; that right wing movements will exhaust and delegitimate themselves; and that the working and middle-classes will come to their senses when they feel the real pain of program cuts. Indeed, there are already signs of "buyers remorse" in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida where swing voters appear to be shocked that the conservatives that they elected in 2010 are actually doing the things that they threatened to do. The public may even recoil at the House Republican's plan to privatize

Medicare. One can imagine many second thoughts as a jobless economic recovery reminds the average American that there was a reason why their parents and grandparents voted Democratic.

But there is also much to suggest that long-term forces will continue to undermine political support for the welfare state. Indeed, for the last forty years, contrary to what the left imagined would happen, American conservatism has grown stronger despite its manifest policy failures when in office. Even as the average American has been watching his and her wage stagnate and even decline, even as the costs of health care and education have increased, people have blamed the government, not corporate America and certainly not the "free market."

Where's the party?

For American voters to resist this steady slide to the right, they will have to understand the Republican attack on public provision for what it is: an effort to redo the social compact so that individuals are on their own, and cannot use government to forge collective solutions to common problems. They will need to see the futility of scape goating the minority poor, and give up blaming public sector workers for the parlous state of the nation. In particular, they will need to admit that there's a class war going on, and that they're the targets. But who will help the average voter sort this out? Many progressives hoped that Barack Obama would rise to the occasion, that this gifted rhetorician would use the bully pulpit of the presidency to unmask the right. But he hasn't.

Some on the left are puzzled by Obama's failure to stand up for liberalism. How could such an eloquent campaigner fall silent at precisely this moment? But others think this misunderstands the man himself. Obama has, they point out, always been a pragmatist and a moderate. He has never shown much interest in explaining liberalism to the American people, and his move to the left during the primaries should be seen for what it was: a strategic move, designed to appeal to the Democratic Party's mass base and nothing more. Look at Obama's advisers, they say. It's hard to imagine that Larry Summers et al, would rush to hold the banks accountable for the financial meltdown, or be eager to prosecute their friends on Wall Street.

Obama's own political advisers offer a third explanation. They cannot, they have argued, influence the media framing of events as presidents once could. In the age of the 24-hour news cycle, non-stop cable punditry, and instant bloguery, presidents cannot shape the "narrative" in any significant way. Ronald Reagan may have been the last American president to wield that kind of influence over the public debate. The only thing a progressive president can do today is push Congress to adopt progressive policies. Those policies will shape public perceptions in a way that speeches no longer can.

While the president's influence over the public debate is undoubtedly diminished, there is a real cost in giving up on trying to make the case for reform. Unless the public understands and supports progressive policies, Congress will feel little pressure to adopt them, and more pressure to eviscerate them from the interest groups that might be harmed; to eviscerate them

as Congress has eviscerated many of Obama's initiatives. Equally important, unless the public understands the larger issues at stake, they are likely to be misled by the negative ads and the conservative punditry that floods the airwaves and the Internet.

And if the president won't make the case for reform, who will? Liberals cannot count on the Democratic Party to come to the defense of the welfare state. Certainly some individual Democrats have and will continue to, but the party as a whole is even less willing to defend the safety net than Obama. In part, it's about money: the Democratic Party is now enormously dependent on corporate America for campaign cash. When the labor movement began its steady decline several decades ago, Democratic insiders like Terry McAuliffe argued that the party could make up for the inevitable shortfall in union financial support by turning to the same sorts of economic interests that had traditionally leaned Republican, in particular Wall Street. And it did. And it shows.

Electoral considerations are also pushing the Democrats to the center. As hard as it is for progressives to admit, most Americans don't see themselves as liberals. Yes, it is exceedingly tricky to figure out what the majority's ideological affiliations actually are – it's not clear that they know themselves. But polls show that there are twice as many self-identified "conservatives" as "liberals" (something like 40% to 20%), with the rest of the population declaring itself "moderate". Certainly, many of those moderates look suspiciously like liberals when we ask them whether they want to cut Social Security or Medicare. But when we ask the how to pay for government, they suddenly turn into conservatives: Slash waste! Don't raise taxes! In all likelihood, none of this is deeply thought out. They want it all and are angry and confused.

But whether voters reject liberalism for good reasons, or just because they don't understand it, the take away point is the same: the Democrats cannot build a sustainable majority coalition by promising a 21st century version of the New Deal. Even if millions of voters want that but don't yet know it, they few show signs of voting for it, particularly when the right hammers them about the tax increases that would be needed to finance a full slate of public benefits. No matter how many times political scientists point out that Americans are comparatively under taxed, most American voters don't buy it. Even if they did, they're likely to respond that they're not getting value for the money they're currently paying. The right has won that ideological battle. Democrats could refight it, but to do so, they would have to go straight at the same interests that they now rely on to finance their campaigns.

Complicating matters enormously, the ability of the Democratic Party to cobble together a majority coalition in Congress depends on the leanings of moderates who are not sure what they want. Yet, unless it wants to be doomed to minority status, or razor-thin legislative majorities (and thus vulnerable to permanent obstructionism by the Republican minority in the Senate), the Democrats have to win over these voters, voters who are easily scared off by what the party's liberal base wants it to do. Think "Blue Dogs" and their opposition to Obama. In other words, even if it wanted to, the Democratic Party is an odd vehicle to carry a progressive agenda.

Blowback

We don't want to take this electoral analysis too far. After all, the attack on the welfare state is neither an exclusively American phenomenon nor only a recent one. To the contrary, in the midst of the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, voters throughout the West are turning to rightwing governments to sort out the mess. So deeper, more general forces are at work.

One is what was once called "the contradictions of the welfare state," i.e., the deeply structural, presumably irresolvable, conflict between guaranteeing social rights to health, education, work, and welfare and guaranteeing a private, profit-driven, market economy. The neo-Marxists who made this argument were optimistic that this tension would be resolved in favor of labor: workers would never give up hard-won entitlements; instead, they would make ever more radical demands, eventually forcing a democratic transition to socialism. In the 1970s, the Swedish Social Democrats' plan to incrementally transfer ownership of the largest firms to worker- and citizen-controlled investment funds seemed a harbinger of things to come.

Sadly for the left, corporate capital and the rich were not on board. And they had political allies among the salaried middle classes, who did not see themselves as the primary beneficiary of an expanded welfare state (whether or not they were), who balked at the heightened tax burden that accompanied redistributional government spending, and who sometimes even resented the social leveling that social democracy promised. And as the proportion of industrial workers shrank, the political affiliations of the middle classes mattered more.

Understandably, because social democratic parties found it necessary to secure the political allegiance of the middle classes, they made sure that core social programs met their needs to. And to minimize capitalist opposition to reform, they sheltered corporate interests from confiscatory taxes. Both decisions, however rational, undermined the redistributional impact of social policy. That, in turn, made the entire social democratic project less appealing to the very workers who were supposed to be its beneficiaries because they ended up paying a very large share of the costs of the benefits they had won for society as a whole.

To make matters worse, as the middle classes became more secure, their commitment to the public provision of collective goods weakened further. After all, if capitalism really could deliver prosperity, why was the welfare state necessary, particularly if one had a decent education and a well-paying white-collar job in a growth industry? This was, of course, the other "contradiction" of the welfare state: social democracy in Europe and liberalism in the U.S. made the middle classes and even many workers just affluent enough to wonder whether they really needed to pay taxes for all those programs. So just as there were in-built forces pushing for the expansion of public provision, there were good reasons to expect a political backlash. And as social spending reached new heights in the 1970s, anti-tax movements, and not just in the U.S., were already on the rise.

Certainly, the expansionary forces dominated the welfare state for some time. Everywhere in

the West, welfare states grew in size and scope. But it is important not to ignore the conjunctural factors that drove social spending higher and, equally important, the countervailing forces that threatened, from the outset, to limit it. In Great Britain, for example, the ideology of "shared sacrifice" in a nation under assault by the Nazi's, and the flirtation by some of the British right with that enemy, helped create a political consensus for social protection. But only three decades later, Margaret Thatcher could bring the Conservatives roaring back with a full-throated attack on trade unions and the "nanny state" that those unions had helped to create. Obviously some countries proved more resistant than others to demagoguery and retrenchment. But in some of those cases, nationally specific factors – such as Norway's fiscal bonanza from North Sea oil – mattered as much as the supposed genius of the social democratic model.

In the U.S., the precarious position of organized labor has proven particularly troublesome for American liberalism. Suffice it to say that many Americans, including people who otherwise considered themselves "progressives," are ambivalent about unions. Yes, organized labor has supported reforms that help the poor. And unions have been at the forefront of nearly every progressive struggle since the mid-19th century. But union members are a minority of the workforce, and that percentage is declining sharply. In fact, were it not for public –sector employees – a special and politically difficult case, as recent events in the Midwest make clear – labor unions would be all but moribund in the U.S. So it is not surprising that many Americans, including some union members, see organized labor as just another special interest, and efforts to protect the wages and pensions of union members look to the unorganized and to the middle classes like special pleading for a relatively privileged "labor aristocracy."

Finally, capitalists, still very much in control of the economy, are well positioned to threaten any government that goes "too far" with disinvestment of one sort or another. Indeed, that threat is much easier to make in the 21st century global economy because of the global integration of financial markets and the ease of transportation and communication. In retrospect, then, rather than the new normal, the thirty years of unparalleled labor peace and economic growth that the capitalist West enjoyed after the Second World War seems like a rather short, virtuous cycle within a longer, more typical epoch of insecurity, inequality, and class conflict.

Where are we heading?

It is fair to say that the American welfare state is today under greater pressure than it has been since its inception. Consider this: until quite recently, the accepted wisdom in Washington was that public attacks on core entitlement programs were political dead ends. Programs for the poor might be successfully challenged, but to attack Medicare and Social Security was to flirt with career suicide. Newt Gingrich's proposal to slash Medicare in the 1990s while simultaneously proposing to cut taxes for the wealthy was one very important reason Bill Clinton was reelected in 1996. But that kind of proposal is commonplace today. And the right is demanding far more than cutbacks. It is trying to change the very political discourse about

social policy and embed its own version of that discourse in the DNA of what remains of the welfare state. The very fact that Republican Rep. Paul Ryan's proposal to replace Medicare with a voucher system that would only replace part of seniors' health care costs is even taken seriously show just how much has changed.

Conservatives are challenging the three defining features of the liberal vision of social policy: that everyone has a right to help; that the state has both the means and the obligation to provide it; and that social policy should try wherever possible to create communities of interest rather than isolate and punish individuals for needing help. If the right successfully restructures the welfare state according to its cramped vision of public policy, people will be forced to make more "hard choices." They will be told to save more even as their incomes stagnate; to allocate more of their meager incomes to health; to better plan for their own retirement and not to depend on employers or government for help; and to pay more attention to how they might want to educate their children, even sending them to private schools. And, in the new world of conservative social policy, they will be told to do these things on their own.

This is not to say that the state will no longer have a social policy. There will always be too many people who need help to ignore. it's hard to imagine a capitalist society stripped of any and all old-age programs, or disability benefits, or aid to the blind And with incomes strained, too many working people will be hard pressed to meet all their income security needs on their own. But while the state is likely to always play a role in propping up incomes, financing health care, and promoting employment, if the right has its way, that role will change dramatically: it will be more market-oriented and decidedly more individualistic – neo-liberal if you will. There would be a small set of rather stingy, means-tested, safety-net programs, available only to the very neediest – the "least eligible" – and, for the rest of the population, tax incentives and subsidies to encourage and help them buy insurance of all sorts.

In the best of all possible worlds, restructuring the welfare state around of the idea of individual choice in a well-regulated insurance market could be made to work. It might even be a good thing to enable individuals to escape the grip of indifferent public bureaucracies and force them to take more responsibility for making decisions about how to face the risks and uncertainties of modern life. But we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. The operation of the American health insurance market makes quite clear that any number of normal business practices would lead to a large number of "irrationalities," inefficiencies, and inequities, including robber-baron style profits for the insurers themselves and grossly inflated administrative costs. We also know that few people know enough, and have enough time and skill to learn enough, about the costs and benefits of various insurance products to make this a real "free" market. And the likelihood that that market would be well regulated, given the enormous political power of the insurers, is small.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the cultural implications of basing social provision on individual choice. If government policy does not express and encourage a sense of social solidarity, indeed if it encourages the opposite, can solidarity survive as a cultural norm? Put another way, if public provision is no longer seen as a social right, earned by virtue of membership in a

political community and the contribution one makes there, whether as a citizen, or a parent, or a worker, or a caregiver, won't it become a privilege (easily taken away) or, for those who cannot afford it, a form of charity to be doled out as those in power think best? This vision could turn especially toxic in the U.S., where racial, ethnic, and other divisions already discourage most forms of collective feeling and action.

What is to be done?

Even as the right masses for its grand assault on government, the American public does not seem quite ready to give up the social programs that they have come to take for granted. Public opinion polls show continued majority support for Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. Polls also indicate that Americans are unaware of just how unequal their society is, and, when presented with the facts, say they would prefer far more economic equality than exists today. The buyer's remorse that many voters now express once they have seen what Tea Party-influenced Republican governors and legislators have in mind is also another sign that the welfare state can be defended.

But how exactly can the left help mount that defense? Obviously, progressives will want to defend the various programs under assault; there is much there worth defending, particularly social security's preference for the poor. But simply defending the New Deal-Great Society way of doing public provision – that curious mix of poorly funded, means-tested benefit programs for the poor, and quasi-insurance programs for the elderly – is not a long-term political strategy. Even if the right fails to blow up the welfare state entirely, its clear that its attack on liberalism has already taken a toll on how people think about government. Americans no longer seem to support the idea of using government to help other people in need, only themselves.

The real political challenge then it to shape the debate over the social implications of market-based reforms. At bottom, this is an ideological struggle. And just as the right has done, the left needs to offer the American public a way of thinking about what's at stake in public provision that makes sense, that resonates with the way the average American thinks about politics while offering the typical voter the possibility of choosing something that she or he thinks is fair.

This will be very hard. The same polls that show continued support for public benefits also show that many Americans are confused about how welfare state programs operate, and are exceedingly fuzzy about the principles that they embody. Worse, many of the people who directly benefit from specific programs aren't aware of it. Or they don't even understand that the programs they personally take advantage of – for example Medicare and student loans – are government programs. Perhaps they are confused. Or perhaps the stigma attached to being "dependent" on the welfare state in this individualistic political culture keeps many people from acknowledging that they are also clients of the state.

Finally, though they decry inequality, many people like even less the taxing and spending programs that are the principal means by which the state can make society more equal. They worry that government spending is riddled with fraud and waste, or only serves some

“minority” community of which they are not part. Rather than “soak the rich,” Americans would prefer to play the lottery. In short, the right’s mantra of individual choice and personal responsibility resonates with the average American in ways that the left’s talk of solidarity does not. And the left is unlikely, at least in the short run, to change peoples’ minds.

This means several things. First, that the left’s case for social provision will have to respect the “earned” quality of the benefits on offer, and guard the link between individual contribution and program eligibility. Second, choice is going to be part of the new American safety net. Better that the left figure out a progressive version of this than decry the very fact of it. Third, because most Americans don’t like government, the left should propose ways to do collective things without creating new of bureaucracies. Liberals have spent decades trying to disabuse people of the notion that government is the problem. But for whatever reason (and there are probably several), most Americans don’t like the idea of politicians and bureaucrats telling them what to do, and that’s what they think the government is, a collection of greedy politicians and overpaid, officious bureaucrats.

In sum, a new progressive social policy should be more decentralized, closer to the ground, more individualistic, less governmental. Some policy analysts have suggested that government provide everyone with a basic grant to be used as he or she wishes, to finance an education, for example, or to start a small business, or to go back to school. That’s one possible direction. For another, state and local communities could set up insurance cooperatives which would be large enough to pool risk, but small enough to be closer to the grass roots. None of these solutions is without problems. But the new health care law and other social policy initiatives have taken halting steps in these directions. We need to go further.

Perhaps most important, the left must force the Democratic Party to make a political issue out of economic inequality. People do resent just how much money some other people make, how bankers and CEO’s break the rules to enrich themselves and then go free. Right now that resentment is focused on public sector workers, but there’s no intrinsic reason why it couldn’t be turned to investment bankers or CEO’s or bond salesmen. The issue of economic inequality may not decide elections today, but it could in the future, particularly as Republicans continue to defend corporate America from environmental regulation and product safety rules, and to push for tax cuts for the very rich.

Unfortunately, before it can push economic inequality further up the policy agenda, the left will have to get the Democratic Party to take the issue of class more seriously. Party leaders are reluctant, partly because they don’t think the issue has any traction in elections, partly because the fat cats who finance the party don’t like to talk about money. But just as the right kept hammering on a small set of issues dear to it until the Republican leadership changed, or was forced to take notice, progressives must force Democrats to pay attention. How did the right change the Republican Party? They stopped caring about winning elections and focused on what small groups of ideologically committed people do best: agitate for ideas, draw lines in the sand, political guerilla warfare.

That’s not to say that progressives shouldn’t vote. They should. Or that progressives shouldn’t campaign for candidates that they support. They should do that too. But progressives need to be clear that this is not how progressive change happens in the American two-party system. Working for and within the Democratic Party will be heartbreaking unless and until that work is understood as part of a large strategy that doesn’t begin or end with getting Democrats elected, but instead ends with changing the Democratic Party. The good news is that there are already quite a few progressive organizations that are already working hard to make the Democratic party sit up and take notice; who challenge party leaders who care more about winning over white Southern conservatives than holding on to the party’s liberal base; who challenge party leaders who care more about fundraising on Wall Street than stoking the popular anger against miscreant bankers.

In the end, this is actually a terrain that the left knows well because it is an ideological struggle. It is about framing issues. Of course, in another kind of party system, the left would not have to do this, would not have to demand that its own party takes such a core issue seriously. But this is not that party system. In this one, the left has a stark choice: help the Democrats win elections but then watch as those Democrats abandon the issues they campaigned on, tacking so far toward the center that they accomplish too little to impress voters, or force the party to sort out what it does stand for, at the risk of losing elections in the short run. But that might be the only way of securing the political future of liberalism and even the Democratic Party itself.

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Race and the Stunted Growth and Rapid Decline of American Liberalism

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Race casts a long shadow in the United States. Since the founding of the republic, race has been built into the structure of American society, often explicitly but more often in subtle, invisible ways. Race, as I use the term here, is a social category created by the relegation of certain people to an inferior social status based on their inherited characteristic. Race is created through both social and psychological processes and yields a class of human beings that can easily be exploited (compelled to work for less than the full value of their labor) and excluded (barred from access to key societal resources).

The ultimate expression of exploitation and exclusion, of course, is slavery, an institution that was a principal source of wealth in colonial America, especially in the south. Although few realize it, In many ways it was the threat to slavery that prompted the American Revolution itself. Prior to 1776, New Englanders had been in the forefront of anti-British agitation, with loud and forceful complaints about taxation, representation, and constraints on commerce; but southerners remained quiescent and were reluctant to join the northern insurgency. After all, Britain provided the market for their high-value, slave-produced commodities and, hence, British markets were the basis of their wealth, and they had no particular grievances about taxation or representation as long as the money flowed.

What tipped the balance in favor of revolution was a British legal ruling, the Somerset Decision of 1772, in which the Court of the King's Bench ruled that "the state of slavery is of such a nature, that it is incapable of being introduced for any reason, moral or political; but only by positive law," which as another way of saying that in the absence of an act of Parliament, there was no legal basis for slavery in Britain. With this ruling the days of slavery were clearly numbered in the British Empire (and it was indeed formally abolished in 1833), thus providing southerners with a specific grievance against the Crown and a reason for joining the northern revolution

The alliance of north and south led to independence, of course, and the critical conundrum facing the new nation was how to create a republic in which all men were created equal yet at the same time allowed chattel slavery to exist for people of African origin. The U.S. Constitution artfully accomplished this end without ever mentioning slavery, Africans, or Negroes, following what the late Leon Higginbotham called the "principle of non-disclosure." It did so by defining specific rights for all persons except "those bound to service or labor" and certain "other persons." The Constitution of 1789 not only allowed slavery to exist, but ensured its persistence for the indefinite future. Provisions such as the 3/5 clause, the Electoral College, and an appointed Senate (with its filibuster rule) gave disproportionate

power to slave states, and by requiring super-majorities in Congress and the states to ratify amendments, the framers guaranteed that slavery would be unlikely ever to be overturned using normal constitutional procedures.

In the end, of course, slavery was not overturned through constitutional means but by a bloody civil war. With union troops occupying the south, Congress passed and the states ratified the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the constitution to abolish slavery, guarantee equal protection under the law, and affirm black suffrage. Although the civil liberties, social position, and economic standing of African Americans advanced markedly during Reconstruction, the withdrawal of federal troops from the south in 1877 led to the reconstitution of white supremacy under a new system of racial subordination known as Jim Crow. This system, which mandated strict racial segregation in all spheres of southern life, was given the stamp of approval by the U.S. Supreme Court in its infamous 1896 Plessy Decision, which adopted the fiction that racial segregation simply produced separate spheres for blacks and whites that were "separate but equal."

From the late 19th century onward, the north turned its attention not to securing black liberties in the south but to building wealth and making money in the north, leaving the south free to restore a plantation economy based on the exploited labor of African Americans, this time based on sharecropping and indentured servitude rather than chattel slavery. Laissez faire capitalism in the north and plantation agrarianism in the south yielded stark economic divides in both regions and inequalities of income and wealth rose to new heights through the first decades of the 20th century. By the late 1920s, so little buying power was located outside of the wealthy classes in the north that aggregate demand was insufficient to sustain its industrial economy, while crop failures and boll weevil infestations in the south devastated agrarian production.

As the global economy simultaneously shut down and nations turned inward by erecting new barriers to trade and investment, the U.S. economy collapsed in late 1929 to usher in a decade of hardship and economic depression, creating the conditions for a political realignment away from the Republican consensus that had dominated American politics since the Civil War. Franklin Roosevelt built a new reform movement in the Democratic party by bringing together northern liberals, western progressives, Midwestern farmers, urban workers, and most importantly, white southerners. With sizeable majorities in both houses of Congress and the White House firmly in Roosevelt's hands, liberalism had its heyday as Democrats enacted a New Deal characterized by progressive taxation, income redistribution, farm supports, financial regulation, federally guaranteed bargaining rights for workers, and the creation of a serviceable social safety net for most citizens under the auspices of the Social Security Act, which provided basic financial support for poor, disabled, elderly, and unemployed Americans.

The Democratic coalition that created and sustained the New Deal was a disparate congeries of interests, however, and the balance of power was held by southern Democrats. After decades of one party rule in the south, southerners had accumulated the greatest seniority and controlled virtually all key leadership and committee posts in both the House and Senate. No

piece of legislation could conceivably pass Congress without their concurrence. Although southerners were economic populists they were social conservatives, and vehemently so when it came to the issue of race. They would only support the progressive economic policies of Roosevelt's New Deal so long as they did not disturb the racial status quo. As a result, every piece of New Deal legislation was thoroughly racialized to exclude African Americans from coverage or to delegate to states the authority to do the excluding.

As Ira Katznelson has exhaustively documented in his book *When Affirmative Action Was White*, the need to placate southern politicians on the issue of race is the primary reason why the American welfare state never developed to the same extent as other in advanced industrial nations and reached its natural limit at a much earlier state. At the insistence of powerful southern Congressmen and Senators, for example, two huge occupational categories—farm workers and domestic servants—were excluded from coverage under the New Deal's social and labor legislation. These two categories employed roughly 90% of all black workers in 1930 (but just a quarter of whites), deliberately leaving gaping holes in the social safety net through which millions of African Americans could and did fall. Even in the industrial sector, labor laws were carefully written to permit segregated unions and dual union contracts. The Federal Housing Administration, meanwhile, explicitly excluded lending to black borrowers and black neighborhoods and the GI Bill created segregated VA hospitals and clinics and mandated that state officials, not federal administrators, would determine eligibility for veterans' educational grants and loans.

In short, African Americans were systematically excluded from the liberal welfare state that built wealth, income, and security for the mass of Americans in the postwar era. Liberal social and economic programs were supported by white southerners, and to an unappreciated extent by white ethnic workers in the north, only to the extent they systematically excluded African Americans. The New Deal coalition would prove to hang together only so as long as the Democratic Party was able to elide the blatant contradiction between its universal egalitarian principles and its deliberate racist exclusions, a conundrum that Gunnar Myrdal in 1944 aptly labeled "an American Dilemma."

The political reality was that Southern Democrats were always prepared to abandon the coalition at the slightest hint of black enfranchisement. The first sign of trouble came in 1947 when northern unions began to achieve unexpected success in organizing black textile and service workers in the south, and in response southern populists quickly defected from the progressive coalition to join Republicans in backing anti-union labor legislation. The Taft-Hartley Act undermined the ability of unions to organize by prohibiting the requiring of union membership and dues paying as a condition of employment, outlawing secondary labor actions such as boycotts, curtailing federal authority to investigate unfair labor practices, and instead empowering federal authorities to issue injunctions to stop collective labor actions whenever they were deemed to imperil "national health of safety." With the passage of this legislation, unionization stalled at around a third of the American workforce and began a long, slow decline that has continued to the present day. Because of the politics of race, unionization in the United States reached a natural limit much earlier than in other industrial nations.

After the Second World War, the winds of racial change were blowing to strain the fragile fabric of the New Deal coalition. Black soldiers returning from the war against fascism joined with progressive whites and northern liberals to push for civil rights, and with the United States assuming its self-designated Cold War mantle as "leader of the free world," the racial contradictions American Dilemma became more difficult for the Democratic Party to finesse. A turning point came in 1948, when the Democratic Party for the first time adopted a plank in the party platform that explicitly called for black civil rights. President Truman followed up this declaration of principle by ordering desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The southern response was immediate and unambiguous. Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina led southern delegates out of the Democratic Party to form the States Rights Democratic Party and launch an insurgent run for the presidency as a "Dixiecrat." Although Truman went on to win the election in a tight three-way race, the foundering of the New Deal Coalition on the rocks of race was clearly foreshadowed by the fact that Thurmond carried the states of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, thus breaking up the "solid south" for the first time since reconstruction.

With the Democratic Party's progressive emergence as the champion of black civil rights, southerners increasingly looked to Republicans to protect them from federal interventions in states' rights. In 1952, the states of Texas, Florida, Virginia, and Tennessee voted to elect Dwight D. Eisenhower as the first Republican president since the Great Depression, ending the two-decade lock on the White House by Democrats. Eisenhower was a moderate Republican, however, and indeed by the standards of today's Republican party he would be considered a deranged liberal. He made little effort to scale back the welfare state created by Roosevelt and Truman and was easily reelected in 1956, picking up the additional state of Louisiana in the south.

In his second term, however, Eisenhower proved a grave disappointment to the south, first supporting and then signing the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which established a permanent civil rights office within the Justice Department. Although the legislation had little practical effect in promoting racial change, it was of great symbolic importance as the first piece of civil rights legislation to clear congress since Reconstruction. That same year Eisenhower very publicly defied Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus by placing the state's National Guard under federal control and sending troops to escort nine black students into Little Rock Central High School to comply with the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision of 1954, which retracted the Plessy decision of 1896.

The party preference southerners in the 1960 presidential election was thus far from clear. As Eisenhower's Vice President, the Republican candidate Richard Nixon could not distance himself too far from the Civil Rights Act or the events in Little Rock. Although the Democratic Party platform explicitly called for "equal access for all Americans to all areas of community life, including voting booths, school rooms, jobs, housing, and public facilities," the Democratic Candidate John F. Kennedy moved deliberately to shore up his right flank by picking a southerner, Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas, as his running mate. Although a southerner,

Johnson had not endeared himself to the cause of states rights, for it was he as Senate Majority Leader who had pushed through the 1957 Civil Rights Bill by breaking the filibuster of Strom Thurmond.

In protest over the choices open to them, Mississippi and Alabama sent uncommitted representatives to the Electoral College of 1960s and they ultimately cast their votes for Harry F. Byrd, a segregationist senator from Virginia. Nonetheless John F. Kennedy won the Electoral College, carrying with Johnson's help the states of Texas, Louisiana, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, though not Florida or Virginia, which went for Nixon. During the early years of the Kennedy Administration, the civil rights movement gained momentum and acts of civil disobedience in the south were met with a rising tide of civil violence that President Kennedy could scarcely ignore, prompting him in June of 1963 to introduce a civil rights bill to give "all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public… [and] greater protection for the right to vote."

Following Kennedy's assassination on November 22, Lyndon Johnson became President and in his first address to Congress stated that "no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." Despite Kennedy's martyrdom, it took all of Johnson's formidable parliamentary skills to break a southern filibuster in the Senate, but he and his Senate allies finally succeeded and on July 2, 1964 he signed the Civil Rights Act into law. As a southerner familiar with the depth of southern opposition to civil rights and a shrewd politician who understood the full well the implications of the Democrat's definitive embrace of the issue, on the evening of the signing presidential aid Bill Moyers found Johnson despondent. When asked why, Johnson prophetically replied "I think we've just delivered the South to the Republican Party for the rest of my life, and yours."

Being a shrewd politician, Johnson attempted to forestall the inevitable white backlash by expanding the economic pie in hopes that black gains would not come at white expense. In many ways, the high tide of New Deal liberalism was reached with Johnson's Great Society program of 1964-1968. He declared a War on Poverty by passing the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and creating the Office of Economic Opportunity. Although Johnson handily won election in 1964, his Republican opponent Barry Goldwater had voted against the Civil Rights Act and campaigned on a platform of states' rights. The widening fissure in the Democratic coalition was evident in his winning of four states in the deep south—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. From then on it was only a matter of time before Republicans would capitalize on the Democratic Party's identification with black interests to systematically remove southern whites from the New Deal coalition and begin the process of dismantling the American welfare state.

In 1965 Johnson went on to orchestrate passage of the Voting Rights Act to guarantee black suffrage and passed a series of landmark laws designed to promote social spending, increase incomes for all, and advance his vision of the Great Society. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act channeled funds to education; the Housing and Urban Development Act

established a new cabinet agency to fund urban initiatives; and amendments to the Social Security Act established Medicare and Medicaid to provide health care to the elderly and the poor. In 1966 other legislation established Model Cities Program, which authorized block grants to cities for health, education, housing, and employment; and in 1967 amendments to the Manpower Development and Training Act were passed to create jobs through the Concentrated Employment Program, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and the Work Incentive Program. He culminated his remarkable string of legislative victories in 1968 with passage of the Fair Housing Act, finally prohibiting discrimination in the rental and sale of housing.

Johnson's strategy of expanding civil rights while increasing social spending might have worked to ameliorate the white backlash but for his entanglement in the Vietnam War, which rendered further social spending fiscally unsustainable and eroded political support among liberals, young people, and minorities. Although incomes rose, poverty rates fell, health improved, unemployment declined, and inequality fell for all Americans during the Johnson Administration, by 1968 black progress was increasingly seen as coming at the expense of whites, with affirmative action and school busing encountering growing resistance in the north and southern opposition remaining as implacable as ever. The outbreak of urban rioting and rising crime rates in the late 1960s exacerbated white fears while rising black welfare usage and growing competition for jobs and education generating new resentment. Meanwhile, federal efforts to promote integration in schools, neighborhoods, and the workforce made middle and working class whites increasingly uncomfortable.

By 1968 the disintegration of the New Deal coalition was in full flower. Former Democratic Governor George Wallace of Alabama led a breakaway presidential campaign to lure southerners to his campaign of states' rights under the banner of the American Independent Party. Freed of his earlier link to President Eisenhower, Richard Nixon honed a new "southern strategy" in which he communicated to whites in subtle, coded language that as chief executive he would drag his feet on civil rights enforcement, cut social spending, and resist transfers to African Americans. At the same time, he wooed northern blue collar ethnic groups by opposing school busing and forced integration of the workplace.

Strom Thurmond had by then switched to the Republican Party and campaigned on Nixon's behalf and his southern strategy paid off for the Republicans when Nixon carried the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida. Wallace, meanwhile, took Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Arkansas out of the Democratic column, leaving the party's candidate Hubert Humphrey with a handful of Northeastern, Midwestern, and Pacific states, not enough to win election. The New Deal consensus was gone.

As President, Richard Nixon quickly declared a "War on Crime," a pointed and sardonic reference to Johnson's War on Poverty, singling out "criminal elements which increasingly threaten our cities, our homes, and our lives," coded references to black urban rioters (threatening cities) and black criminals (threatening homes and lives). Since the 1950s the Supreme Court had been at the forefront of progress on civil rights, and to stem this tide Nixon initiated the Republican practice of appointing only "strict constructionists" as potential

justices—people who were disinclined to use federal power to promote civil rights among the states. His appointments included Warren Burger as Chief Justice along with Associate Justices William Rehnquist, Lewis Powell (a southerner), and after two failed attempts at other southern appointments, Burger's longtime friend Harry Blackmun.

In the 1972 election Nixon won all states except Massachusetts, handing the Republicans a sweep of the former Confederacy for the first time in history. With this landslide behind him, in 1973 Nixon abolished the Office of Economic Opportunity, officially ending the War on Poverty. In the domain of civil rights, he used the bully pulpit to label affirmative action as a quota program and sponsored legislation to halt school busing. Nixon's consolidation of conservative, anti-black power in the election of 1972 might have cemented the end of the New Deal but for the Watergate scandal, which forced him to resign and put a moderate Republican, Gerald Ford of Michigan, into the White House.

With conservative Republicans in temporary retreat and Democrats in control of both the House and Senate, in 1974 Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act to ban discrimination in lending, which was duly signed into law by President Ford, to the dismay of southerners. His pardon of Nixon for crimes committed during Watergate antagonized voters throughout the country, and led to the anomalous election of Jimmy Carter, a racially progressive former Democratic Governor of Georgia, to the White House. Carter managed to win all states in the south except Virginia and in his administration Congress passed the last major piece of civil rights legislation. The 1977 Community Reinvestment Act prohibited lending institutions from "redlining" neighborhoods and thus rendering them ineligible for loans on the basis of their racial competition.

Between 1957 and 1977, Congress had passed seven major pieces of civil rights legislation to put a definitive end to de jure segregation in the south and to outlaw discrimination in markets throughout the United States. But the Civil Rights Era as over. The final dissolution of the New Deal Coalition, postponed for one presidential term by Nixon's implosion during Watergate, finally occurred in 1980 with the landslide victory of Ronald Regan over Jimmy Carter. Reagan and the Republicans did very well among white ethnic and blue collar constituencies in the north, but the nail in the coffin of the New Deal coalition was Regan's decisive trouncing of Carter in every state of the former Confederacy save for Carter's home state of Georgia.

After the 1980 elections, never again would the solid south support social or economic liberalism in the United States. Whereas Senators from the south were still overwhelmingly Democratic at the end of the Carter Administration, by the end of the Reagan Administration al;l the Senators from Texas, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia were Republican and a Republican had been elected from the state of Alabama. Those conservative"blue dog" Democrats who remained in office in southern states increasingly voted in lockstep with their Republican counterparts, giving conservatives effective control of the upper house.

As the party of Lincoln and Grant was transformed into the party of Strom Thurmond and Trent

Lott, it became increasingly conservative both socially and economically. Moreover, as the south went Republican, so did the Plains States, which by the 1980s were declining in population and increasingly inhabited by an aging white population antagonistic to rising tide of minorities emerging on the more populous coasts. In this context, Constitution left to us by the slaveholder framers of 1789 served to amplify the power of conservatives to provide a an effective check on progressive legislation even when the Democrats held, which was not often. Whereas the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress 90% of the time between 1945 and 1980, and held both Congress and the White House 55% of the time, from 1980 through 2010 they held both houses of Congress just 40% of the time and controlled Congress and the Presidency just 15% of the time.

In sum, the wholesale defection of the south over the issue of race, and the concomitant loss of support among blue collar constituencies in the north over related race-issues such as busing, welfare, and affirmative action, brought a definitive end to the century of reform in the United States. With the south now solidly controlled by Republicans and the plains inhabited by older whites fearful of demographic change on the coasts, conservatives have been able to put together a durable coalition to accomplish their long-cherished dream of dismantling the New Deal and Great Society. Progressive taxation and regulation have been abandoned in the economic sphere; welfare has been abolished and transfers cut in the social sphere; punishment has replaced rehabilitation in criminal justice; and huge federal deficits have deliberately been generated through unrestrained spending on the military, prisons, and national security, thus achieving the twin aims of "starving the beast" (crowding out social spending) and buying political loyalty (producing huge profits for well-connected crony capitalists).

The net effect of the political realignment is there for all to see. Measures of income and wealth inequality have risen to their highest levels since 1929; three speculative boom-and-bust cycles since 1980 have battered the middle class and transferred wealth out of the real economy and into the pockets of a small number of financiers and corporate executives; more than a fifth of all children now live in poverty, a figure that rises to 36% among black children and 33% among Hispanic children; levels of public and private debt have risen to record levels; and the United States is falling behind the rest of the developed world with respect to health, education, infrastructure, economic growth, and investment. Because of the lasting legacy of race, working and middle class Americans have repeatedly joined with the wealthy and the affluent to enact policies that are manifestly against their economic interests and detrimental to the long-term interests of the nation. Such is the continuing power of race in the United States.

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The End of Retirement

By | 2011: vol. 10, issue 2

At the end of World War II and during the Great Depression, the United States Congress and President transformed and improved the lives of American workers who were too old to work — either because they couldn't or employers wouldn't hire them — by passing the Social Security and Old Age Assistance programs and legally establishing labor unions. The existence of pensions and unions that bargained for pensions meant that many non union companies would meet or exceed union pensions to stop their workers from unionizing. Employer pensions supplemented Social Security and because of these institutions the labor force participation rates of men over age 65 fell from 50% to something under 15% by 2000.

The hallmark of a civilized society and growing economy is that both the rich and the poor live longer and that both are entitled to leisure at the end of their working lives. Yet, as pensions eroded because of the 30-year trend of employers substituting traditional pensions with 401(k) type retirement accounts that are voluntary and individually-directed eroded pensions a political rhetoric emerged that people should work longer. The call to raise retirement ages has intensified as the economic crises starting in 2008 slashed retirement account values and national debt and deficits increased.

Raising retirement ages is not a good policy and support for it is based on two wrong assumptions: one, that people can and should work longer and, that two, society cannot afford to pay for retirement because pensions and health care spending for the elderly take too many resources away from younger people.

Pensions do not limit resources for younger people. A survey of 58 nations shows that government spending on programs for the elderly does not reduce public spending for younger people. The most important determinants of government spending on education and youth health programs are whether or not political forces are allied with the vulnerable members of a population, for example the elderly, young families, and children. When such a political alliance is in place public spending on social insurance increases: my statistical analysis shows that a 10% increase in spending on education spending (as a percent of GDP) is correlated with a 7.3% increase in spending on pensions.

Though many Americans, especially professional workers, can control when they stop working, most workers leave their job before they plan to because of layoffs and health problems. Though a greater share of older Americans are working longer or looking for work than in the last 30 years the evidence suggests that older workers are increasing their labor force participation because pensions as a source of safe and secure retirement income is eroding not because employers have made jobs more attractive, better paid, and easier to do.

The repositioning of retirement as a luxury and no longer affordable depends, in part, on the

wrong belief that pension spending takes resources away from other deserving people. There is also the wrong conviction which is more positive that supporting retirement is not as necessary as it once was because the current and future elderly are different: they want to work longer and they are healthier. In fact improved longevity is the main argument for decreasing people's pensions and time in retirement. But life expectancy was increasing in the 1960s and 1970s when pensions and Social Security expanded. Longer lives do not mean the future elderly should, could, and want to, work longer. In fact, redesigning pension systems so that a worker has to continue to work longer to get full benefits helps employers.

Winners and Losers When Retirement Ages Increase

Populations are aging but demography is not economic and political destiny.. Making people give up retirement time is only one among many policies to cope with population aging. It is true that the young to elderly ratios are decreasing and those ratio declines may make headline news,[ii] but they are not news. Improved longevity is an expected result: population aging is a classic demographic transition – economic wealth lowers fertility, reduces infant mortality, and increases adult longevity. It is, thus inevitable that pensions become more expensive as the number of workers for every retiree falls. Therefore, demography does not proscribe economic policies because in democracies policies are a result of political choices and these choice sets are defined by national governments and international organizations.

The World Bank's report on pensions in 1994 became a manifesto for cutting state support for pensions and having workers finance their own retirement or work longer—raising the age of retirement is a major way to retrench pensions. The report emphasized the need to change social norms about retirement longer work lives. It advocated penalizing "early" retirement and for private individual pension accounts to replace national social security.

The cover story of the Economist magazine in mid April 2011 screamed "70 or Bust!; Why the Retirement Age Must Go Up." Raising retirement ages seem to make sense: nations with the oldest populations have some of the smallest elderly labor force participation rates. For instance, among German men, 4 % over the age of 65 work, compared to 16 % American older men who work[iii] and the young to old ratio in Germany is .5 versus the American ratio of 1.3 (see Table 1). But it doesn't mean that more work will reduce old age spending. Japanese older men work more than any other men in rich nations, but their projected pension expenses are still high relative to the projected expenses for elderly in the United States.

American elders have been working more than people in other nations for decades: the United States is the only Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development nation that bans forced retirement, pays full Social Security benefits to people who have not retired, and has raised the normal retirement age to 67, a much higher age than its European counterparts.

The linkages between longevity and economic hierarchy has been long researched and the conclusion drawn from the relationships is that workers with high socioeconomic stature lose the least when working longer is a norm because they already work more at older ages. One

group of workers — educated professionals – is hurt least by raising the retirement age. Professionals began working full time in their mid-twenties and by age 65, have worked fewer years than non-college-educated workers. They are also more likely to enjoy and control their work pace and tasks. In the U.S. white collar male workers' longevity has grown faster than any other group's.

Moreover, older workers who are in a high socio-economic status, are more likely to like their jobs and would not suffer significant loss in income if they choose not to work. The gaps in life expectancy between men and women have narrowed but the differences by socioeconomic status has grown larger. Individuals with higher lifetime earnings or more education experience lower mortality rates than those with lower lifetime earnings or less education. [iv]

Employers clearly benefit from a new retirement norm, and that's why employers are the biggest champions of the new "working retirement" norm. A Conference Board's (an industry research group) survey was aimed at reassuring its client employers that future labor shortages will partially take care of themselves: 75% of older workers surveyed said they would continue working when they got older because they did haven't sufficient financial resources to retire.

More American elderly are looking for work since the financial crises of 2009. Economist Rich Johnson at the Urban Institute shows that the 2008 recession was much worse for older American men than any other recession; workers over 50 had to wait longer relative to younger people to get rehired. An increase in the supply of labor invariably redistributes income toward profits away from wages because the pressure faced for wage increases is defused. In general, an expanding labor supply helps employers tame pressure to pay more, to improve working conditions, or to conserve labor by investing to boost labor productivity.[v]

Despite the fact the winners are powerful and the losers are not, the ideas that people want to keep on working, that work is good for people, and that pensions aren't fair to the young are forceful, widespread, and influential. The life force of the latter idea – that the pensions take resources from the young — is the subject of the next section.

Pensions Spending Does not Mean the Old Eat the Young

The claim that the young will get more resources if nations cut pension spending and the elderly work longer has little support. There is little hard empirical evidence for the claim that pensions systems are designed to transfer funds from relatively powerless younger workers to older, more politically astute, elderly. Instead I find support that pension spending is best explained from what political economists John Williamson and Frank Pampel call a "social democratic perspective" that views generous pensions and Social Security policy "the outcome of a struggle between organizations and political parties representing the interests of capital and those representing the interests of labor."

Before I turn to the evidence supporting the social democratic explanation for pensions, it is important to be clear on how, mechanically, the unfair transfers may occur if powerful elderly

write the pension rules.

The conventional view of intergenerational equity is if the ratio of benefits to contributions going to and coming from each cohort stays about the same across generations.

But this equality outcome does not happen as populations continue to get older and contributions increase. When welfare states are relatively new, cohorts' contributions vary. Generations, or cohorts, that were middle-aged when the welfare system was established have benefited the most because, their lifetime financial contributions to the program are small relative to the value of the benefits they collect. In this case, benefit ratios are no longer equal, which creates intergenerational inequity:

The claim is that it is not fair to younger generations that were not part of the planning process because they shoulder the costs, while the designers reap most of the benefits. And population ageing can make the imbalance worse — a larger older cohort makes the younger, smaller cohort contribute more to meet the promised benefits. For example, under a fixed replacement rate system — like the U.S. Social Security system — all costs associated with demographic change fall on retirees. Political scientist John Myles brands this cohort size factor as the "intergenerational lottery" and if societies want intergenerational equity they need to set pension rules to achieve "fair burden" sharing. Otherwise, social benefits aren't created; just "lucky" and "less lucky" generations are created.

But Myles and others are quick to recognize that the distributional aspects of pension systems do not define the distribution in a nation's welfare system. The elderly may get fixed replacement rates, but could "give back" through higher spending on programs for younger people.

Urban Institute economist Lawrence Thompson, responding to the need for a comprehensive measure of the transfers between generations, projected out to 2030 and predicted the net wage (after social insurance contributions) will be 35 percent higher, while the average retirement benefit in 2030 will be only 18 percent higher than the same benefit in 2003. This means, in the U.S., workers will have a greater increase in living standards than retirees in the future. He also finds families, after education and Social Security taxes are accounted for, transfers, on average over $27,000 to younger generations.

American economists Bommier, Lee, Miller and Zuber compare education spending in the U.S. to Social Security and Medicare spending for various cohorts to find that young people do not have lower rates of return on their taxes than the older cohorts. European economist, Axel Boersch-Supan, examined 16 countries and concluded the generosity of the countries towards the elderly (measured by social expenditures for programs targeting the elderly) does not reduce the share of total social expenditures for programs tagerting youth. I and Ryan Taylor found evidenc using 1986 data from 65 nations and, from 58 nations using 1995-2000 data , estimated that pension spending –government pension spending as a percent of GDP per old person – does not reduce or effect government spending on education (as a percent of GDP per

child) hwen just rich nations are examined there is a correlation but it is positive. Rich nations that spend a high percentage of GDP on education also spend a large share on pensions. The simple correlation is 30.8%.

The results do not support the conclusion that the elderly are taking resources away from the young, which undermines “the old eat the young hypothesis.” The strongly significant and positive coefficient on education spending possibly means that pension spending and education go together and that political support for social spending promotes spending for all generations. This could be thought of as social democratic politics or “self-interest” solidarity; that workers support higher pensions, or preserving pensions, because they too will get old and support transfers to workers, young and old. Can we think of class solidarity as younger workers forming alliances with their older selves? A ten percent increase in spending for the young results in an over 7 percent increase in spending for the elderly (as a share of GDP).

In sum, the grim specter that strong-armed generational politics forces young workers to pay high taxes to support the leisure of healthy older people is not supported by this econometric exercise.

Work Is Not Necessarily Good for Older People

At first glance the call for people to work longer makes sense for workers. A first look, it seems that work at old age is healthy: in fact, older men who work are in better health than those who do not. This type of evidence helped support the shift in retirement norms in the 1970s when sociologists sought to explain statistical linkages between ill health, depression, and early death, among retired men. A prevailing interpretation was that retirement caused these ill fortunes because men lost their sense of identity and life’s purpose when they retired.

The problem with the research is that the causation can clearly run the opposite way — that is, negative health could cause retirement, not retirement as the cause for negative health. When the cause of retirement is accounted by Economists Kevin Neuman who found that retirement improves women’s health and slows down the deterioration of men’s health. Women and men reported increases in well-being, more time sleeping, preparing food, and eating, and doing things they like to do when they retired. This means it is likely that the so-called explosion in early retirements, which Gruber and Wise write about, is causing the increase in longevity and it is not happening in spite of it. The implications of the retirement-health ink are that the two trends — earlier retirement and longer lives – cannot be thought of as two unrelated events. More time in retirement may actually be the cause of longer lives! If retirement leads to healthier outcomes, then pension reform aimed at getting Americans (and others) to work longer might inadvertently cause people to die sooner and working more could slow or reverse longevity gains.

The belief that the health and vigor of the elderly workforce is greater than ever before makes raising the retirement age a favorite choice in retirement policy proposals among both liberal and conservative entities. But, longevity is increasing for reasons unrelated to the ability to

work longer, the lives of frail adult are being extended and the population is healthier at older ages, though it is not clear that older people are matched to the new jobs. In the U.S, since 1981, the share of older workers reporting limitations in their ability to work has stayed steady. The rate fluctuates with economic activity as one would expect: the rate of self reported limitations decreased slightly in booms and increased in recessions: The rate was averaged 9.37 % during the economic expansion of 1983 through 1990 to over 10.81 % in the economic boom of the 1990s (see Paul Clark). And while the share of jobs demanding physical effort is declining, especially for men, the share requiring good eyesight or computer skills is increasing (see Rich Johnson's 2004 article).

Working longer is often not a choice for workers who develop health problems or are laid off late in their careers. 40% of workers surveyed are forced to retire earlier than they had planned, with health, or the health of a family member, the reason cited for over half of these early retirements. Age discrimination, layoffs, and plant shutdowns adversely affect older people's ability to work (Rotenberg 2006). Age discrimination is not illegal in most European nations.

Also many older workers in the United States (the comparable study for Europe has not been done) do not stay in their career jobs. Instead of 60 being "the new 50," it has become the new 17, as older people re-enter the job market as retail clerks or in other low-paid occupations. Elderly workers over age 65 have jobs with less status than workers aged 55-64. (They are less likely to be in occupations classified as "executive," "professional," or "technician" and more likely to be in "sales" and "service" occupations. (See Sara Rix at AARP

Advocates for raising the retirement age, including economist Alicia Munnell are aware of the physical limitations older blue-collar workers have, the changing nature of jobs, and the existence of chronic age discrimination. And it is not controversial to advocate that workers get the jobs they want at all ages. However, it is less likely that older workers will obtain jobs on their own terms if their retirement income is more insecure.

Distributing leisure at the end of one's work life has a special meaning that doesn't take away from the importance of vacations, weekends, and holidays. There is considerable evidence that the elderly enjoy free time, like we all do, but for a reason that is particular to older people – time is getting scarce.[vi] If every relevant aspect is the same, a retired person is better off than an older worker because the retiree has more time to recover from mistakes. The boost in time can help compensate for many losses in the aging process.

Congress Promotes Work at Older Ages

A growing acceptance of later retirement are a result of social policy directed at encouraging longer work lives. In 1983, Congress moved to change retirement norms. Congress cut benefits for retirees 17 years in the future[vii] by incrementally raising the normal retirement age starting in 2000. The normal retirement age will gradually rise from age 65 to age 67 by

2022. Under the Social Security system, beneficiaries receive an increased payment per month for each month they delay claiming benefits. For beneficiaries at or over the normal retirement age, the increased payments for delayed claiming are made through the delayed retirement credit (DRC). For workers born in 1943 or later, the DRC is equal to 8 percent of the worker's PIA for each year of delayed claiming beyond the

Besides the primary goal to reduce future Social Security pension liabilities, Congress aimed to raise the age Americans use as "anchor" for what they consider to be the "normal" retirement age.

The rise and maintenance of a youth culture connects to business interests in profound ways. What appears to be social and cultural, actually reinforces the interests of those who want us to work longer. The pain of diminished pensions is met with less resistance if the financial threat of having to work until age 70 is muted with flattery. Believing 70 is the new 40 helps older people psychologically repress the negative feelings that come with having to work longer than they wanted.

Implications of Raising the Retirement Age to Cut Pensions

There are many ways to respond to population aging; but, political and economic forces in European and American societies are cutting benefits and therefore fashioning a response that goes in only on one direction – towards the rise of elderly work.

It is not ideological to argue that if workers have less free time at retirement ages because they have to make up for lost income — pensions and health care (in the U.S.) are eroding — they are worse off.

Conspicuously, policies, cultural norms, etc. aimed at delaying retirement create classes of winners and the winners are prone to overstate the benefits to society from changes that benefits them. The policies and retirement norm changes also create losers, and it remains to be seen if the losers will speak up.

This study addresses the new social contract on retirement in wealthy nations. The old social contract on retirement as one where people could choose to retire or not even if they were healthy and able to work past a certain age. This expectation had just developed in the post World War II period and came about because of economic growth and negotiations about where the fruits of that growth would be distributed between labor and capital.

Perhaps it is true, as many would have us believe, that older people everywhere want to have less retirement and I support sensible changes to pension rules that increase pension benefits as people work more or balance taxes and benefits to avoid huge payoffs in what Myles calls cohort lotteries. But reducing pensions, promoting the scientific veracity of economic trade-offs that don't exist, and manipulating popular culture to promote work as a way to avoid aging and to demean old age leisure as indulgences of greedy geezers, veils a reversal of fortunes for the working-class and middle-classes.

Table 1

The Average Years of Retirement and Pension and Education Spending in Wealthy Nations, ranked by the age of the population (circa 1995)

Country	Ratio of young persons for every old person	Average number of years a person spends in retirement	Pension Spending (% of GDP)	Education Spending (% GDP)
Germany	0.5	16.05 Years	8.39%	4.5%
Italy	0.7	19.8	13.04	3.75
Spain	0.7	17.4	7.19	4.4
Japan	0.7	19.3	5.23	3.5
Switzerland	0.8	12.95	11	5.65
Belgium	0.8	16.65	7.67	5.45
Sweden	0.8	18.2	12.26	7.3
Austria	0.8	14.75	10.12	5.9
Denmark	0.9	15.15	12.29	7.55
Finland	0.9	15.8	9.55	6.35
United Kingdom	1.1	14.65	11.08	4.7
Canada	1.1	17.95	4.53	6.15
Netherlands	1.2	16.1	10.01	5.2
Luxembourg	1.3	18.89	9.76	3.3
United States	1.3	13.55	6.29	5.1
Norway	1.3	16.24	7.93	7.125
New Zealand	1.3	11.1	5.71	6.5
Ireland	1.5	9.35	3.56	4.65
Iceland	1.6	11.55	2.35	6
Cyprus	1.7	13.95	4.46	4.45
Israel	1.9	11.95	2.49	6.85
Singapore	2.2	21.1	1.25	3.1
Korea, Republic of	2.2	12.35	1.19	3.8
Correlation between pension and education spending				42%
Correlation between an older population and pension spending				30.8%
Correlation between an older population and education spending				3%

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Notes

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[ii] *OECD(2011), Pensions at a Glance 2011: Retirement-Income Systems in OECD and G20 Countries (www.oecd.org/els/social/pensions/PAG)*

[iii] Actually, the United States, with a high proportion of elderly workers looks more like a poor nation than a rich one. Old people in nations with per capita GDP half as the U.S., work just as much as they do in the U.S. In 2001 in the United States, the labor force participation rates of men between ages 65 and 70 ranged from 38.7 % to 24.5 % , which is similar to rates in North Africa at 29.2 %. In Asia (dominated by China and India) 42 % of men over age 65 work; in Europe 14.9 % work (Clark 2004, 118).

[iv] See the Congressional Budget Office review of the literature on growing life expectancy gaps by income and socioeconomic status.
https://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/91xx/doc9104/LifeExpectancy_Brief.1.1.shtml

[v] Advocates for longer work lives should not be confused with advocates like the National Center for Black Aged, who argue for better working conditions for elderly people forced to work after age 65.

[vi] After Gary Becker's 1971 treatise on time most economists stopped using the word "leisure" (individuals were either producing time-intensive goods or goods-intensive goods) and stopped dealing with leisure as any special source of well-being. The political struggles for the eight-hour day, sick leave, vacations, lunch breaks, and retirement time became irrelevant to economic inquiry. Leisure consumption merely represents personal decisions about how to spend an endowment of time and skills.

[vii] The Greenspan Commission did not recommend the increase in the retirement age!!; testimony before the Social Security Trustees suggested that longevity trends did not indicate that the elderly were able to work longer. Congress added the provision in order to gain more revenue and to play it safe by cutting benefits for future retirees (Ball 1999, 175).

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“Real Housewives” and the Decline of Civic Virtue

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Why has support for progressive politics seemingly collapsed? While there are clearly many reasons, this essay focuses on the role commercial culture plays in the production of anti-progressive, anti-republican values. Using the “Real Housewives” franchise as an example, I argue that trash television shows undermine the possibility of collective action and government for the common good, by encouraging selfishness, glorifying wealth and status, and exacerbating in people feelings of superiority over and resentment towards others – sentiments more appropriate for an aristocratic hierarchy or corporate oligarchy than for an egalitarian republic. The more such sentiments spread through the population, the easier it is for right-wing forces to dismantle programs that benefit the public at large.

Our Machiavellian Moment

According to J.G.A. Pocock, one of the main challenges of republican self-government is the maintenance of the republic in time – preventing the erosion of the fundamental values, upon which republican self-government is based – and I believe we are facing such a moment right now. On the one hand, we hear a lot of rhetoric these days about the republican founding, but ironically it mostly comes from those who do not actually embrace republican values, which include not only liberty – about which we hear a lot of rhetoric[1] – but also equality (including economic as well as legal equality), popular sovereignty within the confines of the rule of law, government for the common good, and civic virtue, the capacity that makes you care about the good of your fellow citizens. Case in point, Tea Party supporters and their elected officials are trying to lay waste to any program or entity that advances the common good or creates greater levels of economic equality, even when such programs or entities have the support of the majority of the public. That agenda directly undermines the republicanism they claim to support.

At the same time, many on the left seem to view republicanism as a conservative tradition, disregarding the longstanding republican commitment to an equitable distribution of wealth, which dates all the way back to Aristotle, or its emphasis on giving power to the people as encapsulated by the concept of radical popular sovereignty constrained by the rule of law. Indeed, Marx, Engels, and their early followers saw themselves as the legitimate heirs of the republican legacy of the French Revolution.[2] In the American context, think Thomas Paine, a radical republican thinker whom Glen Beck has strangely tried to claim for the right.[3] Clearly, the man has never read *Agrarian Justice*.

The republican tradition may be viewed as the province of the right not only because they

actively claim it, but also because the concept of civic virtue has a conservative ring. Oftentimes, people tend to conflate civic virtue with moral virtue, but the concepts are totally different in history and meaning. Civic virtue is sometimes defined as simply patriotism (love of country and its laws)[4], but I generally describe it as the capacity that makes you care about the common good and your fellow citizens. When we unpack what that capacity must entail, it seems to me that civic virtue requires a sense of public-spiritedness, a collectivist outlook, a sense of reciprocity, and respectfulness towards others. These are the characteristics that are necessary for people to care about and work together for the common good, rather than just focusing on more selfish desires. Indeed in the republican tradition as a whole, self-interest and luxury were considered synonymous with corruption. It seems to me that there can be no progressive movement – no left-wing populist movement – unless people have civic virtue, even if some prefer the term solidarity.

Remarkably, the concept of popular sovereignty sometimes drops out of understandings of republicanism. That is to say, republicanism is often confused with representative government because that is how James Madison defines it is Federalist 10, where he argues against popular sovereignty in order to protect the interests of propertied elites. That depiction is almost the opposite of what the republican tradition stood for historically, however.[5] Republicanism historically emphasized popular sovereignty within the confines of the rule of law – not right-wing populism or simple majoritarianism in other words – and a participatory vision of citizenship.[6] While at this point in time I am personally more concerned about advancing a progressive agenda than I am about doing whatever the people want, it seems to me that any progressive vision would have to include the ability of people to control the forces that govern their lives through participation and democratic decision-making. And unless they are misguided in some way, the people should support an agenda that serves the common good.

The Problem of "False Consciousness"

During a time of great economic crisis, when even many of those in the white middle class have been struck down by market contraction, it seems there would be support for progressive politics, as there was during the New Deal – and indeed many public opinion polls do show support for social programs and public workers. Yet the 2010 elections ushered in a crop of far right-wing politicians, not only opposed to the expansion of social programs to help during the economic crisis (e.g., stimulus money, unemployment insurance, health care reform), but also dedicated to the destruction of anything that serves the public at large instead of just the wealthy elites (whether individuals and corporations), including Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, the public schools, public radio, public unions, government workers, and college professors. While many public opinion polls show that most Americans reject that radical agenda, when asked about specific items, there still seems to be broad support for the right-wing ideological line – and certainly no one wants to raise taxes to pay for government programs. And while many in Wisconsin did rise up in 2011 against attacks on public servants, a progressive movement has not yet emerged. We are losing ground.

In the 1930s, there was widespread support for the New Deal, so why is there not a similar

political will today? On the basis of material interests, today's working class people ought not to be voting Republican, especially during an economic downturn. Yet, according to the recent "Race and Recession" survey, "Fully half of all whites without college degrees identify as Republicans or are GOP-leaning independents, and 42 percent call themselves conservatives, more than other groups."[7] How can this be? Why would working class whites support the pro-corporate party of wealthy elites that favors outsourcing, benefit-cutting, and other policies that immiserate working people? Indeed, it was neo-liberal political and economic policies, strongly supported by the GOP, that arguably caused the Great Recession of 2008, and it seems that the Republican Party is currently pursuing a strategy that will make things worse – cutting taxes in a way that will not stimulate the economy, pursuing an anti-Keynesian budget-cutting approach that will further slow economic growth, and trying to destroy programs that help people who are being hurt by market contraction or that provide a non-market based safety net for the vulnerable. Why would non-college-educated whites, who are vulnerable to lay-offs, probably under-insured, and definitely facing an insecure future, support the party that seeks to make them weaker? Racism certainly plays a role in this phenomenon, but I do not believe it accounts entirely for the widespread support for economic libertarianism. Perhaps it's time to revive the term "false consciousness."

Thomas Frank explores this conundrum in *What's the Matter With Kansas? (2004).* He argues that conservative non-elites, working class or otherwise, do not see "the connection between mass culture, most of which conservatives hate, and laissez-faire capitalism, which they adore without reservation," and they conflate the former with Liberalism.[8]

The corporate world … blankets the nation with a cultural style designed to offend and to pretend-subvert: sassy teens in Sketchers flout the Man; … hipsters dressed in T-shirts reading "FCUK" snicker at the suits who just don't get it. It's meant to be offensive, and Kansas is duly offended. The state watches impotently as its culture, beamed in from the coasts, becomes coarser and more offensive by the year. Kansas aches for revenge. Kansas gloats when celebrities say stupid things; it cheers when movie stars go to jail. And when two female rock stars exchange a lascivious kiss on national TV, Kansas goes haywire. Kansas screams for the heads of the liberal elite. Kansas comes running to the polling place. And Kansas cuts those rock stars' taxes.[9]

For some reason, many ordinary conservatives and the religious right don't understand commercial culture as the direct by-product of the market they valorize and so as a reason to criticize the under-regulated market and the materialistic values it generates.[10] Instead, they blame "liberals."

People no longer understand left and right in economic terms, only in social terms. That is why conservatives insist that the corporate-owned media is "liberal," by which they mean socially left. They think the media are "liberal" because they confuse celebrity culture, sexual exhibitionism, vulgarity, and moral bankruptcy with the left. Because of the omnipresence of the media, conservatives think the left dominates society. As Frank puts it, "In America where the chief sources of one's ideas about life's possibilities are TV and movies, it's not hard to be

convinced that we inhabit a liberal-dominated world."[11] People don't understand that in economic and political terms, the left has been completely marginalized. Indeed, the fact that many on the right call President Obama a socialist demonstrates that they have no idea what a left political or economic agenda would look like.

Consequently, conservative voters attempt to enact change by voting liberals out of office, but no change results. They return an entire phalanx of pro-business blowhards to Washington, and still the culture industry goes on its merry way. But at least those backlash politicians that they elect are willing to do one thing differently: they stand there on the floor of the U.S. Senate and shout *no* to it all.… In all of its rejecting and nay-saying, it resolutely refuses to consider that the assaults on its values, the insults, and the Hollywood sneers are all products of capitalism as surely as are McDonald's hamburgers and Boeing 737s.[12]

Non-elites are confused about and distracted from attending to their true interests by the commercial media. So in essence, Frank argues that many ordinary Americans have false consciousness because corporate elites give them "bread and circuses."

In the end, however, Frank blames the Democrats for the sorry state of the left in America. He concludes that ordinary working Americans, who should form the base of the Democratic Party do not vote Democratic because the Democratic Party has no progressive agenda – no left populist agenda. And while I think Frank is essentially right about that, I also think he is too quick to dismiss commercial culture as a mere distraction, instead of examining the ideological work done by the commercial culture industry.

The Ideological Work of Trash Television

This essay, as noted, strives to think through the effects one part of commercial culture has on republican values. Attributing part of our civic decline to television is not a new claim. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam notes that that the well-documented decline in civic engagement and social capital in America since 1964 directly correlates with the rise of television. Putnam defines social capital as "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" and sees it as related to civic virtue. "The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations."[13] That is why theorists who seek to strengthen civic identity and engagement tend to prefer smaller societies in which people know each other and have some degree of concern for each other's well-being (civic virtue).[14] While liberal citizens of the world may care about fellow human beings in the abstract, that sentiment may not be strong enough to underwrite collective action.

Putnam documents that while social capital rose during the Cold War, around 1964 "this beneficent trend was reversed, initiating a long-term decline."[15] At the same time, civic engagement also declined precipitously. For example, "nearly half of all Americans in the 1960s invested some time each week in clubs and local associations, as compared to less than

one-quarter in the 1990s."[16] Americans became simultaneously less connected and less engaged with each other since the mid-1960s.

Citing a correlation between exposure to television and civic decline, Putnam speculates that the "effect of electronic entertainment – above all, television – in privatizing our leisure time" bears about 25% of the blame for the disintegration of social capital and civic engagement. This is an important issue. First, time in front of the television can substitute for more social forms of engagement, which may produce a sense of connectedness and caring. Second, television arguably accustoms people to passivity, since a person cannot actively engage with the television. Third, while Putnam does not mention this, since most television shows are nationally available, watching TV fosters a national level identification, rather than a local one, which is probably one reason why more people vote in federal, as opposed to local, elections.

What Putnam does not discuss are the ways in which television might have a negative effect on social capital, participation, and civic virtue because it fosters anti-republican values in viewers. Granted the types of shows on television have varied greatly since the 1960s, but anti-republican values can be fostered in multiple ways. For example, in the 1960s, Westerns may have played a role in fostering individualist notions of freedom and antagonism towards government. In the 1980s, shows like "Dallas" and "Dynasty" glorified wealth and legitimized greed. During the 2000s, "Sex and the City" helped popularize extremely overpriced luxury items, fuelling consumerism and legitimizing status-seeking. Corporate-owned television is certainly not the sole impetus for anti-republican sentiments, but it surely must play a role.

It makes sense that television shows produced by corporate-owned media would manipulate the emotions of viewers in a way that increases support for neo-liberalism because while non-elites often do not seem to base their political behavior on their own material interests, elites generally do. Putnam misses this point. While he briefly considers whether "big business, capitalism, and the market" have played a role in civic decline, as many argue, he quickly dismisses the argument: "The problem with this generic theory of social disconnectedness is that it explains too much: America has epitomized market capitalism for several centuries, during which our stocks of social capital and civic engagement have been through great swings. A constant can't explain a variable."[17]

But capitalism should not be considered a "constant," given that its fundamental character is change. As Karl Marx and Frederick Engels explain,

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. … Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.[18]

Capitalism has been dominant in the U.S. since the nineteenth century, but along the way it

has helped radically transform much of the country from rural to urban/suburban, from small communities to disconnected conglomerates, from religiously grounded to commercially-based. As communities and families disintegrate, capitalist values become balder and less buffered by counter-forces.

Central to this transformation has been the media, including television. In the beginning, we got wholesome, family shows, like "Ozzy and Harriet," "Father Knows Best," and "Leave It to Beaver," which projected a certain ideological vision of the family and gender roles that played into Cold War politics. But as the colonization of the market has "torn" the "veil of sentiment" from familial and communal relations, leaving only the cash-nexus, we find ourselves watching "Real Housewives," "Bridezilla," and "Jersey Shore."[19]

My Experience Watching "Real Housewives"

What ideological work does trash television do? While the current American lack of civic virtue is multi-causal, it is my contention that contemporary commercial culture plays a key role in undermining civic virtue, by encouraging selfishness, glorifying wealth and status, and exacerbating in people feelings of superiority over and resentment towards others – sentiments more fitting for an aristocratic hierarchy than an egalitarian republic. On that note, it is interesting to consider, the recent spate of shows that seem to glorify the British class system – "Downton Abbey" and "Upstairs, Downstairs" (as well as the movie "The King's Speech") – not to mention the hyping of the Royal Wedding.

The notion that commercially produced trash television shows might be doing important ideological work occurred to me as I was watching episodes from the "Real Housewives" series in an attempt to plug into what is often termed popular culture, but should more accurately be labeled commercial culture. Honestly, I find the women repulsive and wondered why the franchise is so popular, as evidenced by its replication. I blogged about it for "Tikkun Daily," and many people told me that the post really resonated with them.[20] It remained number one on the "most-read posts" list for weeks.

The shows are popular, but why? Does anyone really admire or want to emulate those women? I hope not, since the women seem to think that selfishness, aggression, and rudeness are admirable qualities. I find stunning the disjunction between what the women think the show is about and what is really going on. That is to say, while the "housewives" apparently think they are bona fide celebrities and the envy of all, most viewers probably find the women totally despicable — money-grubbing, ostentatious, classless, immature, narcissistic, catty, and vulgar. At least I hope that is the case.

So what is the appeal of "Real Housewives" and similar shows? I think the women who watch such shows — and I suspect it is mostly women — watch them because the shows make them feel good, by inducing in them a sense of smug superiority, or at least that is how they make me feel, as evidenced by the above paragraph. This has political relevance, I believe, because it seems to me that the desire to feel superior is one of the strongest underlying forces in

American politics right now. Many people want to feel superior to others — to “illegal” immigrants, to gays, to Muslims, to the poor — or, on the Left, to Sarah Palin and the interpellated masses living in Kansas. This is a problem because feelings of superiority threaten to erode the principle of political equality, upon which self-government is based, and the reciprocity and respect for others required by civic virtue. Unfortunately, indulgence in media depictions of outrageous women fuels these anti-republican sentiments.

Moreover, those who admire the housewives – and there must be some – also have their anti-republican feelings and desires exacerbated. The shows valorize and reward narcissism, legitimize status-seeking and hierarchy, and normalize incivility through their storylines and character depictions, while stimulating in viewers possibly feelings of envy and most likely the desire embrace the lifestyle and attitudes the show embodies. As viewers indulge in those anti-republican emotions, it undermines feelings of public-spiritedness, a collectivist outlook, reciprocity, and respectfulness towards others. The resulting lack of civic virtue erodes democratic society, making it much more difficult to work together or support government aimed at the common good. Needless to say, these shows do not act alone, but form part of a wide range of forces pulling people away from republican values.

What Is To Be Done?

While this essay has used the “Real Housewives” franchise to illustrate an argument about the anti-republican and anti-progressive consequences of commercial culture – we can all think of many other examples – I have no real solutions to offer. This essay simply adds another item to the long list of problems that result from having essentially all of our media, including news journalism, controlled by a handful of for-profit corporations. While I am certainly not making a unicausal argument – and indeed there may be more important factors contributing to the decline of progressivism – those who care about making the world a better and more just place need to understand all the many ways in which ideological support for neo-liberalism is produced.

Two strategies might help to ameliorate the effects of this ideological apparatus: 1) educating people to prefer better entertainment and to maintain a critical perspective when they do engage with more problematic shows and 2) producing alternative entertainment and providing some guarantee that it will be available by protecting non-market dependent venues, such as public television. Obviously the right is actively trying to prevent both from happening, and there is a lot of money behind its efforts. I am not optimistic about the prospects for progressive politics because of this. However, as dark as these times we now live in are, it has been worse in the past. In the early twentieth century, progressive gains emerged out of the ashes of fascism. Consequently, with odds that are less daunting (for now), we should be able to do something positive.

Notes

[1] We hear a lot about liberty, but mostly as freedom of from interference, a liberal concept, rather than freedom from domination, which is Maurizio Viroli's definition of republican liberty. See Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002).

[2] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, second edition (New York: Westview Press, 2001).

[3] Glen Beck, *Glen Beck's Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine* (New York: Mercury Radio Arts/Threshold Edition, 2009).

[4] Viroli, *Republicanism*.

[5] Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

[6] Viroli, *Republicanism*.

[7] "Embittered by Recession," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2011 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2011/02/21/GR2011022105161.html?sid=ST2011022201441>.

[8] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives won the Heart of America* (New York: Owl Books, 2004), 248.

[9] Frank, *Kansas*, 249.

[10] Christian Right organizations do call for boycotts of some companies under certain circumstances, to advance an anti-gay agenda, for example. However, they do not actually critique the market mechanism itself, as opposed to its effects on moral values in particular instances. In contrast, the religious left, on the other hand, does see the market as destructive of many of our society's important values and seek to regulate it, but they are not as politically powerful yet.

[11] Frank, *Kansas*, 241.

[12] Frank, *Kansas*, 241-242.

[13] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 190.

[14] For examples, see Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) and Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Memberships* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[15] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 139-140.

[16] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 62.

[17] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 282.

[18] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in ed., Terrell Carver, *Marx: Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 2000), 4.

[19] Marx and Engels, "Manifesto," 4.

[20] Claire Snyder-Hall, "Personal Reflections on 'Real Housewives' and the Virtue of Modesty, *Tikkun Daily*, February 3, 2011, <https://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2011/02/03/personal-reflections-on-real-housewives-and-the-virtue-of-modesty/>.

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The Role of Race in the Devolution of the Left

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"When the official subject is presidential politics, taxes, welfare, crime, rights, or values . . . the real subject is RACE." So read the cover story for the May 1991 issue of *The Atlantic*.[i] The authors, Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, trumpeted their message with deafening clarity. Their title conveyed the extent that race, in its overt and insidiously covert forms, had come to penetrate, even dominate political discourse. Unfortunately, the Edsalls stop short of a critical examination of the discourses that end up blaming blacks for their own plight. For example, they give credence to the core assumption of the Moynihan Report—that the employment problems of blacks derive from a weak family instead of the other way around. They also tend to explain the white backlash as a reaction to the pathology and disorder emanating from the nation's ghettos, instead of grasping the breathtaking contradiction of the very existence of ghettos in a putatively democratic society, and the ramifications of having an entire people trapped in the scaffolding of an apartheid society. Their epistemological failure is taking all of this as a given.

Nevertheless, the Edsalls offer a penetrating analysis of the centrality of race and racism in American politics during the post-civil rights era. Their message has particular relevance to the Left, given its inveterate tendency to subsume race to class—that is, to treat race as a mere epiphenomenon camouflaging the underlying divisions and interests of class. Or as a distraction or impediment to building coalitions in order to advance its primary goal of class transformation. I submit that we cannot begin to grasp "the undoing of a century of reform" except by confronting the profound influence of race and racism on American politics during the half-century following the passage of landmark civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965.

According to the Edsalls, "by 1964 the Democrats had become the party of racial liberalism and the Republicans had become the party of racial conservatism."[ii] This was highlighted by the fact that Johnson supported and Goldwater opposed passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Of course, Goldwater lost in a landslide, and liberal pundits at the time gleefully declared that "conservatism is dead," which of course turned out to be woefully mistaken.

I can inject a bit of personal testimony here. In 1965, as a fledgling graduate student at UC, Berkeley, I wrote an article (with Gertrude Jaeger Selznick) on "Social Class and Ideology in the 1964 Presidential Election," based on a national survey conducted during the three weeks preceding the November election.[iii] We found that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, many voters were in ideological agreement with Goldwater on a range of social issues, but recoiled at

Goldwater's opposition to Medicare, which had been proposed by Kennedy and was wending its way through Congress. In other words, when pocketbook interests clashed with ideology, many people voted their class interests. The lesson was not lost on strategists within the Republican Party, who made social security and Medicare "the third rail" of politics. Until now! However, Republican leaders have already backed away from "the Ryan plan," which is opposed even by most Tea Party adherents, lest it take the party down to defeat in the 2012 election.[iv]

By 1968 the ideological cleavage among traditional Democratic voters became manifest when Wallace surprised everyone by reaping significant support in Democratic primaries in the North as well as the South. In his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, Kevin Phillips, a strategist in the Nixon campaign, declared that Nixon's election "bespoke the end of the New Deal Democratic hegemony and the beginning of a new era in American politics."[v] The chief reason lay with "Democratic voting streams quitting their party." In effect, this amounted to white flight, not from urban neighborhoods and schools, but from a Democratic Party that had come to be identified with blacks. The mass defection of Southern Democrats made the Republican Party heir to the dubious title as "the party of segregation." However, more was involved than white backlash. As the Edsalls shrewdly observed, "Wallace defined a new right-wing populism, capitalizing on voter reaction to the emergence of racial, cultural, and moral liberalism."[vi]

If the 1964 election signified "the death of conservatism," it took only until 1968 to turn the tables on liberals. Republicans won 5 of the 6 elections between 1968 and 1988, and 7 of the 10 elections between 1968 and 2004, thus establishing firm control over the institutions of national power, including the Supreme Court. To curb defection from its traditional constituencies, the New Democrats moved the party decidedly to the right.

It is commonplace to view this oscillation as an inevitable swing of the ideological pendulum, as though some law of physics or dialectics was at work. However, as Stephen Eric Bronner writes in "Notes on the Counter-Revolution": "The ongoing battle of differing value systems was generated less by some abstract 'dialectic' than a concrete and empirical conflict between the partisans of revolution and counter-revolution."[vii] The challenge, then, is to identify the partisans of counter-revolution and to explain their political ascent. Note, however, that the partisans of counter-revolution do not have to be preponderant to have a decisive impact on electoral politics, as is evident from the recent success of the Tea Party. As the Edsalls write: "The sea change in American presidential politics—the replacement of a liberal majority with a conservative majority—involved the conversion of a relatively small proportion of voters: the roughly five to ten percent of the electorate, made up primarily of white working-class voters empowered to give majority status to either political party."[viii] Indeed, this was the source of worry in the 2008 election when Obama's bowling ball went down the gutter, and industrial states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana hung in abeyance. As it turned out, Obama won with only 43 percent of white votes, despite the meltdown of capitalism and the debility of McCain's campaign. Obama's triumph owes less to stemming white defection than in the unprecedented turnout of Black voters, together with the fact that the two-thirds of Latinos who supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries voted for Obama in the general election. White

youth provided another notable base of support, keeping the partisans of counter-revolution in check.

To understand the counterrevolution, we have to begin with a clear understanding of the unfolding history of the revolution it sought to negate. Let us not forget where it all began. As Bronner writes, “The Civil Rights Movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King initiated what would become a general challenge to racist, patriarchal, and homophobic prejudices . . . .” Nor is it accurate or fair to disparage these movements as “identity politics.” Not only were these movements legitimate in their own right, but they also constituted a necessary first stage in an expanding movement. Stage 2: “These concerns blended into a rejection of imperialism and colonialism, which was expressed in the opposition to the Vietnam War . . . .” Stage 3: “With the ‘new social movements’ in the United States came a slew of new and transformational economic and social programs known as ‘the Great Society’ and attack on inequality more expansive even than the New Deal of FDR.” Stage 4: “In tandem with this came legislation that enabled people of color to vote, overturned racist electoral laws carried over from the collapse of Reconstruction in the 1870s, and thus produced the most radical extension of the franchise since women won the right to vote in 1919. Finally, with respect to the struggle to end the Vietnam War, there emerged an assault upon the traditional insular and formation of foreign policy by the political establishment.”[ix]

Logically and politically, the partisans of counter-revolution were compelled to begin where the revolution had begun—with the civil rights movement. As I argue below, there was a relentless effort to drive every nail into the coffin of the civil rights movement. Conservative intellectuals and strategists seized upon the mounting popular opposition to the racial liberalism of the Democratic Party. With the help of nascent neocons, conservatives underwent an ideological facelift: they now portrayed themselves as the champions of the rights and interests of white workers. This rhetoric gained momentum with an ideological crusade against affirmative action during the 1980s, followed by an attack on “welfare”—that is, Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC). However, these were only dress rehearsals for a larger assault on the welfare state itself. Emboldened by their success, the partisans of counter-revolution, with the backing of right-wing foundations and think tanks, launched a campaign against the New Left and “the Left academy.” Thanks to their control of the White House for 28 years, Republicans were able to pack the Supreme Court with judges weaned by the Federalist Society, which today has chapters in over 200 law schools across the nation. With their neocon allies, Republicans also seized control of the foreign policy apparatus, leading to imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By the time the term “neoliberalism” entered academic discourse, it was already a *fait accompli*.

Nails in the Coffin of the Civil Rights Revolution

In retrospect, the groundwork for counter-revolution began at the very moment that the civil rights movement reached its triumphant climax, and it had the fingerprints of Daniel Patrick

Moynihan all over it. In June 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was wending its way through Congress, President Johnson made his now-famous commencement address at Howard University. The speech, written by Richard Goodwin and Moynihan, was riddled with contradiction. Johnson electrified his audience when he intoned, "Freedom is not enough . . . . We seek not just freedom but opportunity . . . not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and as a result." After that rhetorical high, the speech abruptly switched gears, obviously reflecting Moynihan's handicraft. Now Johnson declared: "Equal opportunity is essential, but not enough . . . . [U]nless we work to strengthen the family . . . all the rest: schools and playgrounds, public assistance and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation." With this rhetorical sleight of hand, the focus shifted from "equal results" to "the black family." This, I submit, was a fateful first nail in the coffin of the civil rights movement, even before it had been given a decent burial![x]

With Nixon's election in 1964, other nails were driven into the coffin. Consistent with the rapidly shifting political currents, Nixon oscillated between support for and unapologetic negation of the civil rights agenda. On the one hand, he sought to appoint two outright segregationists to the Supreme Court. POUND! POUND! On the other hand, with the nation still reeling from the "riots" following Martin Luther King's assassination, and with mounting opposition to the Vietnam War, Nixon was fearful of opening up "a second front" at home. He appointed George Romney as Secretary of HUD, who launched a policy to integrate the suburbs, the very place to which whites had fled to escape the black nemesis. When the predictable backlash erupted, Nixon reneged and eased Romney out of office. Integrated housing: another nail in the coffin.[xi]

The more important flip-flop involved the Philadelphia Plan, which was the embryo for affirmative action policy. Actually, the policy was devised by liberals within Johnson's Department of Labor, but it was shelved after Humphrey's defeat. Confronted with a rash of grassroots protests at construction sites in cities like New York, Detroit, and Chicago, Nixon gave Arthur Fletcher, the black Assistant Secretary of Labor, and his boss George Shultz, the green light to revive the Philadelphia Plan. Nixon then risked a great deal of political capital heading off a challenge in Congress, where the Plan was opposed by most labor unions and Jewish organizations, and received equivocal support from civil rights leaders (it was adamantly opposed by Bayard Rustin). Finally, the Justice Department, headed by John Mitchell, defended the Philadelphia Plan from a challenge in the Supreme Court. After the Court's favorable ruling, affirmative action mandates ("goals and timetables") extended to all government contractors, including universities. Now it was affirmative action that engendered a firestorm of opposition and once again Nixon flip-flopped. In the 1972 election Nixon ran against the very "quotas" that he had put into effect. POUND! Another major nail in the coffin.

This warrants further attention because affirmative action not only shattered the liberal coalition but also helped to resuscitate conservatism from its long slumber. Let me explain.

In 1964, years before affirmative action evolved as official policy, *Commentary*, which at the time was a leading liberal publication, sponsored an event at New York City's Town Hall on

"Liberalism and the Negro." Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, opened the proceedings by warning of "a widening split between the Negro movement and the white liberal community." The problem was that several civil rights leaders were calling for "compensatory programs" in employment and education that would pry open doors of opportunity previously closed to blacks. To Podhoretz and his cadre at *Commentary*, this smacked of a system of proportionate representation that was reminiscent of the *numerus clausus* in Russia and a dire threat to Jews who were statistically overrepresented in the professions and elite universities. Podhoretz brought in his "big guns"—Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, and Gunnar Myrdal, all of whom declared their blanket opposition to any system of racial preference. James Baldwin stood alone, parrying their arguments with his usual resolve and eloquence. In effect, a line was drawn in the sand: these liberals had supported blacks in their quest for civil rights, but they were adamantly opposed to anything that smacked of preference. In 1975 Glazer went on to publish *Affirmative Discrimination*, the first book-length attack on affirmative action, in which he compared affirmative action to the Nuremberg Laws. Never mind that affirmative action was intended as a remedy for Jim Crow practices that inspired the Nuremberg Laws.[xii]

For its own reasons, labor—read: white labor—was adamantly opposed to affirmative action, fearful that it would curb their monopoly on jobs in construction and manufacturing.[xiii] By the 1980s, what began as a squabble within the liberal coalition emerged as a full-blown anti-affirmative crusade, now centered in the political Right. What explains this political metamorphosis?

In *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace*, Nancy MacLean reveals how the rhetoric of compensatory treatment and the emerging political battles over affirmative action resurrected the conservative cause from the doldrums of Goldwater's defeat and the Right's inability to find any traction among the public—that is, beyond diehard Republicans.[xiv] By the early 1970s, conservative pundits realized they could reap political hay from white resentment over "quotas." Now it was conservative scholars who put their talents as wordsmiths to work. Writing in *Commentary* in 1972, Richard Herrnstein (later the co-author with Charles Murray of *The Bell Curve*) railed against "the equalitarian orthodoxy."[xv]

William Buckley, the founding editor of *The National Review*, discovered commonality with the new ideological pathways forged by neocons. According to MacLean, Buckley "observed the work of the neoconservatives with mounting admiration and excitement as Irving Kristol, for example, argued that conservatives were defending liberal institutions from liberals' own mounting complaints."[xvi] Affirmative action provided conservatives with an issue that went beyond fighting Communism and championing free enterprise. At the same time, it dispelled suspicions that conservatives harbored a latent anti-Semitism or animus toward blacks. With this ideological facelift, conservatives could now present themselves, not as the enemy of equality, but as the champion of colorblindness. Instead of opposition to blacks and civil rights, they rallied to the defense of white males against "the New Equality," which, according to Robert Nisbet, was "the gravest single threat to liberty and social initiative."[xvii] Thus, with

the help of the neocons, conservatives used the controversy over affirmative action to turn the tables on liberals, and to develop an ideological blueprint for the restoration of conservatives to power.

By the 1980s, opposition to affirmative action had grown into a veritable crusade, waged by right-wing pundits and publications with the indispensable funding of right-wing foundations and think tanks. As in the case of the revolution that the partisans of counter-revolution sought to negate, the shifting political currents reached into the university and the ranks of social science. Charles Murray's 1984 book *Losing Ground* argued that the welfare state created the conditions that it purported to remedy: welfare dependency, non-work, family breakdown, rising crime, moral breakdown.[xviii] Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, and a cadre of black conservatives, lavishly funded by foundations and ensconced in leading universities, put a black face on "white sociology," vitiating claims that sociology had all along been driven by racism. Publication of *The Bell Curve* in 1994 marked the apogee of the intellectual backlash, with the reinstatement of the scientific racism that supposedly had been relinquished to the trash heap nearly a century earlier. Nor was the backlash only about biology. As Adolph Reed wrote in *The Nation* in 1994: "We can trace Murray's legitimacy directly to the spinelessness, opportunism and racial bad faith of the liberals in the social-policy establishment . . . . Many of those objecting to Herrnstein and Murray's racism embrace positions that are almost indistinguishable, except for the resort to biology."[xix]

If Thomas Sowell put a black face on conservatism, William Julius Wilson put a black face on racial liberalism. In his Godkin lectures at Harvard in 1985, Moynihan could gloat: "The family report had been viewed as mistaken; the benign neglect memorandum was depicted as out-and-out racist. By mid-decade, however, various black scholars were reaching similar conclusions, notably William Julius Wilson in his 1978 study, *The Declining Significance of Race*."[xx]

For his part, Moynihan was on record, as early as 1965, as opposed to compensatory treatment for blacks, insisting that such policies had to be race-neutral.[xxi] Again, Wilson picked up the very ideological position for which Moynihan and white liberals had been pummeled. When he, too, came under attack, Wilson shifted his position to join those who argued that affirmative action should be class-based. This position was congenial not only to many on the Left, but also to right-wing advocates who cast themselves as champions of the white working class. In actuality, class-based affirmative action never had a chance of being enacted as policy, but served only as a red herring in the affirmative action debate. This explains why the idea of class-based affirmative action was embraced by the very conservatives who spearheaded the crusade against affirmative action: Clint Bolick, Dinesh D'Souza, Clarence Thomas, Charles Murray, Richard Herrnstein, and Newt Gingrich.[xxii] It was sheer political theater, as they feigned compassion for the working classes only to provide ideological cover for their assault on affirmative action.

According to MacLean, within less than a year of its proclamation, word spread that the Philadelphia Plan was to "die a quiet death." In February 1973, Nixon appointed Peter

Brennan, the New York City building trades leader who organized the “hard-hat” demonstrations, as secretary of labor, thus driving another nail in the coffin of the civil rights movement.

Let us return to the Republican Party’s ideological facelift that replaced raw racism with code words and allowed conservatives to tap white resentment, not by assailing blacks but by championing small government, states rights, and lower taxes. Ponder the words of Lee Atwater, Reagan’s campaign consultant, speaking with rare candor in an anonymous interview in 1981, in which he explained the evolution of the Southern strategy:

You start out in 1954 by saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger” — that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now [that] you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I’m not saying that. But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me — because obviously sitting around saying, “We want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.”[xxiii]

This was the historical conjuncture when racism receded into code words and circumlocutions that tapped broader ideological currents in the body politic. Thus, the electoral success of Republicans during the post-civil war period was not the result only of racial backlash. It also reflected the inroads that the burnished conservative philosophy had on voters with conservative proclivities who wavered in their loyalty to the Democratic Party.

Welfare had come under withering attack over several decades, no doubt heightened by the success of the welfare rights movement in expanding the welfare rolls during the late 60s and 70s. Reagan stoked the issue with his riff about “the welfare queen” with eighty names, thirty addresses, and twelve Social Security cards who drove around Chicago’s South Side in a Cadillac. Yet for all the political wrangling, AFDC was never a very costly program. Its benefits went primarily to children and the mothers of those children, and consisted of a rent supplement and a meager living allowance. Between 1970 and 1993, total federal and state spending on AFDC benefits increased from $15.5 billion to $22.3 billion (adjusted for inflation). Even though the number of recipients increased by 91 percent, costs increased by only 44 percent because the average monthly AFDC benefit per family shrunk by almost half. The final blow came in 1996, when Bill Clinton, casting himself as a New Democrat, affixed his signature to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, annulling welfare entitlements that had been in place since the New Deal.[xxiv] Another cruel nail in the coffin of the civil rights movement. And an opening salvo in a campaign against the welfare state itself.

Race and Neoliberalism

Only in hindsight is it clear that Bill Clinton, the New Democrat, represented a transitional

period in what morphed into neoliberalism.[xxv] Let me make two related points about race and neoliberalism. First, race and racism were used, with political cunning, to epitomize all that is wrong with the welfare state, to whip up antagonism toward the "big government" that gave us the New Deal and the Great Society, and to impart new legitimacy to "states rights," which was the ideological linchpin behind the Civil War. Second, the policies enacted under the emergent neoliberal regime have all had particularly devastating effects on African Americans. So much the better, as Lee Atwater pointed out, since this tapped the lode of submerged racism and gave proof to the lie that liberal programs were designed to help blacks at the expense of everybody else. Indeed, Glenn Beck has recently denounced universal healthcare, universal college, and green jobs as "stealth reparations."[xxvi]

Downsizing of government and outsourcing of government services. The public-sector has long been the staple of the black middle-class. This evolved partly because wages were lower in the public sector before the emergence of public-sector unions; partly because, in an era of affirmative action, the government could more easily control its own employment practices than those in the private sector; and partly because it was useful to put a black face on such governmental functions as corrections and social services (in contrast to the situation in the uniformed services which remained a bastion of white privilege). Today 21.2 percent of all black workers are public employees, compared with 16.3 percent of non-black workers.[xxvii] As a result, blacks are disproportionately affected by the downsizing of government and the outsourcing of government services.[xxviii] Not only that, but as Glen Ford has said in his radio commentary, "The fact that Blacks are disproportionately represented in government employment makes the entire public sector vulnerable to attack, not just because billionaires like the Koch brothers back Tea Party politicians, but because huge sections of the white public are prepared to withhold solidarity for racial reasons."[xxix] Furthermore, racist stereotypes feed the image of government workers as inefficient and unproductive, thereby providing justification for outsourcing these services.

Free Trade. The swoosh that we heard after the passage of the NAFTA, and the hemorrhaging of blue-collar jobs and downward pressure on wages, are race-neutral but have had disproportionate impact on blacks. Just at the time that they finally secured a foothold in such industries as textiles, automobiles, and steel, millions of these jobs have been exported to low-wage counties.

Neoliberal immigration policy. As was the case during the two World Wars, blacks have always made their greatest strides when immigration was in low ebb. Coming on the heels of the Civil Rights Revolution, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which eliminated the national origins quotas instituted in 1924, triggered the influx of over 30 million immigrants, mostly from Latin America and Asia. Contrary to the standard cant—that immigrants take jobs that blacks don't want—immigrants have made inroads in such coveted job sectors as construction, manufacturing, the hotel and leisure industry, and the healthcare industry. Note that the post-65 immigration was not advanced by liberals or by immigrant advocacy groups, but rather by free-market economists who contended that immigration would offset declining birth rates, depress wages, undercut unions, dampen inflation, increase consumption, and help pay for the

retirement pensions of baby boomers.[xxx] Let me be clear. Immigration has been a huge boon to the national economy, and of course, to immigrants themselves who often are refugees from neoliberal projects in their countries of origin. However, the conclusion is unavoidable that, as in the past, the influx of tens of millions of immigrants has been detrimental to African Americans and other low-wage earners, including immigrant workers themselves.[xxxi]

Gentrification. Cities across the nation are not being gentrified because yuppies have discovered the charms of city life. Rather, it reflects major shifts in the global economy, not to speak of the schemes of politicians and developers. The result has been the reclamation of black neighborhoods previously abandoned by white flight to the suburbs. No surprise that recent results from the 2010 Census indicate a substantial decline of blacks in cities across the nation, including Detroit, Chicago, Oakland, Cleveland, New York, and even Atlanta.[xxxii]

Nor is this because blacks have belatedly discovered "the brass ring" of the suburbs, as William Frey, a demographer at Brookings, has suggested. As Thomas Sugrue wrote in a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, "Those blacks heading outward from Detroit aren't moving to all suburbs equally. Rather, they move into places with older houses, rundown shopping districts and declining tax revenues." Sugrue aptly terms this "secondhand suburbia," a far cry from the situation when whites fled urban neighborhoods for their dream house in thriving suburban communities with rising real estate values.[xxxiii]

Racial/Class Cleansing. The ugly flip side of gentrification has been the eviction of poor blacks from urban neighborhoods across the nation. This is another neoliberal policy that began under Clinton and Cisneros through HOPE VI, and has led to the demolition of approximately 150,000 units of public housing across the nation. In the case of Chicago, entire public housing communities have been obliterated, with the conspicuous silence of Barack Obama and the complicity of Valerie Jarrett. In other cities like Atlanta, the demolished public housing was occupied by stable working-class families, but sat on real estate that was ripe for development. Furthermore, social scientists have provided spurious scientific legitimacy for the relocation of blacks from central cities, since its purpose, or so they claim, is to "deconcentrate poverty" and to "augment social capital."[xxxiv]

Schooling. What does schooling have to do with neoliberalism? A great deal. In the eyes of the new Malthusians, the neoliberal city could be ever more beautiful, and real estate ever more valuable, if we could eliminate the parasitic population of poor blacks (as opposed to immigrants who are seen as bringing energy, vitality, and economic activity to declining neighborhoods). Good schools are essential for attracting young, affluent buyers to gentrifying neighborhoods. Ironically, No Child Left Behind provides a mechanism for closing down "failing schools," usually over the rage and tears of parents who do not want to give up their neighborhood schools and are not offered alternatives that are any better. Thus the charter school movement, essentially a piecemeal privatization of public education, fits perfectly within the neoliberal agenda.[xxxv]

Mass Incarceration. "The carceral state," as Loic Wacquant calls it, involves the incarceration

of some 2.3 million people, two-thirds of whom are black and Latino men. More than 7 million Americans are behind bars, on probation, or on parole. Few analysts have connected the dots between mass incarceration and gentrification, but even more important than luxury housing and good schools are safe neighborhoods. This is the logic behind aggressive policing, "weed and seed policies" (the ballyhooed "community policing" initiated under Clinton), stop and frisk policies, and the targeting of minority males for marijuana arrests. As Harry Levine has shown, between 1997 and 2007 the New York City police have targeted minority neighborhoods and arrested over 400,000 males for possessing small amounts of marijuana.[xxxvi] The end result of the carceral state, with its mandatory sentencing and three-strike provisions, has been to produce a class of "marked men" who are condemned to joblessness and poverty. As Michelle Alexander argues, this has devastating effects on families, condemning another generation of black children to growing up in poverty.[xxxvii] Many states deny the franchise to felons, an ostensibly race-neutral mechanism that, like the poll tax and literacy tests of yore, disfranchise large numbers of black voters.

In short, neoliberalism is a racist project. Not only does it rely upon racism for its justification and execution, but its burden falls particularly heavily on blacks, exacerbating the racial divide on which it prospers.

Conclusion

If my contention is right, and race has played a central role in the undoing of a century of reform, then the Left had better figure out how to navigate the convoluted waters of race in the 21st century. As Michael K. Brown has wisely written, "Racism cannot be removed by ignoring it, despite the ideology of a color-blind society; nor will black and white workers comprehend a common fate by sublimating race to class. To do so is to succumb to the myopia of the racial liberals and radicals of the New Deal."[xxxviii] Brown was alluding to the New Deal liberals and radicals who failed to address massive discrimination in labor markets and within unions, thereby excluding blacks from the social insurance programs that are the hallmark of the welfare state. As Jesse Jackson observed, "a black mask has been put on the face of poverty," thereby confounding the radical project.[xxxix] This is why "poverty" has disappeared from political discourse, as Republican and Democratic candidates, including our "first black President," vie to be "the President of the middle class."

As I commented at the outset, there are those on the Left who see race as a distraction or impediment to the larger project of class transformation. Granted, it is an impediment, but whose fault is that and how is it to be overcome? The Right has been ingenious in playing the race card over the last half-century, and if the Left is going to prevail, it will have to trump that race card with one of its own. Progressives and their allies in labor can begin by confronting their own complicity in a racial division of labor that privileged white men above all others. To paraphrase Justice Brennan, they need to engage race in order to transcend it. Only then will it be possible to restore "poverty" and "inequality" to political discourse. To build coalitions across racial and class lines. And to advance a political agenda that can effectively challenge class power and neoliberal rule.

I am mindful of the argument that there are bigger fish to fry: the ascendancy of global capitalism, imperialist wars, wage polarization, the attack on the welfare state, the simultaneous upward distribution of money to the haves and the shredding of the safety net for the have-nots, the auctioneering of our democracy to the highest bidder, and yes, the undoing of a century of reform. Against that agenda, there is a temptation to put behind "old battles" and to get "beyond race." The problem is that all of these "larger" issues, not to speak of the crucial question of who governs, are enmeshed with race and racism. Indeed, the racial divide that is the legacy of slavery has been the Achilles heel of American democracy, of the noble movement for labor rights, and of valiant attempts of generations of Leftists to advance a progressive agenda. It follows that the struggle against neoliberalism and the struggle for racial justice must go hand in hand.

Notes

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[ii] Ibid., 62.

[iii] Gertrude Jaeger Selznick & Stephen Steinberg, "Social Class, Ideology, and Voting Preference: An Analysis of the 1964 Presidential Election," in *Structured Social Inequality*, Celia S. Heller, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968): 216-26.

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[v] Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969): 25.

[vi] Edsall and Edsall: 62.

[vii] Stephen Eric Bronner, "Notes on the Counter-Revolution," *Logos* 2011: Vol. 10, Issue 1: 4.

[viii] Edsall and Edsall: 62.

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[x] Stephen Steinberg, "Poor Reason: culture still doesn't explain poverty," Web edition of the *Boston Review* (January 2011): https://www.bostonreview.net/BR36.1/steinberg.php

[xi] See Christopher Bonastia, *Knocking on the Door: The Federal Government's Attempt to Desegregate the Suburb*s (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[xii] Material in this paragraph is excerpted from my book, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001): 110-12. Also my piece on "Nathan Glazer and the Assassination of Affirmative Action," *New Politics* (Summer 2003): https://ww3.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue35/Steinberg35.htm

[xiii] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007).

[xiv]Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006): 218-36.

[xv] Ibid., 227.

[xvi] Ibid., 230.

[xvii] Ibid., 235. James Kilpatrick went so far as to say that the equalitarians were "worse racists—much worse racists—than the old Southern bigots," and that "the bureaucrats of HEW have done more to destroy good race relations in the past ten years than the Ku Klux Klan did in a century." Ibid., 236.

[xviii] Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980,* Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

[xix] Adolph Reed, Jr., "Looking Backward," *The Nation* (November 28, 1994): 661-62.

[xx] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986): 42.

[xxi] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Conference Proceedings, *Daedalus*, "The Negro American," Vol. 95:1 (Winter 1966): 288-89.

[xxii] David P. Bryden, "The False Promise of Compromise," *The Public Interest* (Winter 1998): 55; Richard Kahlenberg, *The Remedy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995): 118-19. Among the others whom Kahlenberg cites as supporting a class-based affirmative action are Jack Kemp, George Pataki, Christine Todd Whitman, and Bill Clinton. Stephen Steinberg, "Confronting the Misuse of Class-Based Affirmative Action," *New Politics* (Winter 1999): https://ww3.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue26/steinb26.htm

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Neoliberal Politics as Failed Sociality: Youth and the Crisis of Higher Education

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More often than not, hopes are difficult to recognize in the realities they sediment. The 'invisible hand' of the market operated by selfish individuals in search of their own wealth and pleasure seemed to be rather reluctant or impotent to save humans from the horrors of reciprocal cruelties; most certainly, it managed neither to liberate most humans from the bondage of passions, nor to make completely happy those few whom it succeeded in freeing.
Zygmunt Bauman[i]

Introduction

Within the last forty years, the United States under the reign of neoliberalism, or market fundamentalism as it has been called in some quarters, has been transformed into a society that is more about forgetting than learning, more about consuming than producing, more about asserting private interests rather than democratic rights, more about producing a culture of cruelty than a democratic polity imbued with a sense of social responsibility. Not only are all vestiges of the social state under siege, but the attack on public values that has been waged aggressively by neoliberalism since the late 1970s has now taken a very aggressive and dangerous turn, particularly with the rise of the Tea Party movement, the enactment of the corporate friendly Citizens United Supreme Court decision, the seizure of state sovereignty by corporate powers, and the expansion of the warfare state. Gross inequalities in wealth and income, bankrupt cities, rampant privatization, runaway militarism, unbridled individualism, state sanctioned use of torture, and an obsession with materialism have become normalized to the degree that it is hard to imagine what American society would look like in the absence of these structural and ideological features of the new and militant economic Darwinism that holds sway over the American public. The mantra is well known: government is now the problem, society is a fiction, sovereignty is market-driven, deregulation and commodification are props of the corporate state, and the yardstick of profit is the only viable measure of the good life and advanced society. Public values are now viewed as a liability, if not a pathology. Democratic commitments, social relations, and public spheres are no longer valorized as a symbol of hope. They have become disposable like young people and the expanding populations of the dispossessed, disparaged as a drain on the economy and a threat to neoliberal regimes of truth. In a society obsessed with customer satisfaction and the rapid disposability of both consumer goods and long-term attachments, politics has become not just dystopian but dysfunctional and deeply authoritarian.[ii] The American public is no longer offered the opportunities, guidance, and modes of education that cultivate the capacities for critical thinking and engaged citizenship. The formative cultures that provide the preconditions for critical thought and agency and are crucial to any viable notion of the social are being dismantled. Under such circumstances, thought cannot sustain itself and becomes short-lived,

fickle, and ephemeral.

If Americans, especially young people, do not display a strong commitment to democratic politics and collective struggle, it is because they have lived through thirty years of what I have elsewhere called “a debilitating and humiliating disinvestment in their future,” especially if they are marginalized by class, ethnicity, and race.[iii] What is new about this historical moment for a generation of young people is that they have experienced first-hand the relentless spread of a neoliberal pedagogical apparatus with its celebration of an unbridled individualism and its near pathological disdain for community, public values, and the public good. They have been inundated by a market-driven value system that encourages a culture of competitiveness and produces a theater of cruelty. If labor unions, students, workers, and others are not protesting in large numbers the ongoing intense attack on bargaining rights, labor, higher education, and the welfare state, it may be because they have been born into a society that is tantamount to what Alex Honneth describes as “an abyss of failed sociality [one in which] their perceived suffering has still not found resonance in the public space of articulation.”[iv] Democracy no longer leaves open the importance of and experience of the common good. As a mode of failed sociality, the current version of market fundamentalism turned the principles of democracy against itself, deforming both the language of freedom and justice that made equality a viable idea and political goal. Parading as a species of democracy, neoliberal economics and ideology cancels out democracy as a “as the incommensurable sharing of existence that makes the political possible.”[v] Symptoms of ethical, political, and economic impoverishment are all around us.

In spite of being discredited by the economic recession of 2008, a hyper market fundamentalism has once again returned with a vengeance. The Gilded Age has come back with big profits for the rich and increasing impoverishment and misery for the middle and working class. Political illiteracy has cornered the market on populist rage, providing a political bonus for those who are responsible for massive levels of inequality, poverty, and sundry other hardships. As social protections are dismantled, public servants are denigrated, and public goods such as schools, bridges, health care services, and public transportation deteriorate, withe few exceptions, governments across the globe embraces the values of economic Darwinism and rewards its chief beneficiaries: mega banks and big business. Neoliberalism proceeds once again in zombie-like fashion to impose its values, social relations, and forms of social death upon all aspects of civic life. As memories of the achievements of the social state are eviscerated, politics becomes an extension of war and the welfare is largely replaced by the warfare and punishing state.[vi] Nowhere is the dismantling of the social state and the transformation of the state into a punishing machine resembling Hobbes’s war of all against all more evident than in the current attacks on youth, labor rights, and higher education being waged by Republican governors in a number of key states such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida, and Ohio. What is often missed in these attacks is that the war on the social state and the war on education represent part of the same fabric of destruction and violence. The first war is being waged for the complete control by the rich and powerful of all modes of wealth and income while the second is conducted on the ideological front and represents a battle over the very capacity of young people to imagine a different and more critical mode of subjectivity

and alternative mode of politics. If the first war is on the diverse and myriad terrain of political economy the second is being waged though what C. Wright Mills once called the major cultural apparatuses, including public and higher education. In what follows, I first want to delineate the contours of both of these wars as part of a larger effort to destroy any vestige of a democratic imaginary and to relegate the value of the social question to the wasteland political thought.

Waging War on the Social State

There can be little doubt that the America has become a permanent warfare state.[vii] Not only is it waging a war in three countries, but its investment in military power is nearly as much as all of the military budgets of every other country in the world combined. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute states that "The USA's military spending accounted for 43 per cent of the world total in 2009, followed by China with 6.6 per cent; France with 4.3 per cent, and the UK with 3.8 per cent."[viii] We have squandered over a trillion dollars fighting useless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pentagon spending for 2011 will be more than $700 billion. To make matters worse, as Tom Englehardt points out "We dominate the global arms trade, monopolizing almost 70% of the arms business in 2008, with Italy coming in a vanishingly distant second. We put more money into the funding of war, our armed forces, and the weaponry of war than the next 25 countries combined (and that's without even including Iraq and Afghan war costs)."[ix] Moreover, the United States maintains a massive ring of military bases and global presence around the world, occupying "over 560 bases and other sites abroad"[x] and deploying over 300,000 troops abroad, "even as our country finds itself incapable of paying for basic services."[xi] In spite of how much military expenditures drain much needed funds from social programs, the military budget is rarely debated in Congress or a serious object of discussion among the public.

War is now normalized even as the United States moves closer to a national security state at home and is perceived as an imperial power abroad. Military historian Andrew Bacevich is right in arguing that "The misleadingly named Department of Defense serves in fact as a Ministry of Global Policing."[xii] War has become a central feature of the American character, yet, what is often unacknowledged is that its perpetual wars abroad are increasingly matched by a number of wars being waged on the domestic front. Such a disconnect becomes clear in the refusal of politicians, anti-public intellectuals, and the general public to acknowledge how the federal deficit has been run up by our military adventures. As Frank Rich argues, "The cultural synergy between the heedless irresponsibility we practiced in Iraq and our economic collapse at home could not be more naked. The housing bubble, inflated by no-money-down mortgage holders on Main Street and high-risk gamblers on Wall Street, was fueled by the same greedy disregard for the laws of fiscal gravity that governed the fight-now-play later war[s]" in Iraq and Afghanistan and more recently in Libya.[xiii] Similarly, as the spirit of militarism bleeds into every facet of American life and politics increasingly becomes an extension of war, and right-wing, liberal, and conservative politicians embrace a militaristic approach to policy and the need to cleanse the social order of any institution, mode of dissent, individuals, groups, and public sphere at odds with its state of permanent war and its

militarized and unchecked embrace of economic Darwinism. These foreign and domestic wars are not unrelated, given that they are waged in the interests of right-wing militarists, neo-conservatives, liberals, and corporate moguls–all of whom have a political and economic stake in such military incursions abroad and wars at home. Moreover the costs of armed conflict are directly related to an economic crisis that has produced a wave of political extremism in the United States while furthering the rise of a punishing state that places the burdens of the current economic crisis on the backs of the poor.

War is not merely the outgrowth of polices designed to protect the security and well-being of the United States. It is also, as C. Wright Mills pointed out, part of a "military metaphysics"[xiv]–a complex of forces that includes corporations, defense industries, politicians, financial institutions, and universities. War provides jobs, profits, political payoffs, research funds, and forms of political and economic power that reach into every aspect of society. As a mode of public pedagogy, a state of permanent war needs willing subjects to abide by its values, ideology, and narratives of fear and violence. Such legitimation is largely provided through a culture addicted to the production of organized violence and is largely circulated through various registers of popular culture that extend from high fashion and Hollywood movies to the production of violent video games and music concerts sponsored by the Pentagon. The spectacle of war demands a culture of conformity, quiet intellectuals, and a largely passive republic of consumers. It also necessitates two forms of military intervention that take the form of a corporate war on the social state and a war on any mode of critical education.

The war on the social state is in high gear and is most evident in a range of polices designed to punish unions, abrogate the bargaining rights of workers, cut social protections, and disinvest in higher education as a site of critical learning while reorganizing it according to the interests and values of a market-driven culture. The mean-spirited and ideologically dogmatic nature of the assault on labor can be seen in Maine's Republican Governor Paul LePage's call to remove a 36-foot, 11-panel mural by Judy Taylor from the foyer in the state's Department of Labor building in Augusta.[xv] LePage claims that a number of business officials complained about the mural echoing a sentiment he received in a fax that claimed that the mural "was reminiscent of "communist North Korea where they use these murals to brainwash the masses."[xvi] But LePage's contempt for workers, unions, teachers, and their struggles did not end with the removal of the mural; he also ordered seven conference rooms to be renamed, given that few of them were named after notable labor organizers, including Cesar Chavez, a heroic figure who "led the United Farm Workers union in the sixties and seventies.[xvii] LePage's actions mirror the same disdain for democracy and the social state that is being exhibited by Republican governors in Wisconsin and a number of other states in which draconian measures are being imposed on the unemployed, working poor, middle-class, students, and others who are outside of the radar of politicians in the service of the corporate rich.

The second war, inextricably connected to the war on the social state and democracy itself, is the current assault taking place on higher education. Under the regime of market

fundamentalism, institutions that were meant to both critique and limit human suffering and address major social problems have been either weakened or abolished, as are many of those public spheres where private troubles could be understood as social problems and addressed as such.[xviii]. This shift from the basic tenets of the social contract to savage forms of corporate sovereignty is part of a broader process of "reducing state support of social goods [and] means that states—the institutions best placed to defend the gains workers and other popular forces have made in previous struggles—are instead abandoning them."[xix] Faced with massive deficits, states are refusing to raise taxes on the rich or corporations while enacting massive cuts in everything from Medicaid programs, food banks, and worker retirement funds to higher education and health care programs for children. For example, Florida Governor Rick Scott "[has] proposed slashing corporate income and property taxes, laying off 6,700 state employees, cutting education funding by $4.8 billion, and cutting Medicaid by almost $4 billion. Scott's ultimate plan is to phase the Sunshine state's corporate income tax out entirely. He [wants] to gut Florida's unemployment insurance system, leaving unemployed workers 'with much less economic protection than unemployed workers in any other state in the country.'"[xx] As social problems are privatized and public spaces commodified, there has been an increased emphasis on individual solutions to socially produced problems, while at the same time market relations and the commanding institutions of capital are divorced from matters of politics, ethics, and responsibility. How else to explain the lack of massive protests over the recent revelations that massive corporations such as General Electric and the Bank of America paid no taxes in spite of accruing massive financial profits. The commodification of thought and the depoliticization of everyday life has created both a culture of illiteracy and cruelty in which notions of the public good, community, and the obligations of citizenship are replaced by the overburdened demands of individual responsibility and an utterly privatized ideal of freedom.

In the current market-driven society, with its ongoing uncertainties and collectively induced anxieties, core public values regarding compassion for the common good and especially the poor have been abandoned under the regime of a market society that promotes a survival of the fittest economic doctrine. As Jeffrey Sachs points out, "Income inequality is at historic highs, but the rich claim they have no responsibility to the rest of society. They refuse to come to the aid of the destitute, and defend tax cuts at every opportunity. Almost everybody complains, almost everybody aggressively defends their own narrow, short-term interests, and almost everybody abandons any pretense of looking ahead or addressing the needs of others."[xxi] Shared sacrifice and shared responsibilities now give way to shared fears and a disdain for investing in the common good. Conservatives and liberals alike seem to view public values, public spheres, and the notion of the common good as either a hindrance to the profit-seeking goals of a market-driven society or a drain on the market-driven social order, treated as a sign of weakness, if not pathology, or even worse, dangerous.[xxii]

The War Against Higher Education

Public spheres that once offered at least the glimmer of progressive ideas, enlightened social policies, non-commodified values, and critical exchange have been increasingly commercialized

or replaced by private spaces and corporate settings whose ultimate fidelity is to expanding profit margins. For example, higher education is increasingly defined as another core element of corporate power and culture and as such has to be stripped of its role as democratic public sphere vital to the ideals of democratization. In the current climate, what has become clear is that the neoliberal attack on the social state, workers, and unions is now being matched by a full-fledged assault on higher education. Such attacks are not happening just in the United States but in many other parts of the globe where neoliberalism is waging a savage battle to eliminate all of those public spheres which might offer a glimmer of opposition to market-driven policies, institutions, ideology, and values. Higher Education is being targeted by conservative politicians and governments because it embodies, at least ideally, a sphere in which students learn that democracy as Jacques Rancière suggests a rupture, a relentless critique and dialogue about official power, its institutions, and its never ending attempts to silent dissent.[xxiii]

As Ellen Schrecker points out, "Today the entire enterprise of higher education, not just its dissident professors, is under attack, both internally and externally."[xxiv] Both in the United States, England and a number of other European countries, universities and businesses are forming stronger ties, the humanities are being underfunded, student tuition is rising at astronomical rates, knowledge is being commodified, and research is valued through the lens of an audit culture. The reach and influence of corporate-based models of education can be seen in their boldest forms in the United Kingdom. Imported and slavishly adopted, the neoliberal educational play book now shapes higher education policy in England, specifically through what has been called the Browne Report. This government sponsored report has established modes of governance, financing, and evaluation that for all intent and purposes makes higher education an adjunct of corporate values and interests.[xxv] Delivering improved employability has reshaped the connection between knowledge and power while rendering faculty and students as professional entrepreneurs and budding customers. The notion of the university as a center of critique and democratic public sphere vitally necessary in providing the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for the production of a democratic polity is giving way to a view of the university as a marketing machine essential to the production of neoliberal subjects.[xxvi]

The Browne Report's guiding assumptions, which mimic the logic driving educational reform in the United States, suggest that student choice, a consumer model of pedagogy, an instrumental culture of auditing practices, and market-driven values are at the heart of the neoliberal university. Like most neoliberal models of education, higher education matters to the extent that it drives economic growth, innovation, transformation, and promotes national prosperity.[xxvii] Even though tuition will be tripled in some cases, numerous schools closed, and higher education effectively remade according to the dictates of a corporate culture, the conservative-liberal government appears indifferent to the devastating consequences its policies will produce. Simon Head has suggested that the Browne policies represent a severe threat to academic freedom. In actuality, the neoliberal policies it embodies represents a threat to one of the few remaining institutions left in which dissent, critical dialogue, and social problems can be critically engaged.[xxviii] What is often lost in such criticisms is that

democracy demands a critical formative culture and set of institutions in which complicated ideas can be engaged, authority challenged, power held accountable, and public intellectuals produced. All of this is now threatened in the United States, England, France, and other countries pushing neoliberal reforms. Under this economic model, there is no talk of social justice, addressing social problems, promoting critical thinking, addressing matters of social responsibility, or engaging critically non-commodified values that might challenge the neoliberal world view.

In the United States, this neoliberal model takes a somewhat different form than in its counterparts abroad since states control the budgets for higher education. Under the call for austerity, states have begun the process of massively defunding public universities while they simultaneously provide massive tax breaks for corporations and the rich. At the same time, higher education in its search for funding has "adopted the organizational trappings of medium-sized or large corporations."[xxix] University presidents are now viewed as C.E.O.s, faculty as entrepreneurs, and students as consumer. It gets worse. In some universities, new college deans are shifting their focus outside of the campus in order to take "on some of the fund-raising, strategic planning, and partner-seeking duties that were once the bailiwick of the university president."[xxx] Academic leadership is now defined in part through one's ability to raise funds, engage in strategic planning, and partner up with corporate donors. In fact, deans are increasingly viewed as the head of complex businesses and their job performance ratings are dependent on their fund-raising performances.

As business culture permeate higher education all manner of school practices from food service and specific modes of instruction to hiring temporary faculty are now outsourced to private contractors. Moreover, the most important value of higher education is now tied to the need for credentials. Disciplines and subjects that do not fall within the purview of mathematical utility and economic rationality are now seen as dispensable.[xxxi] In the search for adopting market values and cutting costs, classes have ballooned in size, there is an increased emphasis on rote learning and standardized testing, and tuition fees have skyrocketed, making it impossible for thousands of working class youth to gain access to higher education. One of the most serious consequences facing higher education in the United States under the reign of neoliberal austerity and disciplinary measures is the increased casualization of academic labor and the ongoing attacks on tenure and academic freedom.

College presidents not only now align themselves with business values, they willingly and openly associate themselves with corporate interests. Moreover, as universities adopt models of corporate governance, they are aggressively eliminating tenure positions, increasing part-time and full-time positions without the guarantee of tenure, and attacking faculty unions. In a number of states such as Ohio and Utah, legislatures have passed bill outlawing tenure while in Wisconsin, the governor has abrogated the bargaining rights of state university faculty.[xxxii] At a time when higher education is becoming increasingly vocationalized, the ranks of tenure track faculty are being drastically depleted in the United States furthering the loss of faculty as stakeholders. Currently, only 27 percent of faculty are either on a tenure track of have a full-time tenure position. As faculty are demoted to contingency forms of labor, they not only lose

their power to influence the conditions of their work, they are seeing their workloads increase, paid poorly, deprived of office space and supplies, refused travel money, and subject to policies that allow them to be fired at will.[xxxiii] The latter is particularly egregious because when coupled with an ongoing series of attacks by right wing ideologues against left oriented and progressive academics, many non-tenured faculty censor themselves in their classes. At a time when critics within the academy are often fired for their political beliefs, have their names posted on right- wing web sites, are forced to turn over their email correspondence to right wing groups,[xxxiv] and are harassed in the conservative press, it is all more crucial that protections be put in place that safeguard faculty positions and academics to exercise the rights of academic freedom.[xxxv]

What is clear is that the United States is in a state of permanent war and that the casualties are not just on foreign soil. The war at home is being conducted by the same people who benefit from the wars abroad. Right-wing conservatives, politicians, and corporate billionaires who engage in a full-fledged attack to destroy higher education as a democratic public sphere exhibit not only a contempt for the social state, trade unions, and workers, but also any institution capable of producing "an educated population [willing] to sustain a vibrant democracy and culture that provides a key component of the good life."[xxxvi] Viewed as simply a training ground for the corporate order and the national security state, higher education has defaulted on its promise of democratic future for young people and its investment in a social state. This anti-public social formation has no interest in fostering the educational conditions in which it becomes possible for young people to imagine another world outside of the economic Darwinism that now bears down on every aspect of their lives. While the complexity of such struggles cannot be exaggerated, it is time to develop a new political language that not only connects the dots between the war at home and abroad, but also makes clear that central to the success of such an egregious assault is the destruction of any vestige of higher education as a public good and democratic public sphere. There is more at stake here than simply the abrogation of worker's bargaining rights and a gratuitous increase in university tuition rates. There is also the question of what kind of society we want to become and what is going to have to be done to stop the arrogant and formidable assault on all vestiges of democratic life now being waged by the financial elite, corporations, conservatives, reactionary think tanks, authoritarian politicians, and a right-wing media that eschews any vestige of honor, decency, and the truth. At the heart of this struggle is not only a need to reclaim the social as part of a struggle for an engaged and critical populace, but also what it means to make pedagogy central to any viable notion of politics, and youth the crucial category in imagining a future in which the social becomes the sphere and foundation for a new understanding of the future.

Youth in Dark Times

The way society conceptualizes youth has changed from viewing youth as a symbol of hope and promise into a sign of trouble and threat. What is clear as a result of this "failed sociality" is that if democracy is going to deliver on its promises not only do young people need to have a passion for public values, social responsibility, and participation in society, but they also need

access to those public spaces that guarantee the rights of free speech, dissent, a quality education, and critical dialogue.

Young people need to be educated both as a condition of autonomy and for the sustainability of democratization as an ongoing movement. Not only does a substantive democracy demand citizens capable of self- and social criticism, but it also requires a critical formative culture in which people are provided with the knowledge and skills to be able to participate in such a society. What we see in the struggle for educational reforms in Europe and the Middle East is a larger struggle for the economic, political, and social conditions that give meaning and substance to what it means to make democracy possible. When we see 15 year-olds battle the established oppressive orders in the streets of Paris, Cairo, London, and Athens for a more just society, they offer a glimpse of the true potential of youth as a constructive force for trouble making. But this expression of trouble exceeds the dominant society's eagerness to view youth as a pathology, as monsters, and as a drain on the market-driven order. Instead, trouble in this sense speaks to something more suggestive of what John and Jean Comaroff call the "productive unsettling of dominant epistemic regimes under the heat of desire, frustration, or anger."[xxxvii] The expectations that frame market-driven societies are losing their grip on young people who can no longer be completely seduced or controlled by the tawdry promises and failed returns of either corporate dominated or politically authoritarian regimes.

These youth movements tell us that the social visions embedded in casino capitalism and deeply authoritarian regimes have lost both their utopian thrust and their ability to persuade and intimidate through threats, coercion, and state violence. Rejecting the terrors of the present and the modernist dreams of progress at any cost, young people have become, at least for the moment, harbingers of democracy fashioned through the desires, dreams, and hopes of a world based on the principles of equality, justice, and freedom. In doing so, they are pointing to a world order in which the future will certainly not mimic the present. Most importantly, they are gesturing towards a mode of collective politics in which solidarity is matched by a recovery of a notion of the social in which a market-driven society is not synonymous with democracy and private rights are not more important than the social good. Thus the process of democratization itself, never complete and becoming, constitutes the preeminent space of the social for keeping justice alive and the incommensurable spirit of political possibility open.

Notes

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[i]. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*, (Polity Press, 2008), pp. 1-49-50.

[ii]. See, especially, Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton University Press, 2008). See also my Henry A. Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

[iii]. Ibid., p. 235. I have also taken up this theme in great detail in Henry A. Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[iv]. Alex Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 188.

[v]. Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal Naas, "Translators Note," in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. ix

[vi]. This issue is take up in great detail in Loic Wacquant , *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Angela Y. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, (Seven Stories Press, 2005). See also, Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society and Spectacle*, (NY: New York Univesity Press, 2009). On the evisceration of the social state, see Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, (New York, N.Y.: The Penguin Press, 2010) and John Clarke, *Changing Welfare, Changing States* (London: Sage, 2004).

[vii].Some of the more important literature on this transformation includes: Catherine Lutz, "Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis," *American Anthropologist*, (104:3, 2002), pp. 723-735; **.**Andrew J. Bacevich, The New American Militarism, (Oxford University Press, 2005); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, (Princeton University Press, 2008); Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan books, 2008); Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan books, 2008); Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path To Permanent War*, (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, Henry Hold and Company, 2010).

[viii].Home Research Database, "Recent Trends in Military Expenditure," *Stockholm International Peace Institute* (November 23, 2010). Online: https://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/trends

[ix].Tom Engelhardt, "An American World War: What to Watch for in 2010," *TruthOut*, (January 03, 2010). Online at: https://www.truth-out.org/topstories/10410vh4

[x].Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Big (Military) Taboo," The New York Times (December 25, 2010), p. WK16.

[xi]. Chalmers Johnson, “The Guns of August: Lowering the Flag on the American Century” *TruthOut*, August 17, 2010. online: https://www.truth-out.org/the-guns-august-lowering-flag-american-century62384

[xii]. Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America’s Path To Permanent War*, (New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Books, Henry Hold and Company, 2010) p. 22.

[xiii]. Frank Rich, “Freedom is Just Another Word,” *The New York Times* (September 4, 2010), p. WK8.

[xiv]. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 222.

[xv].. Steven Greenhouse, “Mural of Maine’s Workers Becomes Political Target,” The New York Times, (March 23, 2011), p. A18.

[xvi].. Ibid. P. 18

[xvii]. Peter Dreier, “Battle Over Censorship of Maine Murals Part of a Larger Struggle for Basic Rights and Justice,” *Common Dreams* (March 31, 2010). Online: https://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/03/31-13?print

[xviii]. This theme is take up powerfully by a number of theorists. See C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1974); Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Henry A. Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

[xix]. Craig Calhoun, “Information Technology and the International Public Sphere,” in *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Society in Cyberspace*, ed. Douglas Schuler and Peter Day (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), p. 241.

[xx]. Zaid Jilani, Faiz Shakir, Benjamin Armbruster, George Zornick, Alex Seitz-Wald, and Tanya Somanader, “Rewarding Corporations While Punishing Workers,” *The Progress Report*, (March 18, 2011). Online at: https://pr.thinkprogress.org/2011/03/pr20110318/index.html

[xxi]. Jeffrey Sachs, “America’s Deepening Moral Crisis,” *The Guardian*, (October 4, 2010)

online at:
https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/oct/04/americas-deepening-moral-crisis

[xxii]. Classic examples of this can be found in the work of Milton Friedman and the fictional accounts of Ayn Rand. It is a position endlessly reproduced in conservative foundations and institutes such as the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Hudson Institute, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, and the Hoover Institute. One particularly influential book that shaped social policy along these lines is Charles Murray, *Losing Ground* (New York: Basic, 1994).

[xxiii]. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (Verso 2006).

[xxiv]. Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education*, (New York, N.Y.: The New Press, 2010), p. 3.

[xxv]. A number of important critiques of the Browne Report and the conservative-liberal attack on higher education include: Simon Head, "The Grim Threat to British Universities," *The New York Review of Books*, (January 13, 2011). Online at: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jan/13/grim-threat-british-universities/; Anthony T. Grafton, "Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities," *The New York Review of Books*, (March 10, 2010), p. 32; Nick Couldry, "Fighting for the Life of the English University in 2010," unpublished manuscript; Stefan Collini, "Browne's Gamble", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32 No. 21, (4 November 2010) pp. 23-25; Stanley Fish, "The Value of Higher Education Made Literal," *The New York Times*, (December 13, 2010). Online at: https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/13/the-value-of-higher-education-made-literal/;Aisha Labi, "British Universities and Businesses Are Forming Stronger Research Ties", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (October 4, 2010)

online at: https://chronicle.com/article/British-Universities-and/124814; Terry Eagleton, "The Death of Universities" *Guardian*, (December 17, 2010)

online at:
https://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/17/death-universities-malaise-tuition-fees

[xxvi]. Michael Collins, "Universities need reform – but the market is not the answer", *openDemocracy*, (November 23, 2010). online at:
https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/michael-collins/universities-need-reform-but-market-is-not-answer

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Remembering Fitch: Recollections of a Solitary Syndicalist

By | 2011: vol. 10, issue 2

Bob Fitch died on March 4, 2011 at the age of seventy two. I first met him in Berkeley during the early 1970s and then, until shortly before his death, we continued to meet every month or two at Pete's Tavern on 18th Street in Manhattan's Gramercy Park. It remains one of the oldest restaurants in NYC. Intellectuals and political people used to gather there, and it was the place where O. Henry supposedly wrote his great short story "The Gift of the Magi." Pete's Tavern was always noisy, packed with people, and the food wasn't great. But it was near Fitch's tiny apartment on 17th Street and it reminded us of an admirable past. I can barely remember a conversation with him that did not involve the radical literary or political heritage of times past. It was almost as if he read too much. Historical insights, stories, bristling ideas, facts upon facts, and pregnant theories played off one another in his remarkably fertile mind. How often, after a debate on some obscure issue or another, Fitch would call the next day to say that he had checked it out – and found a citation that clarified the matter (and, usually, validated his position). He was a terrific interlocutor: one walked away from a discussion with him smarter – and more intellectually honest – than before.

Fitch showed little patience for the fashions associated with the 1960s and its aftermath: authoritarian Marxism, identity politics, populism, spiritualism, or what much later become known as "politics of meaning." He was a person of great intellectual depth. Fitch studied the culture of classical Greece (like everything else) on his own. His political outlook fused the communitarian ideals of Rousseau, the ethical rationalism of Kant, the critical political economy of Marx, and a vision of unions as the expression of working class solidarity that derived from Durkheim. But the theorist was also concerned with practice. Fitch first joined a union when he was fifteen and then, after a stint in military intelligence while in the Air Force, he wound up in Berkeley. Radicalized by the 1960s, for a time, Fitch became something of a Maoist. He helped create the Revolutionary Union that, under the stewardship of Bob Avakian, turned into the Revolutionary Communist Party. But Fitch lacked the sorry megalomania of so many revolutionary sectarian "leaders." He was never intoxicated by violence. A trip to Eastern Europe, meanwhile, soured him on communism and vanguard politics. Fitch was also skeptical of third world populism: *Ghana: End of an Illusion* (1966) that he co-authored with his wife, Mary Oppenheimer, provides a sobering analyses of the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah.

Fitch would later spend two years working the Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians from 1989 to 1990. At Local 802, Manny Ness recounted how Fitch organized many shops for the union and was considered a model organizer. He then was hired by CWA Local 1180, a union representing New York City public employees, to develop a plan to rebuild New York's eroding manufacturing base. His research would serve him well and, in the process,

Fitch became aware of corruption in the union ranks. He refused to turn a blind eye – and his public estrangement from organized labor began. To the day he died, however, Fitch was respected by many leading union officials and, in private, some of them continued to ask his advice on union revitalization.

While in Berkeley, along with David Horowitz and David Collier, (both of whom later turned to the far right) Fitch served as an editor of the iconic magazine, *Ramparts,* and he later helped found *Socialist Revolution.* So, now, he turned back to journalism. He became one of the finest essayists of the 1960s generation. Many of his articles and editorials dealt with the nitty-gritty of urban politics. Others were concerned with crisis theory and the contradictions plaguing American capitalism. "Who Rules the Corporations?" (1970), also written with Mary Oppenheimer, illuminated the empirical organizations, workings, and interests generated by the existing accumulation process and what Marx called the "political economy of capital." Fitch was intent upon determining the great within the small: it was perhaps the fundamental theme that ran through his work.

Empirical inquiry was intended, according to Fitch, to illuminate the larger structure and spur indignation against it. And the wealth of his empirical knowledge was amazing. Nowhere does this become more apparent than in the collusion of finance, insurance, and real estate – or what he termed "FIRE" – that resulted in the loss of manufacturing jobs and the creation of a metropolitan playground for the wealthy at the expense of working people. *The Assassination of New York* (1996) exposed the capital working hand in hand with city officials in both parties — when it came to subsidies or housing or jobs — and it created a sensation. Many urban activists and students of city life still consider it a classic. But Fitch received only criticism from liberals for its attack on the Democratic Party establishment and, following the coronation of Rudy Giuliani as "America's mayor" in the aftermath of 9/11 (and his disastrous showing in the Republican primaries of 2008), it has largely been forgotten.

The Assassination of New York (1996) was based on articles that first appeared in *The Village Voice* and the *Nation.* It seems far removed from the university towns and populist politics that were so much a part of the New Left. But Fitch never fully abandoned Berkeley. His romantic vision of solidarity, or "class consciousness," hinged on popular democracy. Fitch was committed to the empowerment of workers and ordinary communities – and exposing the obstacles that hindered it. Fitch identified with working class neighborhoods resisting the capitalist-city government and local unions challenging larger ones. He also envisioned these proletarian communities and unions linking up with one another to create a systematic and organic alternative from the bottom up. Fitch understood the fundamental premise of Marxism, namely, that the power of capital rests on the degree of organizational and ideological disunity among workers. But he understood it in his own quixotic way looking back to the Knights of Labor and the IWW for inspiration. Fitch was always a syndicalist at heart – and that got him into trouble.

Solidarity for Sale (2006) was the book that he loved. Known simply as an expose of union corruption and as an unqualified indictment of the labor movement, it was neither one nor the

other. Fitch had intended to provide a theory of union corruption and his attack was directed less against industrial than craft unions. The problem was that the cavalcade of stories and statistics in his sprawling book obscured the underdeveloped theory and smothered the nuance. Fitch knew that unions were important organizational forms for resisting capitalist exploitation and that they remain relevant. He admired the large and bureaucratically efficient European unions greatly for their relative lack of corruption and the benefits that they provided workers. Fitch believed that the weakness of American unions helps explain the widest inequality of income and the most debilitated welfare state in the Western world. The issue then was not unions but the way in which they are organized in our country or, better, what European labor activists still call “the American disease.”

Fitch knew that capital has the upper hand in capitalist democracy. He noted the debilitating impact upon labor of weak laws, employer criminality, and de-industrialization. But he refused to cast unions simply as victims trampled by external forces beyond their control. Fitch insisted that the American union movement was complicit in the erosion of its membership and its power. He believed that particular forms of union organization can strengthen or weaken the ability of workers to confront capital. Fitch despaired over a situation reminiscent of feudalism in which 20,000 and semi-autonomous craft unions fragment the workforce while low-level officials depend upon the favors of higher-ups to control jobs within their local jurisdiction. Fragmentation creates problems of enforcement, according to Fitch, which leads local leaders into the arms of the mob, while lack of democratic accountability to the membership fosters inefficiency and corruption. Embezzlement of funds and pay-offs for compromises with capital thus reinforce one another – at the expense of workers. Stagnation is the result.

Ironically, for this syndicalist, the problem was not too much bureaucracy –but too little.

What Fitch termed the “fiefdom syndrome” undermines incentives to organize the unorganized and class solidarity. If facilitates the most craven compromises with capital. For Fitch, indeed, the question was not why American unions were weak but why they were ever stronger. He believed it was due not to the courage and intelligence of the conservative and fragmented union federations, but in spite of them. Business was pressured by the state to recognize unions in exchange for non-strike pledges during the two world wars while radical organizations like the IWW and the CIO offered organizational alternatives and generated unrest from the working class thus spurring action by the AFL. Fitch sought to link these two positions. Maximizing state support for labor calls for a unified union movement while, today, only small wildcat unions like those of the Chinese restaurant employees in NYV and their spontaneous strikes provide alternatives to the stagnant, fragmented, and fundamentally conservative union federation that exists.

Fitch never squared the circle. He could not translate his critique into a practical stance. But that was not what left him isolated. It’s not as if anyone on the left has a clear idea of how to transform American unions. What the left establishment could not abide was Fitch’s seemingly sectarian stance. His structural analysis of unions identified internal attempts to reform them, or the old tactic of “boring from within,” with the labor of Sisyphus. No one else stated so

openly that it was impossible to dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.

His estrangement from the establishmentarian labor movement really began with what would become a prophetic critique of UNITE and John Sweeney who succeeded the stolid and reactionary successor Lane Kirkland at the AFL-CIO. Hopes were high among the left establishment but Fitch brought his critical perspective to bear. Old union comrades were appalled; academic technocrats sneered; populists recoiled; and the more prized left-wing publications like *The Village Voice* and the *Nation* no longer had much use for him. *Solidarity for Sale* merely sealed his fate. A small circle of close friends like Mike Hirsch and Jane La Tour remained steadfast. A few more radical journals like *New Politics* still published Fitch. He joined Democratic Socialists of America. But his outlook remained what it was. His name still came up in almost every conversation dealing with unions. Looking back, I can't think of anyone more isolated than this great Marxist voice of American syndicalism. Fitch knew it, too. But he wasn't bitter. Generous to a fault, and not just when it came to money, he was one of those rare intellectuals who actually enjoyed seeing another writer receive recognition. Until the last year of his life, Fitch never had a full-time academic job. He ran around frantically teaching various courses as an adjunct at different universities, gave a few talks on the side, made a bit of money from his writing, and scraped by. John Ehrenberg, Chair of Political Science at Long Island University, told me that Fitch's students loved him. And I believe it.

Fitch had a wonderful sense of humor and he was a terrific storyteller. Often I implored Fitch to write a memoir about Berkeley in the 1960s. It might have made him some money (which he sorely needed as he grew older). He seemingly knew everyone from Mario Savio of the Free Speech Movement to Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers to Jerry Rubin of the Yippies and Michael Lerner the future Rabbi and editor of *Tikkun.* But Fitch always demurred. And it was not merely a matter of humility. He believed that his old stories belonged in the café. Fitch had bigger things on his mind. He was an intellectual of the old school: wide-ranging in his outlook, always ready to battle over ideas, suspicious of the latest philosophical fad, ever curious, respectful of genuine scholarship, and proud of his erudition. There are few friends from whom I learned so much. His critical spirit, uncompromising intellectual integrity and unique voice remain with me. I still remember when he wrote these wonderful lines from "Vetting God's Politics" (*MZine* 11/04/06) that perhaps best crystallize his critical spirit, intellectual integrity and unique voice:

For modernity, political consciousness begins with disenchantment: the understanding that religion is a form of alienation. Man makes God, not vice versa. No true *political* dialogue is possible with people who engage in ventriloqual routines with burning bushes, magic mountains, or enchanted clouds. For those influence by the Enlightenment the claim of being on God's side is not simply unconvincing. It's a coercive, authoritarian form of discourse. Don't tell me what God says. Tell me what you know. Don't tell me what the Lord did. Tell me why it's good to do.

Review Essay: Surge Protectors? Two Books on the Iraq War

By | 2011: vol. 10, issue 2

John Ehrenberg, J. Patrice McSherry, Jose Ramon Sanchez and Caroleen Marji Sayej, eds. *The Iraq Papers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009.

When future generations analyze the Iraq War I hope they concentrate on the tactics of "shock and awe" and the domestic reaction to them. During the buildup to invasion the Bush administration strove to convince the world that preemptive war was necessary and to reassure Americans that the war would be a short affair with limited costs, a testament to the irresistible might of America's military. Although even a sympathetic reader would likely concede ultimate failure in achieving the former goal, the public, conditioned by popular accounts of America's impact in past wars and role as the world's only superpower, was primed to stand in awe of America's military dominance. From the first moment of the invasion on March 19, 2003 the media streamed relentless images of blitzkrieg. Embedded journalists, part of a practice criticized for giving the military control of the narrative, covered the advance towards Baghdad from inside units engaged in an overwhelming onslaught. As the statue of a dictator that even opponents of the war acknowledged to be a tyrant fell on April 9, it was hard not to feel some awe at the culmination of the war's initial stage. For many, this awe was so intense that obvious flaws in Bush's case for war transmuted into the appearance of something like plausibility. Victory seemed so overwhelming that warning signs, such as looting that foreshadowed escalating violence in Iraq, were dismissed. "Stuff happens,' shrugged Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The profound and terribly costly failures of the occupation could only be experienced afterward as a profound shock.

The band Jane's Addiction contended in 1988, that modernity has reached a point where "nothing's shocking." If nothing's shocking, the world can neither outrage us nor catch us unprepared. If injustice and brutality are grounded facets of modern life, we cannot contest them. The cynical subject is thereby relieved of the burdens of intellectual engagement and conscientious response. Such cynicism allows many Americans to consume the war passively, as one might watch a horror film. One is reminded of Sidney Lumet's film *Network,* where the media is transformed into a corporate behemoth that engulfs everything, including resistance, which is futile. In a climactic scene, the crazed Howard Beale encourages viewers, frustrated and enraged both despite and because of the stultifying amusements force-fed them by the culture industry, to open their windows and shout, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" Despite their clamoring, however, Beale's audience remains inert and continue

to take “this” and all other manners of iniquity too. The Iraq War sparked, for the most part, a similar acquiescent bellowing; a majority continues to accept that which they decry.

An overexposed photograph is bright and blurry; the image is unclear. Although Americans experienced the Iraq War live on television, this experience did not, for the most part, generate a better informed discussion of the conflict. The public response vacillates between fatigued indifference and (ignored) demands for broad change, which usually lack a measured consideration of the situation on the ground in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. The false impression of intimacy, of a shared and direct experience of war, may be a large factor in the collapse of the space needed for critical reflection. The citizen is first reduced to the passive status of viewer and then caught up in emotional responses that render candid discourse and thoughtful action difficult.

Freud asserted that one major purpose of psychoanalysis was to function as an “education to reality.” Freud’s meaning is simple: psychoanalysis assists growth by allowing the individual to confront and contest the myriad illusions, personal and sociocultural in origin, that structure human life. Freud correctly saw that living freely and responsibly involves the work of slicing through Gordian knots of delusion and illusion that distort the real. To respond in fresh ways to the Iraq War, one has to make a similar effort. Two recent books, *The Iraq Papers* and *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* are impressive examples of work that accomplishes this daunting task.

Turning to Reality

The Iraq Papers, an edited volume composed of primary texts related to the war, is a striking achievement. The editors’ artful arrangement of texts encompasses the case made for the war and highlights how neoconservative ideology led to a reorganization of foreign and domestic policy around the imperatives of unipolar power, unilateral action and preemption. The central question posed by the editors is: how did preemption, in a nation historically committed to multilateral engagement and the defense of rights, become an acceptable policy? To answer this query, *The Iraq Papers* presents Iraq as a case study and encourages the reader to consider preemptive war as an evolving and dangerous trend. The collected documents are perhaps most valuable in that they reveal how deeply preemption has sunk into bases of American politics and foreign policy. They open up preemption as a topic for criticism and resistance. By presenting evidence, including statements, documents and memos, the editors of *The Iraq Papers* provide readers with the “education to reality” Freud urged. Given conclusive evidence of the illegality of the administration’s actions, the duplicity of its statements, its disregard for international institutions and for domestic public opinion, the reader then is enabled to make informed judgments about the wisdom of, and warrant for, preemption.

The Iraq Papers assesses the war’s consequences for the international arena and the domestic sphere by interpreting its conduct along intersecting axes: multilateral versus unilateral foreign policy and democracy versus empire. The power vacuum resulting from the end the Cold War, when America became the dominant international player, made Bush’s unilateral

policy possible. Unipolar power, however, is going to be a temporary advantage in an evolving world. This (im)balance of power is seen by some realists as an occasion for American leadership. Neoconservatives, however, view it as a vital opportunity to secure permanent American hegemony and a "new American century" (2-4). The administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton were both sensitive to the precariousness of this shift, which is why they declined to move unilaterally. The First Gulf War, as the editors note, reflects both the American commitment to multilateralism and an attendant capacity for restraint. Both administrations – out of a long-term concern about the regional balance of power – refused to remove Hussein from power (hoping, of course, it would happen internally). Several documents, including an op-ed by George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft and statements (ironically) by Dick Cheney in the early 1990s, reveal that leaving Saddam in power was a choice based on the anticipated disastrous consequences regime change would produce, many of which came to pass after the 2003 invasion.

The documents show that opposition to Bush's policies stemmed from a commitment to internationalism and human rights. *The Iraq Papers* returns the reader to the progressive traditions in American politics and thereby provides her with a genuine articulated alternative. *The Iraq Papers* also highlight the link of neoconservative ideology to American imperialism. Neoconservatives generally view it as America's responsibility to shape the international situation through military hegemony, founded on the belief that the American political and economic systems represent the best form of associational life, and therefore mark the end of history. As the editors note, these trends were rendered more dangerous by the neoconservatives' contempt for international institutions and law, which the administration cast as weak and outdated. As the infamous "Downing Street Memo" (document 2.6) shows, the decision to reject containment and to invade Iraq was made before the administration brought its case to the public, and represents a total rejection of the internationalist tradition. The administration simply asserted there was a universal desire for American-style institutions, which were believed to work anywhere and to be inevitable. *The Iraq Papers* pulls no punches in showcasing its disastrous consequences.

The Iraq Papers highlights the irreducible antagonism between democracy and empire. Aggressive intervention abroad runs directly against the political climate and culture necessary for democracy at home. *The Iraq Papers* provides plenty of evidence that unilateral foreign policy was paralleled by the development of a unilateral executive branch (512). The swift passage of draconian laws like the Patriot Act shows that the emphasis on security utilized to promote and defend the invasion overwhelmed civil liberties and democratic processes. Bush's White House, furthermore, utilized military concerns to operate in unprecedented secrecy and to make and shape law through bully politics and a profusion of lawless 'signing statements.' The precedent of using violence to impose democracy is a challenge to the very idea of democracy. Recent developments show the depths of the impact of Bush's efforts to reshape the executive branch and the balance of power through the use of dangers, both real and imagined, related to terrorism. The 2006 Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, for example, broadly restricts animal rights activism, including the actions of violent groups like the Animal Liberation Front. Drawing on an exaggerated need for security, however, sets the dangerous

precedent of utilizing the War on Terror to intimidate nonviolent protestors. The Patriot Act and AETA are not isolated examples. The use of preemption to restrict spaces for resistance and criticism at home was evident in the administration's demands for deference after 9/11. As Condoleezza Rice posited during the 2000 presidential campaign, a key domestic task of the administration would be to define new national interests in line with the hegemonic power it sought in the international arena: *interests that support heightened executive power cannot exist in harmony with democratic, peaceful and cosmopolitan trends* (document 1.16). *The Iraq Papers* makes this shift, and its foundations clear, and thus allows the reader to consider the long-term sociopolitical consequences at home. From this study of the tactics and arguments utilized under Bush, we can recognize the ways in which preemption continues to impact the presidency under the administration of Barack Obama.

The most damning aspect of the critique of the Bush administration made in *The Iraq Papers* comes from the words of administration officials themselves, which amply show misconduct under international and domestic law. The editors' inclusion of relevant passages of law allows the reader to judge for himself, and thus restores critical space for reflection and decision. In Chapter 8, "Human Rights and International Law: U.S. Methods and Operations in Preemptive War," for example, sections of the Constitution, Geneva Conventions, UN Conventions Against Torture and the U.S. Criminal Code are juxtaposed against now infamous memos by Alberto Gonzales, John Yoo and Jay Bybee which proposed devious means of circumventing law and treaty obligations. The dishonesty of these memos and the policies they support is apparent. The inclusion of documents critical of the ideology that guided the conduct of the war was another wise choice by the editors. The editors' thoughtful, restrained commentary also provides necessary information and works like a series of guideposts that help reader to discern the full implications of the selected documents. The solvency of these arguments, finally, cause the reader to wonder why more people, especially given the historically low approval ratings George W. Bush earned, did not act and speak against the war; these critiques thus allow the reader to reflexively critique *himself* as agent and rethink his response to the war. *The Iraq Papers* is, therefore, an essential resource for anyone hoping to make sense of the conflict in Iraq.

Confronting the Real

Reading Thomas Ricks's *The Gamble* against *The Iraq Papers* is a rewarding experience, as *The Gamble* locates the reader directly within the situation through which the arguments examined in *The Iraq Papers* must be judged. It is striking, therefore, that Ricks chooses to open his book with the Haditha Massacre, the killing of 24 Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines in November 2005. The massacre frames the project Ricks undertakes in assessing both the institutional pressures and policies that pushed American troops into sheer murder and the indifferent military brass who utilized aggressive tactics to treat Iraqis as hostile agents, and an out of touch administration above them, which combination Ricks contends led to the near loss of the war in 2005 (8). Things were set to fall apart from the beginning. *The Gamble* makes it clear that it took a reversion to traditional counterinsurgency tactics and diplomacy, the very tools rejected as out of date, to even begin to pull Iraq out of the morass the administration's policies

engendered. *The Gamble* reveals that the impetus for the move to counterinsurgency strategy which, in however an inconsistent way in practice, emphasizes protecting and securing the partnership of the people, did not come from administration. It emerged from a group of military intellectuals after the Haditha Massacre made the catastrophic failure of the administration's strategies indisputable. Ricks's account proves that it took a full year and the electoral defeat of the Republican party in 2006 – during which time Iraq slid into rigid sectarianism, fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing and civil war – for the administration to be forced to see the need for a strategy built around winning the partnership of at least some Iraqis, and thus exposes the full moral calamity of the occupation (9).

The passage of time has effaced the severity of the civil war in Iraq from American political consciousness (if ever aware of it), but this outbreak of violence and the possibility that Iraq could slide into similar conflicts in the future continues to impact American strategies. Ricks presents the civil war in graphic detail, and by making it clear that although Iraqis perpetrated the killings, American decisions crafted the situation in which they became possible. The 2005 elections, which the administration, after initially resisting them, celebrated, only worked to harden sectarian lines (32). Tactics like withdrawing troops to bases where they could neither protect nor connect with the people and transitioning to unreliable Iraqi forces complicit in the violence were the self-defeating focus (14). *The Gamble,* in short, captures a criminally irresponsible administration, whose unrealistic goal of reshaping Iraq in America's neoliberal image led to the total collapse of Iraqi civic life.

The Gamble casts an important light not only on the transition to counter-insurgency strategy, but on the insurgency itself. The distrust of the United States felt by Iraqis pre-surge is a haunting aspect of Ricks's text and the war itself; *The Gamble* clarifies that this was not a hatred grounded in prejudicial differences, but rather one sparked by the shattering of Iraqi life during the war. Ricks's argues that many insurgents simply wanted to protect their communities, families and homes – a task necessitated by American military actions. The insurgency, furthermore, flourished because of counterproductive macho tactics – like harsh treatment in military prisons, which became veritable recruiting centers – sanctioned by the administration (194). Petraeus's new strategy, as Ricks claims, contains a sweeping criticism of the administration, and his reminder to the troops – "live our values" – causes one to question exactly what was being lived before his promotion (25, 29). *The Gamble,* in general, begs the question: if strategic sense had prevailed in the administration from the beginning, is it not likely that we would inhabit a safer world today? Petraeus's new counterinsurgency tactics – supposedly grounded in reciprocity and respect – are, on the face of it anyway, a repudiation of the worst abuses and assumptions made by the Bush administration. The overall effectiveness and long-term impact of the surge remains uncertain at the end of *The Gamble*. Although Ricks contends that the surge was a tactical victory, he poses its strategic success as dubious at best. The surge was bound to the restricted goals of increased security and stability and the realistic assessment that even these stripped down aims would require a prolonged – and why not permanent ? – presence in Iraq. At the end of *The Gamble,* indeed, it is not clear that a winning hand was played, or even what is at stake in the venture. Iraq remains, as Ricks shows, in a political impasse. Ricks claims Obama shares Petraeus's thin hopes for Iraqi

security and contends that General Raymond Odierno, Petraeus's successor in command of the mission in Iraq, will likely pressure Obama to keep troops in Iraq. What is certain about *The Gamble* is the wager it implicitly challenges readers to make through its stark portrayal of the tenuous situation in Iraq; with knowledge of the situation on the ground and the importance of political decisions currently being made, *The Gamble* shows the need to invest effort in activism seeking to shape a responsible policy on Iraq and in sociopolitical activity that rebuilds the internationalism and connections amongst peoples imperiled by preemptive war. The chance to restore democratic processes and values, to reject the unilateralism of the recent past, is one worth taking.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

In April 2009 a controversy erupted over a proposed video game, *Six Days in Fallujah*, which aimed to recreate the brutal campaign in that city. Many critics felt that *Six Days in Fallujah* was a tasteless effort to profit from war and an insult to the soldiers who served in Iraq. The organization Gold Star Families Speak Out, which represents the families of fallen soldiers complained that "war is not a game and neither was the Battle of Fallujah."[1] The surprising part of this story is not that Atomic Games, the game's producer, would create such a game, but rather the outrage the game provoked. Similar games, including the popular *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* series, have simulated real wars. Even games focusing on Vietnam, an unpopular conflict with many surviving veterans and families of the fallen, caused little uproar. The Iraq War, moreover, influenced, indirectly and through consultation with veterans, the popular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. A game based on the war in Afghanistan, *Medal of Honor 2010* incited no response save the excitement of gamers. If one looks at almost any medium of amusement, it is obvious that the Iraq War has impacted the way Americans entertain themselves.

So what explains the response to *Six Days in Fallujah*? The game strikes too close to the media narrative of the war, which often relied on game-like footage from aircraft and gun cameras. As a work of survival-horror, with insurgents cast in a role that might be elsewhere filled by zombies, it comes too near the Manichean experience of Iraqis as evil incarnate. The game is juxtaposed uncomfortably with an administration that treated the conduct of war like a strategic game in which anything goes, where consequences need not hinder the declaration of "victory." Above all, the game served as a screen upon which outrage at the really distasteful thing – the war itself – could be projected and thereby vented. Indignation aroused by *Six Days in Fallujah* is a truly hopeful sign. If the public can face the reality of these 'wars of choice", we can move beyond the haphazard expression of outrage.

Works like *The Iraq Papers* and *The Gamble* pull down the screen and force the reader to analyze the war directly, and in that sense, both are curatives that remove us from the emotionalism that for years suffocated critical thought. This could not be more important today: our first live war has faded from the headlines, but it has yet to fade from our sociopolitical experience. Although the war gets little attention, it still haunts the public. Soldiers and their families struggle with worst symptoms of this trauma, including PTSD, drug

use, violence and a high incidence of suicide. The mass trauma of war, however, is harder to discern. Iraq marks the collapse of American delusions of military dominance and exposes the illusions of American candor, goodness and morality. Today, we need to consider the positive aspects of these shocks. Whether we mean the shock felt by a child who has stuck his finger in a light socket or the shock of citizens watching an illegal invasion slide into chaos, shock offers an occasion for learning. Shock invites the subject to reflect on the circumstances that led to present straits and thereby allows for the development of limits on action and more intelligent choices. Works like *The Iraq Papers* and *The Gamble* provide a strong foundation for this effort, and thus merit the attention of citizens and activists working towards a world in which the unjust actions of the recent past will be less and less possible.

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[1] https://www.military.com/news/article/April-2009/iraq-war-video-game-canceled.html

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Anna Grear, Redirecting Human Rights: Facing the Challenge of Corporate Legal Humanity

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The U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United decision last year– opening the floodgates for corporate monetary influence over elections – was a landmark victory for the "business civil liberties" movement founded by the Chamber of Commerce in the early 1970s. At that time the Chamber invited Lewis Powell (shortly before his appointment to the Supreme Court) to circulate a strategic white paper describing how business could go on the offensive against student activists, consumer advocates and anyone else who challenged the supremacy of the business community. Following Powell's advice, the Chamber and a raft of non-profit "free enterprise" law firms supported by Olin, Scaife and other foundations launched a campaign to advance corporate interests by advocating expanded constitutional rights for corporations. The boundaries of commercial and political speech doctrines consequently expanded as corporations managed to convince the Court to block or overturn public health and consumer regulations. Meanwhile, the Chamber and its allies mounted a virulent campaign for "tort reform," threatened SLAPP suits, and lobbied for other legislation (e.g. food disparagement laws) designed to stifle consumer, student and citizen activism.

By the 2000s Powell's framework was taken to the international level primarily through corporate-friendly trade agreements festooned with investor rights provisions that trumped national and sub-national regulations. The insertion of corporations into international human rights law was a direct extension of the corporate rights strategy. Unfortunately, this latter development has been obfuscated by debates over corporate complicity with human rights abuses. In part that consequence is a reflection of human rights activists' success in mounting high-profile campaigns, and lawyers' skillful use of the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789, which put many multinational corporations on the defensive. In response to these and other pressures, corporations worked to integrate human rights concerns self-interestedly into their agenda. At least 270 companies worldwide adopted human rights policies, according to the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights. At the same time, with activists exposing major weaknesses in international accountability mechanisms (e.g. the exemption of corporations from the International Criminal Court), the UN is struggling to operationalize its Norms on the (human rights) Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations, adopted in 2003.

None of these activist interventions prevented corporations from strengthening their standing under international human rights law or continuing to mount claims, a phenomenon that received less organized resistance from activists (especially in the U.S.), and scant attention from legal theorists. The boundaries are being constantly pushed at the European Court of

Human Rights (ECtHR), in ways that enable corporations to prevail in commercial disputes and to overturn national or subnational regulations. In the 2002 case *Societe Colas Est v. France*, for example, publicly traded companies successfully relied on 'the right to respect for private and family life' under Article 8 of the European Convention (ECHR), and specifically for the right to respect for their 'home' to challenge a police raid on the corporate premises during an investigation into anti-competitive practices. Invoking the need for a "dynamic interpretation of the Convention," the court suggested that Article 8 "may be construed as including the right to respect for a company's registered office, branches or other business premises." Quite an impressive stretch, legal and otherwise.

Although the ECtHR does not always rule in favor of corporations (in the so-called McLibel case the court found that the activists had been denied the right to a fair trial and denied their freedom of expression), between 1998 and 2003 it delivered 126 judgments in response to complaints submitted by companies. How could a system of international human rights law established after the horrors of the holocaust have become so susceptible to corporate exploitation? The answer can be found in Anna Grear's new book Redirecting Human Rights, which meticulously cross-examines the theoretical underpinnings of corporate human rights claims. Grear locates the problem in the weak cognitive architecture of human rights law, and its abstract universality which makes it especially vulnerable to clever corporate exploitation.

In contrast to other regional and global human rights arrangements, the ECHR offers specific openings that corporations successfully exploited. Article 1 of the First Protocol in particular extends the protection of private property to "every natural and legal person." Although the ECHR framework is the most important, it is not unique. Conceptual slippages in the concept of legal personhood allow corporations, as "disembodied jural entities," to fit the entire template of human rights law in ways that socially situated human beings do not.

Lacking an historical examination of key precedents (much of that territory was already covered by other scholars, including Maurice Emberland and Upendra Baxi), Grear unfortunately cannot make it clear how corporations first established themselves as legitimate claimants. Did the acceptance of certain conceptual distortions occur from the ECHR's inception? Did key cases create a doctrinal shift? What's clear is that the ECtHR's conveyance of human rights to corporations happened without any adequate formal review or examination. The court "simply (has) not engaged in a fully explicated, normative assessment of whether or not companies are appropriate beneficiaries of human rights protection," Grear writes. Nor "has the court engaged in a technical legal sense with the question of whether the artificiality of the corporation imposes limitations on its ability to be the victim of a rights violation." The issue is not an issue, it's an ideological *fait accompli*, a self-fulfilling assumption.

In the infamous Santa Clara decision of 1886, the Supreme Court extended 14th Amendment protections to corporations, thereby embedding the notion of corporate personhood into American jurisprudence: "(T)he court does not wish to hear argument on the question ….We are all of the opinion that it does," the justices stated, a passing remark that the court's clerk (a former railroad attorney) elevated in importance. As justices Black and Douglas later observed,

"there was no history, logic, or reason given to support that view. Nor was the result so obvious that exposition was unnecessary." Black described the import of the decision by observing that in 50 years of Supreme Court decision-making following the Santa Clara decision, over half of the cases in which the Court applied the 14th Amendment involved extending its benefits to corporations.

The Supreme Court's failure to address the question of corporate constitutional rights was noted during oral arguments for the Citizens United case by Justice Sotomayor. She noted that the courts themselves "created corporations as persons" and suggested "there could be an argument made that that was the court's error to start with…[imbuing] a creature of state law with human characteristics." Although the plasticized concept of "legal person" is assumed to mean any rights-bearing entity, Grear reminds us that this was not always the case. When the concept of a "person" was first established in Roman law, it did not denote the basic legal unit or subject of law. Abstract entities were capable of legal relations, but were not "persons." Slaves were considered "persons," but were devoid of legal existence. Thus, there was no amalgamation of the concept of personhood and legal subjectivity. Accordingly, in Roman law, there was an inbuilt resistance to any potential (or temptation) for confusing human beings and legal persons.

It was the historical emergence of liberal individualism and universal rights (wherein the individual became the fundamental unit of law) that ushered in the use of "person" as the bearer of rights. As espoused by Hobbes and Locke, society was founded upon an assumed contract based on free assent. Contract-driven social relations reinforced the notion of the "possessive individual" as the fundamental unit of law, linking the rise of the new liberal social order to a conception of personhood predicated upon ownership. The use of the anthropomorphic 'person' as a legal term, however, could only complicate legal reasoning about rights-bearing entities. By designating both the legal subject (i.e. rights-bearing entity) and the human individual as "persons," much confusion was created, a confusion that continues deleteriously today.

Grear suggests that the best way for legal advocates to create an "ethically satisfying theory of human rights" and protect human rights law from being dominated by corporations is to focus legal standing on the notion of "embodied vulnerability." Just as the creation of an abstract universal "person" allowed corporations to insert themselves as claimants, so pressure for "embodiment" is necessary to resist such claims. It is the inherent capacity to "suffer harms associated with human rights violations" that should have critical normative bearing upon how the law is interpreted. A-historical arguments to define rights-bearing entities as abstract universals should be resisted, she suggests, since such exercises can exclude individuals in greatest need of protection. Proposals to define rights-bearers as "citizens," for example, would not only exclude undocumented aliens, but forget that one of the Nazis' first acts in preparing its victims for extermination was to strip them of their status as citizens.

One of the dimensions of Grear's examination that might have been explored more deeply is the theory of the corporation itself. Theories of the corporation have had a large bearing on

the justification, if not the creation of corporate rights. Although dominant theories of the corporation continue to assume that they are "rights bearing entities" by definition, there is no convincing argument that this should be the case. Nor did such a theory always have legitimacy. During the early nineteenth century, the reverse was true. Corporations were artificial entities, "existing only in contemplation of law," as Justice Marshall put it. States created corporations by charter, a franchise or concession that defined their existence, usually with the public interest in mind. The 1819 Dartmouth case marked the first departure from the notion that corporations were subordinate to the will of the state. In Britain, the 1862 Companies Act similarly effected a subtle shift in company law that imbued corporations with legal subjectivity. Then, just as Santa Clara established legal personhood for corporations in the U.S. in 1886, the British Interpretation Act of 1899 stipulated that the expression 'person' should be assumed to signify any body of persons.

A restoration of the notion that corporations are "creatures of law" established (through the process of incorporation) by governments, which in turn draw their legitimacy from a sovereign people, would be useful for challenging corporations. As creations of law, they are not entitled to the same unalienable rights reserved to real people. It would follow, therefore, that human rights law is an unfit and illogical place to give them standing. Unfortunately, the context for raising this challenge (outside of legal theory) is currently missing. Thus, instead of burrowing critically into corporate theory, Grear argues for "structuring the normative field of focus," offering a more supple challenge to corporate standing and entitlement that, while less clear, seems more consistent with political reality.

Although corporate claims should be resisted at the ECtHR and elsewhere, Grear concludes that more effective ways may emerge than challenging corporate standing directly within the existing human rights framework. Even the suggestion that the same abstract universalism that opened the door to corporate claims could be used to raise the status of countervailing claimants (i.e. animals, plants and even inanimate objects that might just as easily be shoehorned into anthropomorphic frameworks) cheapens human rights. Instead of pushing the notion of "embodiment," new frameworks might be constructed to clarify the place of human beings within human rights law, as well as reshape property relations in a manner that enhance community rights and the natural resource commons.

Current battles over water are a "paradigm example" of how this can occur. Rather than struggle with "property constructs," the focus is on elevating the perceived human right to water to a higher norm (as the UN General Assembly did when it adopted a resolution recognizing the human right to "safe and clean drinking water and sanitation") and thereby delegitimize its commodification. The result is the expectation that human beings (and natural resource commons) obtain greater legitimacy in the law. Other examples include the UK Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, which challenges traditional private powers of territorial exclusion in order to improve public health and reduce social divisions, and the Marine and Coastal Access Bill 2008, which would expand public access to the coast of England.

The corporate human rights claims represent the most perverse and radical extension of centuries-long jurisprudence, and for the illegitimate advancement of corporate interests over the broader public interest. Although such claims may not be the first weapon of choice for any particular company, because they are so counter-intuitive and illogical on their face, they represent a litmus test of civil societies and their governments' ability to rescue international law from corporate colonization. Grear's book helps illuminate the path ahead for global justice activists and legal theorists wishing to do so.

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George Scialabba, What Are Intellectuals Good For? Essays and Reviews

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Benjamin Franklin recounts in his Autobiography that during his years as a printer's apprentice he developed a "bookish inclination" and a fondness for "the arts of rhetoric and logic." He writes:

About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it.

To stumble across delightful writing is one of the great pleasures of intellectual life. You read something and are at once settled and shaken by it, persuaded of one thing and provoked into new questions about another. Perhaps you are surprised by how a piece of good prose can both express and elicit a kind of moral poise, can clarify perceptions and can leave you—this will sound strange, but I think it is true nonetheless—a bit readier to stay a course of thought and action.

George Scialabba is one of the three or four contemporary writers who consistently have the effect on me that the *Spectator* did on Franklin. This, his first book, brings together 33 of his essays on writers, ideas, and public life. (Scialabba's previous chapbook and many of his other essays and reviews are available on his website, www.georgescialabba.net.) The essays here, written between 1983 and 2005, are almost all occasioned by specific books, although "book reviews" seems a thin and colorless name for them. About four fifths of the writers reviewed are American, by birth or by immigration. Two thirds of these review-essays were originally published in *Agni,* the *Boston Review, Dissent,* or *The Nation*, with the rest scattered through another half-dozen newspapers and small magazines.

Scialabba belongs to a tradition of generalist essay-writers and "citizen-critics" (his term) of the democratic left whose forebears include Randolph Bourne, Albert Camus, Nicola Chiaromonte, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, George Orwell, and Ignazio Silone—to mention those Scialabba refers to most often. (Bourne and Macdonald are his favorites among these, and the book includes an essay or two on each.) In the book's title essay, Scialabba describes this species of intellectual. They "wrote in the vernacular, with vigor and clarity, for the general, educated reader. Their topics were large, their interests wide; however small their actual, engaged audience, their writings opened out, and so helped sustain at least the idea and the hope of a public culture." He quotes Irving Howe's description of one group of such writers: "The kind of essay they wrote was likely to be wide-ranging in reference, melding notions about literature and politics, sometimes announcing itself as a study of a writer or

literary group but usually taut with a pressure to ‘go beyond’ its subject, toward some encompassing moral or social observation.” Scialabba’s book is about the place of that tradition in America today (note the past tense in both the passages I quoted above) and the book itself is a superb contribution to the tradition.

Reading several of Scialabba’s essays together, one can sense his particular intellectual vocation. It is what Matthew Arnold, writing about Edmund Burke, called a “return . . . upon himself.” Scialabba writes:

To perceive as readily and pursue as energetically the difficulties of one’s own position as those of one’s opponents; to take pains to discover, and present fully, the genuine problems that one’s opponent is, however futilely, addressing—this is disinterestedness as Arnold understood it.

Arnold thought he had found a splendid example of it in Burke who, at the close of his last attack on the French Revolution, nevertheless conceded some doubts about the wisdom of opposing to the bitter end the new spirit of the age. In “The Function of Criticism,” Arnold cited this passage and commented:

That return of Burke upon himself has always seemed to me one of the finest things in English literature, or indeed any literature.

Scialabba is forever returning upon his own arguments, subjecting them to the most serious critiques he can find or invent. Again and again, he comes back to the cases against his own democratic, modernist, and socialist convictions: the nagging questions raised by elitist critiques of democracy, the conundrums of the liberal-communitarian debate, the new griefs that arrive with modernization, the unarguable successes of the parties of social inequality and war and imperial power. (My favorite of Scialabba’s returns upon himself is in an essay on faith and apostasy, not included in this book but available on his website, in which he imagines his “beloved tormentor” C.S. Lewis visiting him in hell in an attempt “to persuade [him] to give up modernity for eternity.” He suggests that Lewis might, just possibly, succeed.)

The question posed by the book’s title suggests a return upon Scialabba’s work as a whole. What worth is there, here and now, in the model of intellectual work to which he aspires? In some essays here, Scialabba makes a strong case for the obsolescence of the intellectual, or at least the kind of intellectual he most admires.

Of course the truths of political morality need frequent restatement. But much of what commands attention and respect about these writers (Bourne, Orwell, Silone, Camus, Macdonald, et al.) cannot be recaptured: the authoritative tone and sense of responsibility produced by their immersion in European literature the impression of high specific gravity produced by the historical circumstances and by the fact that all literate Europe and America was their audience; finally, their sheer virtuosity.

Even if the older intellectuals’ tone, sense of responsibility, and literacy were somehow

recaptured in our time, Scialabba contends, the increased opacity of society and politics would make restatements of old moral truths less timely and that old virtuosity unattainable. We are saturated with words and images produced by “anti-public intellectuals” of the public relations industry; corporations and the wealthy have accumulated overwhelming political power; the “decline of print literacy” saps what sources of public thought might remain. Thus our most evident intellectual need is for writers who can research, expose, debunk.

It might seem obvious, for example, that Reaganomics was bad for ordinary Americans—this, if nothing else, a contemporary left-wing intellectual ought to be able to affirm with confidence. Unfortunately, some undeniably honest and intelligent people affirm the contrary. One who is determined to see ‘all sides of every question’ must then learn how to distinguish among ways of measuring median family income, job creation and job loss, unemployment, and several other economic indicators, along with the basics of monetary theory. For a literary intellectual, this is quite a chore.

The chore becomes a Herculean labor when we consider not just the specialized vocabulary and research methodologies of economics but also those of ecology, public health, nuclear physics, chemical engineering—and so forth. “To be, or at any rate to seem, an expert on everything,” Scialabba writes, “is now not a challenge but an invitation to vertigo.” None of us today can “‘put together’ all of culture.” The scope and complexity of our problems and the quantity of information necessary to the serious investigation of our situation are so great that generalist intellectuals cannot hope to “make social relations transparent,” as Merleau-Ponty called on them to do. Literary intellectuals cannot be the legislators of our world because they are simply “ordinary citizens without politically relevant expertise.” And without relevant expertise, how is one to make a useful contribution to a public world in which rulers rule by obfuscating and in which questions of justice must be formulated and answered in technical vocabularies?

Scialabba argues, against his own example, that the only useful thing to do is to abandon the ideal of the humanist intellectual and become an expert in some area of public debate. Social criticism has necessarily “grown far more empirical, more specialized,” than it was in the day of writers like Macdonald and Orwell. The newer kind of intellectual this situation calls for does not display the “pleasure in dispute, dialectic, dazzle” (Howe’s words, from a passage Scialabba quotes more than once) of the older literary intellectuals but simply aims to teach citizens “how to read the newspaper.” These empirical intellectuals are not artful in their composition of ideas; the most we can ask is that their writing be “[l]ucid, penetrating, austere, unaffected.” Scialabba sees Noam Chomsky as the model for this new kind of empirical intellectual. I am inclined to think there are better models, but nevertheless this distinction between the newer and older intellectual styles is plausible and provocative. On the one hand we have researchers and journalists who make themselves into specialists, whose work lacks grace but who clarify and organize information that would otherwise bewilder the rest of us; on the other we have generalists who “go beyond” their immediate subjects, essayists whose prose models moral balance and thoughtful engagement with the world. We have one kind of writing that delights no one but that is serious, straightforward, eminently useful to the

writer's fellow citizens, unarguably good for something. And we have another which has its delights but about which we have to ask: is it good for anything, in our circumstances?

It would no doubt be a good thing if more American intellectuals learned the languages of, say, labor economics or climate science. But Scialabba proposes that we conceive of "a division of labor and of sensibility among contemporary intellectuals" that can preserve something from the older tradition of the humanist intellectual as well.

Scialabba has an idea of what that something ought to be. Consider this passage from his essay on Irving Howe:

[T]he very ideal of cosmopolitanism, of the intellectual as "anti-specialist," uniting political and aesthetic interests and able to speak with some authority about both, is obsolescent…Perhaps the demise of the "public intellectual," of the "dilettante-connoisseur," is a symptom of inevitable crisis, a sign that intellectual wholeness is no longer attainable and that the classical ideals of wisdom as catholicity of understanding, and of citizenship as the capacity to discuss all public affairs, must be abandoned.

Here is at least the germ of an answer to the question in the book's title: the kind of writing practiced by humanist intellectuals is a heightened, intensified, exemplary form of an activity that a healthy republic requires, to one degree or another, of all its citizens (although it is not, we should note, the only such activity). "Literature is," Scialabba writes, "practice for civic life." He describes "civic pedagogy" as the only remotely plausible response to the management of culture by social elites and to the deficits of "energy, imaginative range, sensual and familial detachment, and inner poise" that are "necessary for citizenship in a republic" but that elude most of us most of the time. (Part of what Scialabba is getting at in passages like these is the notion that words like "civic," "citizenship," and "republic" are useful for talking about the political work that a modernist and democratic socialism entails. This is an important idea—and one I agree with—but this is not the place to say much about it.)

The work of the humanist intellectual, then, is "to infuse politics with the values of art: intellectual detachment, emotional honesty, imaginative fullness" and thus to contribute to "the formation of a supple, humane political sensibility." Scialabba wants to foster a political sensibility—or, better, a civic virtue—marked by "an emphatic lack of deference toward wealth, office, and professional credentials; contempt for luxury and greed; a strong preference for economic independence and for face-to-face relations in business and government; a sense of place; a lively curiosity about science, art, and philosophy; and perhaps most of all, a passion for vigorous debate and splendid rhetoric." This sensibility (or virtue) emerges not from metaphysical propositions but from "what the eighteenth century called 'sympathy' or 'benevolence' and what we may simply call moral imagination." And this moral imagination requires cultivation. In elementary school, I was given composition books that had on their covers the motto: "Learning maketh a man fit company for himself." Scialabba's motto might be: Humanist essays make—or at any rate, might sometimes help make—republican citizens fit company for each other.

Cultivating a sensibility is different from providing information. The former isn't done so directly as the latter; it has more to do with arranging for new experiences than with arranging data. For Scialabba, thus, the style and form of writing are at least as important as its subject matter. Scialabba's highest praise is to say that one writer holds to "strict standards of honest intellectual craftsmanship" and his sharpest dig is to note that another "writes like a dean." Writing that fosters civic virtue, he suggests, is characterized not merely by clarity, but by grace of expression and willingness to return on the writer's own arguments.

Scialabba's own writing is delightfully graceful, but if it succeeds as civic pedagogy it is also because of two other characteristics, more structural than stylistic. The first is that Scialabba often quotes big, satisfying clusters of sentences from the works he is writing about. My Great Aunt Esther tested her cooking with a large serving spoon, not with a teaspoon; she insisted that she couldn't properly taste sauce or soup unless it filled her mouth. That's how Scialabba quotes those he writes about. Thus the reader sees enough of the writer's argument to think beyond whatever line of thought Scialabba happens to be following and, perhaps more importantly, gets the feel of the writer's work, not just the concepts.

The second is Scialabba's way of returning upon his own argument about the work under review by stepping back and forth between appreciation and critique. He somehow does this in a way that is elegant but also decisive, even forceful. He is generous toward those he criticizes, but also knows when not to pull a punch. Consider this passage from his review of Michael Walzer's *The Company of Critics,* a book in which Walzer argues for a model of the "connected" or "internal" social critic.

Concerned not to cut himself off from his fellow-citizens, the internal critic will be tempted to moderate, if not his indignation, then at least the expression of it: his rhetoric. And sometimes—usually—he will be right to do so, to set political effectiveness above literary effect.

But indignation is not always manageable. And however conscientiously the critic tries to reiterate, to reconstruct the moral history of those in other communities, it will always be difficult for him to give their suffering due weight. We are properly skeptical of the habitually enraged critic; but we are also disappointed on occasion—and they may be the most important occasions—by the invariably judicious one. Perhaps this is why, though I largely share Walzer's political positions, I have seldom been profoundly moved by his own social criticism—enlightened, yes, but rarely inspired. The young Kafka wrote: "If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it?" Walzer is, alas, far too polite ever to have hammered on anyone's skull.

Nearly every sentence pivots from what Scialabba thinks Walzer gets right to what he thinks Walzer doesn't, and sometimes a sentence pivots more than once within itself. But the interesting thing is that the structure of this passage achieves much the same thing as Scialabba's substantive critique of Walzer. Scialabba argues that social criticism should hammer as well as ponder—and this passage ponders for a long time, with a bit of well-timed hammering at the end. Having read this, I expect that my appreciation for Walzer's polite and

judicious social criticism will always be alloyed with a bit of Scialabba's impatience. I like Walzer's work, and so I need to be attuned to what is weakest in it, and Scialabba has both convinced me of that and given form to my needed return upon my own habits of mind.

And that seems to be just what the humanist essay is good for. By insisting that we return upon our own arguments and habits and attitudes, Scialabba imparts a valuable idea. But through the structure and feel of his essays he lets us experience a virtue essential to the republican citizen, the virtue of listening and thinking at the same time. (We too often forget that the main activity of citizens in the Athenian assembly—still, and rightly, our ideal of the citizen—was listening, not speaking.)

The classical ideal of citizenship faces different threats in America today than it has in other countries and times, and Scialabba is right to point out that the humanist essay is not particularly well suited to confronting those particular threats. The need for specialized empirical intellectuals who can clarify technical problems for the public does indeed overshadow the other roles that intellectuals might take on, and the experience of residing in a republic that often resembles an oligarchy or an empire can be, for American intellectuals, horribly disorienting. To respond with essays and reviews is, to say the least, awkward. But that turns out not to matter as much as one might think. The grace and integrity and sympathy required of the good citizen must be learned, and we cannot afford to neglect any opportunity for that education. The humanist essay cannot put together all of culture or make social relations fully transparent. It certainly cannot replace the kinds of education citizens get through participation in political campaigns or trade unions or social movements. It can, however, provide some occasions for some parts of our education as citizens. That is a small thing, but to be good for a small thing is still to be good for something.

And, no less, the essay can delight us. That delight—in the nicely placed word, the rhythm and flow of prose, the lull and roar of ideas—is a good thing in itself. It is also a subtle invitation to public life that no overt civic pedagogy can replace. A renewal of that inviation, it seems to me, should be counted among the things Scialabba's essays are good for.

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Pedro Pérez Sarduy, The Maids of Havana

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Pedro Pérez Sarduy, *The Maids of Havana*. Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse 2010.

Reviewed by Linda Etchart

Black skin

White masks

I am a sentinel

Seated on the shell of a continent

Lain by the music on the dawn

Vibrant the bayonet bearing the name of the century

Asleep is the music on the continent

Vibrant its wounded body bearing the name of the guerrilla

Black skin

White masks

I am a sentinel

Seated on the shell of a continent

Watching over the stricken dream of a white dove

– Pedro Pérez Sarduy

Cuban independence from Spain came late (1898) partly as a result of a fear of a repeat of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, where a slave uprising led to independence and liberation from slavery. In Cuba, similarly, the liberation of the slaves and the independence wars were interrelated: slaves were freed in order to fight with their former owners against Spanish colonial domination. The mulatto General Antonio Maceo played a key role in the wars of

independence and retains legendary status alongside José Martí as national hero, although Cuba was, in the early part of the twentieth century, regarded as being the most racist of the Hispanic Caribbean territories. It was not until Fidel Castro's 22 March 1959 'Proclamation Against Discrimination' that there was an acknowledgement of the need to address institutional racism, supported by Fidel's defining Cuba as Latin-African. Yet, while many black Cubans as part of the poorest sectors of society benefited from the programmes of the Revolution, subtle forms of racism remained, particularly as the question of race was subsumed under the Socialist project, so there were few statistics on race gathered or published, and little in the way of affirmative action.

Connected with this was the modernising trajectory of scientific socialism, which meant a state-directed hostility to religion (and to some extent to tradition) until the 1980s, when there was a rapprochement with the Christian Churches as well as a renewed respect for santería—syncretic spiritualism—*lucumí, regla de palo* and *abakuá*; then a visit to Cuba of African leaders in 1987, and finally the opening up of the Communist Party Congress to religious believers in 1991.

Pedro Pérez Sarduy's novel *The Maids of Havana e*merges out of this history and brings it to life through personal histories, taking us from the highly racially segregated daily life in Santa Clara in the 1950s, through to Havana just prior to the Revolutionary takeover in 1959; and in the second half of the novel to the complexities of relations among the Black Cuban community in Florida, Washington DC, and New York, up to the mid-1990s. The individual stories are told in the first half of the novel–and partly in the second half—through gossip at the hairdresser's in the first person by Marta (a rendering of the author's mother), and in the second half in the form of letters sent by a Cuban scientist (Gracielita) who emigrates to the US in the 1980 Mariel exodus. Pérez Sarduy does not shirk from confronting the challenges faced by the revolutionary state from its beginning in 1959—sociolismo (obtaining what you need through contacts—social capital a.k.a. nepotism) and the contradictions and distortions epitomised by Cuban jokes (*chistes*), but at the same time the novel works to counter anti-Castro propaganda put out by Miami Cubans and US Republican (and Democrat) governments.

Beyond taking on race, class and gender, The Maids of Havana is a celebration of the richness of Cuban culture, central to which are Afro-Cubans, who have avoided acculturation and succeeded in achieving transculturation, to use the terms adopted by Fernando Ortiz, one of the few Cuban scholars who addressed the question of race in the 1940s (and was publishing on Afro-Cuban culture from 1906). The West African legacy is strong in music, dance, poetry and in fine arts—and from the 1990s Lucumí (santería) and its Yoruba gods (orishas) have enjoyed a revival in Cuba, as elsewhere. The Yoruba gods, such as Yemayá Olokún, goddess of the ocean—the background to Brazilian writer Jorge Amado's 1936 lyrical story *Mar Morto*—and Changó (the god of thunder and war), are lively characters that trump Fidel in the respect conferred on them by some of the characters in the novel. Like Fidel they are to be found in many Afro-Cuban homes, in the form of a vessel (*nganga*) of sacred water on an altar (often a wardrobe) rather than as an inspiring voice on the television exhorting citizens to protect the Revolution. Pérez Sarduy has also carefully researched and remembered other

aspects of African and Afro-Cuban culture that have survived and thrived, such as the use of particular plants for cooking and for medicines, two of the few spheres of everyday life in which the Yoruba language is in evidence. Yoruba is also enjoying a revival in song lyrics. Cubans can trace their origins to Nigeria, Benin and Congo, the author having known his great-grandmother—who appears in the novel—who was brought to Cuba as a slave from Congo as a child and who was proud of having come from Africa.

One of the reasons for this new efflorescence of Black Cuban culture since the 1980s is Cuba's change of skin hue since 1959 when bourgeois white Cuba made a swift exit to Florida, taking its cash and jewels with it, leaving behind its Tiffany lamps to be snapped up at bargain prices by wily Russian technicians in the early part of the Soviet period. *The Maids of Havana* continues where Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 film *Memories of Underdevelopment* leaves off, first telling us the tale of the White Cubans living comfortably before the Revolution, then following their undignified and shambolic exodus to the US—all told from the point of view of the maid who was left behind.

The White exodus then turns into one of all skin-colours and classes (and released prisoners) during subsequent exits from the port of Mariel and elsewhere. Pérez Sarduy notes in the story that Cubans entering the US were given official red-carpet treatment reserved for exiles from communism—in contrast to the violence meted other immigrants, such as Haitians, or Mexican attempting to cross the Rio Grande. But once in Florida, mixed-race Cubans found that Southern US racism precluded them from using the skills gained through the education provided by the Cuban state, and we can see from the fate of the protagonist of the second half of the novel—Gracielita—that it was only when she moved north to Washington DC that she was able to find work other than that of maid or nanny. The racial prejudice she encounters as well as the destitution of poor black and white people that she witnesses in the US serve to illustrate the greater wellbeing (in terms of health at least) of the majority of the poorest Cuban citizens in Cuba compared with their poor counterparts in the US. The Cuban Revolution is more of a backdrop to the novel, however, playing a minor role in the drama: Pérez Sarduy has crafted the politics of liberation from oppression by demonstrating that the spirit of the Revolution is inherent in soul of Marta, who claims her rights to equality without knowing much about liberation struggles past and present, as she explains to her employer: "I've told you already that I'm not with any Fidel, and I don't understand politics, but I do have a niece who once told me that all these abuses will stop when the *barbudos [*bearded ones] come down from the hills."

The Maids of Havana was first published in Spanish in Puerto Rico in 2001 and 2004, and in Havana by Editorial Letras Cubanas in 2002. Its translation into French won it the 2008 Prix du Livre Insulaire, Ouessant, and it was also shortlisted for the best Caribbean novel in French translation. This is not a didactic book, nor is it vengeful. The rich white employers are hopeless and incompetent, rather than mean, finding themselves dominated (and outwitted) by their maids—on whom they depend for their survival—and yet capable of reflecting on their prejudices and learning. Homophobia is confronted in the Black community's disgraceful treatment of a gay boy who finally seeks asylum in the US, and Pérez Sarduy touches on the

epidemic of entertaining foreigners in exchange for hard currency, essential to buy basic goods only available in the dollar shops. The neighbours cluck in disapproval.

The Maids of Havana is devoid of the sleaze-writing emanating out of Cuba that is favoured by some Western publishers, and the reader is insulated from the violence that permeates much of Black diasporic literature. The mood is positive, and even in situations of destitution in the 1950s, the female characters demonstrate fortitude, ingenuity and a propensity to enjoy life. One of the few references to violence (apart from the beating of homosexual Pimpi) is that of Batista's henchmen against political opponents prior to his capitulation to Fidel Castro in 1959. And in a similar vein to British-Jamaican writer Andrea Levy's 2004 splendid, warm novel *Small Island* there is no male violence against wives or girlfriends, as is more commonly portrayed in Black women's writing, perhaps not altogether unconnected to the fact that this is a novel written by a man entirely from the perspective of women.

Apart from homophobia and political repression by Batista within Cuba, the only other seriously ugly behaviour is that on the part of Cuban exiles in US detention centres. Gracielita's story is therefore a cautionary tale for those dreaming of emigrating northwards to seek a better life—and an exhortation to Miami Cubans to grow out of their unhealthy and obsessive preoccupation with demonising their fellow countrymen and women across the Florida straits. One of the reasons for Gracielita´s eventually following her Cuban friends north to Washington is to escape the weight of the constant anti-communist rhetoric in Florida, where some of the Miami Cubans spend their weekends doing military training ready for the next Bay of Pigs invasion. The second half of the novel could be construed as a call for reconciliation among old foes and across a political divide that has sent some young Cubans to watery graves, and the novel as a whole could be interpreted as a tribute to those who have been transported or who have transported themselves away from loved ones over centuries across land and sea, forming a diaspora within a diaspora—and a celebration of the incorporation of elements of Yoruba, Bantú, Abakuá (from Southern Nigeria) and Arará (from Benin) culture into a rich Cuban idiosincrasía. This first novel by Pedro Pérez Sarduy combines the poignancy of Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* (1984) with the humour of Cuban director Tomás Gutierrez Alea's 1995 film *Strawberries and Chocolate* to create an original contribution to Afro-Caribbean and Latin American letters.

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Michael Scammell, Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic

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Arthur Koestler, Individualist

Michael Scammell, *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* New York: Random House, 2009.

Arthur Koestler authored dozens of books but one in particular provides the main reason to pay attention to him. Even if he cannot be seen as a reliably prescient and stalwart opponent of the twentieth century's devastating trinity of fascism, totalitarianism and Stalinism, as his contemporary and acquaintance George Orwell can, Koestler was a vigorous foe of the first beast, risking his life in Spain because of it, and vociferously countered the others once he realized one of his gods had failed. However, after he rejected communism he embraced other illusionary cure-alls for humanity's suffering. Even if Koestler made several miscalculations, his biographer Michael Scammell believes he learned faster than many of his fellow leftists, at least until he surrendered critical thinking in favor of transparent wishful-thinking. (Incidentally, Koestler's interactions of varying degrees of intimacy with other prominent authors and philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century expose the startling smallness, in more sense than one, of the intellectual world.) In his hefty *Koestler: The Literary and Political Odyssey of a Twentieth-Century Skeptic* Scammell cannot fully account for his subject's choices; instead, he thoroughly presents the man in his messy and confounding complexity.

Koestler is one of those writers, like Norman Mailer, who did his literary reputation disservice by publishing as much as he did. He might be best known for *Darkness at Noon* (1941), but wrote more than thirty books, including novels, autobiographies, scientific works and pseudo-scientific excursions. With the novel he set an artistic example he couldn't again match. Scammell, who deems the little-read *Thieves in the Night* (1946) to be Koestler's second best novel, concedes that "the sheer bulk and variety of this output, not to speak of its inevitable unevenness, raise questions about its quality and relevance, for in one sense Koestler simply wrote too much, in too many genres." Still, his best work ranks with those by Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, in Scammell's estimation. Paul Berman groups Koestler with Camus and Orwell, and in *The New Republic* claims "in the 1940s these three men were the greatest writers anywhere in the world on totalitarian themes." This is no small accomplishment, whether judged in literary or political terms. (Here's another impressive achievement: Koestler, who died in 1983, did not change literary languages once, as Conrad

did; he did it twice, shifting from Hungarian to German while still young and then from German to English while in his mid-thirties.)

If Koestler has a claim to historical importance beyond authorship of one great novel, then this might be it: "Koestler was the only significant writer to stare death in the face in Spain and return to write about it." Yes, writers such Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, W.H. Auden and others traveled there and wrote about the civil war, and Orwell and André Malraux actually fought (and still others like Julian Bell and Christopher Caudwell perished), but only Koestler sat in a cell expecting execution and survived to transmute that experience into fiction. When Koestler was arrested, he was first taken to Málaga Prison; he was soon transferred to the Central Prison in Seville. "Málaga was the first of at least a dozen cells that Koestler was to occupy over the next five years, marking the start of a precipitous descent into the twilight world of ideological outcasts and political prisoners that would define his outlook for the rest of his life," Scammell writes. Koestler was later incarcerated in a Vichy concentration camp. His imprisonment in Spain, where daily he heard other inmates being killed, made him a committed foe of capital punishment and led to what Scammell calls "his successful campaign to end the death sentence in Britain some twenty years later."

Koestler joined the National Campaign for the Abolition of Capital Punishment in 1955 and published *Reflections on Hanging* the following year. "Outright abolition came only in 1970, but it was generally agreed that Koestler's book, and the campaign he started, were hugely influential in altering the climate of opinion and making it possible," according to Scammell. (In France, the book came out in 1957 and included Camus's essay "Reflections on the Guillotine.") Koestler's opposition to the death penalty prompted this explanation of his outlook:

People say: "He used to want to save humanity. Now a dozen souls are enough." It's true. To snatch a single man from the gallows is very gratifying. It's the whole point of my life's path. I don't believe that the end justifies the means. I don't believe that an individual is the result of a crowd of a million divided by a million. I don't believe any more in humanity. I believe in the individual.

His turn from "humanity" (and a dogma advocating its perfection through social engineering) toward unique human beings may have made him more humane (at least in his outlook), but his "life's path" eventually took him to some strange places. Scammell, who clearly admires Koestler, repeatedly lauds him for being ahead of both his peers and his times in his early arrivals at the right positions. In taking a critical view of the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, "he had gone far ahead of most leftists in his thinking." As late as 1938, when he was writing *The Gladiators* (which was published the following year), Koestler was "still confused in his attitude toward revolution and its aftermath, " but by the time he was working on *Darkness at Noon,* he "had gone far ahead of most leftists in his thinking" by adopting a staunch anti-Communist position. In his efforts to avert a third world war from occurring in an atomic age, Koestler urged "psychological disarmament," meaning freedom of communication and movement across border of the Cold War blocs. "As usual Koestler was light years ahead of his time: It wasn't

until the 1950s and ’60s that this idea became popular.” It also wasn’t until the 1950s that protest marches and demonstrations – such as those Koestler called for in order to permit Jewish immigration to Palestine and to promote the formation of a nation for Jews there – became popular either. Koestler decided to donate his royalties from the play adapted from his magnum opus *Darkness at Noon* to refugee intellectuals fleeing Eastern Europe. “As usual, Koestler [was] out in front of his confrères,” Scammell asserts. “Funds and organizations to help Eastern Bloc writers would proliferate some ten to fifteen years hence, but in 1950 they were unheard of.” Koestler developed an interest in Eastern spiritual practices, which led to travels in India and Japan, which he chronicles in *The Lotus and the Robot* (1961). Of Koestler’s research, Scammell observes: “In this he was also ahead of the curve.” He sounds this refrain again when discussing Koestler’s advocacy, in 1979, of a “United States of Europe” complete with a European flag, a European currency and a European government. “Again he was far ahead of both the Labor and Conservative parties in Britain, and as usual out of step with both.”

Despite what he vaunts as Koestler’s multiple instances of profound foresight, Scammell can’t help but bemoan his many failures of critical vision. “Maybe it would have been better for Koestler if he had died in his forties, like his friends Orwell (later canonized as ‘St. George’ in the eyes of millions of admirers) and Camus, and acquired an aura of martyrdom, instead of sullying his career with speculations about astronomy, evolution, parapsychology, and Jewish racial theories.” Scammell attempts, rather unsuccessfully, to couch Koestler’s confidence in the spoon-bending “mentalist” Uri Geller, his preference for what later would be called intelligent design over Darwinian science, and his subscription to discredited postulations about ethnicity, among other eccentricities and misjudgments, to a kind of skepticism. He habitually challenged orthodoxies, whether political or scientific. He refused to endorse unthinkingly the conventional view or go along with the majority for its own sake. Besides, if something hadn’t been disproved, perhaps it had merit after all, or so the thinking goes. This kind of skepticism amounts to self-granted permission to believe any wild thing, and in the latter half of his like, Koestler exercised it. It might have taken a kind of courage to do so, but it also made him easy to mock.

Scammell, like many who knew Koestler, speculates about the psychological impetuses for the writer’s beliefs and behavior. Koestler’s shortness, for instance, determined his personality at least to some degree, Scammell insistently repeats. “Like many short men (barely five foot six in his stocking feet), he was incorrigibly competitive and relentlessly combative, quick to take offense and slow to forgive.” In this respect, Koestler resembled his father, who also “made up with energy and determination what he lacked in physical stature.” While Koestler’s “work discipline was exemplary,” he could also be rather obstreperous. Scammell notes “the perverse delight he took in breaking rules and causing scandals.” Furthermore, “discussion rarely remained discussion with him,” Scammell reports. “It was transformed into a gladiatorial struggle, in which the goal was to wrestle your opponent to the metaphorical floor and pin him there with your conclusions.” Sometimes the floor onto which he tried to knock his disputants was not metaphorical. “His chronic insecurity and the temper tantrums of the spoiled brat were never far from the surface: moments of genuine sincerity and tenderness could morph with

lightening and frightening speed into assertive arrogance, leading to offensive preening and prancing, and all to often to the fisticuffs that invariably got him into trouble (and often led to excessive feelings of guilt and remorse afterward)." Here again, he recalls Mailer. Koestler's friend Manès Sperber spied "the paradox at the heart of his character" – a boastfulness and predilection for "provoking antipathy" coupled with sensitivity and insecurity. Another associate, Otto Katz, an editor Koestler worked with in Paris in the 1930s, told him: "We all have inferiority complexes of various sizes, but yours isn't a complex – it's a cathedral." Koestler liked the line well enough to include it in a memoir. Still another colleague, Cyril Connolly, editor of the magazine *Horizon,* helped him overcome the "self-doubt and insecurity" that preyed on him during his early days of literary life in England, where the peripatetic Koestler eventually settled after stints in several counties on the Continent as well as time in Palestine and the United States. Nonetheless, in Scammell's view, Koestler remained "an egotistical, mercurial, and unpredictable perfectionist" whose relentless demands made him difficult if not impossible to live with (though one of his three wives evidently found it impossible to live without him).

Koestler's intensity also manifested itself in tempestuous intellectual entanglements. New ideas caused Koestler an almost sexual excitement, Scammell says. "His intellectual nerve endings were so finely tuned that he experienced the onset of fresh ideas like orgasms, and mourned their passing as the end of treasured love affairs." Koestler called himself the "Casanova of causes," and he indubitably was a promiscuous thinker. Scammell portrays Koestler as a fiercely passionate lover who repeatedly grows dissatisfied with each successive partner. In retrospect he recognizes all the flaws he couldn't see in the heat of early ardor but still craves the giddy feeling that sparked the infatuation and seeks it again and again. According to Scammell, "no one has better conveyed than he the emotional intensity of conversion to a new creed, and there is little doubt that this is how he experienced it."

Despite his mental leapfrogging from one platform to another, Koestler did make what St. George called "the familiar dilemma of ends and means" a steady theme of his work. "Should man be a subject and an end, or should he be an object and an instrument?" Scammell rhetorically asks when outlining the political and philosophical debate Koestler joined. "For Koestler, the former obviously took priority." Such arguments had personal aspects for Koestler, who was licentious in a literal as well as intellectual sense. Sonia Brownell (who worked with Connolly at *Horizon* and later married Orwell) visited Paris in the summer of 1947, when Koestler was there. She began an affair with the Marxist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of Koestler's chief opponents in arguments over idealism and materialism. In response to Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* (a collection of essays from 1945 that first appeared in France in 1946), Merleau-Ponty contended (in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*) that World War II conclusively demonstrated that humanity could not survive on a capitalist basis and that though both communism and capitalism used violence the former aimed to end economic exploitation while the latter sought to perpetuate it. During the war, Brownell had had an affair with Koestler that had led to an abortion. She revealed the incident to Merleau-Ponty and to only a couple of other people, according to Hilary Spurling's biography of Brownell, whose description of Koestler as a sadist may have influenced Merleau-

Ponty's opinion. Camus sided with Koestler; he also had a fling with Mamaine Paget, Koestler's lover at the time (and later his second wife). Camus rejected Simone de Beauvoir when she offered to sleep with him. Koestler did sleep with Beauvoir, once. And he remained friends with Camus after learning of his dalliance with Paget. Beauvoir, however, turned against Koestler, claiming his hatred of communism put him on the side of reactionaries.

Whether for purely personal or disinterestedly ideological reasons, Koestler did find himself isolated. By the 1950s, the European and American left rejected his claim to still be a socialist; they, like Beauvoir, accused him of selling out to the right. The right, in contrast, didn't dispute his self-identification as a socialist. As a leftist anti-Communist convert, the former Communist lacked allies. This left him in a situation similar to the one faced by Budd Schulberg, his neighbor in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in the early 1950s. Schulberg had also grown disenchanted with the Communist Party, to which he belonged from 1937 to 1940. He outraged his ex-comrades by testifying as a cooperating witness on Hollywood's Communists to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Though he considered himself a resolute anti-fascist, for naming names he lost friends on the left. All the same, he was the top American contributor to Koestler's Fund for Intellectual Freedom, giving ten percent of his royalties to it and trying (and failing) to interest friends like Mailer.

Koestler was inconsistent in his ends/means stand. This resulted in making excuses for terrorism. He believed the Irgun (the successor movement to the Zionist Revisionists he'd supported in his twenties) deserved some credit for driving the British from Palestine. The Stern Gang, which had ties to the Irgun, assassinated Lord Moyne, Britain's colonial secretary, and, according to Koestler, "without terror the British would never have cleared out of Palestine." He praised "the boys who got themselves hanged by the British while being called fascists and thugs by the official representatives of their own people." As Scammell phrases it: "In an extension of the message of *Thieves in the Night,* he argued that 'ruthlessness was essential for human progress' and that the end could justify the means at decisive moments in history. He compared the Irgun to the IRA during the Easter Rising and saw it as a catalyst for human progress." Koestler tries to defend what looks like wobbliness on the ends/means issue in *Promise and Fulfilment* (1949), which Scammell calls "one of the liveliest and freshest accounts of Israel's war for independence ever written." Scammell explains Koestler's attempt at nuance: "He had always held that the dilemma of ends and means was at the core of the human predicament … and the problem admitted no permanent solution. The end could justify the means only 'within very narrow limits.' The 'arsenic of ruthlessness, injected in very small doses,' was 'a stimulant to the social body.' In large quantities it was 'a deadly poison.'" In the USSR, there was too much of it; in Israel, just enough.

If *Darkness at Noon* depicts a man's mental contortions as he convinces himself to believe something a part of him knows he should not – in that case the idea that hoped-for ends of the Russian Revolution could justify Stalin's brutal means or, more generally, that unjust acts can somehow create a just society – then Koestler had plenty of material to work with as someone suffering from "absolutitis," the condition he diagnosed in himself. "The thirst for the absolute is a stigma which marks those unable to find satisfaction in the relative world of the now and

here," Koestler writes in *Arrow in the Blue* (1952), one of his autobiographies. It set him, over and over, on searches for new faiths. After Zionism came "the verifiable achievements of the scientific revolution." Communism followed. Later still, extrasensory perception and other non-verifiable mysticism seduced him. His love affairs with various causes and concepts prompted one ideological costume change after another. "Like all the roles he was to fill subsequently in his life, it fitted him only in part," Scammell says of Koestler's newfound pride as a Jewish fraternity member during his university days in Vienna, "but it appealed irresistibly to his romantic nature. He was learning to try things on and wear them for a while, before moving to another role." Though this might make Koestler seem superficial – and some peers during his Zionist phase thought he was – his biographer regards it as important for Koestler's development as an author. "For the rest of his life he would find himself playing roles of one kind or another, and learning also to observe his behavior from outside, the mark of a burgeoning writer."

Writing sixty-five years earlier than Scammell, Orwell remarked on the tendency to locate the reasons for rebelliousness in troubled mental states, something Koestler himself was prone to do. "Of course it is true in many cases, and it may be true in all cases, that revolutionary activity is the result of personal maladjustment," Orwell writes. "Those who struggle against society are, on the whole, those who have reason to dislike it, and normal healthy people are not more attracted by violence and illegality than they are by war." (In *Darkness at Noon,* Nicolas Salmanovitch Rubashov, the former commissar who persuades himself, out of party loyalty, to confess to the manufactured crimes for which he stands accused, comes to a somewhat similar realization. "We have a surprising number of defectives in the Party," he thinks. "Either it is because of the circumstances under which we work – or the movement itself promotes a selection of defectives.…") Even so, Orwell recognizes, this doesn't necessarily undermine the causes misfits adopt. "Actions have results, irrespective of their motives.… History has to move in a certain direction, even if it has to be pushed that way by neurotics."

Orwell identifies weaknesses in Koestler, but not because of neuroses or outlandish propositions. Indeed, when Orwell was writing in 1944, Koestler had yet to embrace the crack-pot notions of his later years. Instead, Orwell faults Koestler for his treatment of his principal conundrum and for not fully thinking through its implications. "Revolutions always go wrong – that is the main theme," Orwell writes. "It is on the question of *why* they go wrong that he falters." He summarizes the problem Koestler ponders with characteristic concision: "You can achieve nothing unless you are willing to use force and cunning, but in using them you pervert your original aims." The result of this conclusion is that nothing can be done: No action can make life better, and any effort for improvement might only make it worse. Orwell judges Koestler's self-described status as a "short-term pessimist" as tantamount to that of a hedonist who anticipates immediate catastrophe but expects everything to work out in the long run.

Orwell reveals some pessimism of his own in his essay on Koestler. "Since about 1930 the world has given no reason for optimism whatever," he writes. "Nothing is in sight except a welter of lies, hatred, cruelty and ignorance.…" Yet he resists it and tries to avoid the trap he

believes snared Koestler. While he might not think an earthly paradise possible, or even definitely desirable, Orwell holds onto the idea that some move toward amelioration can be made even if all problems can't be solved. "Perhaps some degree of suffering is ineradicable from human life, perhaps the choice before Man is always a choice of evils, perhaps even the aim of Socialism is not to make the world perfect but to make it better." Here's the kicker: "All revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure."

In his own way Koestler did commit the same failure again and again. After each god he backed couldn't come through, he'd latch onto another one instead of rejecting the mental framework that allows for panacean faith. Perhaps Scammell offers reasonable explanations for Koestler's successive commitments to absolute solutions, but as Orwell argues, they don't automatically validate or invalidate given beliefs or causes, which can have merit (or not) regardless of adherents' motivations. Certainly Koestler's gradual incapacity to discriminate between sense and nonsense calls his judgment into question (as does the double suicide in 1983 with his still healthy younger wife, Cynthia Koestler). Despite Orwell, when considering a person's life, motivations do matter, even if they can't be determined with precision. Koestler offers a curious reminder of the wisdom of Andre Gide's plea (which Mailer adopted as a personal motto): "Please don't understand me too quickly." With Koestler, there's no chance of that, and his ultimate inscrutability reads as a tribute to irreducible individuality, the kind of thing he attempted to articulate in his more lucid period and did express in his masterpiece.

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