

HEATWAVE

FALL '25 ISSUE 2

A BETTER MAGAZINE
FOR A WORSE WORLD

REMEMBERING
FALLEN COMRADES

TREATISE FOR THE
YOUTH IN REVOLT

COMMUNIST RECONSTRUCTION AND
THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN SPECIES





CONTENTS

07 | Editorial: Comrades Known and Elsewhere
Heatwave Collective

12 | Remembering Sher Singh 1951 - 2025
Friends of FMS

18 | The Murder of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi
Anonymous

24 | Communist Reconstruction and the Limits of the Human Species: On the Concept of the Ecological Council
J. Caurine

34 | The Red Thread of Black Power: The Case of Abeng
Saul Molcho

40 | Red May Theses
Jasper Bernes

44 | A Summer with a Thousand Junes, Part II: Restructuring, Surplus Population, and Riots
Artifices / Trans. Enzo Bodine & otto dix rivers

50 | Yasuda Redux: A Conversation about Student Movements at Tokyo University in Spring 2024
May Wren & Tatsuki Kihira

56 | Poems
Robert Mittenhal

58 | Tales from the (French) Far Left
Gilles Dauvé

66 | Hurricane Season
Jean Maro

70 | "Pumping Up" the Revolt: The Serbian Uprising, Its Roots, and Its Discontents
L.P.

76 | Dispatches from Mae Sot, Part II: The Town of Exiles
Wu Qin

82 | The Anti-Imperialist Imperialism Club: On Left Internationalism and Iran
Arya Zahedi

88 | Treatise for the Youth In Revolt
Colapso y Desvío

96 | Fire to the Prisons

100 | Reviews



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Comrades Known and Elsewhere

for Joshua (1962-2025)

EDITORIAL

The scene has played out many times in the last few decades. A horrific event takes place—police murder yet another Black man, the state disappears migrants or political opponents, a financial crisis leaves millions without homes or jobs or both—and this time people take to the streets in protest of these immediate events and, perhaps, out of some deeper longing that the world ought not be the way that it is. Property is damaged. Police are called in. The crowd does not disperse but pushes back. Then tear gas. It stings the surface of your eyes and burns at the edges, dripping like acid down the nose and into the throat to pool in the lungs. Maybe this is your first time, maybe you were at the front of the line, maybe you just got unlucky. Regardless, you are overcome, gasping out desperate, burning breaths as your vision blurs. Suddenly, you feel arms around you and you are lifted from the heat of battle, dragged to the sidelines. Then those same arms depart, making quick motions that you can't quite make out through the blur, rustling through something, and returning with that same gentle touch: pulling open each eye with care, dousing each with water that seems glacier cold. The moment seems almost ritualistic: an intimate baptism of the sight. Suddenly you are pulled back into the profane world. The person makes an awkward joke to ease

the tension. Eventually, your vision clears enough for you to reenter the crowd, to blend into the sea of black and then into the night, free to return again tomorrow. Years later you will tell the story of that night: “The first time I met Joshua Clover he washed tear gas out of my eyes.”

When Joshua passed away in late April, social media was filled with a cornucopia of similar stories from those lucky enough to see him in his element: at the riot, the occupation, the barricade. The flurry of places and dates invoked in these stories—Berkeley, Paris, Seattle, Davis, Mexico City, Ferguson, and Oakland, always Oakland—paint the picture of a man committed to being in the struggle wherever it arose, someone you could count on equally in the street and the quieter moments before and after. It was in the course of class conflict that his work as a teacher and poet achieved its practical truth, alive in the throes of history. Indeed, Joshua took knowledge seriously. Whether we were reading his work, arguing with him on some online forum, studying *Capital* together, or organizing alongside him, thinking with Joshua felt like nothing so much as being made to see clearly, the rapt vision of eyes blinking through tear gas just rinsed away. For so many young communists, this process of learning to see was our real introduction to Joshua and to the communist movement. The

* This story was inspired by a comrade and is shared with permission, but there are many such stories.

tools of siege are nothing if not instruments of sensory hijack. Amidst the smoke and chaos and pain of the present, he was there, not to show us the way, but to share the arts of clarity and to demonstrate how they could be wielded against the blinding powers of a social order that thrives in obscurity.

Most of the young communists emerging in the U.S. after the turn of the century found themselves unmoored from the history of the communist movement. Previous generations had learned to articulate politics through active mentorship within left-wing institutions built up through decades of struggle. Though such institutions could be stifling, they nonetheless endowed subsequent generations with the practical and theoretical proficiencies that would then allow them to distinguish their own politics from that of their predecessors, even framed as a revolt against this institutional inheritance itself and articulated as a new “revolutionary” position in contrast to the “reformist” remnants of an “old” left—even if that “old” left had, in its heyday, been new and revolutionary in contrast to its own predecessors.

After many decades of defeat, however, this generation was left with nothing but ruin. The institutions of both the old and new lefts were crushed, made historically obsolete by the shifting sands of capitalist production or ripped apart by their own sectarian decay. The brave were killed, the cowards returned to the fold as the romantics fled to the hills, and the swindlers built up their cults in the ashes. In the end, only a spare few remained, scattered and alone. Our communism was therefore not learned but salvaged. Wandering the wilderness of work, wage, and forever wars, we were left to rediscover the fragments of our own history, unearthing the rusted weapons of battles lost. And, lacking a meaningful institutional inheritance (whether “reformist” or “revolutionary”), we were forced to reinvent the basic axioms of the partisan project in our own fight against the status quo.

In these long decades of repression, at least some memory of the collective intelligence of revolutionary history was sequestered in subcultural insignia, in rank-and-file reform caucuses within the shrinking unions, and of course in the academy. Anti-communist purges across the unions, universities, and culture industries had ensured that communist thought could proliferate only at the seemingly harmless margins: in the punk subculture, the breakroom of a dying industry, or the underfunded English department, where it could be left to molder under the gnawing influence of “postmodernity.” And yet these repositories proved invaluable, preserving and even elaborating key aspects of the partisan project as much as possible in the exultant years of liberal victory once thought to be the “End of History” and which proved, in the end, to be merely an intermission.

The process was long and grueling, but new generations of partisans emerged at first slowly and then more quickly in the wake of the world-shaking crisis of 2008 which spawned, on the one hand, a minor renaissance of interest in Marx and, on the other, the sputtering struggles of the 2010s, where new waves of militants would come to see the practical limits of lofty theories tested on the ground. A rising generation of communist thinkers came to reengage with their own sequestered lineage and reappraised old texts in the light of fresh-lit fires burning across the world. In this context, figures like Joshua proved invaluable in first linking young militants to their own history (and encouraging an active, questioning engagement with it), and then linking them to one another, gathering what would otherwise have been scattered sparks.

It is difficult to exaggerate how crucial this work was in the moment. While there were other communists in art scenes, universities, and community centers, many carried with them the baggage of sectarian battles and a salient fear of repression. As a result, when sought out by young radicals, they were reticent, quietist, and sometimes outright hostile. Joshua was, in every respect, the opposite. Even in the vigor of debate, he showed a spirit of open engagement that tended to uplift all involved. At the same time, he was always willing to argue any topic down to the finest points, bluntly pointing out misunderstandings of Marx, rigorously shattering the false or oversimplified historic narratives that served as the ideological bedrock of “the left” for so many years, and always insisting that we return to the original texts, to the real complexities of revolutionary history, and to the world as it actually exists. He never used disagreement as a pretext to tear others down, nor did he accept partisan name calling as a substitute for articulating the real substance of disagreements.

Perhaps most importantly (and in distinction to many so-called Marxist academics), Joshua retained fidelity to both the popular and incendiary dimensions of the communist project. He was not only immensely skilled at interpreting popular sentiment but also demonstrated mastery in the forgotten art of translating high theory into accessible language without oversimplification. Meanwhile, whether in the classroom or a magazine column, he never quavered over the fact that the communist project is a revolutionary one and that revolutions are inherently violent affairs. In an era when many “radical” theorists were seeking out the peaceable expression of politics in “everyday utopias,” Joshua stressed that politics was always, at root, a fiery confrontation with the powers that be. To these ends, he not only helped bring together a new generation of young communists but also pushed them to engage directly with the rising tide of class conflict, understanding full well that the street and the shop-floor are the true classrooms of the partisan.

Heatwave is, in a sense, an attempt to embody this spirit at a larger scale. Like Joshua, we hope to serve as an engine of engagement, linking our readers to their own history and to one another. Like Joshua, we adopt a principle of ecumenicism, refusing the false dividing lines inherited from the long dissolution of the last global communist movement. At the same time, like Joshua, we also insist on a theoretically rigorous approach that invokes the real complexity of revolutionary theory and history, actively seeks evidence for its claims, and engages in good faith with opposing positions. And, like Joshua, we maintain that the partisan project is inherently incendiary, requiring confrontation with the rulers of the world, rather than gradualist compromise or secessionist retreat. Finally, communism requires an unambiguous commitment to internationalism. Although our project is currently anglophone, we recognize that elaborating a partisan politics requires learning from the self-activity of the dispossessed at the global scale.

For all these reasons, we work to ensure that every issue contains material from multiple countries and continents, that this work upholds a vision of revolutionary social transformation, and that it expresses an ecumenical spirit, putting diverse views into conversation with one another rather than elaborating our own editorial “line” by passing content through a sectarian sieve. We apply the same standards of rigor and accessibility that Joshua encouraged. Regardless of the argument, we ask: does this intervention make logical sense on its own? Can its analysis make sense of the real world? And, if so, could it also be explained to most people? In so doing, we hope to develop a collaborative, common language through which to express the partisan project: a vernacular for contemporary communist thought. This is perhaps the simplest summary of our editorial mission.

In this second issue, we bring together perspectives from Serbia, Jamaica, India, France, Iran, Chile, the United States, Palestine, Japan, and the Thailand / Myanmar border. The articles range widely in scope and subject matter, from longer explorations of the conditions surrounding contemporary

struggles to reflections on historical movements and their legacies to accounts of the daily work of survival, organizing, and community defense. Many are works in translation, a practice we consider integral to our internationalist ethos, as it allows us to make global perspectives available to an anglophone audience and break through the siloed analysis that often prevails in the U.S., which is so habituated to seeing itself as the center and entirety of the world.

While many of the pieces in this issue think through the conditions in a particular place, others rove over issues of greater breadth. J. Caurine’s theoretical exploration of communism as a form of ecological partisanship will satisfy those looking for more sweeping analysis, while readers interested in larger movement dynamics will find an evaluation of the pressure campaign’s revitalization as a popular



ADAM AHLGRIM, ALL GRIM PRINTS, BLOCK PRINT

strategy. On the cultural front, this issue features poetry as well as multiple essays exploring popular culture, including meditations on country music, pop albums, and the porous boundaries between genres.

The pieces herein are not intended to be read in isolation, but rather shared and discussed. Taking inspiration from the case of the workers’ newspaper *Abeng*, explored in the contribution from Saul Molcho, we hope that you will take this issue to your comrades, that you will debate and argue and get caught up in the minutiae, as Joshua would have. We hope that you will test the validity of any conclusions in practice, in daily life and in the streets. And we hope that you will bring back your findings to us, so that we can all refine our understanding together.

“I cannot imagine what it must be like to be making one’s way through the current chaos with the knowledge that you will have to navigate its causes and its effects for a sustained time and figure out how to survive and how to act in the world. But it must be some amount of terrifying alongside the infuriating and obscene. I am very much hoping you can find a way to make it and not go mad, and will try to help as best I can.” This message from Joshua, sent to a younger comrade in despair, demonstrates a comradely tenderness, but pulls no punches. Desperation holds primacy. As the world grows ever darker, as the rubble of today’s catastrophes pile atop the last, we do not feign hope or deny the terrors and obscenities that face us. Navigating this chaos often feels impossible, and every departed comrade only adds to the burden. Lost in a dark forest, it often appears that our only guide is the very process of analysis itself, of trying to understand the terrain, and finding our bearings in the long night. In this task we have Joshua’s example, and the example of so many communists who came before us. And we have each other, the connections that Joshua and others helped to forge, those we continue to make for ourselves through correspondence, and those that only exist in brief moments of recognition at a distance, glances through clouds of tear gas. Maybe Joshua put it best: in the end, “*it comes down / to comrades known and elsewhere.*”





Remembering Sher Singh 1951–2025

This article presents the life of Comrade Sher Singh, editor of Faridabad Majdoor Samachar (Faridabad Workers News) and member of several other communist groups based in northern India, including Kamunist Kranti and Collectivities. Written by his comrades, “Friends of FMS,” it tells his story and, through that, provides a window into the social transformations and political terrain in which he tried to intervene.

Over the past few months, Anglophone left media has been mourning the loss of Joshua Clover, Jacques Camatte, Fredric Jameson, and Loren Goldner (who played a key role in bringing Kamunist Kranti to the attention of Western communists), but there has been little discussion of Sher Singh, probably reflecting a certain parochialism of the milieu’s field of vision and personal networks. In line with our mission of promoting practical connections among comrades across the planet, and an ecumenical grasp of their diverse conditions and priorities, we hope to contribute to correcting this lacuna with the publication of this text.¹

Sher Singh was born in Haryana’s Bhiwani district, in a village called Sandwa. Born into a family of peasants and soldiers, he was sent to a military school, where he spent his childhood in relative comfort. From there he went on to study engineering and international relations at elite institutions. The whole process pulled him toward becoming an “expensive cog in the machine,” as he put it.

Already at this age he had begun to feel a steady discontent with the existing state of politics. The national “Emergency” declared by Indira Gandhi’s Congress government in 1975 created a situation that funneled Sher Singh and many others into the Maoist movement.² He gave up personal relationships and adopted the role of a “professional revolutionary” for the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), or CPI-ML, working full time as an organizer in villages and the jungle. A friend jokingly recalled that in this period, Sher Singh lost his taste for soccer and films.

The major communist parties of India considered (as some still do) the country to be a “semi-feudal, semi-colonial” society that was not yet fully capitalist. For this reason, he did not focus on the industrial areas in northern India, believing the real struggle was deep in the countryside.

1975–1980

Sher Singh moved about in the far-flung regions of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh on behalf of the CPI-ML. He was part of a network of déclassé revolutionaries from the cities trying to “organize the masses” in remote areas without much state presence, toting rifles but mainly doing educational work among the unemployed. With high levels of state repression in the cities, an atmosphere of secrecy and hierarchy reigned within the party. Because it attempted to act as a vanguard for diverse sections of the rural population (peasants, workers, Dalits, “tribals,” etc.), the party was di-

vided into numerous factions defined by competing interests.

Around this time, following the death of Mao Zedong and the rise of Deng Xiaoping, internal divisions within the CPI-ML sharpened. Sher Singh and some of his associates shifted focus: “Suddenly in 1979, it was felt that work should be done among the workers in the industrial sectors, not in the rural areas.” They may have realized that the fruits of hyperactivity they were looking for in the rural context were not likely to develop. As one comrade described it, “Sher Singh found that in fact the ‘tribals’ were wage-laborers working for the timber mafia.”

From the accounts of that time, it appears that factory workers were also grappling with the divisions emerging within and among communist parties at the national level. After the CPI decided to support the Emergency of 1975–1977, workers who had previously voted the party into positions of power now abandoned it in many locales. In such a situation, Sher Singh’s group continued to interact with those workers through study circles, discussing “a little bit of Marx and a lot of Lenin.” It produced a booklet titled *Mazdoor ka Ka-Kha-Ga* (“The Worker’s ABC”), presenting a materialist philosophy of history for proletarian readers. The group also got its first taste of how the central trade union federations collaborated with factory management. In response it tried to set up independent unions and other forms of labor organizations.

Sher Singh felt that India’s Leninists saw themselves in a role similar to the Narodniks of pre-revolutionary Russia (focusing on the peasantry, etc.). To rectify this, his group prepared a program for the establishment of a “Marxist-Leninist Workers’ Party,” centered on the organization of urban proletarians. All activities were undertaken in secrecy, because now the danger was coming not only from the state, but also from the CPI-ML itself. Hoping for support, he sent this proposal to a senior leader of the party in Delhi, who

had been active in one communist party or another for a total of 40 years. The leader responded by accusing Sher Singh of insubordination and dismissing him from the party.

While attempting to organize in the industrial zones of Madhya Pradesh (Indore, Gwalior, Bhopal), Sher Singh’s group discovered that the manufacturing sector there was already in decline. For example, the Jiyajeerao Cotton Mills of Gwalior, run by the Birla family since 1921, were facing serious problems in paying off loans.³ Eventually they were shut down, and apparently still have not settled accounts with 8,000 workers, the electricity department, and multiple banks.

In addition to such features of the global recession, the 1970s also saw the resurgence of widespread labor unrest throughout India—particularly in more modern industrial zones such as Faridabad.

1980–1984

Faridabad became the perfect laboratory for the radical experiments of Sher Singh and his comrades.⁴ Emerging as an industrial center only after 1947, this city had developed a more diverse manufacturing sector than those in Madhya Pradesh where the group had tried to intervene before—producing not just textiles, iron, or chemicals, but also electronics, footwear, motorcycles, and tools, fueled by a combination of domestic and foreign capital. Managers enjoyed well-planned housing while the workers had to build their own huts along the railway tracks. Labor struggles had been reported since the 1960s, becoming commonplace by the time Sher Singh’s group arrived.

Workers’ rejection of trade unions affiliated with the central federations, which the group had discovered in Madhya Pradesh, had begun to take on a greater scale and intensity in Faridabad. During the 1975–1977 Emergency, the state had already begun to collude with management to attack workers through forced sterilization and the demolition of slums. Standoffs

with management frequently escalated into clashes with the police, and the union federations consistently sided against the workers. By the end of the decade, unions from 80 factories had broken with the federations and formed a “Workers’ Struggle Committee,” organizing huge processions of workers throughout the city. In October 1979, one of these processions ended in the Bata Square Massacre, where police opened fire on striking workers, killing hundreds.

When Sher Singh’s group moved to Faridabad, it still saw its mission as centered on “awakening” class consciousness. As in Madhya Pradesh, it organized study circles sitting together with workers to read classic texts aloud, including all three volumes of Marx’s *Capital*—which some of them read from beginning to end over the course of many evenings, during the brief hours between work and sleep.

During this period, Sher Singh also still believed labor unions to be necessary vehicles of proletarian organization, so his intervention focused on pushing for the removal of managerial stooges and the installation of honest, worker-friendly representatives, on the exposure of “fake communists,” on raising awareness about the oppressive nature of global imperialism, and on the popularization of Marxist ideas. Even though the group’s geographical locus had shifted from the countryside to industrial centers, its members still saw their role as that of an intellectual vanguard. This program comprised the central rationale behind their monthly newspaper *Faridabad Majdoor Samachar*—FMS—when it first came out in 1982.

We have been unable to find copies of the first few issues of FMS, but key material was preserved in the 1993 collection *Majdoor Andolan ki Ek Jhalak* (“A Glimpse at the Workers’ Movement”). Many of the pieces featured agit-prop centered on uncovering collusion of unions with management, government, and police. The authors often tell work-

ers what they should do, frequently criticizing them as “merely swatting flies” (i.e., spinning their wheels on ineffective activities)—clearly the language of a self-appointed vanguard.

FMS could engage in these activities only with the help of militant workers already taking the initiative to organize resistance. The paper became a medium for proletarians to express frustrations about their lives, and a supplement to their activities on the shop floor, helping them bring together massive groups of disenchanted coworkers against not only management bent on cutting costs, but also the unions that had come to stand in their way. While FMS emerged from a somewhat conventional project of intellectual vanguardism, it also began to uncover a new perspective through interaction with workers initiating their own struggles.

In weekly meetings with those from multiple factories, Sher Singh would urge them to fight for a “truly representative” union, recommending they pay dues and then pressure the officials to fight for their interests, but still about half the workers refused to do that. From their perspective, unions were defined by three things: (1) goons who intimidate the workers; (2) collusion with management; (3) the blessing of someone in the police or government. Their experiences taught them that unions were simply not meant to serve their interests. Faced with this sort of pushback, the group decided to stop publication in 1984 and rethink their formulation.

1984-1990

For the next couple of years, the group devoted less time to meeting with workers and more to reading and discussing revolutionary literature with other communists. Many of the workers who used to attend weekly meetings had become targets of the management. Some had their wages withheld, while others returned to their villages. Sher Singh moved to a comrade’s farm,

where he delved into Marxist theory and communicated with sympathetic activists, while also playing soccer with neighbors. To support himself he took what would be his last paid jobs: as a tutor, and as a translator for *Reader’s Digest*.⁵ He later referred to this decade as a period of “drinking water from every *ghat*” (experiencing a wide variety of things in life). Now that a whole slew of inherited Marxist doctrines had been challenged by the realities of class struggle, he began to search more widely for theoretical inspiration.

For example, Sher Singh revisited Marx’s critique of political economy, and he learned about contemporary groups that recognized India as a fully capitalist society: the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) in Bhopal, the Revolutionary Socialist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), and those who had split from it to form the Revolutionary Proletarian Platform (RPP). He met with members of these groups and began corresponding with the International Communist Current (ICC) in Europe. These communications encouraged Sher Singh to read Rosa Luxemburg, for example, but *The Accumulation of Capital* was not available for purchase at that time, so he found it at the library and hand-copied important sections to take home and study.

Some of Sher Singh’s conclusions from this period of exploration were presented in a 1986 article called *Kamunist Kranti* (“Communist Revolution”), including the following points:

1. The East India Company had introduced the widespread use of money through taxation and dependence on the sale of goods produced for the world market. Hence, India’s “feudal” period had ended long ago.
2. Between the feudal and capitalist periods, India was characterized by a distinct transitional phase called “simple commodity production,” based on domestic production for personal use and limited trade of surplus.⁶

3. Capital as “private property,” understood as the property of individual capitalists, was on the verge of becoming obsolete. Marx had already observed that joint-stock companies outcompeted privately owned firms, making capital a broader social relation that was now expressed in publicly traded transnational corporations and state-owned firms.

With these points in mind, Kamunist Kranti (what Sher Singh and his comrades became known as at this time—“KK” for short) resumed publication of FMS in 1986, with a monthly distribution of about 1,000 copies during this second period. They also mapped out new goals: promoting worker self-organization, with an understanding of trade unions as functionaries of capital, and taking steps toward the formation of a “Global Workers’ Communist Party.”

By the following year, many manufacturing firms were struggling to stay afloat, and unions increasingly sided with management and the police to weaken workers’ power. In the decades leading up to this time, as many as 95% of jobs in the manufacturing sector had been permanent. Both the bosses and labor law had treated workers as part of the firm so long as it was operational. But in the 1980s, Indian manufacturers were facing financial strain and more intense competition on the world market. In a bid to raise productivity, they tried everything from longer hours to wage cuts, automation, and layoffs. When these tactics failed, bosses resorted to looting whatever constant capital they could get their hands on and fleeing. Unions played the role of either keeping the workers in the dark or managing their opposition until the curtain lifted. One of the methods the unions adopted was what KK came to call “engineered strikes.”

When workers resist from within a factory, they can exercise a certain power by controlling the machines, raw materials, and finished goods.

Traditionally, strikes were considered a form of proletarian power, but in the late 1980s, management-friendly unions began to use strikes to separate workers from the factories. In Bombay, 60 textile plants shut down in just a decade, with 250,000 workers left protesting in vain. Union-led strikes were instrumental in bringing workers out of the plants so the management could lock them down. Numerous examples of such engineered strikes can be found in the pages of FMS.

KK’s new perspective on these strikes changed their relation to the events taking place around them, now understood as part of a global transformation of industrial production and the contours of class struggle. As Loren Goldner put it in his article about the group, KK “does not mince words. ... in the 19th century, strikes were a weapon of the working class; at the end of the 20th century strikes are a weapon of management. Not just in Faridabad, or in India, but everywhere.”⁷ Today, when labor historians write about this

period, they tend to agree that “neoliberal” efforts to restructure production dismantled the collective power of workers by dissolving them into global supply chains. This was as true of the Bombay textile industry as it was of coal mining in the UK or auto manufacturing in the US. KK tried to understand these events not as a defeat of the labor movement, but as a crisis within the class relation itself.

1990s

Thus far, we have seen a series of shifts: from understanding Indian society as semi-feudal to fully capitalist; from organizing the peasant and “tribal” masses to organizing the industrial proletariat; and from organizing “real” labor unions to a comprehensive critique of unions’ role in managing the class relation. However, the scope of these questions had been largely limited to the national level, in conformance with the conventions of Indian Marxism. By the 1990s, Sher Singh had begun to examine proletarian struggles from a

more internationalist standpoint. KK thus came to recognize the importance of connecting with comrades in other countries.

It was not until they had corresponded with the ICC for a few years that KK began to reconsider its role as a vanguard. This correspondence called into question KK’s lingering desire to show workers the correct path forward, and this changed the content of FMS. Until then, each issue of the paper had included a column called “Marxism,” which included debates with activists, slogans, and radical quips, often phrased in abstract, jargon-ridden language. By 1993, this had begun to feel like a waste of time, so the column was discontinued. That same year, the paper’s length was increased from two to four pages, and the number of copies increased to 4,000 (still all distributed among workers in Faridabad).

Around this time, Sher Singh wrote that the character of both factories and workers was changing drastically. Permanent employment was disappearing



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from the manufacturing sector. Where FMS had only occasionally addressed temporary workers in the past, now they became the paper’s predominant readership.

Looking back through the 1990s editions of FMS in comparison with those from the 1980s, it appears as if the paper had been taken over by an entirely different team of editors. Gone were the criticisms of workers as “merely swatting flies,” lamentations of their miserable fates, and sloganeering about far-off Marxist organizations. Instead, the new FMS gave the sense of someone sitting comfortably and sharing their experiences, both good and bad, about work and their lives outside of work, rather than incessantly wailing about hardships. Gone was the pained, martyr-like attitude which today reads like a parody of leftism. The paper also frequently published letters, stories, and poetry submitted by readers. After

1998, more space was devoted to what workers were doing and saying, and the editorial voice was gradually toned down. KK had decided that “the 95%” of ordinary workers (as opposed to “the 5%” of activists) needed to be the focal point of their activities. While many left groups claimed to work for the 95% in some capacity, this often became a sort of populism symptomatic of the capitalist division of labor and social segmentation.

In the late 1990s, Sher Singh also interacted with students from a Maoist organization at Delhi University and others who were studying film at Jamia Millia Islamia. Despite obvious differences of background and perspective, several of these middle-class students became involved in the newspaper, sitting down for long conversations with the editors and factory workers. These interactions produced some of KK’s most well-known pamphlets: “A

Ballad Against Work” (1996), “Reflections on Marx’s Critique of Political Economy” (1997), and “Self-Activity of Wage Workers: A Critique of Representation and Delegation” (1998). They also played a lot of soccer together, and Sher Singh travelled with them to visit comrades and investigate conditions in other parts of India.

Emerging Perspectives in the Early 21st Century

It is often said—sometimes critically—that FMS and Kamunist Kranti were “workerist.” We won’t delve into the definition of workerism here, but there is no doubt that a primary source of inspiration was the workers’ essential, spontaneous, and self-driven resistance to capitalism. However, to claim that this was their only source of inspiration seems incorrect.

First, it must be noted that after 1984, and especially after 1990, Sher Singh engaged in extensive correspondence with multiple activist groups. More importantly, FMS was a meticulous chronicle of the industrial system’s expansion across the National Capital Region (including cities such as Delhi, Faridabad, Gurgaon, and Noida). If the paper strove to doggedly present the workers’ side amidst (or in preparation for) such material changes, it was because its editors saw the project as not an academic endeavor, but a proletarian intervention.

We thus see that the 21st century brought new energy to their work. Faridabad was turned upside down by the introduction of new automotive plants owned by firms such as Honda and Maruti Suzuki. The nearby small town of Gurgaon became a massive “auto hub,” with thousands of factories set up to supply parts for local assembly plants, as well as for international supply chains. By 2007, 2,200 cars were produced daily at the town’s Maruti plant. Most of the workers there were temporary, overworked, and brimming with class anger. The next decade at Maruti Suzuki was defined by turbu-

lent class war, as it was at other big auto plants like Honda, in many garment factories, and sometimes throughout entire cities such as Noida. We recall Sher Singh having a perpetual smile on his face during those years, delighted to see the renewal of mass proletarian action in the twilight of his life.

Based on these experiences, FMS tried a new organizational form that sought to converge around multiple points of contact in the National Capital Region. The paper advertised four addresses throughout the region as weekly *baithaken* (“gatherings”) for workers to share experiences with fellows from other workplaces. These were also intended as sites of local self-organization, from which critical proletarian groupings could emerge to permeate the area and expand the focus on intensified self-activity.

During these last years, Sher Singh described his role as merely that of an “investigator,” but one “of and from the workers’ side.” He had come to maintain a healthy distance from

his earlier conception of himself as a “revolutionary.” Whenever he was obstructed by the police, goons, or even managers, his response was straightforward: if workers couldn’t meet here, they would find an easier place to meet, where there would be no restrictions. He calmly accepted that the issue was not about his personal rights but about facilitating communication with workers, and that aligning one’s personal struggle with that of the class was not as simple as many leftists assume.

By 2018, comrades in Faridabad, Delhi, Gurgaon, and Noida were helping to distribute 18,000 copies of FMS throughout the region each month. Sher Singh’s closest associates remained steadfastly by his side, distributing the paper regularly. After that year, they began giving bundles directly to workers, increasing distribution to 30,000 copies, with about 1,000 delivered by mail.

The 2020 lockdown brought an end to the newspaper. Sher Singh used this time to compile pieces from earlier is-

sues into booklets and, in 2022, began traveling across the country. As he visited various cities and villages, he continued to spark conversations among workers and comrades, just as he had done for decades. He often said that “every person is an epic,” and certainly his life was nothing less.⁸



Notes

1. This article is an abridged, revised, and annotated version of “Faridabad Majdoor Samachar: Communist Possibilities from Self-Critique” written in Hindi and translated by Friends of FMS with assistance from YD. The full versions can be found at Kaamsechhutti.home.blog (February 2025). Also see related texts on Angryworkers.org (March 2025), including citations removed from this version. Special thanks to the author (who wishes to remain anonymous) for expeditious help in halving the article’s length by rewriting much of it within the limited time available for inclusion in issue 2, to Angry Workers for putting us in touch, and to YD for providing clarification and helping with annotations.
2. The Emergency lasted 21 months, during which over 100,000 political opponents, dissidents, and journalists were imprisoned. The justification for this policy was a series of threats to India’s stability, including a major railway strike, assassination attempts, protest movements framed around socialism in Bihar and anti-corruption in Gujarat, as well as more narrowly political struggles within Parliament. The regime seized the opportunity to crack down on labor unions and left parties such as the CPI(M), although it is unclear to what extent those were the true targets of the Emergency.
3. The Birla family comprises one of India’s oldest and most powerful industrial conglomerates.

4. Faridabad (pop. 1.4 million) is the most populous city in Haryana state, a major satellite of Delhi, and a key industrial hub linking India to global supply chains—making it the world’s second most polluted city in 2018.
5. After these years, Sher Singh relied on the hospitality of neighbors and comrades to support his extremely modest lifestyle. Monetary donations went directly to fund the printing and distribution of publications such as FMS.
6. Sher Singh adopted this term from Engels’ misreading of *Capital*, chapter 1, where Marx had presented “simple exchange” as it appeared on the surface of capitalist society, abstracted from dimensions such as production. Setting aside the question of whether “simple commodity production” ever existed in Europe, it is interesting to see how this concept became helpful for Sher Singh and his followers to break with predominant doctrines in the Indian context.
7. Loren Goldner, “Revolutionary ‘Termites’ in Faridabad: A Proletarian Current In India Confronts Third Worldist Statism,” *Collective Action Notes* (1998).
8. If you would like to share your thoughts about Sher Singh ji, FMS, or KK, please send them to kaamsechhutti@gmail.com.

The Murder of Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi

The following is the edited transcript of an interview with a comrade who travelled to the occupied West Bank with Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi and the International Solidarity Movement. Ayşenur Ezgi Eygi was a Palestine liberation activist from Seattle, Washington in the USA who was murdered by the Israeli Defense Force at a Palestinian demonstration in the West Bank in late 2024. This interview was originally recorded and broadcast on *The Beautiful Idea*, a podcast from a collective of several anarchist and autonomous media producers scattered around the world. A link to the full episode can be found in the notes.¹

Could you explain what exactly ISM is and what it does?

It stands for International Solidarity Movement. It was founded in 2001 by some Palestinian activists, a small group of anti-Zionist Israeli activists, and some international activists. They operate along four principles: they're Palestinian-led; they're committed to non-violence as a strategy, not necessarily as ideology; they make decisions using consensus; and they use an anti-oppression lens, which includes being explicitly anti-Zionist. Their origin is connected to the Palestinian popular committees that arose during the First and Second Intifadas. ISM's goal is to participate in and support the popular resistance. They do this through a variety of activities. A big part of what they do is what they call *protective presence*: international volunteers accompany Palestinians in their daily lives in the hopes that an international presence will lessen or decrease the amount of violence that Palestinians face from both Israeli settlers and the military. Concretely, this includes simple things such as accompanying shepherders in the field, farmers harvesting their crops, accompanying schoolchildren on their way to school, or being present at homes that are threatened with demolition.

What does it mean to be involved in the popular resistance in Palestine? Could you talk a little bit more about ISM's relationship to different government entities and to armed groups?

First, I should clarify that I volunteered with ISM and travelled to the West Bank, but I actually didn't do the work with the ISM that I intended to do, because my friend was murdered soon after I arrived. So, I can't speak in depth about what it looks like in practice. My understanding is that ISM doesn't have a direct relationship with any specific political entity. The organization doesn't take a position for or against any of the political parties or groups. I imagine that there is a range of political opinions amongst volunteers, but as an organization, there's no formal relationship with, for example, the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, or any other party-like formation. The relationship with the Israeli government is very contentious, obviously, because ISM is an explicitly anti-Zionist organization.

Could you share why you decided to work with ISM? I'm also wondering if we could talk a little bit more about this question of the difference between nonviolence as a strategy versus an ideology, and how this ties into your decision to work with ISM.

In my case, I didn't decide to go to the West Bank because I thought that I personally was going to make any difference in the broader, brutal, colonial dynamic. I wasn't convinced that being an international doing *protective presence* was going to change much about the situation either. For me, it was specifically an opportunity to expose myself to dangerous conditions in the hope that the experience would be useful for coming struggles and would give me more courage to act in the future.

What do you think about "protective presence"?

I have complicated views on it. I'm not exactly sure what I think. The phrase itself is a little uncomfortable to me because it reveals that there's an acceptance of inherent difference between internationals and Palestinians. And, I don't know that, in the long run, emphasizing or accepting that difference is a sound strategy for liberation. It calls into question what solidarity means in my mind. The underlying assumption of that strategy is that by mobilizing the racial or national privileges of international volunteers, the ruling class and the government of the United States alongside other world powers will suddenly be convinced that they need to stop funding ethnic cleansing and genocide in Palestine. This could be the case, but it seems unlikely. It hasn't worked yet.

Not purposely, but incidentally, this also accepts the premise that the lives of Americans or other internationals are fundamentally more valuable than, and completely separate from, Palestinian lives. This is probably true in the

eyes of the Israeli government and military. But it undermines the concept of solidarity. If we're truly in solidarity with people, Palestinian or otherwise, don't we have to see ourselves as no different than them? It doesn't seem like there can be a tiered struggle in which Palestinians risk their lives as insurgents and internationals only risk their social reputations. And the extent of solidarity is simply supporting or observing the insurgents from a distance rather than participating as an equal. Until large numbers of internationals are willing to see themselves as 100% invested in the struggle, the Palestinian rebels will still effectively be on their own.

You went to Palestine with Ayşenur. Can you speak on what motivated her?

Since Ayşenur's murder, there's been a number of tributes published about her, written by people who knew her, maybe even more so than I did, or in different ways, or at different points in her life. All of those are worth reading. In my case, we became acquainted 4 years ago through her partner, who is my friend. I've since learned that she had quite an active political life before I met her. After October 7, we both got re-engaged in Palestine solidarity work—this helped us build a new dynamic in our friendship based around shared political activity.

She was involved in some notable things the year prior to us traveling to the West Bank. For example, she organized a grassroots fundraiser for people in Gaza. She did it seemingly all on her own in a very short period of time and was able to raise something like \$40,000 or \$50,000 in just a matter of hours. It was 10 or 20 times the amount that she expected to raise. She was a very tenacious organizer—when she set her mind to something, it was pretty admirable.² Last year, Ayşenur was also heavily involved in organizing the student encampment at the University of Washington, where she was a student.³

She worked tirelessly. The experience of the encampments deepened our political relationship. I'm not positive about this, but it's my view that the disappointment at how the encampment at the University of Washington ended led her to search for a different sort of activity around Palestine. That's when she approached me about traveling to Palestine. We had previously talked about going to volunteer with ISM, but neither of us had really committed to it. But it was in the aftermath of the deterioration of the UW encampment that seemed to make her more certain about going. Her certainty and resolve motivated me to take that step.

How long did it take to plan that trip? What steps did you take? And what was the situation on the ground when you arrived?

ISM does a vetting process. This was followed by a couple of



online informational and training sessions before actually traveling there. The planning took 3-4 months.

I think that in large part the West Bank is off the international radar because of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. But the reality in the West Bank was also very brutal and had been getting more and more deadly over the course of that year. It's always been bad. And it had grown significantly worse over the past year. In the West Bank, there's this very complicated system of governance, and what it all essentially boils down to is Israeli occupation and control, but they call it different things in different areas. There are three areas: A, B and C. It's quite complicated. The three different areas are the result of the Oslo Accords from 1993-95. Area A is supposed to be controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Area B shares control between Palestinian Authority and the Israeli military. And Area C is exclusively controlled by the Israeli military. In effect, the Israeli military can do whatever it wants in any of those areas, but their presence is less frequent in area A and to an extent, Area B. Area C is often where territory is actively being settled and annexed by Israelis with the help of the Israeli government.⁴ Some of the larger cities in the West Bank are primarily in Area A. For example, Ramallah, which is where ISM is somewhat based, and Nablus, another major city. But, outside of Nablus is a town called Beita, whose land is defined as a mix of Area B and Area C with an active settler outpost being constructed on it for the last four to five years.

It would be really helpful to hear your reflections on your experience with Ayşenur's murder.

After two days of training, it was Friday, and we were planning to attend the weekly Friday demonstration in Beita. But then I became unexpectedly ill. Ayşenur decided to go to the demonstration without me.

I'll just say that the story has been reported extensively in the media. A lot of people already know the details.⁵ I wasn't there but was able to piece together what happened from eyewitness accounts of other ISM volunteers.

She attended the demonstration. A soon as it started, the Israeli soldiers shot tear gas and live ammunition at the demonstrators. This area is on a very steep hill. When the Israeli soldiers begin firing at the crowd, the protesters usually quickly retreat down the hill into olive groves near the village. After this period of retreat, a period of calm followed where it seemed like the demonstration might wrap up. People later said this lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. But what some of the Israeli soldiers regularly do, and they did on this day, is they take over nearby Palestinian homes to use as surveillance points. A group of Israeli soldiers took over a rooftop at the top of the hill of a Palestinian home where they had a clear view all the way down the hill. The demonstrators that had retreated were over 200 yards away from where the soldiers were standing on the rooftop. And then suddenly, in the midst of what seemed like the end of the demonstration, two shots of live ammunition rang

out. One of them struck something metal, either a pole or a dumpster, ricocheted, and hit a Palestinian youth in his leg. The other one was a direct shot at Ayşenur's head. She was standing next to an olive tree in one of the olive groves. People tried to stop the bleeding while she was loaded in an ambulance and rushed to the hospital, but she died very shortly after reaching the hospital in Nablus.

Do you want to share how you how you found out and then maybe also some pieces from your journal from that time?

My journal while I was in the West Bank was in the form of somewhat regular reports to a group of friends on a messaging app. I asked friends if they wanted to receive updates from me on this list and I would send reports when I could. I found out that Ayşenur had been shot via text message from other ISM people who were present at the scene in Beita. I was in shock for quite a while. Soon after it was reported that she had died. I can share some of what I wrote that day. It captures where I was at emotionally at the time.

September 6, 2024: I don't know how to say this. There's no easy way. I wish I could write something eloquent, but I can't through my sobbing tears, Ayşenur, my friend, comrade and travel partner to Palestine was just shot in the head and murdered by the Israeli occupation forces. May she rest in power. She is now one of many martyrs in the struggle.

I'm just sitting here all day, tears welling intermittently. I don't know what to do. So many regrets. I wish it would have been me and not her. I am much older than her and she had so many things she wanted to do with her life. I was the one who came more prepared to die here. I knew the risks. I wrote a will before I came. I don't think she really considered that much of a possibility. I should have discouraged her from going to the demo. I was asked not to go to it today because I have Covid. So I stayed in Ramallah. I should have asked her to wait another week for when we could go together. Instead, when she asked me if I was in her shoes, would I go alone, I said I would. This morning, I gave her some supplies to deal with tear gas, advised her to stay alert, to stay away from the front of the demo, out of the line of fire, and to stay close to the more experienced activists. Finally, I told her I thought she would be alright. In fact, I think that may have been the last thing I said to her: "I think you'll be alright." Shows that I know absolutely nothing.

At 2:41 p.m. today, I called Hamid, her partner, and delivered the devastating news. We both sobbed and cried. What do you say to your friend whose wife was just

murdered on a trip she took with you? What do you say when she traveled from Istanbul to Palestine with you, and yet you didn't go with her to the demonstration? What do you say when you have known for months that bringing a camera phone to face the US-Israel genocidal machine is completely insufficient, and yet you traveled here with her anyway? To be honest, I thought injury, arrest or death was likely for me. For some reason I didn't think death would come for Ayşenur. I was not prepared for this moment. It came so suddenly.

Thank you. Do you want to continue sharing from other parts of your journal?

I can read from a few parts of the journal from the following two weeks. Ayşenur was born in Turkey but moved to the US, I think, before she was even one year old. So she grew up in the US, but her family made the decision to have her formal funeral in Turkey and have her buried in Turkey. I decided to travel there for the funeral. *This journal entry is from the funeral.*

September 14, 2024: A few friends have caught glimpses of me standing off on my own. They acknowledge me with a subtle nod or a slight wave of the hand. A friend comes over and gives me a hug and whispers, "I'm sorry" in my ear. I don't think Hamid has seen me. After he and others fill her grave with dirt, he sits solemnly next to her for a very long time, just staring at the new mound of dirt dotted with flowers and draped in a kufiyeh and two small flags: one Turkish and one Palestinian. I don't notice any tears on his face. He appears dry-eyed. I am the same. The tears won't come in this moment. They feel stuck behind something. Perhaps if I was dead and had no more concerns swirling inside my brain, then this body would know how to cry. Instead, I retreat to a different part of the cemetery, too consumed with worry. Some time passes and everyone else has now left. I sit alone, waiting for the unknown time when this body will be at peace.

Later, I approached Ayşenur's grave, grateful to have an opportunity to finally get close and not have any cameras or dignitaries present. I touch the soil covering her body, and all I could think to say was, "I'm sorry", over and over again. As I did this, the tears finally started to flow. This was the moment I needed with her.

A couple weeks after returning home, I wrote this reflection:

Each morning, I spend a few minutes looking at Ayşenur's face amidst the memorial-in-process that I have been building, contemplating what has happened. On occasion, a few tears drip from my eyelids, down



my cheek, sometimes a groan of agony, sometimes a shake of the head. I do not feel weak when my tears bubble to the surface. I only feel weak that my tears don't translate to effective and decisive action. These are the twists and turns that my grief takes. Undoubtedly, I have not reached the end of this winding road. For now, all I can say is that life is composed of dying and mourning. Yet still we must honor our martyrs. We must destroy what destroys us; what destroys the people of Palestine. We must globalize the intifada.

Since I've returned, it's been really unclear to me what to do, how to honor her, how to remember her, and how to give a report back. The only things I have come up with to share are these journal entries because they just seem like the most honest words.

I wanted to return to the ISM. How did your experience impact your understanding of the role of accompaniment, if at all? And what is your analysis of the work that ISM does?

I will say that the people I've met in ISM are some of the bravest and most dedicated people I've ever met. So, I have a tremendous amount of respect for them as individuals and as an organization, and the work that they do. Also, I actually didn't do the on-the-ground work with ISM. I only had the training, and then the next day, Ayşenur was murdered. The rest of my few days there were spent attending memorials.

There are many ISM volunteers who have anecdotes that their direct presence made a tangible difference in saving lives. I can't discount those experiences. If we look at the Palestinian context more broadly, however, it does seem that this sort of model of accompaniment or protective presence tends to devolve into a service-oriented framework.

What do you mean by service oriented?

It's sort of this crisis response model rather than a long-term strategy of resistance. That's not to say that it's not important to do that stuff. But I think if we step back and assess whether it's effective overall at countering Zionist terror, I don't know that it is. The degree of violence and repression from the Israeli state makes a commitment to nonviolence at times seem illogical.

There's this common idiom, *you don't bring a knife to a gunfight*. But with this model, you're only bringing a smart phone equipped with a camera to a violent conflict with highly armed security forces. It doesn't seem sufficient.

What resistance strategy do you think would be effective? And what international solidarity do you think is useful in Palestine, specifically?

In the context of Palestine, it seems clear that Israel is not going to stop their settler colonial project and all the brutality that comes along with that unless the US no longer backs them militarily, economically, diplomatically, etc. So I guess that points to the broader strategy for Americans that instead of traveling to Palestine to act as a protective presence, you stay in the US and try to, frankly, destroy the US empire from within.

There was an essay released shortly after October 7, 2023 and its conclusion on what solidarity with Palestine looks like in the US was pretty simple: solidarity with Palestine means destroying the United States.⁶ The Israeli settler state is a project of empire. But how to do that obviously becomes a much more difficult question.

Yeah. That was my next question to you.

I think it's pretty unclear. In general, as a movement, there's not a clear direction. From what I can tell, the most inspiring moments have been direct action campaigns of sabotage and property destruction. Those seem like the most tangible acts of solidarity that I've seen. A more specific example might be the Palestine Action campaign of targeting Elbit Systems, one of Israel's largest weapons manufacturers.⁷ A lot of their activity has been in the UK, although there have been activities on the east coast of the US as well. Some of their activities have had success in shutting down factories and offices of the arms manufacturer. There have been other small direct actions that are designed to limit the material support for the State of Israel by targeting groups that directly finance its activities.

I also want to hear your thoughts on supporting the Axis of Resistance. For example, there are organized armed groups fighting the Israeli military, who are statist or capitalist in orientation, and do not share leftwing or anarchist values. It's a really challenging nuance that doesn't necessarily have a clear answer.

For most of my life, the visible Palestine solidarity movement in the US has taken an almost pacifist and liberal approach, publicly. And publicly, none of these groups would talk about supporting Hamas or even acknowledge that armed struggle existed. In this portrayal, Palestinians were only victims. I think that has changed in the past year or so. There is now a sizable chunk of the solidarity movement, the decolonial Left, which actively and publicly supports Hamas and other armed factions in the Palestinian

resistance, along with the broader Axis of Resistance in the region. This new solidarity movement views the Axis of Resistance as a kind of vanguard of anti-colonial struggle. In this instance, solidarity with Palestine equates to supporting these movements and political parties without question. I find that a little problematic. But there isn't space for this discourse because it's automatically assumed you have some ideological aversion to violence as a form of struggle.

But that's not where I'm coming from. Personally, I think the only thing that really makes sense in the context of a place like Palestine is armed struggle. I'm not a scholar of Hamas. I only know what they've said publicly that's readily available. My objection to Hamas is that their political vision has nothing to do with abolishing capitalism or a centralized state authority. It's hard to align my political values with that sort of vision. The objection is not that they have taken up armed struggle.

There's a lot of pro-Zionist propaganda out there, and its entire purpose is to discredit Palestinian resistance. I think all of this should be acknowledged. And also there should be an honest debate amongst revolutionaries about what the political vision of these organizations that are considered the leaders of anti-colonial struggles is exactly. We should also look at it from a historical perspective—with in past anti-colonial struggle, there's a variety of political orientations and visions involved. Almost always, the authoritarian factions in these struggles succeed in taking over. Once independence is gained, these factions ascend to power and become the ruling party. This usually results in generating the same inequalities and class organization of society for the majority of people that existed under the previous colonial regime. Given the historical examples, we have to approach anti-colonial struggle with a critical lens and a vision for something different, an anti-capitalist and anti-statist vision.

Notes

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4. "What are areas A, B, and C of the occupied West Bank?" *Al Jazeera*,



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6. Anonymous, "10 Anarchist Theses on Palestine Solidarity in the United States," *Haters Café*, <https://haters.noblogs.org/files/2024/01/Theses-on-Palestine-Solidarity.pdf>.
7. See: palestineaction.org.



COMMUNIST RECONSTRUCTION AND THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN SPECIES: on the concept of the ecological council

J. Caurine

What will communism make of the human species? To communist theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries, revolution possessed a distinctly anthropological and anthropocentric character. With the transition to communism, the fetters of all hitherto class society dissolve and the human species for the first time takes control over its own development *as members of a species community*. This understanding has become so axiomatic that today its basic premises remain unchallenged. Despite revolutionary pretensions, “the cult of man in the abstract” continues to find expression in communist liturgy. No longer. The human being is nothing other than a ritual of capital. Communism begins on unconsecrated grounds. What follows is an ab-

breviated version of a much longer and more detailed speculation on the process of communist reconstruction, ecological limits and planning, and the concept of the council as an interspecies self-reflexive process. What appear here are selections from that text to advance the general hypothesis that communist partisanship must overcome the limits of the human species.

Marx and Engels left all variety of scattered precedents for the conceptualization of communism as the providence of fully developed humanity. If all previous forms of social reproduction were riven with class antagonisms of some kind, then only in a truly planetary classless society does the human species as such step onto the historical stage as

the subject-object of its own self-development. This is why Marx cryptically referenced communism as the end of “the prehistory of human society.”¹ The constraints of necessity are diminished and human history proper begins. In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels characterizes the transition as a drama in which the human species wrestles itself free from external nature through the scientific mastery of “natural” forces, now put to exclusively human ends, leaping from the “kingdom of necessity” to the “kingdom of freedom.”²

The formulation of communism as freedom opposed to necessity can be found in Marx: “the realm of freedom really begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper.”³ In keeping with 19th century revolutionary thought, and with the level of development of contemporary natural sciences, Marx conceptualized communist freedom as an exclusively human possibility. While criticizing Feuerbach for his conception of human essence as naturalistic and ontological, Marx’s own early treatment of the question of “species-being” relied on essentialist notions of human labor. In this treatment, the problem with capitalism is that it alienates this essence of the species from itself. Thus, in his youth, Marx fixated on communism as the “true *appropriation* of the *human* essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e., human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous periods of development.”⁴ But whereas, for Engels, this conscious, social appropriation of human capacity was to be expressed through the hard separation and domination of nonhuman nature, through man’s repression of animality, Marx was more ambiguous. He described communism as a “fully developed naturalism,” which “equals humanism,” and “as fully developed humanism [that] equals naturalism.” Communism is “the true resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature,” or, “... the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature... between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution to the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution.”⁵

His characterization of communism as the “negation of the negation” suggests that both humanism and naturalism are ideological fetters that result from bourgeois society. Yet these sketches from his notebooks were very abstract and provide little insight into the regulatory functions of a truly communist social metabolism.⁶ When he did provide more practical insight into the basic prerequisites of communism, he tended to drop the philosophical pretenses of his early notes, instead focusing on pragmatic concerns of socially-planned production in more anthropocentric terms:

Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature. But this always remains a realm of necessity. The true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite.⁷

The formulation we inherit then is something like: communism – realm of freedom – the development of human powers as an end in itself—a sort of communist categorical imperative.⁸ In contrast, the nonhuman world, including our own animality, figures into the realm of necessity. Its relation to communism is as a condition of possibility from which the human species emerges and greets itself for the first time.

The terms “human species,” “humanity,” or “human community,” while popular invocations and mobilizing images among communist theorists, are abstractions without clear material content. The fraught concept of *species* that communism will inherit is itself a conceptual artifact of capitalism, which materially conflates the historical taxon *Homo sapiens* with the concept of humanity-in-general, and further confuses biological species with community. This confusion is historically unique because only the capitalist mode of production brings about an identity between species belonging, social reproduction, and individual subsistence. “Humanity” is a perverted, ideological form of the capitalist social metabolism that appears to us as natural and essential, dissolving any distinction between social practice, biology, and subjectivity. While not abstractly equivalent, the “human species,” “humanity,” or “human community” are made *practically* interchangeable by capitalism. This is not because they describe the same phenomena, but because capital inscribes within each the irreducible quality of labor-power.⁹ This *social* meaning of humanness essentially colors and eclipses all others, whether biological or philosophical, normative or descriptive. In the hands of communists, these concepts deserve more scrutiny.

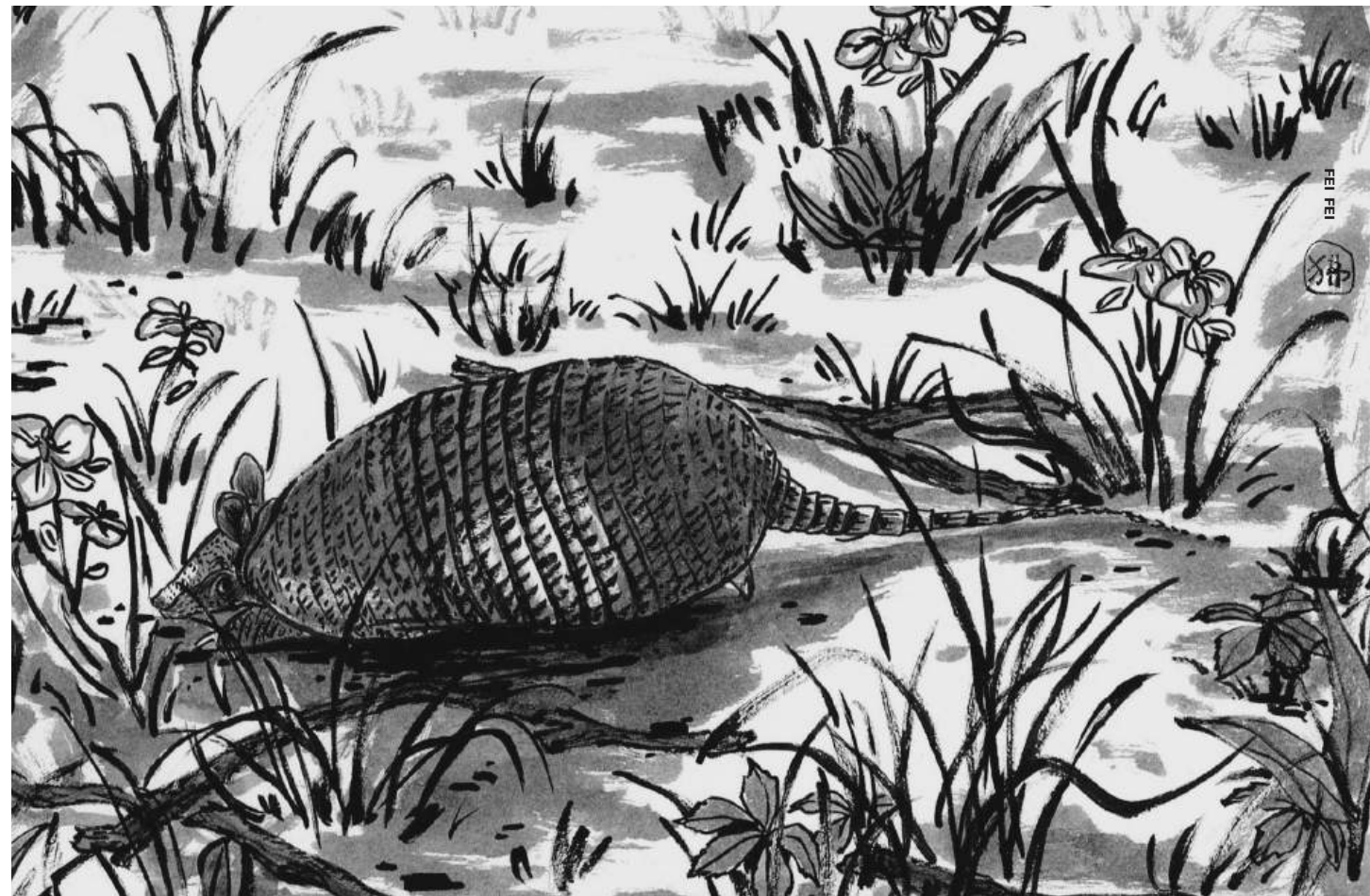
In any case, some version of the human-without-qualification makes its way through the motions of capitalism, the sole protagonist of history and the solitary engineer of communism. Communists still sing the praises of some human essence, as if it were always there in its totality, regarded as a transhistorical fact in the process of becoming that was repressed by class society and will unleashed by its destruc-

tion. Human emancipation, being an essential condition of communism, is presented not only as the whole of the content of the communist program, but as a test of its actualization. Jasper Bernes, for example, describes the present task of the communist movement as building structures of self-organization that can realize the “real human community—classless, stateless, and moneyless.”¹⁰ In their “Theses on the Council Concept,” The New Institute for Social Research argue that, precisely because it functions self-reflexively as a form of human social reproduction, “the concept of the council remains oriented toward the possibility of humanity qua classless society as self-determining subject.”¹¹

The ambiguity of terms like “community” and “humanity” is matched by their ubiquity. Presuppositions such as “humanity qua classless society” or “communism qua humanity” seem to animate essentially all communist perspectives and programs today. While precedent clearly exists in the work of Marx and Engels, the now taken-for-granted formulation of communism as “the material human community” comes to us from the Italian left communist Amadeo Bordiga, by way of his pupil Jacques Camatte.¹² Adding to our confused inheritance, Camatte read “humanity” and the “human community” (the two

terms are never quite clearly defined or disarticulated) onto Bordiga’s conception of the human species. For Bordiga, the human species, which “supersedes all bourgeois ideology,” was the real subject of the communist movement.¹³ To him, unlike the bourgeois conceptions of human individuality and dignity, the species *as such* was a biological and historical fact, brought into totalizing relationship with itself by the movement of capital. Communist revolution, “for the first time in history,” will allow society to “voluntarily and scientifically subordinate itself to the *species*; which is to say, will organise itself in forms that best respond to the ends of future humanity.”¹⁴ Put simply, Bordiga thought of communism as “a life plan for the species.”¹⁵

Camatte interpreted this with more abstract grandeur, finding in Marx the blueprints for communism as the “material human community” (*Gemeinwesen*). According to Camatte, capital had either entirely eradicated or subordinated all prior forms of historical community, which were only ever partial, regional, and particular. It replaced these social ties with the bondage of the market and production. This material community of capital could now be appropriated *by the species* and transformed into the human community as a *universality*.¹⁶ Marx generally used *Gemeinwe-*



sen to refer to something like “community” but, to make his point, Camatte mostly drew from Marx’s earlier writings, specifically an 1844 article in which he claimed that

social revolution possesses a *total* point of view because—even if it is confined to only one factory district—it represents a protest by man against a dehumanized life, because it proceeds from the point of view of the particular, real individual, because the community against whose separation from himself the individual is reacting, is the *true* community of man, *human* nature.¹⁷

From this perspective, the function of communism is to bring about the “true community” as an essential, natural quality of human existence. Since Camatte, unlike Bordiga, does not mobilize “species” in the biological sense, any safeguarding against reified conceptions of humanity is lost. We return to capitalism’s peculiar species abstraction, now dressed in revolutionary costume.

It is true that “communist revolution is, fundamentally, an anthropological revolution.”¹⁸ Communism’s break with the human species is a forward thrust, an anthropological revolution that finds its dialectical partner in the revolt of nature, such that neither humanity nor nonhuman nature would be preserved unchanged. Communist revolution will shatter the world inherited from capital—its social relationships and categories, its material structures of production and distribution, its ecological devastations—and initiate a process of *communist reconstruction* through which these inheritances are reshaped into a transparent metabolism. In the process of communist reconstruction, the fate of the species should not be confused with the fate of *species* as a social category. If communism breaks with the human species, it is because it breaks with *speciation* as a reification of biological and social processes and breaks with the material process that gives practical truth to the abstract conception of humanity.¹⁹ In the absence of market relations, such a practical abstraction would be unmoored in communism. The significance of *species* as a category will dissolve. Taxonomic rankings may be reconstituted, but it is not possible to know what this will look like in advance. Social reproduction and individual subsistence will not be mediated by class, race, gender, or even species belonging.

While this may appear bizarrely idealist or utopian, directly contradicting the lineage of communist theory and a communist movement that sought to measure communism by the unit of species, these contradictions are more apparent than real. The contradictions between scientific mastery and atavistic enchantment, freedom and necessity, humanism and naturalism, human and nonhuman, find their terminus in the destruction of capitalism and the construction of communism on its ruins. Indeed, articulations

of the communist program as anthropological revolution are helpful in coordinating the tasks of communism as an interspecies process of metabolic reconstruction.

The communist program *must* reckon with the problems posed by species and anthropocentrism for two basic reasons. The first is the simple fact of the world as it actually exists. The planetary metabolism involves a complex array of biogeochemical flows and cycles that involve biotic communities and abiotic factors alike. As a minimal condition, communism makes possible and requires the transparent and planned reproduction of these cycles to maintain biospheric integrity. It does so by reducing necessary labor and material and energy throughputs to a minimum but cannot do so merely via the planning and regulation of human activity alone. Any process of communist reconstruction will need to develop ways to account for the metabolic flux of planetary reproduction. Here, an expanded concept of the council is needed.

Historically, “councils” refer to workplace executive bodies composed of revocable worker-delegates linked together in a system of political and economic organization. In the early 20th century, councils grew out of strike and action committees to become a key form of revolutionary organization and combat under direct proletarian control.²⁰ The council was treated as both a means and end—both a weapon intended to eviscerate class society and an organ through which to germinate communist relations and imperatives. As I am appropriating it here, council is more concept than form, one not necessarily limited to the factory floor.²¹ The council names a relational process, a social matrix to define and execute tasks to solve the problem of common social reproduction, providing a formal opening for creative experimentation in the social-ecological reflexivity that is communism in becoming.²² As a shorthand, we can think of this structure of interspecies accountability as the ecological council.

Second, if we take seriously the basic prerequisites of communism as not merely the end of value, money, markets, and wage labor, but of class society *tout court*, then this means the historical negation of the Neolithic agrarian revolution.²³ Such a revolution would be a reckoning, the practical expression of the normative impulse of the communist project—that is, non-domination, “the minimal guiding principle of a communist society.”²⁴ Non-domination is not identical with communism, but remains a necessary condition for it, one of its basic negative measures. This is the meaning of “association of free producers.” An expanded concept of the council as interspecies and ecological poses uncomfortable problems with respect to non-domination. As the positive content of communism, the imperatives of “voluntary association” and “free development” are intended to proscribe against the possibility of domination reemerging. Yet what, exactly, constitutes

domination among species? How do “voluntary association” and “free development” apply to nonhuman life or abiotic processes? This is not entirely clear. Some activities more obviously involve interspecies domination than others. Systematic violence is dispensed against all variety of existence.²⁵ Yet, in the communist imagination, the messy work of relating freedom to necessity conventionally takes the form of measuring *human* freedom against nonhuman necessity. Thus, the minimal condition of non-domination is conventionally limited to the human species, excluding nonhumans from consideration in the communist program before it can be tested against reality.

Reality tells a different story. It is my proposition that the destruction of capitalism will upend this conventional understanding of non-domination by eroding the social basis of anthropocentrism. The communist program annihilates the social burden that is undifferentiated humanness, reified in the ideology of human dignity. Through voluntary association and coordination, labors and efforts are rendered directly social, bypassing the mediation by abstract human belonging. In other words, social (re)productive activity would no longer be exclusively human. In fact, it *cannot* be, and never was, but could only be valorized as such under capitalism through the mediation of wage-dependence. What communism makes “transparent and tractable” are the already-existing realities of the planetary metabolic flux, the biogeochemical cycles, biotic life processes, and abiotic components implicated in *every* social practice and ecological-developmental process.²⁶ Planning of social reproduction from the perspective of ecological limits, accounting for the metabolic requirements and throughput across and among species, this is precisely the task of ecological councils.

The council function must innovate new forms of representation that permit deliberation as an interspecies process. While the concept of an interspecies communism is relatively novel, it has in fact been articulated elsewhere.²⁷ These articulations for the most part have been either rhetorical or ossified as a discursive exercise of the academy. This is unfortunate, because any real communism will be a communism of the biological-metabolic continuum, what Marco Maurizi in a more limited sense calls the post-Neolithic, “enlarged animal society.”²⁸ The difficulty lies in moving from mere thought experiment or empty gesture to the practical path before us (though social struggles have already begun to test this hypothesis). Added to this is the mysticism and pure ideology that cloaks the metabolic separation, which in turn renders any *present* speculation on the prospect of interspecies reflexivity and reciprocity either heavily intellectualized or encumbered by atavistic folk-science or vulgar animism (think *The Secret Life of Plants*), often manifest in attempts to “inhabit” the land in nouveau-autochthonous fashion. What the concept of the

ecological council demands is not opacity or esotericism, but transparent and exoteric participation in processes of metabolic repair, amelioration, and convalescence, all tending toward the reconstruction and reproduction of dynamic systems with endlessly diverse internal differentiations and biotic and abiotic compositions.

For Maurizi, “contrary to animism, reciprocal respect between humans and nature would not be caused by a fundamental *indistinctness* between us and the other species: it would flourish from our ability to perceive and appreciate *difference*.”²⁹ This is necessary, but insufficient. Difference, yes, but which difference? My wager is this: it will not be the abstract difference between the human and nonhuman *tout court*. In the absence of production-for-value, this Manichean divide would no longer be necessary. Its salience is neither essential nor transhistorical, but given by capital’s abstraction of humanness.³⁰ More granular forms of difference, particular ecosystem limits and dynamic equilibrium requirements, determined by ever-shifting species compositions, would factor into production and reproduction considerations directly. In practice, the ability to appreciate difference and make it tractable to production would then render the distinction between the “human” and “nonhuman” increasingly untenable and unstable. The functions of “transparency and tractability” *necessitate* ecological and biological knowledge and research to maintain ecosystem services and interspecies functional biodiversity for the more-than-human community. However, because the deep structure of social functionality is so profoundly shattered and reconstituted by the revolutionary process, the *forms* and *concepts* subjected to transparent self-activity and reflexivity are themselves destabilized and transformed. The very category of species will be made void—at least as we know it presently. Nothing is sacred in the communist destruction of the old world.

The advantage of this reconceptualization is that it allows us to shift the vantage from merely the point of rupture, which carries with it an endless obsession of organizational forms, to the perspective of social reproduction, the problem of a communist function crystallized from historical and physical—that is, *ecological*—reality. The New Institute writes that the council is “essentially self-reflexive responsiveness to *natural* and social conditions in the process of their collective transformation by individuals,” but fail to draw out what I think are dramatic implications for the character of communist reconstruction as an *interspecies* process.³¹ Indeed, the authors maintain a sort of knee-jerk reaction to any whiff of “anti-civ” or “anti-humanist” tendencies among contemporary communists, especially those “ecologically” inclined (not without cause). But, in doing so, they elide a very real problem posed by the very council concept that they champion. The process of communist metabolic reconstruction is the desecration of anthropocentrism

through the practical destruction of the process that gives form and function to the human abstraction, leaving transparent and tractable the flux of ecosystemic metabolism. It is in this theoretical space that the concept of the council can generate possibilities for political activity and clarification of the tasks of communist reconstruction.

Communist reconstruction makes legible and practical the reality that the object of social reproduction has never been the human species *per se*, but has only appeared as such in the capitalist mode of production. Any concept of communism that makes alpha and omega of the human species is an idealism made obsolete by the real anthropological revolution of communist reconstruction. At best, we can imagine that voluntary associations would tend to retain an anthropocentric character as a purely practical matter, given individual self-interest and most immediate filial relations, such that only a small percentage of the human population would assent to planetary injunctions against the domination of nonhuman forms of life, prohibitions against certain kinds of use that reflect the particularity and reflexivity of species life history strategies, interests, and measures of planetary biodiversity. Yet even in this more pragmatic scenario, it is unclear why species self-interest—implying ethical prescriptions, forms of kinship, and modes of social reproduction—should be given in advance of the revolutionary process itself. After all, the human species (including even the scientific and social content of the *concept* of species) will be utterly dissolved and transformed by the anthropological revolution that constitutes communist reconstruction. Communism opens the possibility for new forms of interspecies relationships, giving unprecedented historical content to biological symbioses and altruisms, regulated by conscious, scientific planning and understanding of biogeochemical processes that underwrite the complexity of the planetary ecological metabolism.

Communism presents the flux of the biological world as transparent and participatory, rather than blindly automatic or atavistic. Communist reconstruction is a process-activity, an aspect of the universal ecological-developmental dialectic. This is always happening. What distinguishes communism is the historical capacity to actively plan *within* the ecological-development process as it unfolds. Communism renders this relational mediation transparent. It does not invent it. It does not overcome it. The ecological councils function as units of this absolute metabolism, what Marx called the universal metabolism of nature. We come then, finally, to the negation of the negation. Communism overcomes the first negation—the dispossession from “late Neolithic multi-species resettlement camps”³² that constituted the unity of the human species in capitalism—through a second: reconciliation with multi-species infrastructures by overcoming class domination qua market dependence. It is only in this limited sense then that the concept of “spe-

ciesism” has any practical force, when the potential for its real overcoming is finally realized. Non-domination of non-human life then becomes more like a measure of the extent and success of communist reconstruction, if only because its implementation has as its necessary conditions not only the full negation of capitalist relations, but the negation of the Neolithic scars of class society and the abuse of the land and its inhabitants. It is only in this particular and limited sense that communism is the end of human prehistory.

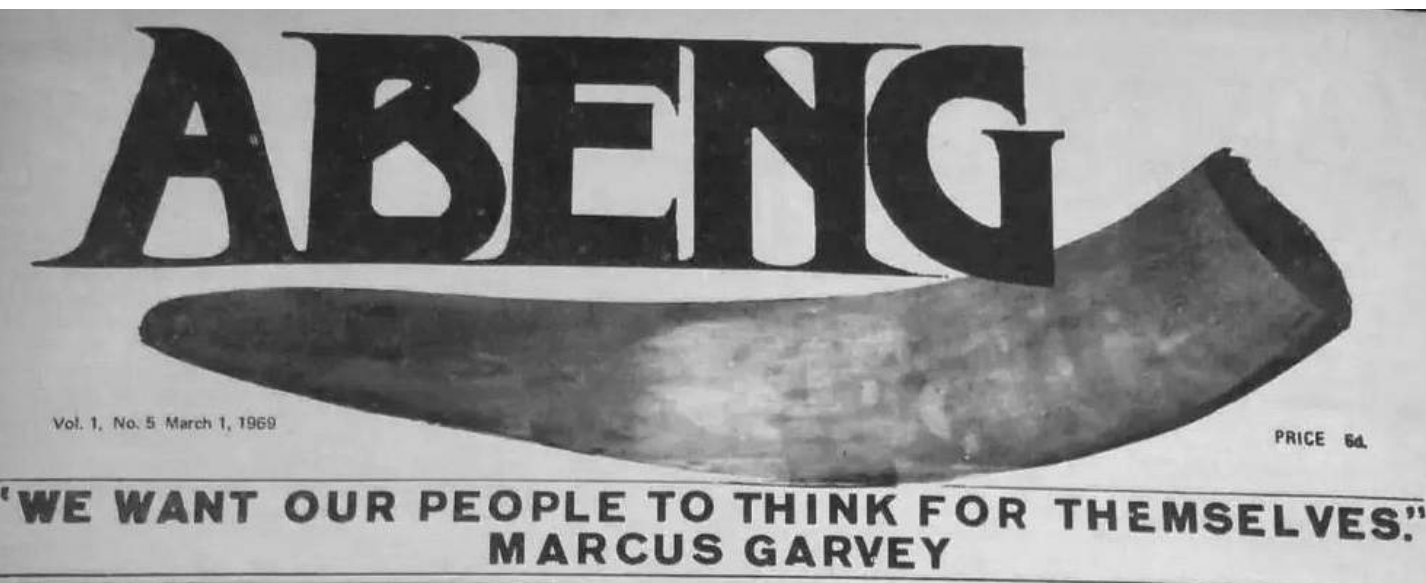
Notes

1. Karl Marx., *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.
2. Friedrich Engels., *Anti-Dühring* (1877), Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume III* (Penguin, 1991), 958-9.
4. Karl Marx. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. In *Early Writings* (Penguin, 1992), 348.
5. Ibid., 350, 348.
6. Ibid., 358.
7. Marx, *Capital: Volume III*, 959.
8. Indeed, this is precisely what Marxist humanists argue themselves. Karen Ng recently described Marx’s project as a “new categorical imperative,” informed by “the doctrine that man is the highest being for man.” Ng, “Species-Being, Metabolism, and Natural Limits,” *Qui Parle* 34, no. 1 (2025): 178.
9. Capital’s peculiar form of social wealth, objectified human labor in the abstract, weds the reproduction of the human species *per se* to the reproduction of capital. The operative abstraction is human labor in general, a logical category that has a real, material dimension in capitalism. In the process of capitalist reproduction, the valorization process abstracts the quality of human belonging from the flux of nonhuman nature. Human workers, by realizing their capacity for labor and their aliquot part of the undifferentiated human metabolism, are *ipso facto* valorized as possessing the quality of humanness, belonging to the species. Every other aspect of the production process, from the tools and machinery to the raw materials and energy inputs, are devalorized, or, in other words, rendered nonhuman in the abstract, the undifferentiated mass of species nonbelonging. In effect, all that matters is that these various substrates and inputs do not possess the capacity to valorize value, to produce surplus value, which in turn delimits the form of their utilization and externalizes the conditions of their reproduction.

10. Jasper Bernes, *The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising* (Verso, 2025), 159.
11. A New Institute for Social Research. “Theses on the Council Concept” https://isr.press/Theses_on_the_Council_Concept/index.html.
12. Loren Goldner, “Communism is the Material Human Community: Amadeo Bordiga Today” (1995) *Libcom*. <https://libcom.org/article/communism-material-human-community-amadeo-bordiga-today-loren-goldner>; Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community: the results of the immediate process of production and the economic work of Marx* (Pattern Books, 2020).
13. Amadeo Bordiga, *The Science and Passion of Communism: Selected Writings of Amadeo Bordiga (1912-1965)* (Haymarket, 2020), 450.
14. Ibid., 455.
15. Ibid., 88.
16. Camatte, *Capital and Community*.
17. Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article: ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform.’ By a Prussian.” *Vorwärts!* 63 (1844). Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm>; For Camatte’s invocation without reference, see Jacques Camatte., “Origin and Function of the Party Form.” *Il programma comunista* (1961). Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/camatte/origin.htm>.
18. Phil A. Neel and Nick Chavez, “Forest and Factory: the Science and Fiction of Communism” (2023) *Endnotes*. <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/forest-and-factory>.
19. “The human and the nonhuman, being achieved as a practical truth through the valorization process, generated as a speciated discontinuity in the continuum of life and metabolic processes, are themselves perverted forms of dynamic social-ecological material relationships. The reproduction of this speciation is the humanization process.” *Decompositions*, “Tragic Theses” (2023): <https://decompositions.noblogs.org/post/2023/03/09/tragic-theses/>.
20. For a good historical and theoretical introduction see Anton

Pannekoek, “Workers’ Councils” (1947): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1947/workers-councils.htm>.
21. Councils of course never were limited to the factory floor.
22. A New Institute for Social Research, “Theses on the Council Concept”.
23. This point has been made elsewhere. For example, Bernes (2025) argues that communism is “the negation of those elements not only of capitalism but of class society since the Neolithic revolution: division of labor, state, and class” (125). Or, for, John Clegg and Rob Lucas, “if communism is to amount to the abolition not only of capitalism but of class society per se, then a communist revolution must be seen as the negation of this first agricultural revolution.” John Clegg and Rob Lucas, “Three Agricultural Revolutions.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 1, (2020): 101.
24. Neel and Chavez, “Forest and Factory”.
25. Widespread animal domestication comes to mind, for a variety of reasons, but nearly all modern agricultural and extractive activities have deleterious to disastrous consequences for the nonhuman life and systems involved. The challenge is to distinguish harm from domination.
26. The formulation of “transparent and tractable” comes from Bernes, *The Future of Revolution*, 171.
27. See e.g., Leigh Claire La Berge, *Marx for Cats: A Radical Bestiary* (Duke University Press, 2023).
28. Marco Maurizi. *Beyond Nature: Animal Liberation, Marxism, and Critical Theory* (Haymarket, 2021): 172.
29. Ibid., 174.
30. For this reason, Marx called Christianity, “with its religious cult of man in the abstract... the most fitting form of religion” for bourgeois society. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Penguin 1992), 172.
31. New Institute, “Theses,” emphasis mine.
32. James Scott, *Against the Grain: The Deep History of the Earliest States* (Yale University Press, 2017), 18.





THE RED THREAD OF BLACK POWER IN JAMAICA: the case of abeng

Saul Molcho

The ecstatic days of the long 1968 placed social revolution squarely on the agenda for militants around the world. The decades-long entrenchment of parties hamstrung by their ties to the Soviet Union, the bureaucratization of previously militant trade unions, the monological focus on the factory and its downtrodden inhabitants as the sole social base for revolutionary transformation of society—all these calcified forms of class struggle and organization were challenged openly in the various globe-trotting skirmishes that characterized the heady, staccato timeline of the late '60s.

The specter of '68 took on additional valences in the Caribbean against the backdrop of national independence and racial capitalism. The few short years of independence,¹ which saw the evacuation of the former colonizing powers, failed to bring about the benefits of national uplift and basic dignity for the majority of Caribbeans that had been promised by the tepid anticolonialism of the national bourgeoisies. Instead, the beneficiaries of the postcolonial state cowered to the reinvigorated demands of imperialism, now devised to recruit the consent of the national elite who, in turn, aimed to manufacture the consent of their respective populaces.

Jamaica's neocolonial condition was expressed primarily by the island's continued exploitation by foreign companies for raw materials, particularly in the bauxite, sugar, and banana industries. The bauxite and aluminum mining sectors grew especially quickly in the 1960s, with land devoted

to mining overtaking sugar plantations and Jamaica's bauxite industry becoming the largest in the world.² The growth of the mining industry contributed to land monopolization, environmental degradation, and poor living conditions, all while the bulk of profits went to the US and the UK where the aluminum was finished. Urban development for tourism caused evictions and segregation as police shielded resort-goers from black Jamaican life. In one politically formative moment in April 1963, known as "the Coral Gardens incident," a group of Rastafari protesting police violence and segregation burned down a gas station, leading to the death of two police officers.³ Then-Prime Minister Alexander Bustamante ordered those with locks and beards to be "brought in dead or alive," and in the subsequent repression of the Rastafari movement, Jamaican police killed eight Rastas and sent many more to jail. Jamaica's political elite in the 1960s, in bed with foreign capital, was at war with its own population, declaring emergency powers for weeks at a time and banning Black Power literature and figures from the island. A Creole middle class—"white-hearted" lackeys of imperialism, in the words of Walter Rodney—came to define the terrain of national politics, capturing and quelling the widespread anticolonial fervor that had contributed to the end of formal colonialism.

In this context, the revolutionary movement in Jamaica had to confront the power of foreign multinational companies and the neocolonial state that facilitated exploitation

and inequality. Largely based among the educated middle class, this movement also needed to solve the problem of its isolation from Jamaican workers, peasants, and "the lumpen" while articulating new organizational forms that could replace the political parties and their affiliated unions. This meant bringing together a diverse group of people against the current state of affairs, an unstable mixture of communists, Rastas, black nationalists, unemployed or semi-employed proletarians of the "rude boy" subculture, independent union members, intellectuals, and rural workers.

During his brief eight months lecturing at the University of the West Indies, the Guyanese historian Walter Rodney took up this organizational challenge by holding "groundings" throughout Kingston and its surroundings, talking with Jamaicans at dance halls, football pitches, and slums. Rodney maintained that he had much to learn from these interactions about Jamaica and how to fight for liberation, primarily engaging in conversation about their lives and only occasionally delivering lectures on African and West Indian history. Rodney was successful in catalyzing Black Power consciousness in Jamaica because he eschewed middle-class social conventions while articulating a sharp critique of capitalism and neocolonialism, thus positing a resounding example of how others in a shared position might contribute to the revolutionary movement. Rodney's own intellectual production articulated the commonalities of emergent Black Power politics with an anticolonial Marx-

ism: "there is nothing," Rodney asserted, "with which poverty coincides so absolutely as the color black."⁴ The result provided an analytical framework that could accommodate multiple forms of revolutionary political articulation that did not otherwise organically find association with one another.

Rodney's exemplary status in Jamaica did not last long. After he was banned from Jamaica for posing a presumed threat to national security, proletarians and university affiliates alike took to the streets of Kingston to display their frustration at this open act of state repression, and to express a deeper and more pervasive disdain for the dispensations of the neocolonial order. University affiliates, just hours after the news of Rodney's expulsion was announced, staged a march from the secluded University of the West Indies campus into downtown Kingston, where they were met with attacks from both police and official trade union stalwarts, the latter being just as committed to the neocolonial state as the former. On the heels of the university affiliates' actions, proletarians—whose domain in Kingston had been confined to the densely concentrated "dungles" (slums)—burst into open revolt, resulting in an estimated \$1 million of damage in Kingston alone. The spirit of 1968 had come to manifest in Jamaica.

"A riot is not a revolution," Rodney opined following his expulsion.⁵ The flashpoint of the "Rodney Riots," while delivering a significant blow to private property in the heart



of Jamaica's capital, did little in themselves to put in place or build upon organizational capacities that could sustain a revolutionary challenge to capital's dominion in the Caribbean. However, the riots were seen to be the clearest expression of a popular desire for the reordering of things, expressed through a program of total disorder. For Rodney, "a riot can contribute to revolutionary consciousness," lending itself to the development of a force capable of confronting the ruling order directly. The Rodney Riots exposed in broad daylight the fault lines of neocolonial society in Jamaica, with the imperial order and their local representations on one side, and the aggregate population of Jamaican proletarians—the chronically unemployed, small farmers, sugar estate workers and bauxite miners, the manifold dangerous classes—on the other. Militants in Jamaica faced the challenge of deepening, clarifying, and codifying the rupture brought to the surface of Jamaican society in the wake of the Rodney Riots while avoiding capture by existing compromised institutions, whether bureaucratic trade unions, national political parties, or Comintern-affiliated organizations.

It is within this context that the Abeng group and its weekly, eponymous newspaper first appeared in January 1969, offering an innovative and popular response to the deepened crisis in Jamaica. Several of *Abeng's* key contributors were radicalized by Rodney's exile, and the group was inspired to cultivate an organic connection to Jamaica's disaffected classes by Rodney's grassroots work and the clarifying experience of the riots. *Abeng's* short existence until October of the same year was characterized and unified primarily by an opposition to the neocolonial situation in Jamaica and the Third World more broadly, and the belief that a creative response to this situation could be devised only through connection and collaboration with the pro-

letariat in its various formal and informal guises. From our contemporary vantage point, the primary lessons of the Abeng group are to be found in their innovative approach to the relationship between party and class, and to the new forms of organization this approach called for.

Abeng and the Spread of Assemblies

In the wake of Rodney's banning, disenchanted intellectuals and dispossessed "sufferers" became politically entangled in previously unforeseen ways, presenting a new conjuncture through which to agitate for revolutionary change. To sustain this coalition and to expand its influence, a small group of revolutionaries resolved to establish a national newspaper that could provide a mouthpiece to all disaffected elements of Jamaican society and begin the articulation of a generalized antagonism against the neocolonial state. Contributors to the paper came from diverse ideological backgrounds, including acolytes of C. L. R. James like Robert Hill, proponents of a mixture of vernacular black nationalism with Situationist-inspired council communism such as Fundi (Joseph Edwards), and more orthodox Marxist-Leninists like Trevor Munroe. The Abeng group sought to shatter the dominance of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP), and to create new forms of organization which they thought could only come about through collaboration with the working class. They named the newspaper after the maroon word for a sheep's horn, used during the colonial period to communicate across vast distances and stage attacks on slave society.

If Rodney codified the conjunctural impetus for *Abeng's* coherence, Trinidadian historian C. L. R. James in many ways set the foundations for the paper's manifest philosophy of revolution. For James, the moment of insurrection frequently took the form of a mass, democratic insurgency: rather than the storming of the Winter Palace, James saw the creation of soviets in every workplace as the basis upon which socialism was to take shape. The latter was the political form that would expand the "natural and acquired capacities" of human beings, conjoining the moment of capitalism's delegitimation with that of the proletariat's newfound self-legitimation. Revolutionary activity carried for James both a destructive capacity and, perhaps more importantly for him, a pedagogical mandate. The storming of the Winter Palace could teach nothing of the technicalities or intimacies of self-management within the arteries of a democratized mode of production, much less ensure the expanded political power of the proletariat itself to act in a newly self-capacitated manner. It was from the shop-floor that the most intimate knowledge of socialism derived and, in order to thrive, such knowledge needed the broadest dissemination. James, ever the man of letters, regularly emphasized the importance of literary production and, in particular, the creation of newspapers as the basis upon which

struggles could be conjoined, knowledge of the productive apparatus could be distributed, and lessons from experiences of proletarian self-organization could be adequately aggregated and publicized. The practices organized around the production and distribution of *Abeng* saw James' philosophy play out: the paper aimed to become a mechanism for catalyzing mass, democratic insurgency.

The *Abeng* newspaper also provided an opportunity to institute a dynamic reciprocity between, on the one hand, the militant core of the paper's partisans who propelled its production and distribution and, on the other, the nebulous aggrieved and disaffected sufferers who were quick to see the paper as addressing their most prominent concerns and who, in turn, spoke through the newspaper to one another. This reciprocity by and large designated *Abeng's* self-conscious approach to revolutionary organization:

The strategy of *Abeng* is—from the people to the paper, from the paper to the people and back again. At each stage the paper must raise itself and the people to a more solid union. A paper written, edited, financed, produced and distributed by committees of the people must subvert the politics of exploitation, give the people experience in collective action and help form the forces for a national community based on freedom and justice for all.⁶

The paper was therefore not only to put revolutionary intellectuals in contact with Jamaica's lower classes, but to do so in the context of "collective action."⁷

This reciprocity was largely achieved through "Abeng Assemblies" which would regularly form along the distribution routes of the paper. After printing every Friday, Abeng group members would disperse throughout Jamaica early the next morning, "devoting much time and petrol to the effort" of distributing the paper to rural and urban readers alike.⁸ Along the way, they would assemble with locals in various urban and rural enclaves across Jamaica's parishes to discuss the contents of the paper, reflect on their daily lives, and, on occasion, announce the political forms that their struggles against dispossession and impoverishment were already taking. These assemblies varied in scope and scale but commonly provided the foundation for an ever-tightening entanglement between those most regularly producing the newspaper and those who identified most readily with its aims.

While travelling the country to distribute *Abeng* and conduct assemblies, members dealt with stiff state repression. Multiple issues of the paper recount police harassment of distributors such as Bongo Neville, a young man from Kingston who was arrested on several occasions and even had eviction orders served against his mother in retaliation. Police attention was unsurprising given the banning

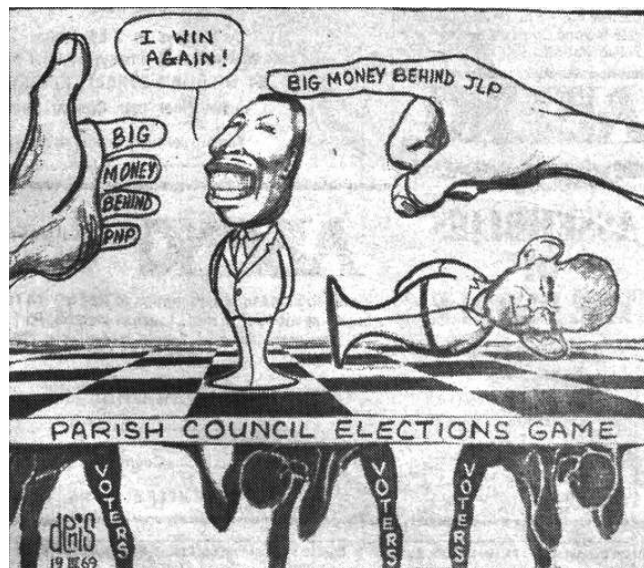
of Black Power literature in the 1960s, including many of the authors reprinted by *Abeng* like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X.

Although they brought increased state scrutiny upon Abeng members, the assemblies allowed them to identify various forms of existing and emergent struggle among proletarians. Most prominently, reports of efforts to form workers' councils on sugar plantations in Westmoreland clearly demonstrated the independent capacities of Jamaica's proletariat to innovate forms of collective self-management and resist domination implemented at the point of production. Other areas formed "Citizens Councils," which would write to *Abeng* explaining local conditions and their attempts to intervene. The Greenwich Town Citizen's Council, for example, recounted the pollution of a local river and destruction of subsistence fishing by industry, stating succinctly that the present task was to "link the struggles for the pre-existing immediate needs of the oppressed Black populace with the revolutionary goal of Black liberation and social change."⁹ This task was at the center of *Abeng's* operation.

In addition to placing Abeng members in direct contact with sufferers throughout the island, the Abeng Assemblies provided the basis upon which an ever-growing readership also became implicated in the production of *Abeng*: where concerns were raised in the course of an assembly, those concerns would become the basis of reportage or testimony in the following issue. Readers were encouraged to contribute reflections on their daily lives and attendant struggles to the newspaper, or to orally recount them to an Abeng member who would give them written form. These contributions were most commonly implemented under the recurring section "Blow the Horn, Tell the People," an eclectic combination of brief letters-to-the-editor, commentary on previous *Abeng* issues, and a myriad of grievances. As the second issue of *Abeng* insisted, "the reporting of news and experiences and distribution of the paper depends on everybody."¹⁰

Such efforts at dispersed production and distribution lent themselves to the softening of positional differences between an educated middle class and a vastly discontented but often illiterate working class, while nevertheless preserving these distinctions in the technical division of labor. The Abeng group, largely drawn from the most militant of the former camp, aimed to displace their own class hierarchies by placing their technical expertise—writing, researching, printing—at the service of an emergent class-for-itself, rather than claiming leadership over the class: "Those of us producing the paper can only go to these assemblies to help discussion, not to lecture and tell people what to do."¹¹

Of course, Abeng assemblies couldn't entirely displace class society, and critiques were commonly printed in the paper. Readers often remarked that the group's connec-



tion to the grassroots was incomplete and that the paper expressed itself in a language too elite to be meaningful to most Jamaicans. Another critique held that *Abeng* needed to develop a strategy and more directly advise workers on what to do rather than simply record and amplify struggles as possible examples. This suggests that belief in the revelatory nature of “groundings” and assemblies wasn’t shared across the movement, and that at least the strategy being pursued by *Abeng* had to be more clearly explained within its own pages. Clearer strategizing may have been precluded by the multi-tendency composition of the group.

In this context, “readers” is only an approximate and ultimately unsatisfactory term, given the active nature in which proletarians engaged with *Abeng*. “Reader” suggests a unidirectional relationship where content is provisioned and disseminated by “producers” before being passively consumed by the former. The act of “consuming” *Abeng* was not so standardized and, in addition to being read by individuals, the paper was often spoken aloud to groups of

sufferers gathered together, a practice that then served as an impetus to discuss the contents of the paper. We might consider “correspondent” a more apt term for those who engaged with *Abeng* from various angles, where readers served as active participants in the creation and circulation of the paper, insofar as they provided critical and instructive feedback within the Abeng Assemblies. As such, we can begin to place *Abeng* alongside the long history of communist correspondence projects like Marx’s own Communist Correspondence Committee, the *International Council Correspondence* journal edited by Paul Mattick, Sr., and the Correspondence Publishing Committee around C. L. R. James in Detroit—all of which were committed to a practice of inquiry. This lineage of communist correspondence projects sought to institute an open and inquiry-based form of communication that regularly militated against a staid and all-too-anachronistic party line emanating from Moscow and conveyed by its agents, seeking instead the proletarian reinvention of class struggle. *Abeng*’s contribution to this tradition of correspondence is its most profound legacy for contemporary politics, demonstrating a comprehensive reworking of the relationship between party—a coherent grouping of individuals dedicated to the task of identifying and extending revolutionary practice—and class—that living force which demonstrates the movement from which communism is rendered possible.

Conclusions

At its peak, *Abeng* amassed a print run of 20,000 copies which circulated throughout Jamaica and, to a lesser extent, the Caribbean diaspora. Despite this popularity, after just nine short months, *Abeng* ceased to exist, beset by the ills of interpersonal fallout, the destruction of their printery in a mysterious fire, and the twinned counterstrategies of state repression and recuperation. Legal fees accumulated from staving off repression drained the paper’s finances, and then the more permissive and recuperative environment of the 1970s under Michael Manley’s Prime Ministership further fractured the composition of the group, as some dedicated their activities to electoral politics while others continued to rail against Westminster governance altogether. *Abeng* saw the continuation and spread of the revolutionary movement in Jamaica to the immediate next stage following a popular uprising, raising for thousands the prospect of sustained antagonism to the neocolonial state—but it left the historical stage having amplified and conjoined grievances without illuminating what might emerge in its wake.

From a contemporary vantage, the lessons of *Abeng*, considering its shortcomings in practice and in theory, appear more as the promise of *Abeng*, an orienting idea that nevertheless fell short of its own aspirations. Rather than resolve upon and thus codify an answer to what shape organization for social transformation should take in Jamaica,

Abeng refrained from programmatic declarations, hoping to advance a popular discussion around the needs, desires, and afflictions of Jamaica’s sufferers to better clarify a popular social basis for radical transformation. In so doing, *Abeng* was able to give expression to a number of otherwise competing ideologies within a single textual space, not as so many preferential options to be considered and ranked, but as a practice of articulating across their differences for purposes of popular mobilization. While this composition did not sustain itself for long, *Abeng* nevertheless posited a complex discursive formation that evaded left factional distinctions, instead reconfiguring the register of the popular within its historical moment and redefining the terms of democratic participation in revolutionary struggle. If we are to distill a particular form from the *Abeng* experience, it is one that is necessarily flexible and expansive, capable of accounting for the “multiplicity of interests” in a manner not dissimilar from how Marx characterizes the Paris Commune. *Abeng* did not seek to design and implement any “ready-made utopias,” but rather to “set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.”¹²

While there is much about *Abeng* that feels relatively anachronistic 50 years on—a physical newspaper passed hand-to-hand has now largely been displaced by digital communication and impersonal delivery—much of its animating spirit should continue to inform contemporary revolutionary struggles. *Abeng* demonstrates a central object around which a non-sectarian coterie of partisans could cohere and agitate nation-wide against the independent state. The paper provided a material project that reflected the ideologically diverse social basis that brought it into being and served to highlight discrete tasks. These tasks brought revolutionaries into regular contact with Jamaicans across the country and actively involved them in the project of producing the paper.

The production of *Abeng* can perhaps most accurately be compared to the *operaisti* practice of co-research rather than traditional workers’ inquiry, particularly in its relation to struggle and to the types of knowledge it sought to produce. Each assembly held, each paper published, was an attempt to create a greater unity between party and class, and to one day do away with the distinction altogether. *Abeng* did not separate the paper’s production from the waging of class struggle, seeing research and writing as a way to spread and connect democratic grassroots groups capable of expanding confrontation in the workplace and village. The group sought to uncover not primarily objective technical aspects of production and consumption, but rather subjective experiences of suffering and domination that would spur opposition to neocolonialism and clarify alliances between partisans across sociological and ideological differences. The group’s flexibility and close atten-

tion to Jamaica’s specific historical conjuncture allowed it to identify the most salient contradictions in Jamaican society and push to deepen them. If not for its premature end, *Abeng* might have provided the context for long-term collaboration between revolutionaries and sufferers of disparate social groupings, a prerequisite for expanding struggles towards a rupture with the current order.

As in so many places across the world, the Caribbean left in the 1970s moved towards more bureaucratic and authoritarian forms of communist practice as well as more specialized modes of armed struggle, with few exceptions. In Jamaica, a reinvigorated social democracy fractured the revolutionary movement and, although workers continued to engage in wildcat strikes, independent trade unions never reached the scale or coherence necessary to challenge the state. For a brief moment in 1969, *Abeng* helped sketch a different future, one without managers and politicians, where reciprocity and equality come to characterize relationships. Their experiment was an essential piece of the communist movement that will bring about a classless world.



Notes

1. Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago both gained national independence from the United Kingdom in 1962.
2. Monica Silberberg, “The Jamaican Bauxite Industry and Decolonization,” *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2012): 92-106.
3. Horace G. Campbell, “Coral Gardens 1963: The Rastafari and Jamaican Independence,” *Social and Economic Studies* 63, no. 1 (2014): 197-214.
4. Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (Verso, 2019), 13.
5. Walter Rodney, “Africans Abroad in Jamaica,” unpublished manuscript, 36.
6. *Abeng* 1, no. 11 (1969): 4.
7. In this way, *Abeng* may be seen as a vehicle for what Sartre called the “group-in-fusion,” a social body constituted through a unified orientation toward practice. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1 (Verso, 2004).
8. Ken Post, “UWI Mona and the Government of Jamaica, 1967-69,” in *Rupert Lewis and the Black Intellectual Tradition*, eds. Clinton A. Hutton, Maziki Thame, and Jermaine McCalpin (Ian Randle Publishers, 2018), 26.
9. *Abeng* 1, no. 29 (1969): 2.
10. *Abeng* 1, no. 2 (1969): 2.
11. *Abeng* 1, no. 6 (1969): 2.
12. Marx, *The Civil War in France* (1871), marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm.

Red May Theses

in memory of joshua clover

Jasper Bernes

1. The first condition of revolution is the destruction of the repressive state—army and police, judiciary and prison. All other conditions depend on the first: socialization of wealth by the revolution can only occur to the extent that the repressive apparatus has been suspended. From the looters in a riot to common production for common use, communism advances as property and its violently enforced right recedes.

1.1 As the state is disarmed, the revolution is armed. But the powerful few are not the same as the weak many. Insurrection and state are asymmetrical. The revolution succeeds by dispersing rather than concentrating state violence. Frontal confrontation between the party of chaos and the party of order always leads to the reimposition of order. The eclipse of the state proceeds through desertion, mutiny, and fraternization between the forces of order and chaos. Fight against the drawing of lines, it reminds us, by fighting behind the lines.

2. The breakdown of the state is only the gateway to revolution. Revolutions are social and not merely political insofar as they are revolutions of the vast majority of humanity, the proletariat. The vast majority cannot become a new power over society, for then it would simply exploit and dominate itself, a contradiction in terms. It must abolish exploitation, domination, and all classes. This is therefore the second condition: the revolution must be massive, its organizations must be organizations of the vast majority, the proletariat. They must be universal except for this condition. They disallow elites and their enforcers but are otherwise unrestricted by any other social category or identity.

2.1 The structures of revolution therefore must comprise, at least potentially, everyone. They must be both intensive, rooted within the fundamental structures of daily life of the common people, and extensive, linking people with others at a distance. Since the human species cannot be concentrated in a single location, such

structures must also coordinate common action at a distance. They must delegate. However, since inclusivity is a first requirement, these delegates must be given explicit mandates and their decisions made revocable at will. Authority is both given and retained and therefore held in suspension. This is the third condition.

2.2 There must be no difference between delegates and their delegators, which means that delegates serve for a limited period, and their work is simplified and rendered transparent to all. Where expertise is required, it is advisory. These must be working bodies, not governmental ones, both political and economic at once and neither, abolishing the division of labor between execution and conception, manual and mental labor, that structures capitalism.

2.3 These structures presume the abolition of police power. The arming of the proletariat, of the vast majority, means that violence can only ever be directed outward, against the enemies of the revolution, and not inward as a backstop to the revolution. Directed inward, such violence violates the first and second conditions, reconstituting the police power of the state and excluding the majority from participation.

3. We can name this collection of three conditions *the commune*, inasmuch as the postulates outlined above correspond to what Marx, writing about the Paris Commune of 1871, calls the commune-form. This is a “thoroughly expansive form,” as Marx wrote, plastic and scalable. The commune is fractal, self-similar, exponentiating across any social distance, assigning delegates to delegates as needed. This expansivity means that it projects a future—it is both actuality and idea, actuality calling by way of idea to further actuality. In this way, the commune is not confined to a place or time but is universal. As a fragment of a future communism, it rallies communists around the world to its side. Its borders do not coincide with any nation, for its black flag spells death to the nation-state.

3.1 The commune is, however, ambiguous, amphibian—as an expansive form its content remains unspecified. If simply a structure of direct democracy, it can easily become vehicle for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Who composes the commune? What does it do? How? And why? These are questions to which history poses an answer with the soviets and workers’ councils that appear first in Russia in 1905 and then again in 1917, and in 1918 and 1919 across central Europe.

3.2 The historical workers’ councils have a content restriction—a restriction to proletarians—because they are transitional products of the mass strike, a class-wide proletarian action that exceeded the control of the institutions of the workers’ movement (parties and unions) and therefore required an extra-party instrument. During the German Revolution, participants were sometimes asked to show an employment card as evidence of proletarian identity in order to join. After the councils were defeated from within, voting to abolish themselves, many concluded that it was because non-workers were allowed to participate and become delegates, bringing many of the councils under the control of the unions and parties. It was necessary, they concluded, to ensure the proletarian character of the councils.

3.3 But because the mass strike moves inexorably toward insurrection, these organizations for the conduct of the strike make plans to depose the police, to occupy the government buildings and the newspapers. As soon as they silence the machinery of capitalism, they also quietly maintain services vital to the revolution and to the reproduction of the vast majority. They keep the power station running and print newspapers with headlines announcing the revolution. To the proletarian content restriction, we must add a communist one. The councils must expand to include everyone and everything in a common plan to provision for common use. They must abolish production for profit and with it the commodity, money, and the law of value through common production for common use.

4. Thus, the workers’ council: the only new invention of the communist movement in the 20th century. All else since can be seen as a refinement of the council-form as it supersedes the commune-form. But here again we need to distinguish between the council as actuality and the council as idea. In actuality, as I indicate above, the councils were not entirely proletarian instruments. But more importantly, the councils lacked a functional content restriction—instead of becoming avatars for the extension of the revolution and the socialization of wealth, delegates were reduced to electors for a national assembly, re-constituting the German state as a parliamentary democracy. In order to be revolutionary, the councils needed to be both proletarian and communist. They needed to be oriented toward the reproduction of the revolution, and the absorption of the vast majority, thereby abolishing all classes and with it the proletariat as a dominated class. This can only happen to the extent that such organizations are engaged in the destruction of generalized commodity production and its replacement by common production for common use.



4.1 With these restrictions, the councils make clear what is meant by the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Certain people are excluded as a matter of first principles—unless they relinquish the powers conferred upon them by capital and the state. Nor are these democratic, constituent bodies. They are communist by definition and presume a communist unanimity.

5. From this principle one can derive a limited definition of the party—not a formal organization, per se, but that grouping within the self-organizing councils which is oriented toward insurrection and common production for common use. These are aspects that cannot be put to the vote. The party is also, in moments of insurrection, a red army, an army whose unity is emergent rather than imposed. The red army is self-constituting, volunteerist. Its officers are chosen not imposed and have no special privileges. Its structures of centralized decision-making last only for the length of armed confrontation. This is in fact a model for communist organization broadly through the councils—it is no problem to temporarily designate a decision-maker within a particular process, or to establish automatic procedures for certain actions. Not everything has to be deliberated.

5.1 The army levels and expropriates, abolishing the rule of property and its armed guards. It abolishes class but it cannot abolish itself except by giving way to freely associated producers related to each other through transparent, tractable mechanisms.

6. Council communists imagined this early stage as constituted by “ruthless enforcement of the compulsion to work,” something that cannot be achieved except by the reconstitution of the repressive state. Where labor is both obligation and right, where workers can only be sent somewhere else and not starved to death, workers cannot be made to work with concentration or care. Those who do not want to work effectively cannot work and any activity is better off without them.

6.1 But the councils might instead socialize rather than individualize necessity. Some things must happen—call it work, labor, reproductive activity—if everyone is to be fed, housed, provisioned. But we need not restrict access to food and housing in order to ensure these things happen. That part of total output devoted to production of essential goods and services is now a small portion of overall economic output. More of these essential goods and services can be produced with less effort than capitalism presently mobilizes if unproductive activity related to the capitalist mode of production—cops, defense contractors, bankers, bureaucrats, brokers, advertisers, and insurers—were eliminated, along with

luxury production for the consumption of elites. There is no longer any need to individualize necessity. It can instead be immediately socialized.

7. The immediate socialization of necessity and social wealth requires forms of accountability that are *transparent* and *tractable* to all. People account for each other by accounting for things. Social reproduction takes place in part through processes that are openly and transparently planned and accounted for—the numeric figures corresponding to such processes are made visible to all and tractable through open, inclusive decision-making processes requiring no specific technical knowledge.

7.1 This does not mean, however, that everything can or should be planned deliberately. Planning also means, by definition, leaving some things unplanned; all planning is planning for anarchy, for the unpredictable, the unscripted, the spontaneous, and free.

8. The maxim of communist human community is free development both individual and collective. Everything is permitted except that which hinders free development. A puzzle that can be solved in hundreds of different ways, through the cultivation of subjectivities and forms of life scarcely conceivable now.

9. Necessity is socialized and therefore rendered free. Humanity finally decides freely how to organize its metabolism with nature—it transparently organizes itself in response to natural necessity. As necessity is rendered free, freedom becomes necessary. We therefore cannot speak of communism as containing, on the one hand, a realm of necessity, and on the other a realm of freedom, with the first corresponding to social obligation, compulsion, or requirement and the second a lack of all responsibility. Rather there is a realm of planning, of deliberate, collective accounting, and a realm of anarchy, of free and unscripted activity. All activity is organized but not all activity is organized in advance (planned). Both realms might involve freedom and necessity in varying degrees. For some individuals, perfecting technical processes involving deliberate collective work might be the purest expression of their freedom, of a situation in which labor has become life’s main want. For others, ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic cultivation instead defines their reason for being, but even this is likely to involve discipline, rigor, obligation. As the opposition between the individual and the collective dissolves, so too does the opposition between freedom and necessity.

10. Communism is the end therefore not just of capitalism but of class society as such and with it the end of the metabolic rift between humanity and nature, the end of the Neolithic counter-revolution known as civilization—not a return to the dynamic equilibrium between humanity and nature of prehistory but the establishment of a new dynamic equilibrium, likewise open-ended and infinite, that must contend with the long shadow of industrial capitalism. The maxim of free development extends beyond humanity to all of nature. Communism is a dynamic equilibrium between the free development of humanity and the free development of nature. This allows us to distinguish between the value of a lawn and old-growth forest. Of course, what constitutes the free development of nature will have to be freely decided by humans. There is no single perspective in and as nature that can guide us—the wolves will want something different than the dolphins. Instead, communism will reenchant the world, treating everything as potentially a person, as capable of development. We will at last recognize the built environment as a collaboration between our ancestors and nature with our free development as its aim. No longer will dead labor dominate us as capital—rather, the world built for us by our predecessors will guide our way out of the violence of prehistory and into true human history, no longer a story of necessity against freedom but freedom as necessity. Communism might last a million years.

May 29, 2025

Seattle, Washington



Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance.

– Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacular-Market Economy"

The process of racialization sketched in Part I does not explain the form that the 'revolt in the banlieues' has taken.¹ To understand how the contradictory position occupied by the racialized proletariat today finds its expression in looting, we need to consider the ways in which the disintegration of the working class and changes in the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production can constitute rioting as a contemporary 'mode of regulation' of social relations. In short, we need to take a look at the phenomenon of surplus populations. The latest restructuring of the capitalist mode of production has, as Endnotes points out, brought back to the fore a fundamental and long-term tendency towards a crisis of reproduction, which Marx called the "general law of capitalist accumulation." This law states that:

The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital, also develop the labour power at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour.²

In practice, capital must constantly reinvest its profits to ensure that accumulation will continue at a higher rate. This leads to constant innovation on the one hand, and an increase in the rate of exploitation on the other, driving down the cost of production. This maxim of profitability, and the maturation of industries, which occurs when production reaches the market's relative carrying capacity, causes the rate of profit to fall, and drives some capital to find new sectors offering more satisfactory rates of profit.³ Of the capitals that remain in the low rate of profit sectors, the most competitive are those that manage to maintain a high rate of exploitation while reducing costs, which leads to a relative fall in the demand for labor. Part of the labor force is then expelled from these sectors. Meanwhile, capitals migrate to more profitable territories. However, the productivity gains achieved through technological advances that allow the mechanism of accumulation to run at full speed are spread across the various sectors of production. The

new sectors of industry, benefitting from the same types of productivity gains as the old ones, cannot absorb all the labor made redundant by the latter as a result of the increase in productivity. We call this unabsorbed remainder the *surplus population*. Importantly, surplus population does not refer to absolute overpopulation in relation to an external physical limit; instead, surplus is relative in relation to capital. However, this population tends to become surplus "absolutely ... to the needs of capital," creating a consolidated surplus population, and this consolidation takes the modality of race.⁴ The general law of accumulation is thus not simply an account, now widely known (but not always put to good use!), of the contraction/expansion cycles of the famous industrial reserve army according to fluctuations of demand in the different sectors of production.⁵ It is also a description of how "the dynamic of capital manifests itself as its own limit" in the long run, of a "secular crisis" currently in progress and still to come.⁶ If we can say that the relative surplus tends to become absolute in relation to "the needs of capital," it means nothing less than that the reproduction of an ever-increasing number of people becomes contingent to that of capital, that population growth is no longer absorbed by the need for labor.

Against the backdrop of long-term economic decline and crisis, the working class, its identity, its movement, and its means of making demands began to disintegrate. Certain segments of the working class, however, are affected before others by the developments of the capitalist mode of production outlined above. Racialized workers felt the effects of the crisis from the 1970s onwards, being the first to be pushed out of the old sectors and condemned to precarity as a result of the relative decline in demand for labor also affecting the new sectors. Here, the notion of surplus population becomes relevant in identifying an immediate material reality: there is a particular layer of the proletariat made distinct from the rest by virtue of its structural exclusion from the labor market. The 1970s saw the emergence of *abjection* as a social logic of stigmatization associated with these transformations of capitalism. Abjection names the condition of being "cast off, marked as contingent or lowly, without actually being exteriorized."⁷ From police repression to everyday racist state violence, not to mention reactionary media crusades, abjection designates first and foremost the contemporary production and management of the surplus population introduced with the restructuring of the capitalist mode of production.⁸ The abject is thus nothing other than the proletariat, but "vilified, cast beyond the pale of social respectability." This specific subject produced

A SUMMER WITH A THOUSAND JUNES, PART II: restructuring, surplus population, and riots

Artifices
Trans. Enzo Bodine & otto dix rivers

by restructuring “is actively taking part in the labor market, but this very activity presupposes that it is expelled from it as soon as it enters it.”⁹ It then “faces the value production cycle without ever being incorporated into it.” It is thus the symptom of the decomposition of the working class and of the difficulty of achieving its unity, something which cannot be realized either around the old universal subject of the factory worker or around the abject.¹⁰ That’s because this exclusion does not define the subject in question, but rather *produces* it. We need to insist on the fact that racialization, which here is certainly closely linked to abjection, does not simply divide an *a priori* homogeneous proletarian class but constitutes the class—the position of surplus members of the population has been produced, in this historical sequence, through racial criteria.¹¹ But this position is “at the peak of a process of de-essentialization of labour, a process which now concerns the ... society as a whole,”¹² namely the gradual generalization of unemployment and “flexible” work.

As the surplus condition becomes more widespread among the ranks of the proletariat (from the 1980s to the 1990s), the dynamics of abjection seem to become autonomous from their original function of managing and producing a specific surplus population. It seems unsatisfactory to describe this as an autonomization of abjection, an irrational and involuntary result of the desire to manage a surplus population as abjection loses its purely functionalist character, because this process can only be understood by inscribing it at the heart of the dynamics of racism and capital. The abject cannot be taken solely as a neutral category that would apply to particular dynamics (race, gender), and abjection cannot be grasped solely as a model of the general tendencies of these particular dynamics. Abjection is certainly based on fault lines, in this case racial, in the decomposing working class, but race is also the clear and unambiguous expression of it, and it must be accounted for as such. Particular subjects remain the target of these logics, even where and when their economic condition tends to become the norm.

The racialized segments of the working class, excluded from “proletarian respectability” and not integrated into wage labor in any stable manner, have been unable to formulate “regulative demands,” and it is clear that rioting became, from the 1970s onwards, one of the means of expressing and formulating such demands (though the riots could not be reduced to this), which could even win concessions from the state.¹³ The riot, in its most contemporary form, thus became one of the contemporary “modes of regulation” of class relations, a response to the affluent society. The point here is not to make the surplus population, without further clarification, the contemporary revolutionary subject, the one at the origin of post-restructuring struggles or even revolution, but to show how this category

can be relevant to our analysis of the present situation. This category makes it possible to situate this sequence within the long-term trend of decline of the capitalist mode of production, a trend at the origin of the production of a specific racialized subject which happens to be the subject of the riots, and which is also the subject that can be killed, i.e., the target of state violence.¹⁴ This subject, surplus in the eyes of capital and the state, is placed under the sole sign of control, and of counter-insurrection once it starts to rise up.¹⁵ The absence of political channels forces the state to repress and pushes surplus workers to riot.

The Calm Next Time?

Don't touch the school. The library, the gymnasium, everything that belongs to all of us, that is our common property.
— Jean-Luc Mélenchon,
speech on 30 June 2023

Within leftist “anti-racism,” the old problematic was reversed: it was no longer just a question of integrating immigrants into the national proletariat, but of ensuring that the national workers’ movement itself was representative of all fractions of the class. We call this perspective programmatic/programmatist, because of its fundamental belief that unity is possible in the terms of capital, that it can be achieved politically through the positive action of the class to overcome its divisions. Now, without denying the atavistic disinterest of left-wing political forces in the autonomous struggles of immigrants, the structural absence of

ways of integrating labor today prevents the class from subsuming racial particularisms. Because they are surplus, the class of wage labor represents for the insurgents an “outside” to their social existence, facing them as an external and, in the end, hostile force. The Left, which had promoted an “egalitarian” integration into the now-defunct national labor community, lost its political function with regard to the surplus population.

In 2005, nobody really talked about the causes of youth anger—or even about the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré.¹⁶ There were occasional references to the recent drop in subsidies to neighborhood associations and the abandonment of crime prevention policies, but nothing about the discrimination suffered by young black and Arab people at every stage of their lives (school, work, etc.). As absurd as it may seem, the riots seemed to have come out of nowhere, even though they had been periodically shaking up French housing estates since the early 1980s (car “rdeos” in the Minguettes district of Vénissieux in 1981, riots in 1990 and 1991 again in the Lyon conurbation and the Paris region). Debates about the origins of the clashes focused more on the provocative antics of Sarkozy, the Minister of the Interior at the time. In fact, the “far left” alternated between very critical support and outright condemnation of the rioters, referring to them as an uncontrollable lumpenproletariat or contenting itself with sporadically criticizing the government for not talking about “social issues.”

However, in 2023, the left began to denounce the racist practices of the cops, in particular the “license to kill” granted to them following a law passed in 2017 under the mandate of François Hollande. Since its introduction, the num-

ber of shootings at moving vehicles has increased fivefold. The different views on the situation in these urban areas are also linked to the place occupied by the Left within the state. In 2005, the priority for the entire political class, without exception, was a return to order, and support for repression was unanimous. Almost twenty years later, the whole of the institutional left, battered electorally, is dreaming of regaining its place at the negotiating table.¹⁷ It timidly followed the riots, knowing full well that it had no control over them, and tried to take advantage of the situation to present itself as a privileged interlocutor between young people with “no bearings” and a state that was in no way interested in talking. So, the left issued condemnation after condemnation of the executive’s repressive stance, often highlighting the racist statements made by members of the government which were allegedly responsible for breaking off the so-called “dialogue.” In a statement with the sober title “Our Country is in Mourning and Anger,” dozens of left-wing trade unions, associations, collectives, and political organizations (La France Insoumise, Europe Ecologie – Les Verts, Parti Communiste, etc.) expressed regret over “the abandonment of these neighborhood populations” and called for “citizen” marches on Saturday 8 July across the country. On the Trotskyist far left, even the most narrow-minded of Lutte Ouvrière [Worker Struggle] teachers have understood that the working class has disintegrated and that the rioters are not an anomaly, but a fraction of the proletariat, which they must support in order to broaden the scope of the Party.

The emphasis shifted from “nothing justifies violence” to “anger must be heard.” The riots stem from a precarious and racialized social context, condemning them serves no purpose, and we should therefore respond to this situation on a social and political level, i.e., embrace the citizenist [citoyenniste] project. The Left in 2023 understands violence, even legitimizes it, but cannot accept that anyone lay a finger on the republican school, the epicenter of its project of social renovation™. The self-proclaimed representatives of the banlieues do not occupy a very different role since their “autonomous/political anti-racism” inexorably concludes with a call to vote for LFI.¹⁸ However, there is still a tendency, perhaps a little more marginal, to explain events in terms of rampant delinquency, which distinguishes between good and bad proletarians.

At the end of the day, the slogans and demands of the insurgents have no resonance. Even the LFI deputies labelled as coming from “working-class neighborhoods,” like Carlos Bilongo, were ejected manu militari, and no citizen-activist was able to make the most of the situation and launch a career as a professional peacemaker. The autonomous activists who came as reinforcements had to contend with the mistrust of the rioters.



Notes

- 1. See *Heatwave* #1.
- 2. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume I* (Penguin 1982), 798.
- 3. Endnotes, “Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital,” *Endnotes* #2 (2010).
- 4. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- 5. Marx described the different forms taken by relative surplus population as follows: 1) floating surplus, living between employment and unemployment, with an employment advantage over unemployment; 2) latent overpopulation, ready to be employed by capital as soon as accumulation resumes; 3) stagnant surplus, permanently living in precarious conditions and with very irregular occupation. The limit of the reserve army was designated by Marx under the term “pauperism,” bringing together the population definitively excluded from employment.
- 6. Endnotes, “Misery and Debt” (2010).
- 7. Endnotes, “An Identical Abject-Subject?” *Endnotes* #4 (2015).
- 8. It should be noted in passing that the methods of management and control, and in particular those of policing, which took place after restructuring had their origins in the colonial system. See, for example, M. Rigouste, *La Domination policière*, Paris, La Fabrique (2012).
- 9. Zashia Bouzarri, “Arson with Demands. On the Swedish Riots,” *SIC* #3 (2015). <https://www.sicjournal.org/arson-with-demands/index.html>.
- 10. On the problem of composition, see “The Fate of Composition” in *Decompositions*, in particular part 2. <https://decompositions.noblogs.org/post/2024/04/10/the-problem-of-composition/>.
- 11. Abjection can also be based on other dynamics such as gender. See Endnotes, “The Logic of Gender: On the separation of spheres and the process of abjection,” *Endnotes* #2 (2010).
- 12. Bouzarri, “Arson with Demands,” (2015).

- 13. Didn't Macron say that the council estate planning [plan banlieue] is a “strategy as old as I am?”
- 14. “Détruire la république nous semble un objectif raisonnable,” <https://604.cafe/Detruire-la-republique-nous-semble-un-objectif-raisonnable>.
- 15. The social existence of the surplus population is always virtually criminal, since the framework of legality, i.e. the judicial-police management of labor-power, is defined by their exclusion. On a global scale, Palestinian proletarians are the most sadly emblematic incarnations of this category. See William I. Robinson and Hoai-An Nguyen, “Gaza: A Ghastly Window into the Crisis of Global Capitalism,” *The Philosophical Salon*, January 15, 2024, <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/gaza-a-ghastly-window-into-the-crisis-of-global-capitalism/>.
- 16. The riots began in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil on 27 October, following the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, two teenagers who were electrocuted inside an electricity substation while trying to escape a police checkpoint. Three days later, a tear-gas grenade was thrown at the entrance to the Bilal mosque. This police provocation spread the riots in Clichy-sous-Bois to the whole of Seine-Saint-Denis, then two days later to many other communes. The government declared a state of emergency on 8 November and extended it for three months, even though the clashes had already ended by 17 November.
- 17. The anti-racist struggles of the last fifteen years, from the Truth and Justice committees \$Comités Vérité & Justice\$ to the international stir caused by the BLM movement, have of course played a considerable role in this political shift, but an analysis of these movements is beyond the scope of this article.
- 18. On La France Insoumise, see Gilles Dauvé, “Tales from the (French) Far Left,” in this issue.



Yasuda Redux: a conversation about student movements at tokyo university in spring 2024

May Wren & Tatsuki Kihira

In 1968-1969, student militants occupied the iconic Yasuda Auditorium at Tokyo University, turning it into an emblem of the Red Years of postwar Japan. On the night of June 21st, 2024, protestors of a proposed tuition hike at Tokyo University took the auditorium again, albeit just for the night. This brief escalation came after a month of organized student opposition to a 20% increase in tuition and fees, about 110,000 JPY (\$760 USD), the first such move in two decades that raised the sticker price of Japan's top university to 642,960 JPY (\$4500 USD) per year. It also followed a longer period of pro-Palestine protests on campus that blossomed into an encampment in the spring of 2024 in solidarity with the worldwide "student intifada." I spoke to Tatsuki Kihira, a Japanese comrade active in organizing the 2024 tuition protests, about their approaches to composition and escalation, the movement's vertical and horizontal connections, and the emergence of a Japanese alt-right.

Can you give a brief recap of the events that escalated to the occupation of Yasuda Auditorium? How and why did the tuition question become a rallying call in the spring of 2024?

The protest began right after the plan for a tuition hike was leaked in mid-May. A non-sectarian anarchist group called Dame-Life ("The Life of Good-for-Nothings") led a demonstration during the annual school festival on May 19, 2024. Dame-Life is an alliance of university students throughout Japan who identify as "dame" ("impossible," "no good," "useless," "hopeless") and were inspired by the anarchist collective Dame-Ren ("The Alliance of Good-for-Nothings") that began in the 1990s.¹ Other participants included formal student self-governing associations (jichikai), student rights groups, liberal students that weren't part of any group, and leftist and liberal professors, some of whom were students in the '80s.

Dame-Life's tactics were more direct action-styled, and the student unions were more authoritarian, but neither gained broad student support within the movement. Members of Dame-Life made many attempts at demonstrating, including organizing a hunger strike, handing out shaved ice, lobbying in Parliament, and holding mock funerals and mock courts. They were so rigid about adopting a *single-issue* strategy that they set a ground rule about only protesting the tuition strike and nothing else—a practice that has become common in social movements lately, including in Japan. The student union, on the other hand, called for the unification of groups under union leadership. This was even less popular because they weren't even negotiating with other student organizations.

On June 6, a general assembly was held that included a broad spectrum of groups and was attended by about 500 students in total. During that meeting, one student called for a *student strike*; this was widely applauded. This particular call for a student strike was important, for two reasons. First, it made us aware that our action together should be *worker-based* rather than *consumer-based*, a distinction that Bifo's recent interview "Sabotage and Self-Organization" helped us articulate.² Students could express grievances as disgruntled consumers, but they'd still be *passive, individual* subjects who would not be united by their grievances. Indeed, Tokyo University's financial director called students "customers" in a meeting with student representatives, and the university ordered students to submit inquiries on their personal portals. Social movements are always at risk of becoming identified with a base of consumers in their solitary rooms. But students are also *workers* and *producers*; they are a collective subject that reproduces the university through the labor of research, political activity, socialization, and club activities, not just customers of the services provided by the university. The strike-call made us aware of our identity as workers and shifted our actions from placating with the bullshit justifications the university administration had made for the tuition hike to a more confrontational expression of our demands.

Secondly, the call for a strike was reminiscent of the student strike that initiated the 1968 uprising at Tokyo University, sparking a historical continuity and confidence in our collective power. This confidence led to a variety of escalatory tactics: some started a hunger strike, some started lobbying lawmakers, and most importantly, some started encampments in front of Yasuda Auditorium, where the university, in response to riots in the '60s, had planted grass to prevent students from gathering and protesting. This ironically made the encampment more comfortable. In mid-June, a Palestine solidarity encampment group active on another campus of Tokyo University joined our camp. This culminated in the lead-up to June 21, when the university president was expected to release an explanation for the proposed tuition hike.

On June 21, we first held a meeting at the encampment. With a huge sound system, speeches were given in front of an audience of 500 angry students. The students then joined a public viewing where the president read his statement, which was conducted virtually because the university was afraid (correctly) that the students would get out of control. After the viewing, most students returned to the camp, even though it was already 9 p.m. The encampment had already functioned like a *base* for protesters. At the time of their return, when "Inoki Bom-Ba-Ye" (the theme music of Japan's most famous professional wrestler Antonio Inoki) began to play, protesters got excited. It was a beautiful moment. To quell the riot, the university had to call in the police for the first time since 1969.

Can you describe your involvement in the movement, and how you worked with these different groups? What were some of the organizing strategies or interventions that you found effective, and why?

The idea of *composition* was deliberately introduced as an organizing strategy, and Hugh Farrell's "The Strategy of Composition" was an inspiration for us.³ Since most students were wary of the student union's call for "unification" under its leadership, and existing groups were indeed divergent in both political orientation and personal character, it was necessary to somehow realize the alliance of different factions while maintaining the autonomous intensity of each group. A specific composition was necessary so that we did not end up as an ordinary student movement in which we only express our moral refusal instead of becoming a political *force*. The groups involved seemed to agree on the need for composition and collectively made an effort towards this end. There were, of course, some conflicts: many liberal students left as the protest intensified, and we had to talk about setting "ground rules," a concept of which I am personally skeptical. Composition was somewhat successful as a process of *transformation*: we changed each other in order to compose. For example, the single-issue strategy rule was dropped when the Palestine solidarity group joined the encampment. At the encampment, students held a reading group of Okayama Shigeru and Shiraishi Yoshiharu's *Shin Daigaku Genron* (Theory Toward a New University), a book on the political philosophy of the university. Based on the reading, they proclaimed that the university must be anti-war through anti-capitalism, which justified the Palestine solidarity movement and the protest against the tuition hike together.

It was also important to create a territory on which we could compose. The encampment was where we gathered, ate lunch, and strategized together. By creating such a territory, as Kristin Ross points out, different groups could act based on local conditions instead of group logics that often caused conflicts. For example, we could focus on defend-



ing and maximizing the efficacy of the territory, fostering a sense of unity among the many groups. The point in creating a territory and cultivating unity was to escalate the movement. The encampment became the base for our collective force, although we did not sleep there overnight and could have done more. The historical weight of the place itself also made us more conscious of past student struggles. This led to many unaffiliated new students joining us.

Our success with composing had two effects that made the June 21 escalation possible. First, each group was compelled by its own agency in the riot, as the riot became *their* revolt, acting autonomously without losing a sense of our collective identity as student-workers. This active pull of agency would not have been possible if the organizing strategy was not compositional—if they felt that the event was compelled by a specific group. Second, the territorial character of the movement was the necessary condition for protestors to *return* to the camp after the action at the president’s public statement. It surprised us that the students returned to the encampment.

I was struck by the fact that an earlier generation of activists who participated in the anti-globalization movement said that the June 21 revolt left them with a feeling they had not shared in a long time. It is undeniable that we have various historical reasons to be pessimistic about political subjectivation in Japan, like the widespread nihilism about militancy after the United Red Army and the atomization of radicals after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. In the latter case, every aspect of life, including where to live and what to eat, became so intensely politicized. Conflict arose from such mundane things like meeting at a bar because of likely exposure to irradiated food. Some of the most radical activists left Tokyo and criticized those who remained as collaborators of the nuclear power system. The atomization was so severe that people with different views on radiation could no longer talk to each other.⁴

In a way, the June 21 revolt demonstrated a path towards optimism, even though it is still a very small hope. We need to acknowledge that the escalation was nowhere near sufficient. It resulted in a skirmish at one university. We *failed* to escalate the movement at large. We need to keep trying to break free from atomization.

How did protestors respond when the university, in the immediate aftermath of the protests, decided to push back its decision on a tuition hike? Was it considered a victory?

People around me agreed that we needed to *make* it a “victory.” This was primarily because we determined that no further escalation was possible and that we lacked the resources necessary to expand the movement. The summer break was around the corner; a decline in the movement was imminent. Also, we could not maintain the encamp-

ment due to the extreme heat in Tokyo, which has become oppressive in recent summers. Thus, affirming the victory and closing the movement was a kind of strategic retreat.

What has happened since the university announced the 20% tuition hike in September 2024? If there hasn’t been an organized direct-action response, why is that the case?

After June 21, the university began repressing the student protests through a series of investigations. The university summoned some students and asked what they did on June 21. But that was the extent of what they were capable of: the university did not understand internal organization of the movement because we intentionally made it opaque.

In the aftermath of June 21, the movement has also become more liberal and “pragmatic.” Some students tried to rebuild student unions and have encountered procedural difficulties; others have turned to lobbying. The lobbying has seen some success because most Japanese politicians seem in favor of tuition-free education. This is kind of funny because it is a political backlash against the backlash from the university administration. Public attention garnered by the protest at Tokyo University and the continuing efforts of liberal students have led to a student solidarity coalition at universities across Japan. This is good news for them, but the liberal turn means I’m no longer actively involved in the situation.

Did you see direct or indirect connections to the ‘60s-70s generation, either in terms of continuity in formal parties or organizations, or informal social and intellectual networks on and off campus?

We feel that the organizational continuity between the ‘60s and the current generation is continuing to disappear. Since the ‘80s, Japanese universities have gentrified campuses, demolishing dormitories and club houses that were the basis of prior student movements. At the same time, student self-governing associations, which played a major role in recruiting students to politics, lost their political influence. In short, leftists, whether sectarian or non-sectarian, failed to reproduce themselves. Most recently, we did not see the intervention of sectarian leftist or Marxist student groups that were commonplace in the ‘60s. This means that the number of professional activists on campus is really decreasing. But this has had a positive effect on the consciousness of history. We amateurs can intuitively feel the historical continuity where more traditional activists cannot. We can, without thinking too much, easily call for a strike and start a camp, because the ‘60s is just a textbook thing.

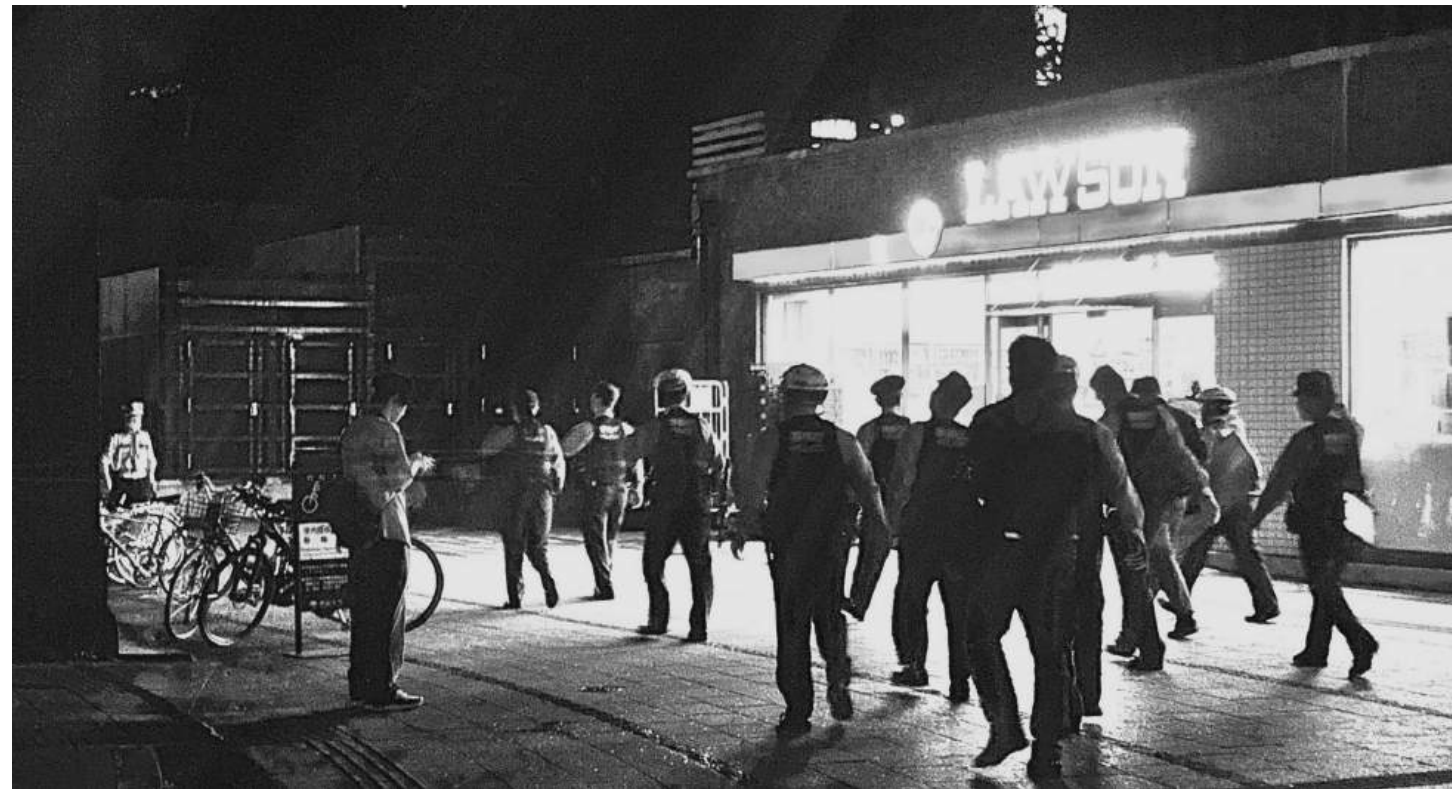
The rise of Dame-Life in the tuition strike most clearly demonstrates the organizational gap with the past. Unlike the traditional sectarian left, where political agents are, or are trained to be, ideologically aligned, Dame-Life includes different kinds of agents: anarchists, moralists, liberal dem-

ocrats, anarcho-capitalists, and some who even call themselves “anarcho-fascists.” There are at least two reasons for this diversity: one general and one very coincidental. The general reason is, obviously, that the traditional left has lost much influence and can no longer reproduce itself. Sectarian organizations suffered significant damage, and non-sectarian anarchists have shown a lack of commitment to organization. The situation has become so dire that liberal popular movements are the only option for many. Aspiring students are organizationally lost and thus absorbed into movements like Dame-Life.

Specifically, an influencer and activist named Toyama Kōichi, who identifies as anarcho-fascist, is responsible for initiating students into politics. He first gained subcultural recognition in the 2000s when he ran in a Tokyo gubernatorial election and demonstrated an eccentric style of agitation that parodied traditional anarchists and made him into an internet meme. Every year, he holds a 10-day long free retreat-style study group where he teaches a distorted history of the Japanese left. Over the course of 10 years, about 400 students have participated, which is probably the largest anarchist involvement of students post-Fukushima. Large in number and diverse in character, including anarchist labor union activists, fascists, and mostly non-political students, people introduced to politics through Toyama’s retreats share one thing in common: they’ve all learned a history of the Japanese left distorted by Toyama. To them, it is his teaching that sustains a perverse connection to the ‘60s.

How did you and your comrades interpret the appeal of this self-proclaimed “anarcho-fascist” tendency to the youth? What’s anarchist or even leftist about Dame-Life? What’s actually fascist about them, in the context of more hegemonic fascism in Japan, past and present? Is there some kind of revolutionary agenda (if a reactionary one) that animates their social and historical negation?

It is an unfortunate fact that Dame-Life, a group that is essentially contrarian, has become more mainstream in activist circles. It is also a problem that some self-described fascists are becoming parasitic in certain radical scenes in Tokyo, possibly because of Toyama’s influence. Toyama began his political career as a peripheral member of the anarchist movement, including Dame-Ren, and gained popularity online for his performances parodying the left. His political character—like his self-proclamation as a fascist, his problematic behavior, his sexism, which is not popular even within Dame-Life—should be understood as a negative reaction to the traditional left in Japan. To them, identifying with some kind of fascist accelerationist futurism from the early 20th century is a way to be a “real anarchist,” contrary to existing anarchists who are “weak” or the more traditionalist nationalist far-right. Of course, we cannot cooperate politically with people who openly identify as fascists. I’ve personally never talked with a self-described fascist Dame-Life, as that would be useless. They should be pushed out from movements, because public engagement and criticism only increase their subcultural popularity, which they gain by being different from other *leftists*, not other right-wingers.



But Dame-Life also includes many young activists who are not fascists, despite a possible affinity for fascism or accelerationism instilled by Toyama. My experience shows that it is not at all impossible for revolutionaries to cooperate politically with them. Most of them aren't actually fascists; 90% of Dame-life are just regular, liberal-minded youth. They're often early-career radicals, upper-middle class university students, who were consistently among the most militant and cooperative figures during the tuition protests. It seems to me that Dame-Life's tactics often stem from a desire to be different, which makes them the most active element in the movement but can be an obstacle for organization. Being radical is an easy and righteous way to be different but also pigeonholes them into ridiculing and criticizing others that aren't active enough for them. They also seem to be in constant danger of internal conflicts because of their diversity, with the leftist members feeling disgust toward the more fascist members. Dame-Life have a compositional problem within themselves that their way of organizing, which largely depends on the internet, cannot solve.

We can't change the fact that some students got politicized by Toyama, but I don't think there is much positive substance to the so-called anarcho-fascism that we should take seriously. It's mostly a story of organizational failure on the left. Dame-Life are not the real enemy, especially when compared to actual fascist populist movements and far-right parties like Sanseitō, though they will pose a compositional problem for organizers for a while.

You are saying that even the reactionary tendency in Dame-Life is still more of a reaction to the left, not a sub-cultural form of far-right nationalist and populist organization?

Yes. They shouldn't be conflated with openly racist and xenophobic "Japanese first" right-wing parties, to whom Toyama's crew is still fringe leftist. The problems I outlined are familiar features of youth radicalism; they want to be radical but often lack a revolutionary outlook. As the appeal of old leftist sectarianism declined, Toyama's presence grew, because unlike other anarchists, he strategically organized left and liberal-minded students. This is unfortunate but not a hopeless situation. I'm more interested in the possibility of their growth and in providing them with a more revolutionary perspective, given that Toyama's distorted history class is often the only basis for their politics. In this sense, instead of blaming Dame-life for their moral and political failings and ignorance, we should think about the revolutionary possibility that they become *friends* of ours in the future.

In Japan, the left shares a historical common sense that there is no political use to morally blame others, largely due to memories of repeated factional splits and interne-

cine killings motivated by moral purification. The case of the United Red Army was the most tragic expression of this kind of failure. Not only do we fail to gain political force, but we also lose it once we embark on a journey of moral purification. We are aware of this fact because our nihilistic current is the consequence of that. I am not suggesting that we should abandon our contempt for the fascist tendency, nor do I endorse the laissez-faire liberalism willing to recognize any idea or identity. My point is that it's pointless to beat up on people we have contempt for. Moral criticism creates a self-fulfilling prophecy here because it only proves Toyama's teaching that leftists are the enemy. Our focus should be on how to organize and reproduce revolutionaries, because the real enemy is capitalist power.

Returning to the university as battleground, at elite U.S. universities that capitulated to attacks by the Trump administration, cost of attendance can reach \$90,000-100,000 USD per year. The criminalization of pro-Palestine speech and weaponization of vulnerabilities of international students and faculty have enabled the right to assert domination over these institutions crucial to U.S. hegemony. Tokyo University, along with other Asian and European universities, have been courting international students and scholars exiting the U.S., though it remains to be seen how activists can intervene in conflicts that will surely emerge from these attempts at realignment. I'm curious how this might impact the future of campus politics in Japan as a site that bridges international and local struggles?

As I mentioned, it was crucial that Palestine solidarity activists joined the camp. Having the Palestinian flag in the symbolic space of the student struggle created an indescribable atmosphere of unease that strengthened our power. For example, a typical Zionist tweet said it was wrong for the university to call the police to repress "peaceful students," but that there might be "extremists" like the Japanese Red Army among the students because they were holding the Palestinian flag. So the flag helped the movement not be consumed by the media as simply an expression of discontent by "poor" students. It also rallied many international students, one of whom gave a very passionate speech in perfect Japanese and agitated the protesters on June 21. It has been a feature and strength of the Palestine solidarity movement that it attracts people of different origins. For a largely homogeneous country like Japan, it is important for movements to gather many international political subjects.

On the other hand, the Palestine flag attracted mostly European students, and the tuition protest did not effectively mobilize international students as a whole even though the tuition hike affects them directly. For example, Musashino Art University in Tokyo raised tuition only for international students, an extra 20% or 363,000 yen (USD \$2,500), but

there seems to be no active organization of international students about it. This is likely because tuition is still affordable for middle and upper middle-class students from China, who make up a large part of international students in Japan. We need to consider the difference between internationalist movements like Palestine solidarity and more local movements like the tuition protest, and how to organize with Chinese students. The latter is really a pressing question that may be more important than organizing Dame-Life.

The involvement of international activists in Japan should pose a significant challenge not only for student movements but for revolutionary movements in general. Spaces in Tokyo, such as TKA4 in Koenji and Irregular Rhythm Asylum in Shinjuku, have been doing a lot of work to connect international activists to Japanese movements. We must create additional systems that allow activists who come to Japan for different reasons, including political asylum amid Trump's attacks on universities, to stay and live committed political lives. We need more foreign organizers who can cultivate and mobilize international activists. Otherwise, the scene might be filled with people aimlessly wandering around, simply seeking a sense of community. We must transform Tokyo into a political metropolis rather than a tourist attraction.

Notes

1. For the political context of Dame-Ren, see Sabu Kohso, "Life of Militancy: Japan's Long '68." *Ill Will*, January 12, 2024, <https://illwill.com/life-of-militancy>.
2. See Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "Sabotage and Self-Organization," *Ill Will*, May 7, 2024, <https://illwill.com/sabotage-and-self-organization>.
3. Hugh Farrell, "The Strategy of Composition," *Ill Will*, January 15, 2023, <https://illwill.com/composition>.
4. Another factor contributing to the division among radicals after Fukushima was the conflict regarding attitudes toward right-wing participants in the anti-nuclear movement. For example, there was disagreement about whether organizers should prevent them from raising national flags. Additionally, numerous activists were imprisoned around that time, leading to a contraction in the radical movement.



Props

Ushered below orchestra pit
packed in boxes
I take unthreaded debt
Virgil's digression
fidelity to failure

Holdup he says
your money shouldn't be your life
the last beautiful thing to happen
in an old film noir
Full of accouterments props
transform as soon as you see them
wafer on tongue city on chip
looking for a luxurious device for similes
where rabbit becomes duck and duck rabbit
where we move horizontal against the vertical
killjoys who simply kerplunk

In solidarity
we kept our eyes on the street
on the blood in the street
if you think you are that person
the city is coming to city
to absorb all mortars all bombardments
ordered against it

After years of living
in the glory of shotgun shack
roused by the poverty of objects
prerequisites for love
picture how to shuffle down the stack
grip lost on the material image
in the gimcrack mode
produced in séance
scrolling down the poet parkway

We named the trees or rather the trees named us
Russian Olive Tibetan Cherry absent the Smoke
the Contorted Filbert now dead
unbearable fruits
where lecture notes begin
we seek the limit of song nomadic
facts when the music stops

Just listen for your cue whispered the judge
see the Magnificent Maxine sliced in half
Barnum's prestige to embody the intervals
to walk the gang way & swagger aboard ships
You can't jaywalk on the midden mast
(said to no one in particular)
the gag exists to prevent speech
We're mere objects on stage figures moving
Theatre for beginners
Tale of Two Cities
One trunk two tables and four chairs

They marched all the wounded uphill
dead reckoning
toward an epic party of one
I wanted it simple
to skate & sleep on the remains of Lake M
to wake in a puddle
unified @instagram account
Edited until the poem appears on the police blotter
on a long list of things to be abolished

Time corrupts

I'd like to thank slush fund
anchor and swill
tavern on the green
trees that change names
to provide shade
parasols to garnish
crab leg & moss
aliases to extend beach
I'd like to thank sediment
in proximity to sediment
words that run aground
to secure beach
as flotsam aches for land
there is no enchanted isle
no modesty partition
no capacity for error
just the swallows the diving
egrets barking back
no more Gilligans
no more diminutives without proper names
I'd like to thank the Professor and Maryann
reflexive bling
cocktails & pressed shirts
bad habits
years of words
enough blood to support
theme songs & epigraphs

POEMS

Robert Mitterthal

PHOTO BY REMI

Tales from the (French) Far Left

Gilles
Dauvé



Fallen Communist Party

In France, up to the 1960s, handing out radical leaflets at factory gates could result in being beaten up by Stalinist heavies of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT, the union controlled by the *Parti Communiste Français*). A young member of the Communist Party's (CP) student organisation once proudly showed me the truncheon he'd recently used against Trotskyists in his working class suburb. The CP professed to be *the* party of the working class, or often passed as such, and the top CGT man always served in the party's political bureau. In the 70s, more than 7 million French people lived in a town with a CP mayor.

Those days are gone. With a membership smaller than that of the more avowedly conciliatory *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*, the CGT is no longer the largest confederation, and no CGT leader has their seat reserved in the CP's *bureau national* ("polit-buro" sounded too Orwellian). Actually, the present CGT general secretary, Sophie Binet, never belonged to the CP, and was a long-time member of the socialist party. In general elections, the CP has fallen from about ¼ of the votes (nearly 30% in 1946) down to less than 3% in 2024. Its leaflets and posters eschew class talk and prefer talking of *les gens* (people). In the 21st century, a harmless CP appears reasonably moderate, no longer perceived as a threat to national identity, and no one would think of denouncing it, as a Minister of the Interior did fifty years ago, as "a totalitarian party with fascist leanings." (In fact, in 1927, another Minister of the Interior exclaimed "Communism, there is the enemy!" Today's slogan would rather be: *Russia* is the enemy!)

Hardly Worthy of a Resurrected Red Scare

Contrary to a now respectable *Parti Communiste Français*, *La France Insoumise* (LFI) is now regularly typecast in the public eye (meaning the media, social media included) as the villain of the French political scene. In particular, since any serious critique of Zionism is currently equated with anti-Semitism, a widely accepted view is that LFI (not unlike Corbyn in Britain) is inherently anti-Semitic. LFI's provocative symbolic gestures in parliament (waving Palestinian flags and displaying pictures of children killed in Gaza) are said to prove a hatred of Israel and an acceptance of Hamas terrorism (more on Israel later in this text). Politics feeds off bogey men.

Before its birth in 2016, LFI originated from the *Parti de Gauche*, founded in 2008 as a split from the *Parti Socialiste*. A major reason for the left wing of the party to go its separate way was the result of the 2005 referendum. Voters had been asked to decide whether the French government should

ratify the proposed constitution of the European Union. The "No" won with 55% of voters rejecting the treaty out of a turnout of 69%. (Even the French Greens were divided on that issue: an internal party vote opted for "Yes" only by 53%). The decision was later overridden by the French parliament. (That same year, a similar process took place in the Netherlands: although 61% did not comply, the European constitution was accepted by the Dutch senate.) Most media and political comments explained away the "No" vote as an expression of ignorant lower-class dissatisfaction and xenophobia, as opposed to the informed "Yes" to Europe from the educated, open-minded middle class. As for the socialist left, it interpreted the event as the opportunity for a political space on the left of the left, with possible rich electoral dividends. In response to the general drift to the right of socialist parties, exemplified by the French 1983 turn to austerity and Blair's New Labour, a sizeable socialist minority believed it was possible to reverse the course that led to privatisations, labor market flexibility, trade liberalization, banking deregulation, tax cuts for the rich, increased social inequality, etc. To put it shortly, LFI, headed by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, hopes to cure the left parties' identity crisis by putting forward a *credible* alternative to social-liberalism.

Now, what's in a name? And in this day and age, what's in a logo?

However confused and confusing words can be, when a group or party names itself communist, socialist, labor, anarchist—or conservative, liberal, national—the party at least gives some idea of what it stands for. Emblems also have direct political meaning; the hammer and sickle is a symbol of the working masses which the far left claims to represent.

Insoumis means unbowed, refractory, unsubdued. In French, it also refers to a soldier who deserts their unit or does not show up for mandatory conscription. It conveys no specific political message, let alone program. Besides, LFI's logo is the Greek letter, ϕ *phi*, which in French sounds just like "FI". "We chose the symbol *phi* because it begins the word philosophy and also out of affection for those who taught us democracy," Mélenchon declared. The letter, however, is redrawn in a special way, so the party leader added: "Some will see a little man making a fist, others the symbolized signal of a feminized gender, others will see what they really want."

What is it that LFI members and voters want? LFI's name and symbol emphasize a rebellion inspired by a philosophical love of wisdom, not subversion or direct action; when LFI takes to the street, it is always as a backing to *parliamentary* lawmaking. And let's not take *insoumission* literally: LFI never suggested French soldiers should go AWOL, and

when in 2024 dozens of Ukrainian soldiers deserted from the elite Anne of Kiev brigade during their training in France, it was certainly not with LFI’s approval or assistance.

LFI speaks to and for “the people,” defined as those who work and contribute to real wealth, which raises the question of what and who is included and excluded. Jet-setters, stock brokers and high frequency traders of course do not belong. That leaves a people made of nearly 99% of the population. LFI’s inclusiveness, however, concerns the *French* people, i.e. those within a national framework. Granted, contrary to far right politics, LFI’s nation is multi-ethnic and secular, it encompasses Europeans as well as non-Whites, and does not discriminate against immigrants and undocumented people. But it still thinks in terms of a nation, albeit an open-minded and welcoming one. LFI’s *internationalism* is limited to what the word says: an association of nations, i.e. national states engaged in an extensive political and economic cooperation. LFI accepts a world where populations are politically structured in national states, which will coexist in peace if they are run by governments truly representative of their people. This replicates the Second International’s politics: fitting into a national system, hoping for the best from nations, and making do with the worst when war breaks out in 1914.

From "Class and Disaster in Valencia" in Issue One of *Heatwave*:

The people can be the totality of citizens subject to the rule of a particular government. Or, the people can be defined more narrowly by language, food, traditions, religion, race. Usually both definitions sit on top of each other. In either case, state institutions are the most important element that create the people: either the abstract fact of being subject to a specific government, or more concrete institutions like the school system, immigration enforcement, language laws, subsidies for certain kinds of cultural events. Being a people is, to a large extent, a question of having a state, and states justify their rule by being the state of a particular people.

No wonder LFI’s leaders refer so much to 18th century Enlightenment rationalism, secularism and constitutional law, and a lot more to French Revolution Jacobins than to early communist Babeuf. One of LFI’s main efforts is to build up a broad consensus by proposing the formation of a new Republic, a 6th one after the 5th established by de Gaulle in 1962. In other words, social change backed by constitutional change, thanks to a referendum—a proper one, this time, unlike the 2005 flop.

No harm in adding a touch of vivid red to faded socialist pink.

Yet despite such innocuous politics, red-baiting is back. Though the French ruling elite has nothing to fear from

LFI, it has become standard practice for political pundits to portray them as “dangerously extremist,” “a real threat to French Jews,” “pro-terrorism,” “a disaster for the left,” “totalitarian,” etc.

The truth is more down-to-earth.

At the moment in France, the right is too weak, the left too divided, and the far right unacceptable for the time being. The right-of-center is running the show, yet leaning further to the right, with Prime Minister Bayrou saying that immigration is leading to a “feeling of submersion.”¹ The absence of a definite majority is no major problem, because a “central bloc” minority government can get support from the far right on law-and-order issues (more police power), and from the right and moderate socialists on anti-social policy (fewer social budgets and unemployment benefits).

Well-minded people search for a “real” left but what are the real and *unreal* lefts? Before 1914, only a number of anarchists and a few Marxists (notably Anton Pannekoek) had understood that revolution was an “add-on” to the daily reformist activity of nearly all socialist parties. A striking example was the committed Marxist Jules Guesde, die-hard challenger of Jean Jaurès’ reformist approach, leader of the “intransigents,” and a fierce opponent of socialist participation in bourgeois governments. In 1914, national defense against the German invasion turned into Guesde’s absolute priority, and he became a member of government until the end of 1916.

“Moderate socialists” has one word too many.

Popular Front: Reality & Myth

LFI’s remedy is part of the disease. In June 2024, it promoted a *Nouveau Front Populaire* that associates LFI, the CP, the socialists and the Greens, plus a few small parties. One wonders if LFI really thought its partnership with those who have implemented anti-labor policies for decades could alter the course of events. In fact, no partner seriously believed in this electoral alliance (already breaking up in 2025), which was only temporarily useful to the participants while they kept jockeying for position. In contemporary parlance, politics is a zero-sum game—some win because others lose.

In that respect, the reference to the 1936 *Front Populaire* is an imaginative publicity gimmick, together with a historical fallacy. The French Popular Front had its reality, but now also serves as a myth. Its bedrock was three components: the Radical-Socialist Republican Party (the center-left backbone of most governments throughout the 3rd Republic), the socialist party (which for the first time had a majority in parliament), and the CP (which was part of the Popular Front but chose not to have ministers). What really mattered were the May-June 1936 widespread sit-down strikes which were mostly initiated by the rank-and-file and pushed the newly elected government to grant deep social reforms. But the strike wave ebbed off, the socialist

party only stayed in command for a year, and by mid-1937 the *Front Populaire* was over in all but name. The Radical-Socialists came back into office, abolished the 40-hour week, and introduced an anti-foreigner policy. In 1938 an attempted general strike called by the unions was met with severe repression and ended in complete defeat. After France was invaded by Germany in 1940, a huge majority of the radicals and the socialists granted full power to marshal Pétain, who introduced a reactionary and fiercely anti-Jewish puppet regime.

Nearly a century later, the *Front Populaire* still keeps a positive image but as in 1936, even from a purely pragmatic reformist point of view, any new Popular Front is bound to be hampered by its structural coalition with middle-of-the-road socialists. LFI now associates with the party it chose to separate itself from, as if the left was an extensive family where honorable members have to put up with insufferable cousins on special occasions.

The new Popular Front is wide enough to accommodate components as utterly opposed to each other as Trotskyists from the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste- L’Anticapitaliste* (NPA-A), and left liberals like Raphaël Glucksmann.

Raphaël Glucksmann’s life reads like a 21st century Balzac novel narrating the ascent of a skilful climber perfectly adapted to globalised contemporary politics. In 2007, he supported right-wing candidate Sarkozy in the presidential elections, and between 2005 and 2012, he was an adviser to Saakashvili, the president of Georgia. His then wife, also special adviser to Saakashvili, later became First Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine from 2014 to 2016. Back in France, in 2018, Glucksmann founded the center-left political party *Place Publique*, and in 2024 his list in the European Parliament won over 13% of the votes (nearly as many as president Macron’s defenders). An oddity and a sign of the times.

How can a Trotskyist NPA-A fraternize with the likes of Raphaël Glucksmann? Mao explained that “contradictions among the people are not antagonistic”—only those “between the people and its enemies” are.²

Leaving aside the meanderings of internal politics, let’s take a look at the far left on foreign affairs issues.

From the River to the Sea

Without delving into the details of the Israeli/Palestinian question, let’s remember that Zionism has the probably unique peculiarity of being born (and remaining) both a *national* movement and a *colonial* one, with the result of *two* peoples having to live on *one single* land. Though there might be a future way out of this historical contradiction, it is not in the offing.

Israel’s founding fathers did not deny Palestinian Arabs’ right to exist, but never on an equal footing with the Jews. The title of Tom Segev’s informative biography of Ben Gu-

rion, *A State at Any Cost*, adequately sums up the predicament. Within Israeli territory, Arab citizens (about 20% of the present population) can live, work, benefit from social and political rights, elect their own MPs, etc., providing they accept that Israel is first and foremost the *Jewish* homeland, i.e. an ethnic democracy. Outside Israeli borders, Arabs have to admit that at best they come second. If they don’t, it is legitimate to force them into submission, or eventually to expel them. A Jew from London or Milan has more right to a home in Israel than a non-Jew whose family has been living there for three centuries. As an Israeli once said, “I don’t want to live any more in a country where I belong to the *minority* group.” Such is the foundation of Zionist logic, and it can logically be applied—differently, of course—to areas which were not part of Israeli territory in 1948: the West Bank, the Golan Heights, possibly south Lebanon, and Gaza.

It is historically relevant that the phrase “From the *Jordan* River to the sea” can be used *both* as a Palestinian rallying cry and as an Israeli slogan.

So far, no peaceful and/or violent Palestinian movement has been able to secure a decent place for the Arabs, and whatever number of Arabs it displaces or kills, the Israeli State will not get rid of millions of landless, homeless people. Moreover, in the West Bank, the so-called Palestinian National Authority has never had real authority on its statelet—a series of isolated Bantustans enveloped by Israeli territory and under Israeli military rule. So even before 2023, both the bi-national solution, and the two-state solution (put forward by an array of political forces, right, left and far left, LFI included, and officially by some countries, Britain and France for example) were devoid of reality. In the West Bank, since the time of the Oslo Accords (1993), the number of Jewish settlers has kept going up, and more and more land is being taken over by the Israelis. People have made fun of Trump’s absurdity of a new Riviera in Gaza but the idea of a Palestinian State is just as much a fantasy, bizarrely harboured in unexpected quarters: “The Gaza war will be followed by more violence until Israelis and Palestinians create a state called *Isratine* where they can live together in peace, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi said in remarks published on Thursday.”³ The following year, the Libyan dictator was overthrown and killed.

There simply is no room for either *Isratine* or for an independent separate Palestinian State.

Demonization

By a sadly ironic twist of history, it is now the far left, above all LFI, which is charged with anti-Semitism, even more so after the October 2023 Hamas-led attack.

For years there has been an anti-Jewish undercurrent in the far-right National Front, and Jean-Marie Le Pen (its leader until he was expelled from his own party in 2015) was repeatedly attacked and convicted for his professed an-

ti-Semitism and genocide denial. However, in March 2024, Jordan Bardella, second-in-command of the *Rassemblement National* (the National Front renamed itself in 2018) visited Israel, shook hands with the prime minister, met the president of the Knesset and was granted a private tour of the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Taking part in a conference on anti-Semitism among a variety of international speakers, he made no reference to his party’s past, but denounced “the deadly honeymoon between Islamism and the extreme left” (read: LFI). A few days before, French left-wing MPs and officials had their visas to Israel cancelled on the grounds that they could act against the state. For the vast majority of the French political class and for all mainstream media, it is now an undisputed fact that LFI is anti-Semitic. As a matter of fact, this is consistent with French law which in 2019 linked anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

The far right used to be openly anti-Arab and covertly anti-Jewish; it now is only anti-Arab, while the far left is branded as dangerous pro-terrorism extremists.

Ukraine and the Art of Contradiction

As explained above, the *Nouveau Front Populaire* is not even a marriage of convenience, but rather a civil partnership. Anyhow, as long as it lasts, the NPF has its own foreign policy. In June 2024, it asserted its desire to “defend Ukraine and peace on the European continent,” and approved “the delivery of necessary weapons.”

Together with the rest of NATO, France is already waging war against Russia by proxy—halfwarmongering is warmon-gering all the same. LFI affirms the existence of a consensus within the New Popular Front on the necessity of sending arms to the Ukrainian government, while at the same time LFI rejects further French involvement that would entail a *risk of escalation*. This is forgetting that Ukraine, in its inevitable effort to break the stalemate, keeps asking for more and better weapons that imply some degree of escalation, therefore more French (and European and American) commitment. If, as Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function,” this is true of all political parties, left, right, soft and hard left.

As for refusing to have “boots on the ground,” i.e. European soldiers in Ukraine, it goes against Macron who does not rule out the possibility of sending forces onto the battlefield, but it does not mean much, since those European Union or US soldiers that might be sent to Ukraine would not be labelled “fighters” but United Nation-style “peace-keepers.” In 1999, NATO planned to send “heavy peace keepers” to Kosovo. After all, NATO already has its *Partnership for Peace*, a military cooperation program between members and non-member states, including post-Soviet countries, with special interest in central and Eastern Europe. Britain’s war office has been called the Ministry of *Defence* since 1964.

Maybe Ukraine will be blessed with a “reassurance force.” Politics is the art of squaring the circle; it is also the art of words.

When socialist party eminence Olivier Faure said pacifists were in the West, but missiles belong to the East, i.e. Russia, he was echoing President Mitterrand in 1983, at the time of the American Pershing vs. Russian SS-20 crisis, who said “pacifism is in the West and the Euro-missiles are in the East.” The socialist party stood and will always stand for NATO.⁴

Despite its insistence on “non-alignment,” LFI is the political ally of a party decidedly aligned with one camp against another.

The Trotskyist Way

One would expect a Trotskyist group like the NPA-A to come forward with a very demanding policy. It does. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the NPA-A recalled that in the 1960s and 70s true revolutionaries called for the USSR to provide Vietnam with arms to defend itself against the US without sending Russian troops on the ground. Likewise the NPA-A has now called for the US to provide Ukraine with arms without sending American soldiers on the ground.

The NPA-A lays claim to solidarity with “the people,” not with Zelensky. The trouble is, “the people” is not a historic player by itself, only acting via the state that rules the population.

Besides, according to the NPA-A,

The war has created new forms of self-organization and politics from below. The mobilization of the people for the war of liberation has strengthened people’s sense of common cause and made them understand that it is thanks to ordinary people, not oligarchs or corporations, that this country exists. The war has radically changed social and political life in Ukraine, and we must prevent these new forms of social organization from being destroyed and, on the contrary, develop them.⁵

Who can seriously believe that the Russian invasion has resulted in a new Ukrainian society, where bottom-up forms of organization wage a national liberation war uncontrolled by the government’s regular army? During World War II, anti-German resistance movements in occupied countries, though *much larger* than Ukrainian grassroots initiatives, were able to harass and weaken the Wehrmacht, not defeat it, until the Allied French, British, American and Russian armies had the final word. Only in Yugoslavia and Albania did the resistance movements win, because they were more than partisans, they were the military arm of a political state structure gradually taking control of the whole country, and nobody will argue that post-1945 Yugoslavia and Albania were ruled bottom-up.

If “the war has radically changed social and political life in Ukraine,” it is unlikely to be the sort of change favored by the NPA-A. Though not as repressive as Putin, Zelensky consistently clamps down on protest, censors the media, bans dissenting political parties and infringes on labor rights (in the name of national interest, needless to say), the exact policy that the NPA-A would denounce as oppressive and dictatorial in any other country. Nothing unusual here—it is standard practice in wartime to curtail civil liberties.

One last quote, from the French Committee of the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine: “We demand that France, instead of selling arms to dictatorships, seriously help the Ukrainian resistance, without increasing its own military spending.” Simply put, French-made tanks and guns meant to be shipped to Riyadh should be diverted to Kiev instead, with no additional cost to the tax-payer.

The NPA-A supports this committee.

Though it has at most 2,000 members, and barely any political influence, the NPA-A is representative of a disorientation that prevails among the far left, even among some anarcho-communist or more or less Marxist groups.

To avoid being charged with Trot-bashing, let’s add a quick word on parts of the evolving, splitting and merging Trotskyist galaxy. Founded in 2009, the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* gave birth in 2022 to the NPA-A (“A” because of its magazine *L’Anticapitaliste*). Calling the NPA-A “Trotskyist” is a misnomer as the NPA-A prides itself on its openness. It welcomes Marxists and “libertaires,” although not the rightist neo-liberal libertarian kind, but in the anarchist sense of those committed to *liberté*. Plus, *libertaire* sounds a lot more palatable than old-school anarchism. Other NPA splits generated the *NPA-Révolutionnaire*, and *Révolution Permanente*, which both stay within a Trotskyist framework (zero risk of council communist, Bordigist, anarcho-communist, situationist deviations), but they regard the Ukrainian war as an inter-imperialist conflict and side neither with Moscow nor with Kiev. For its part, *Lutte Ouvrière* (Worker Struggle), which has never belonged to the 4th International, also does not support Ukraine (and NATO) against Russia.

Why?

Back to reformers, another (minor) illustration of their quandary is the fate of *Nouvelle Donne* party (“New Deal”, an obvious hint at the US in the 30s), launched in 2013. Advocating a thoroughly ecological policy, public regulation of finance, and innovation in the working world (in particular, a 4-day week), the party gathered a number of progressives dissatisfied with the socialist party. After a modest but promising start, *Nouvelle Donne* withered, and its small remains have gone back to the fold of the moderate left.

LFI is of course a more forceful competitor than *Nouvelle Donne* ever was. It might receive more votes, maybe

(who knows?) get a foothold in a future left-wing government, but no party can renovate social-democracy at a time when there is no political space for it.

Such a statement sounds counter-intuitive when so many facts point to a looming overall crisis.

Globalization has neither brought prosperity, nor harmony between countries. In this early 21st century, the earth is a multipolar planet where imperialist blocs (the US, China, Russia, Europe as a big market that lacks political unity and military power) face each other, no one knowing who might eventually be allied with whom. In domestic policy, phenomena such as Brexit, the socialists’ ever more determined swing to the right, and the rise of so-called populism are symptoms of imminent upheavals that call for political reshuffling. With the climate catastrophe on top of that, socialist dissidents like Mélenchon were hoping that such unstable times would be propitious for change, opening the door to newcomers on the reformist stage.

Indeed LFI is doing its utmost to become a government party, trying to appear at the same time radical and acceptable. Its leader Mélenchon did rather well in the last two presidential elections (nearly 22% of the votes in 2017 and 22% in 2022), and the number of LFI MPs went up from 17 to 70 (out of a total of 577) between 2017 and 2024. But the party is still restrained by a limited local rooting (it has few mayors, councillors, presidents of regional councils, etc.) and its poor influence in the trade-unions. On the contrary, the much declined CP and the *Parti Socialiste* still have extensive local bases. It took decades for the old socialist party before 1914, and later for the CP, to build up strongholds wherever they managed to express working class (and sometimes small farming) interests and contributed to a bettering of workers’ lives. They conquered local councils before they got seats in parliament. LFI has not achieved anything comparable, nor is it in a position to do so.

What’s missing? One key factor.

In-depth reform implies a social background of mass strikes and crowds demonstrating in the streets. In contrast, what has been happening since the 1980s is the failure of social movements to do more than try and resist factory closures, casualization, and attacks on welfare. To give just one recent example, in France, a succession of demonstrations against the new pension law (increasing the retirement age from 62 to 64) only succeeded as an exercise in damage limitation. Overall, the bourgeois are winning and the proletarians are fighting back in retreat. Capital is mobile, labor is not—unless it is rootless labor imported by “rich” countries (North America and Western Europe) from the “poor” countries (Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa). This prevents parties like LFI from achieving what social-democracy, French and Italian CPs, and British Labour managed to do in the past, when they were well entrenched in workplaces, rooted in local communities, and where family

and neighborhood ties contributed to solidarity and unionization.

Reformers now find themselves in the situation of actors out of role, either in France or abroad. Portrayed by *The Economist* as an outdated reincarnation of Lenin, Jeremy Corbyn has now been safely sidelined, and a Blairite PM is now in office. Spanish *Podemos* once offered a far-reaching political platform to be put into effect by a broad alliance that inevitably watered down such a program. In Greece, ex-political disruptor *Syriza* hoped to replace the PASOK as the new mainstream center-left party, until it plummeted in the polls. *Die Linke* has proved de-radicalized enough to be accepted in coalitions with the socialists and the Greens in several *Länder*. Bernie Sanders embodied a leftward shift in the Democratic Party, before he realized he could not be nominated for the presidential election and chose to fully support Hillary Clinton. It bears repeating that *lesser evilism* only succeeds (if it does) by giving up on even mild change and siding with moderate politics that not only achieve nothing, but in fact increase the public appeal of “evil” politics.

Sanders’ program had been compared to Roosevelt’s, but therein lies the problem; the New Deal was backed by wildcat strikes and the CIO’s novel unionization drive of unskilled laborers.

Like its foreign equivalents, LFI must be content with expressing the eternal bad conscience of the left.

In the highly unlikely event of a *Nouveau Front Populaire* government, its far left wing might be able to impose piecemeal measures, but won’t be strong enough to reverse anti-labor politics.

So what?

However bleak the picture, there is no need to prophesize doom. In any case, nearly two hundred years after Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto*, communist theory has still not been validated by history—there has been ample time to give up on revolution. Indeed quite a few have.

Proletarians have experienced more counter-revolutions than revolutionary attempts and, possibly worse, they have led themselves into many a political deadlock. Two centuries of capitalism have shown us that utter misery does not automatically pave the way to revolution. Neither does the failure of reform.

There are now more large-scale and lengthy strikes than the bourgeois press cares to report (“bourgeois” sounds old-fashioned, but we do not live in a classless age, especially when 90% of French mainstream daily papers are owned or controlled by millionaires), and not all labor conflicts end in defeat. After a nearly two-year strike in 2019-21, Paris hotel cleaners (mostly women) won a substantial pay rise and better workplace conditions. In the rest of Europe and

elsewhere, notably in Asia, struggles go on, and the writers as well as the readers of this text obviously take part when we can—otherwise our communist perspective would only be words, words, words. But we also know that revolution is more than a continuation of the ongoing tug-of-war that capital/labor confrontations happen to be most of the time.

The future will not play to any preordained scenario.

No doubt the “realist” school of politics will dismiss our point of view as uselessly negative: “*So what do you propose other than a critique of everyone and everything?!*”

In the endless “revolution vs. reform” debate, we can only say that pragmatic reform has failed to prevent war (world wars included), that it has proved incapable since the 1980s of countering anti-welfare policies, that it now cannot put an end to the far-right wave currently sweeping a lot of the Western world, not to mention its helplessness in front of the accelerating catastrophic climate crisis. So, who is a dreamer? Who is a realist?

Expect the worst, prepare for the possible best.

June 2025

Notes

1. “French PM Bayrou Sparks Outrage with Immigration ‘submersion’ Remark.” Le Monde with AFP. January 28, 2025.
2. Mao, Zedong. *On the correct handling of contradictions among the people*. London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1957.
3. “Gaddafi refloats one-state idea after Gaza war.” Reuters. January 22, 2009.
4. “Débat sur L’Ukraine à L’assemblée.” franceinfo, Radio France. March 12, 2024.
5. Sotsialnyi Rukh, “Ukraine : La guerre a créé de nouvelles formes d’auto-organisation et de politique par en bas.”, l’Anticapitaliste n°633, October 18, 2022.



Hurricane Season

Hurricanes are coming, earlier each year, more are on the way, no-one doubts it. Those living in their paths no longer pray for rain but for its absence, hoping against hope that they won't face the same fate as Western North Carolina did last year. Though hurricanes can affect nearly anywhere in the eastern half of the country, the vast majority of hurricanes that make landfall in the US do so in the South. For that reason, we might also expect these storms to be a frequent subject for country music, as concerned as that genre is with regional experiences. But as dedicated country listeners know, hurricanes appear relatively infrequently in the genre. When they do, it is usually as metaphor, as in Luke Comb's "Hurricane" (2016), in which the titular storm stands in for the emotional devastation wrought by the narrator's ex-girlfriend. "Hurricane" (2024) by The Castellows—a cover of Leon Everette's 1981 hit—is an outlier for being about an actual storm. Released well before the deadly 2024 hurricane season, their resuscitation of this song nevertheless provides an interesting window into both the genre's climate imaginary and the hurricane seasons yet to come.

Jean Maro

Weather is an integral part of country music's symbolic vocabulary—thunderstorms and tornados make regular appearances, but rain is by far the most frequent. This is not surprising, since rain is the enabling condition for the rural lifestyle that forms the foundation of the genre. Country is, after all, a genre structured around a fantasy of white rural life, one that arose at the historical moment this life began to disappear along with the small farms and agricultural employment that had formed its material basis.¹ Whenever rain appears in country music, it indexes both the tenuousness and persistence of the small farm. Take, for example, Jason Aldean's "Amarillo Sky" (2005), in which an old farmer, beset by hardship, plows the fields and asks God to preserve his family's farm and the only life he's ever known. Rain is the unspoken subject of the farmer's prayer, the force that both makes farm life possible and serves as the reward for the farmer's unwavering dedication to that lifestyle. Though less heartfelt, Luke Bryan's "Rain is a Good Thing" (2010) is equally clear about the importance of rain. The song celebrates a forecasted rainstorm because "rain

makes corn, corn makes whiskey, whiskey makes my baby feel a little frisky." Here, the weather underwrites both literal reproduction and the reproduction of rural life—as Amarillo Sky puts it, rain makes both "crops and children grow."² To pray for rain is to pray, not for any single harvest, but for the continuation of an entire way of life.

Throughout country music, rain takes on quasi-magical properties of generation, an association that has a long history in western stereotypes of rain dances, fertility ceremonies, and other misappropriations of Indigenous practices. But the relationship between rain and prayer in these songs also signals the extent to which the farmer is enmeshed in his environment. Weather patterns form a harmonious cycle in which the farmer participates and of which his prayers are but a part. People pray for rain but also know the rain intimately, and their prayers are a sign of connection to nature, growth, and reproduction. This ritualistic aspect of country life relies on a certain degree of repetition and predictability, the promise that prayers will usually be answered.

"Hurricane," however, is not set on a farm but in New Orleans, and does not feature prayers for rain but preparations for a storm. The song describes the city preparing for a hurricane—"shrimp boats comin' home," people nervously

discussing flood prevention measures—until an old man in the French Quarter assures the narrator that there is nothing to worry about. Hurricanes come every year, he reminds his listeners, and this one will pass over without trouble. After all, it "takes a lot of water to wash away New Orleans." Despite the urban location of the song, the old man stands in as an embodiment of the local meteorological knowledge typical of the country genre—he was "born in the rain on the Pontchartrain" and thus represents a meeting of rain and tides reminiscent of a hurricane itself. Like the farmers of the country tradition, he has an intimate connection to the elements, and he carries that rural foundation with him into the urban setting of the Quarter. He can thus speak as an emissary of that knowledge, dispensing wisdom to the song's narrator and its listeners.

Given the old man's position as a source of local folk knowledge, we might expect him to have something useful to say about climate change. At least, that is the prevailing wisdom. According to popular environmental justice discourses, "frontline and fenceline communities"—those living in flood zones, fire-prone areas, and the paths of storms—not only have the most at stake in fighting climate change, but also have unique insights to offer in that fight.³ These communities have first-hand knowledge of the impacts of climate change and an intimate sense of what has been and is still being lost. Meanwhile, the survival practices fostered by marginalized communities might offer strategies for surviving catastrophe and alternate modes of relationship to the natural world. Here is the wisdom we need as the "high black waters" of climate collapse rise all around us. When the old man speaks, we should all listen.

In this song, however, the world this local knowledge gives us is truly a world turned on its head. All the nameless old man can tell us about hurricanes is that they "come around every June"—storms are no catastrophe, but as regular and welcome as rain, and anyone concerned about them must be bordering on hysterical. Yet it is this very sense of normality, so common to country music that it would normally pass unnoticed, that makes this song so striking in the present context. The old man's assertion that hurricanes are a normal part of life, while superficially true, ignores the fact that storms are becoming more intense and arriving earlier each year. Normal weather patterns no longer hold; to insist otherwise is climate denial. The song maintains country's long association between rain and repetition, weather and cyclicity, but in so doing it denies the realities of climate change, insisting against all evidence that everything remains the same. But, like all climate denial, the old man's advice is based on a fantasy: the predictable world he describes is already long gone. In a time when 100-year weather events are becoming a yearly phenomenon, this instinct to board up the windows and ride it out as we have always done is going to end up with a lot of people dead.



Not every character in the song is quite so nonchalant. In the song’s second verse, an engineer from Chicago attempts to repair the city’s aging levees, but he is quickly written off by the old man. According to the logic of the song, climate mitigation is an outside imposition foisted on communities by ignorant yankees. By presenting the levees as an unnecessary burden that the community must reject, the song positions the breakdown of public infrastructure—collapsing levees, decaying bridges, crumbling roads—not as a constraint imposed by decades of stagnation and crisis, but as the will of the proletariat itself manifested in the built environment. If we don’t have levees, it’s because we didn’t want them in the first place. The song also transforms the nation’s abandonment of poor frontline communities, represented here by the engineer’s swift departure northward,⁴ into a sort of positive localist self-sufficiency. Those Chicago boys might need climate mitigation, but we down here in the South know better. It’s climate denial with a touch of hometown pride.

The song’s setting of New Orleans is a majority Black city that is more strongly associated with Black musical genres like Jazz and Gospel than it is with country. While the old man’s racial identity is never explicitly stated, the setting and a number of other details in the song call his identity into question. The fact that he is frequently identified with the land may be an attempt to hint at indigeneity, while the Quarter, where the man sits in the street with his whiskey bottle, was historically a Creole enclave. The old man is thus implicitly racialized yet remains racially ambiguous, allowing him to stand in for the racial and ethnic minorities of the city’s past and present while maintaining his connection to the white rural lifeways that form the unspoken basis of country music. By presenting this quasi-racialized old man as a source of climate wisdom, the song mirrors the insights of the environmental justice movement, which highlights how racialized and other marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by climate harms and should therefore be centered in climate mitigation and ecological reconstruction projects. Yet the song once again turns this insight against itself, for it is the old man—avatar of the city’s dispossessed communities—who rejects the need for mitigation efforts. We get Hurricane Katrina all over again, except this time the poor and dispossessed are the ones leaving poor Black and brown people to die.

“Hurricane” is a striking example of the future of climate denial. It absorbs the commonplaces of the environmental justice movement only to mobilize them in shoring up the status quo. It achieves this by weaponizing identity—local, regional, racial—toward the abandonment of the very communities it claims to represent. As climate collapse intensifies and the world continues to burn and flood, we might expect more of this particular brand of climate denialism. The resilience of marginalized communities will increas-

ingly become evidence for why they don’t need help, while the representatives of those communities will be the ones delivering the news that no aid is coming.

In addition to providing a window into folk climate denial, “Hurricane” also tells us something about the role of rain in contemporary country music. If rain symbolizes predictable cycles and stable reproduction, it does so at the very moment that this can only be pure nostalgia, the moment when rain, like all weather, is a bad thing. This climate reality has serious implications for country as a genre. The agricultural employment that gave country music its material foundation is long gone, and now the stable weather patterns that represented that life in country’s symbolic imaginary have also disappeared. In the present, every prayer for rain is not a hope for the future but an invocation of the past. Country, of course, cannot admit this, as doing so would mean accepting its own irrelevance. Instead, it continues to recycle the same images, as if insistence alone could stave off the inevitable. In this context, the fact that “Hurricane” is a cover is almost too on-the-nose, for how better to insist that nothing has changed than to literally resurrect the past? The world now is not the world of 1981, and this song’s return to the radio exists purely to deny that truth.⁵

The old man promises that it “takes a lot of water to wash away New Orleans,” a truism transformed from banal to horrifying by the knowledge that there is, in fact, a lot of water out there. Storm surges, torrential rain, flash floods—the water is rising all around us. If we are to survive the coming storm, we will have to do a lot more than pray.



Notes

1. For one exploration of this argument, see Joshua Clover, “The High Rise and the Hollow,” *Commune*, April 24, 2019, <https://communemag.com/the-high-rise-and-the-hollow/>. Joshua introduced me to “Hurricane” shortly after it was released. I have never met anyone who loved country music like he did, and I owe my understanding of the genre to our many conversations over the years.
2. We might hear an echo of Joe Diffie’s “John Deere Green” (1993), in which Billy Bob and Charlene “settle down on eighty acres, raisin’ sweet corn, kids, and tomatoes.”
3. The Climate Reality Project, “Frontline and Fenceline Communities,” <https://www.climateRealityproject.org/frontline-fenceline-communities>. For other examples of how climate justice frameworks understand the role of local communities and marginalized people in climate activism, see AU Center for Climate Preparedness and Community Resilience, *Centering*

- Equity in Climate Resilience Planning and Action*, <https://www.climateResilienceFund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Centering-Equity-in-Climate-Resilience-Planning-and-Action-2022.pdf> and International Climate Justice Network, “Bali Principles of Climate Justice,” <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/bali-principles-climate-justice>.
4. I like to imagine that the engineer does not return to Chicago, where he had been living a rather dissolute life, but instead stays in the South and eventually becomes the love interest of Morgan Wade’s “Wilder Days.”
 5. That denial may be incomplete, however. While the original song is in a joyous, almost playful major key, the cover transforms it into a darker minor mode that sounds at once more defiant and less hopeful. One has to wonder if this change represents an unconscious recognition that things have gotten worse, even if that reality remains unsayable.



“Pumping Up” the Revolt: the serbian uprising, its roots, and its discontents¹

L.P.

“After a rain mushrooms appear on the surface of the earth as if from nowhere. Many do so from a sometimes vast underground fungus that remains invisible and largely unknown. What we call mushrooms mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger, less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork—or underground work—often laid the foundation.”

—Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

On November 1, 2024, a recently renovated train station collapsed in Novi Sad, Serbia, killing 16 people. This was perhaps the clearest result of the state policies we have witnessed here in the past decade that prioritize capitalist profit over people’s wellbeing or even survival. The government’s obvious culpability in these deaths led to massive protests breaking out almost immediately. By the end of November, students all over the country began occupying their universities and instituting directly democratic student councils to organize the movement.

In the wake of this incident, we have seen massive protests against official corruption, the state, and its violence. The government’s response has been mass arrests and threats of university privatizations. The protests have spread throughout society, involving not only students, but also local citizens’ assemblies, school teachers, trade unions, war veterans, biker gangs, and many other groups organizing against the state. We have seen a proliferation of radically democratic counter-institutions inside the movement, as well as tactics of occupations and strikes—something we have never seen at this scale in Serbia before.

International observers have been following these events closely, inspired by the sight of hundreds of thousands of protestors challenging the right-wing authoritarianism that has been on the rise throughout the world in recent years. However, each has interpreted the movement through their own specific lens: liberal European politicians have seen it as a non-violent mass protest for European values; libertarian leftists as a people’s movement against “neoliberalism” and for radical democracy; far-right and authoritarian left-

ist groups as merely another “Color Revolution” instigated by the West. Strictly speaking, it hasn’t really been any of those things.

While elements of radical democracy have been present, as well as pro-(Western)-democracy attitudes and tendencies, the movement has also been highly diverse, full of contradictions and without a clearly defined goal. That is probably also why it has grown so popular: it tends to stay away from controversial topics and ideological debates. It does not clearly define its vision for societal change.

Of course, the movement did not emerge in a vacuum. Although the way the uprising has been organized differs considerably from movements we have seen in Serbia before, it still carries their DNA. Various elements of Serbian society and its recent history have come together in a confluence to produce the uprising. If we are to learn anything from these events, we need to understand all of these disparate elements and what their “spontaneous” explosion might be able to tell us about the terrain of future struggles.

While the movement seems to be dying down after being active non-stop for almost a year (as of August 2025), with many universities ending their blockades, and many citizens’ assemblies quietly dissipating, it is still highly unpredictable where things are going. Still, it is useful to reflect on the roots of the movement, current Serbian society, and where the events have led us so far.

Serbia at the End of the 20th Century

Contemporary Serbia is largely defined by the 1990s. It’s a country still reckoning with what remains of Yugoslavia. As Marxist-Leninist regimes across the world went through economic, social, and political crises during the 1980s, political-economic elites in those states looked for ways to retain their positions. In Yugoslavia, this manifested as a rise of nationalist and separatist fervor instigated by influential (current or former) Communist officials, who successfully outmaneuvered their rivals in the party, many of whom advocated more permissive and market-socialist-oriented roads similar to those advocated by Gorbachev or Deng Xiaoping. In Serbia this wave of nationalism was spearheaded by Slobodan Milošević, a man who would soon lead Serbia into war with the other republics. He led a brutally repressive regime, which, while holding nominally democratic elections, would in practice violently repress any attempts at dissent by opposition activists, students, workers, anti-war groups, and ethnic minorities.

It was this period that would come to define the Serbian political climate of today. On one side was a coalition of former hardline Communist officials, organized crime, the state security apparatus, and the far-right; on the other there was a big-tent anti-government movement of liberal democrats (led by the Democratic Party), moderate former Communists, progressive civil society activists, and

a sizeable number of right-wing groups who viewed the government as insufficiently nationalistic. These opposing coalitions, formed out of convenience and the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” would dominate Serbia’s politics. Even though some of the specific groupings have shifted, the broad strokes have remained the same, with large, “post-ideological” coalitions leading the charge against violent state and parastate repression.

The current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, along with large swaths of his current party (the Serbian Progressive Party or SNS), also started their careers in the 1990s as members of the neo-fascist Serbian Radical Party. While the Radical Party at the time presented a critical attitude towards the Milošević government, it represented a fundamentally controlled opposition, supporting and propping up many of the government’s repressive and genocidal policies while violently attacking all those who opposed it. This eventually resulted in the party forming a coalition government with the then-ruling Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). However, while the SPS still maintained some vestiges of the old state, including some social benefits and state control over parts of the economy (though simultaneously privatizing many state-owned enterprises and abolishing the system of workers’ self-management), the Radicals wanted a clear break with the old system. They despised the Communists, identifying themselves with the collaborationist right-wing Chetnik forces of World War Two and advocating an aggressive process of complete privatization of the economy. Despite their populist rhetoric aimed at Serbia’s increasingly dispossessed population, their actual agenda favored large capital and massive cuts to social spending.

At the end of the decade, following years of war, sanctions, and other forms of international pressure, mass protests led by the broad social and political coalition against Milošević overthrew the government and ushered in an era of democratic reform. Cracks in this coalition quickly started to show in debates over how much the existing security apparatus (loyal to the previous government, with ties to organized crime and far-right groups) should be dismantled, what the attitude of the government should be towards the EU, and how to deal with war criminals hiding in Serbia from the ICC. This turbulent period also led to an even more aggressive and rapid privatization of state-owned enterprises, which were sold off to either their previous party-appointed “managers,” people close to the new governing parties, or—more often than not—multinational corporations. These processes were rarely transparent and left large swaths of the workforce unemployed. This led to a sizable but fragmented and defensive movement of workers fighting to keep their jobs, obtain unpaid wages, and resist privatization altogether. However, these movements, while successful in some of their goals, weren’t able to stop the processes of mass privatization and deindustrialization.

Because post-communist trade unions have been weak and cozy with the state, contemporary worker organizing has generally been passive and unable to play as significant a role in Serbian politics as other groups like local movements, liberal-democratic parties, or even non-governmental organizations.

By the mid-2000s, after years of unstable governments, snap elections, economic slumps, and violence by organized crime and far-right groups (resulting in the murder of Serbia's first democratically elected prime minister, Zoran Đinđić, in 2003), it seemed that a consensus was cautiously emerging. More and more people in Serbia supported EU accession and democratic reforms. Civil society groups and independent media outlets formed, and Serbia gradually re-integrated into the global capitalist economy, bringing optimism that the economic situation was starting to improve.

This was complicated, however, by two nearly simultaneous events. The first was the Great Recession following the 2008 economic crash. The second was Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia (on the basis of its predominantly Albanian population). While the then-ruling Democratic Party managed to retain power by forming a coalition with their former nemesis, Milošević's SPS, a shift was imminent. Then, the Radical Party's popularity exploded after a faction split off to form the SNS as a moderate, pro-European conservative party. This effort was led by Tomislav Nikolić, who had previously served as acting president of the Radicals while its founder and actual leader was on trial for war crimes in the Hague. Nikolić's second-in-command was the much younger and more charismatic Aleksandar Vučić.

This shift in rhetoric was enough to siphon off much of the Democratic Party's voting base, attracting conservative nationalists who nevertheless wanted the economic benefits of EU membership, as well as many anti-systemic voters hungry for a change from the status quo. The incumbent government rightly appeared to many voters as inefficient, corrupt, chaotic, and unfair towards the average, working person. The SNS moved to harness this dissatisfaction, and their strategy paid off. After moderate gains in the 2012 elections, which allowed it to form a minority government (in coalition with the SPS) and take over the presidency, the party won a sweeping parliamentary majority in 2014, gaining a grip on power that it has not let go of since.

The Vučić Years

The early years of SNS rule didn't demonstrate much fundamental change. The new government, despite its far-right past, appeared to align with the direction in which the previous government had been moving. The SNS continued the path of EU accession, complying with the reforms that the EU required of Serbia. In this, the new government ini-

tially saw more success than their Democratic predecessors. They started accession talks in 2014 and opened the first chapters in the negotiation process the following year.

Not much appeared to change for civil society, either, though there were some indications of an opening up. The new government allowed the Belgrade Pride march to be held in 2014. Such marches had not taken place since 2010, when the previous government had banned Pride in response to widespread far-right violence. In 2014, no major incidents occurred and the march has been held annually ever since. At the level of media, right-wing and liberal outlets took turns criticizing and praising the government, depending on the issue.

Despite the previous hardline nationalist and expansionist rhetoric of its members, the SNS-led government appeared to be more moderate on the issue of Kosovo. The 2013 Brussels agreement normalized relations between the two *de facto* independent states of Serbia and Kosovo, yet selective terminology allowed the Serbian government plausible deniability regarding Kosovo's statehood in order to save face among voters—for whom Kosovan independence has been extremely unpopular.

For Serbians, what we witnessed during the early SNS years was a continuation of the liberal capitalist, moderate nationalist, pro-EU consensus that had come to dominate the Serbian political landscape over the previous decade. This image soon began to crack.

One defining feature of the current government throughout its tenure has been a tendency for massive public-private joint ventures led by foreign firms. These are typically expensive, large-scale construction projects, through which companies close to the government skim money using opaque contracts that exclude citizen participation or consideration of working peoples' needs. The foreign capital funding these projects comes from many countries including the UAE, Germany, China, the UK, and the US. The first of these major projects to gain notoriety was the Belgrade Waterfront, a massive Dubai-style project of gentrification, aimed at constructing a new neighborhood of skyscrapers for the ultra-rich while demolishing an older, largely proletarian part of town. A massive resistance movement to this arose under the name of Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own!, which led diverse but largely symbolic protests and petitions against this and other similar projects. This was the first glimpse we caught of the methods of repression this government would be willing to deploy, with masked men (likely tied to organized crime networks) demolishing buildings in the middle of the night in 2016 so that citizens and activists wouldn't have time to react.

In response, multiple local campaigns of mass resistance confronted these controversial projects funded by foreign capital. For example, there were massive protests, occupations, and acts of sabotage by villagers against a project to

build a hydropower dam that would affect all local rivers in the Stara Planina mountain range. There was also a series of protests and occasional encampments in major cities against the demolition of remaining green spaces to make way for new construction. The largest of these campaigns opposed a lithium mine owned by Rio Tinto that would have devastated the livelihoods of local villagers. This movement saw both massive protests and encampments throughout the country, as well as decentralized blockades of major roads.

Many of the oppositional movements that have characterized the previous decade thus ended up being local and grassroots in character, with a focus on the idea that citizens should directly determine the built environment in their own communities. This led to a sizeable presence of local and municipalist political parties, as well as (sometimes successful) community attempts to take over institutions of neighborhood governance left over from the system of worker's self-management, which are supposed to allow citizens to gather together and have their voices heard in the city government.

Throughout this period, the national government became increasingly repressive and gradually took control over all levels of society—from city councils and public enterprises down to schools, cultural institutions, student parliaments, and media outlets. It got to the point that almost all local governments are now controlled by the SNS or their coalition partners in ethnic minority areas. This trend provoked a new big-tent movement whose protests were gen-

erally large, all arising as a response to some form of repression: highly controlled presidential elections in 2017, brutal violence against opposition figures in 2019, manipulated covid statistics before the 2020 elections (in order to lift lockdowns—causing many people to get infected—with the measures restored immediately after the election), and the government's lackadaisical response to two mass shootings in 2023.

Three features characterized all these protests. First was their top-down approach: they were often organized and controlled by mainstream opposition parties or groups close to them. Second, the protests were usually docile and shied away from civil disobedience, destruction of property, or disruption of economic infrastructure. Finally, they lacked ideological or programmatic coherence, with liberal and far-right groups organizing together, while left-wing groups and progressive civil society organizations would take part on the margins. While largely ineffective in their goals, these movements did lead to new waves of organizing and a restructuring of the political scene, with almost all the currently active major parties emerging from these waves. Many new civil society groups and networks arose as well, from the left-wing housing movement formed in the wake of the 2017 protests, to the youth and student-led pro-democracy activist groups formed in the wake of the 2023 protests. The latter in particular would end up playing an important role in the current movement, at least initially.

On this topic of student activism, one more historical point should be reviewed before we begin our examination



of the ongoing wave of protests. Student-led movements played an important role in the opposition to the Milošević government in the 1990s, with many of the student leaders of the time ending up as important political figures after his overthrow. However, the character of such movements shifted after the democratic reforms of the 2000s. In the early 21st century, they usually organized only against capitalist restructuring of higher education, and so were broadly left-wing. Their methods of organizing differed from their predecessors and involved blockades of the universities. These blockades led to directly democratic student assemblies that attempted to give a voice to student grievances. While tactics and organizing strategies were certainly shared between the different generations of student activists (as well as between students from different countries, with the most important connection perhaps being with those from Croatia), what defined the new movements was their lack of continuity. Waves of protests and occupations would appear in response to new market-oriented measures by the universities, then they would explode and eventually die down

without forming more permanent structures. Any student organizations that formed in this period tended to not last beyond a single generation, after which a new group would form from scratch.

While still partially dealing with student issues and using the tactics of blockades and building occupations that marked the previous two decades, the student-led groups that formed after the 2023 protests were different. Their primary focus has been resistance to the government and its authoritarian structures, rather than focusing on the commercialization of education or the advocacy of direct democracy and left-wing politics as their predecessors had. In this they more closely resembled the movements of the 1990s, organizing for all sorts of issues outside the universities. It should be noted that these groups were generally small and had limited influence both on the student body and the public at large. However, they were instrumental in organizing many actions against government policies, and this would place them in a key position to channel the public anger after the train station collapsed in 2024.



Train Station Collapse and Its Aftermath

In 2021, the SNS government awarded a sweetheart deal to a consortium of construction companies to rehabilitate a railway station in Novi Sad, Serbia’s second-largest city. Part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative aimed at building transportation infrastructure in Southeast Europe, this project involved all the elements present in the aforementioned cases that have become associated with the regime: inflated costs, lack of transparency, subservient² cooperation with foreign capital that would allow it to profit massively while disregarding the needs of the community and the workers, and presenting the project as something of great national importance—which the government used as propaganda for its developmentalist image.

On November 1, 2024, in a tragically preventable accident, the canopy in front of the train station collapsed and killed 16 people. Sensing a major image problem, the government went on the defensive. After Vučić had taken personal credit for this project for years, posing for photo-ops and opening ceremonies, the government quickly tried to distance themselves by denying that the faulty portion of the station had even been rebuilt in the first place. This blatant attempt to cover up their role—even as survivors and dead bodies were still being pulled from the rubble—only served to cement the government’s guilt in the eyes of the public. They immediately started pulling all publicly available documentation related to the project, signaling further guilt.

Building on the anger with SNS rule that had been building through the preceding years of smaller protest movements, this event sparked an explosion of revolt on the streets. While initial demonstrations were called by activist groups led by students and other young people, in coordination with some local opposition parties, they immediately expanded beyond their control. These groups had called on people to gather without marking themselves any sort of leaders, but the atmosphere made this precaution seem unnecessary: the demos would probably have erupted even without being called by those particular groups. The marches over the next few days were some of the largest in recent years, involving property destruction and clashes with the police—especially in Novi Sad, where City Hall was breached and painted blood red. While this kind of rioting is rare in Serbian protests and often speculated to be instigated by government agents trying to discredit the movements (since they have rarely been the targets of subsequent police repression), this time many of the people participating saw this kind of response as entirely appropriate—even if it turned out that it *had* been orchestrated.

The riot in Novi Sad led to a brutal police response against demonstrators, with many people being beaten or arrested, including students. The repression initially led to a somewhat more radical response from the movement,

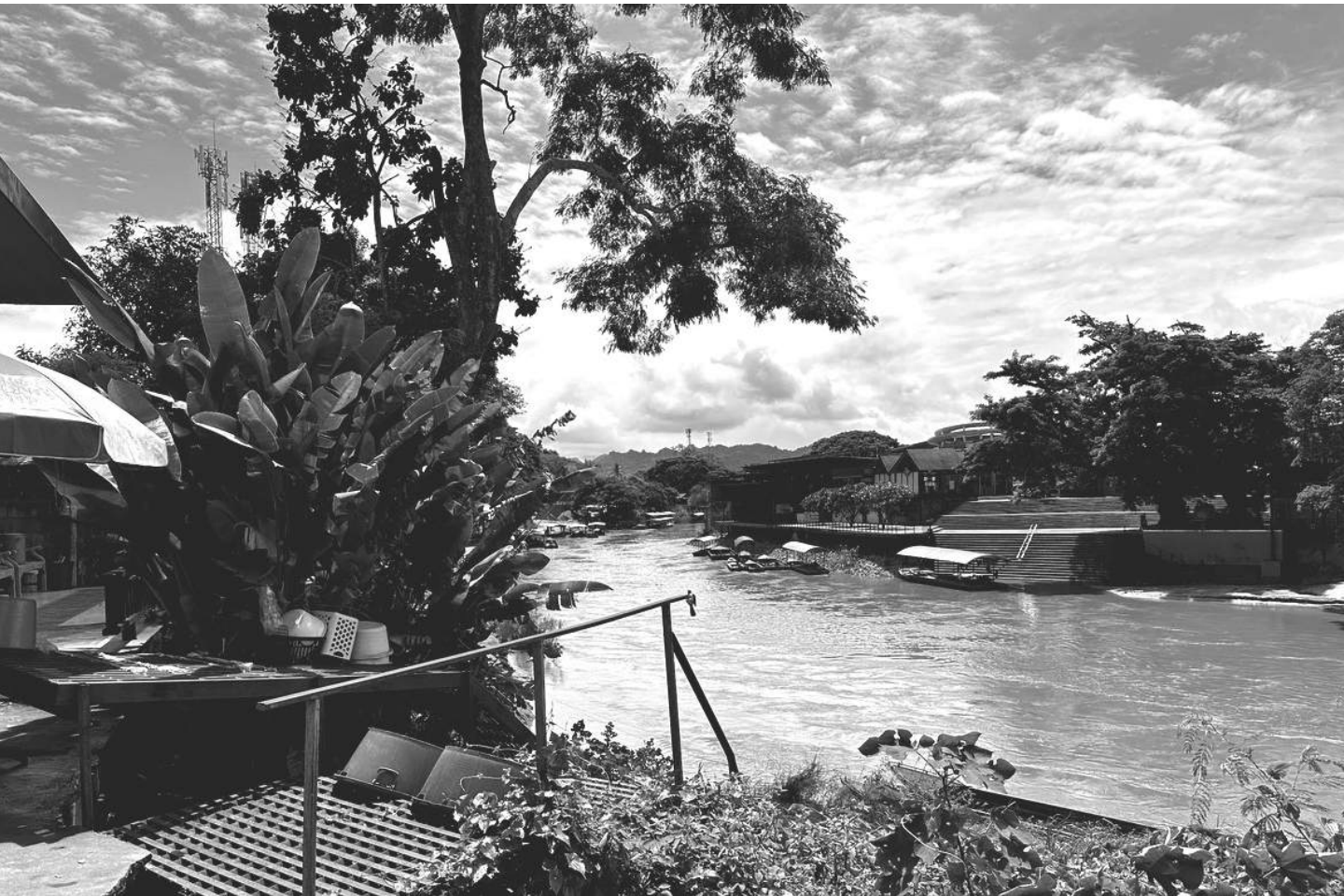
with opposition members of parliament blocking the city’s courthouse to demand the release of arrested protesters. This second round of demonstrations was also somewhat decentralized, with activist groups calling on people to blockade roads every Friday wherever they happen to be for 14 minutes of silence (to signify the 14 people who had died by that point—two more would succumb to their wounds in the coming weeks). These actions were met with new repressive tactics: Thugs close to the government attacked these protests, driving cars into the crowds and using other forms of physical violence. This backfired as well. After students from the university drama school were attacked, they organized a blockade of their school, demanding that the attackers be arrested and that students held in custody be released. In the coming weeks, their fellow students from other campuses and universities would follow in their footsteps. Soon, all campuses of all the public universities throughout Serbia would be blockaded.

In the university blockades, students organized themselves in directly democratic assemblies, inspired by previous movements—although on a much larger scale this time. Many of the students were also supported by university staff (at least initially), with some schools even officially endorsing the demands. The movement would expand greatly over the coming months, with a massive, decentralized base of student activists launching all kinds of innovative actions against the government.

Part 2 will appear in Heatwave issue 3

Notes

1. "Pump it!" (*pumpaj*) has been a slogan of the movement since its early days. Normally associated with rap music and working out, this term’s connection to protests is more nebulous, implying something like “don’t let the energy drop,” but perhaps also to pump the government full of air until it pops. A related slogan has also come into use, coined by sociologist and left-wing populist Jovo Bakić: “Stew it,” meaning we need to prepare for a long-term struggle.
2. This subservience takes many forms, such as large subsidies granted to multinational corporations opening factories in Serbia. The government has signed bilateral treaties giving Chinese companies preferential treatment for exports and exempting them from following certain laws, specifying, for example, that Chinese citizens working in Serbia are to be treated according to Chinese laws, leading to terrible conditions for many guest workers. In this and the earlier construction projects, a common tendency has been a lack of public tenders, with backdoor deals predetermining which companies the state will cooperate with.



Dispatches from Mae Sot, Part II: the town of exiles

Wu Qin

In Heatwave #1, we introduced this series of texts by a Chinese anarchist who left the PRC in 2022 and ended up in Mae Sot—a town on Thailand's border with Myanmar. There she's been chronicling the lives of exiles from the ongoing Spring Revolution that erupted after the 2021 coup in Myanmar, partisans of Karen autonomy whose longstanding struggle has become intertwined with the revolution, Burmese Muslims (including merchants as well as those fleeing persecution since the 2010s), migrant workers in the region's manufacturing and agricultural sectors who have been shuttling back and forth across the border for decades, and participants in the online scam industry run by Chinese triads (including workers from throughout Asia and Africa whose conditions range from outright slavery to “normal” economic compulsion)—to name just a few of the groups comprising

21st century Zomia. In this second installment, we follow a labor activist who smuggles drone components and takes guerrillas to the dentist, meet a female guerrilla who adopted the children of fallen comrades, and begin to learn about the divisions of class, age, and political orientation among revolutionaries—including their contrasting relationships to Western funding. The latter have been changing rapidly since the dramatic curtailment of US support following the end of USAID, forcing more of the elite exiles to scramble for jobs, and possibly reducing the gap between their ranks and ordinary Burmese migrant workers in northwestern Thailand. This selection was based on interviews conducted in 2022–2023, but these more recent developments will be addressed in future installments.¹

As Ko Pyar Tar, a labor activist from Mandalay, drove me to a “black” market on the border for shopping, he received a call asking him to pick up some guerillas who were coming from the jungle to get their teeth fixed in Mae Sot. Prior to the coup, Ko Pyar Tar had been active in international labor support networks for many years. After fleeing to Mae Sot, he started researching Burmese migrant workers for international NGOs while also providing supplies for comrades across the border.

When the revolutionaries initially fled Lay Kay Kaw² for Mae Sot, they faced an arduous journey, but once they had resettled here, sneaking across the border became a daily practice. Guerillas often visited Mae Sot for healthcare, entertainment, or just a sense of normalcy unavailable on the battlefield. Strolling through the markets, you're sure to see a few shops selling military uniforms alongside those offering a diverse array of garments from Myanmar's various ethnic groups.

The border became more tightly monitored after a shooting at Bangkok's Siam Paragon Mall in October 2023. Evidence suggested that the shooter had purchased the weapon through Thailand's thriving illegal arms market, fueled by the war in Karen State. Now it takes more time to locate spots where it's still possible to sneak across the border.

After the initial excitement about the post-coup sequence of struggles in 2021, international media gradually shifted its attention away from Myanmar, but the fight never ended. The revolution continued on the ground, where tactics and strategies have been continually debated and tested.

Lacking arms supplies from the international community, the ground troops of the Spring Revolution relied on the support of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), as well as DIY drones. Components for drones were delivered from Mae Sot to the jungles across the border, where they could be assembled by guerrillas. One of the guerrilla engineers responsible for assembling these drones was a friend of Ko Pyar Tar. Before to the coup, he had cultivated a hobby of flying drones for aerial photography—never suspecting how important this skill would become.

After the visitors completed their dental work, Ko Pyar Tar drove us to a logistics facility to pick up batteries for agricultural drones. They transported the packages to a safe house, opening each one to inspect the contents, then resealing them within larger boxes as a disguise before sending them on to the border. After the Bangkok shooting, cross-border logistics management had become stricter as well. Saw Marner [a young Karen revolutionary introduced in Part I] told me that his father and brother had recently been arrested by the Thai police for transporting drone parts from Mae Sot to the jungle, and were expected to be detained for 80 days.

Of course, on the other side of the border, the rebels' sacrifices continued to be more intense. Saw Marner showed me the photo of a Karen friend who had just lost his leg on the battlefield, commenting wryly, “It's like his whole family is cursed: both his dad and his grandpa also lost a leg in two different wars following Myanmar's independence.”

After the aerial raid at Lay Kay Kaw in late 2021, a Burmese Muslim from Yangon called Kyine tried unsuccessfully to contact her boyfriend, who had gone there to join the People's Defense Forces (PDF). Months later, she heard from fellow guerrillas that he had died. Despite her religious identity, she believed in Marxism and did not pray. During our 2023 conversation in Chiang Mai, she held back the tears while narrating her story: “I hope that maybe he just wanted to break up and asked his friends to lie about all this.” A year had already passed since his disappearance, but she had still not accepted his death.

One woman I met who used to be a guerilla was called Shein. A singer from Mandalay, she looked thin and pallid next to three children when we met at a bar in Mae Sot. The oldest was about six or seven, while she appeared to be only in her twenties. I asked if they were all hers. “They are the children of my comrades. I adopted five of them.” Their parents had died, one after the other: tortured to death by the military, or dying from disease in the jungle or accidental explosions. Eventually, she brought the children across the border to Mae Sot, persevering for their sake. “I've considered suicide many times. You don't know how taunting survivor's guilt can be.” Now she works at a migrant school for displaced Burmese children.

Those who came to Mae Sot before the coup could recall when there was only one bar here, with hardly any young Burmese urbanites sporting fashionable attire. Now there are over ten bars, with Burmese-owned restaurants and tea shops everywhere. The arrival of thousands of such exiles has contributed to an unprecedented economic boom, turning Mae Sot from a sleepy town into a bustling city. That said, most of the streets are still rugged, with packs of wild dogs roaming the alleys at night. You can also see 7-Elevens, a Robinson Mall, cafés, and UNHCR hotels set up to house those recognized by the UN as political refugees, in transit on their way to a third country for asylum.

I met Tin Hla, a researcher and consultant for the oppositional National Unity Government (NUG), in a restaurant frequented by political figures in exile. He kept his voice low even though the dining room was empty, drawing illustrations to explain the roles of various actors in the revolution—such as the NUG, the PDF, the EAOs, and the NUCC (National Unity Consultative Council). Born into an upper-middle-class family in Yangon, he had completed a self-funded postgraduate degree in the UK. After fleeing to Mae Sot, he wrote reports on Myanmar for a US-funded research institute in addition to his work for the NUG.

Following the arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and other core members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) on the day of the coup, the NUG was formed by former NLD representatives, representatives of several EAOs, and independent pro-democracy activists, partly as an organ that competes with the junta for legitimacy on the international stage.

The NUG declared an end to the 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, crafted during the junta-directed democratic transition. While the Constitution had facilitated the 2015 general election (Myanmar’s first since the one rejected by the junta in 1990), it also required 25% military representation in both houses of parliament, allowing the junta to defend the old order within a parliamentary framework.³ In the years since the 2021 coup, the NUG has been drafting a new Federal Democracy Charter in consultation with certain EAOs.

As we talked, a group of well-dressed, middle-aged Burmese men walked into the restaurant and headed straight toward a private room. Tin Hla briefly exchanged greetings with one of the men when he passed by, later explaining that he was a former NLD representative, and that many of those attending the meeting were members of the NUG.

Despite all belonging to the same community, Burmese exiles are divided into very different worlds. Those with university degrees who speak fluent English, such as Tin Hla, are active in networks tied to the UN and INGOs. Such organizations employ discourses of “human rights,” gender, ethnicity, labor, and refugee status to connect their com-

patriots in Mae Sot to “the international community.” Most of the INGOs previously stationed in Myanmar relocated to Thailand after the coup. Their Western employees generally choose to live in Chiang Mai, only occasionally visiting Mae Sot for frontline news.⁴ Burmese citizens employed by these organizations have also enjoyed access to work permits and set up residence in Chiang Mai. The organizations with more emphasis on grassroots engagement have mostly stayed in Mae Sot, either by choice or by necessity.

Ko Maung, another labor activist from Yangon who fled to Mae Sot, conducted research on Burmese migrant workers for various INGOs, but has now grown wary of these organizations’ discourse and ecology. “Their agendas are often preset from a distance by Western worldviews and priorities. Even many local organizations have to write impractical proposals just to get funding. Most participants in this system waste time producing discourse and competing for the ownership of truth.” When international funders hear “armed struggle,” they recoil in fear. Their support is reserved for what they call “nonviolent civil resistance,” the kind of activism that fits neatly into donor reports and grant proposals. The most urgent needs of grassroots activists and revolutionaries cannot be made presentable.⁵

In this sense, INGO activities in Mae Sot are oriented toward an international audience, with the goal of producing presentable results. The INGO ecology transforms frontline realities into spectacles of suffering, relegating them to different categories according to the aforementioned discourses such as “human rights.” By depoliticizing the plight

of Burmese exiles in a game of discourse production, INGOs effectively perpetuate their hardships by distracting from efforts to transform their conditions. Ko Maung thus chose to remain in Mae Sot, instead of moving to Chiang Mai, in order to stay grounded in frontline experiences.

Many of the young Burmese exiles in Mae Sot have complicated feelings about those who moved to Chiang Mai. One of them named Kyaw Zaw told me: “Suffering is the most essential component of a revolution. Most of us who stay here are impoverished. The exiles who receive high salaries from international organizations are not in the same revolution as those who work factory jobs to survive. They basically live like white people.” After the revolution erupted, he left behind everything he owned, including two apartments in Yangon, before crossing the border into Thailand. Now every week he travels back and forth across the border to coordinate supplies into the jungle. His wife had worked as an accountant before the revolution. Now she works at a hair salon in Mae Sot 13 hours every day, with only one day off per month, earning only about \$150 USD.

Here, the line between highly-educated revolutionary youths and migrant workers seeking better opportunities is gradually fading away.

As the revolutionary horizon was pushed indefinitely into the future, everyday survival became the main immediate concern for many exiles. International funding proved far from sufficient. As the funds pass through Chiang Mai, there is little left by the time they arrive in Mae Sot.⁶ Among the thousands of exiles arriving in Thailand, many are highly educated but only a handful can find jobs in such foreign-funded organizations. The vast majority have become cheap, expendable labor in the manufacturing and service sectors along the border, paid far below the Thai minimum wage (about \$11 USD per day in 2023) in “flexible” arrangements characteristic of what anthropologist Stephen Campbell has called “border capitalism.”

At the same time, migrant workers continued to pour in as the Burmese economy collapsed after the coup, compounded by general strikes, Western divestment, a paralyzed financial system, and of course the war itself. The family members of migrant workers who stayed in Myanmar found themselves out of work. Impoverishment and deprivation have thus given “the laboring masses” just as much grievance against the junta as the educated exiles of the Spring Revolution.

Many ordinary Burmese people, including migrant workers and small business owners, still hope Aung San Suu Kyi will somehow return from prison and restore Myanmar to its *status quo ante*. The NUG has even saved a spot for her in the new structures of power they plan to implement. Meanwhile, the younger generation had long since lost faith in such leaders after witnessing round after round of anti-Muslim pogroms, alongside the state’s continued wars

on ethnic minorities fighting for autonomy throughout the last democratic transition. For them, “normality” has never been desirable.

The Fog of “Democracy”

Whenever I spoke of “the coup,” Mg Saint, one of the anarchists from Yangon [introduced in Part I], would always retort slyly, “Which one?” Of course, he knew I was referring to the one in 2021, but he always reminded me that Myanmar’s modern history has consisted of one military coup after another, one struggle for democracy after another.

In a 2020 epilogue to *The Hidden History of Burma*, Burmese historian Thant Myint-U wrote, “when the National League for Democracy won its landslide election victory [in 2015], some Burmese analysts guessed that its government wouldn’t last: differences with the generals would come to a head and there would be an army takeover. But nothing of the sort happened. There was mutual distrust and at times rising tension. But at the end of the day, the former political prisoners and their erstwhile captors had found a way to work together.” Just one year later, the military chased Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD out of the political scene.

According to mainstream accounts (both in the West and among many Burmese liberals), Myanmar’s history since independence seems to have been locked within a heroic, binary struggle between parliamentary democracy and military dictatorship: a self-sacrificing goddess leading a desperate people in need of salvation faced off against an evil, autocratic general in a series of confrontations from 1988 to 2007 and 2021.⁷

Mg Saint had traveled from Yangon to Mae Sot for the first time in 2009, when he was 22 years old—two years after the Saffron Revolution. There were already a lot of Burmese people in Mae Sot at the time, some having fled there after the 1988 crackdown, others after 2007, including both dissidents and migrant workers displaced by marketization throughout those two decades. Mg Saint’s parents were 88ers. He had always been suspicious of the junta’s education since childhood, eventually dropping out of college at the age of 20. The Saffron Revolution became his first taste of collective revolt. Named after the color of the robes worn by Buddhist monks, the movement attracted a great deal of attention from Western media, its image of the monk standing up to the junta quickly coming to define international conceptions of Myanmar. This was also the first time Mg Saint had witnessed protestors being slaughtered in the streets, and the start of his life as a militant. Hoping to develop a firmer grasp of political ideas, he moved to Mae Sot, where he studied English and political science at a British-run institution.

As Thant Myint-U pointed out, however, the democracy vs. dictatorship narrative, symbolized by Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition to the junta, not only obscured existing



problems, but created still more problems for the movement. The narrative implied that the West needed to save the goddess of democracy from the barbaric generals of the Orient. Consequently, every repressed movement brought a new round of Western sanctions. Myanmar thus became one of the poorest countries in Asia by the 1990s.⁸ The sanctions led by the UK and the US lasted for a generation, with a severity at times exceeding those against North Korea.

As of today, there are around three to four million Burmese people working in Thailand despite abhorrent labor conditions due to domestic economic woes.

Born in New York, Thant Myint-U received an elite education in the West and worked in UN peacekeeping. After the 1988 uprising, he began advocating for Myanmar’s democratization among international policymakers—supporting the intensification of sanctions. In the 1990s, however, he began to question these as it became clear that they were hurting the nation’s poor much more than weakening the junta.

In the face of these sanctions, the junta turned to a strategy of predatory development that dovetailed perfectly with China’s capitalist transition in the 1990s, providing goods for emerging Chinese markets, Burmese markets for Chinese exports, and eventually lucrative projects for investment. A minority of civilians attained wealth by leveraging connections with the military, working with highland militias in resource extraction, or investing in illegal industries. The illicit drug trade in Upper Burma and real estate development in Lower Burma complemented each other, as peasants lost their land and became migrant workers. Economic inequality returned to the level of colonial times.

After Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested again in 2003, the US imposed sanctions of unprecedented severity, which devastated the budding manufacturing industry. At least 200,000 young female workers lost their jobs overnight and had to seek employment in neighboring countries. The sanctions were not limited to trade and investment, also restricting developmental aid. This brought wave after wave of humanitarian crises as the medical and educational systems fell into near paralysis by the time of the 2007 uprising.

In 2015, the day liberal dissidents and their Western allies had prayed for since 1988 finally arrived. For the West, Aung San Suu Kyi now also became a savior for global democracy after the embarrassing outcomes of the Arab Spring. Yangon’s “middle classes” began to grow, entrepreneurs unconnected to the military emerged, a “civil society” took shape, and exiled intellectuals returned to the country hoping to work for the NLD.

Over the next few years, however, Aung San Suu Kyi’s image began to change among the younger generation. Whereas in 2009, Mg Saint had participated in a sit-in outside the prison where she was being held, in 2020, he boycotted the election with the same friends who had accom-

panied him at the sit-in. “We’ve seen how Aung San Suu Kyi became part of the establishment after coming to power. Now there’s no substantial difference between her and the junta.”

As a labor activist, Ko Maung also boycotted the 2020 election, straining his relationship with his family. In his view, the NLD’s five years in power had done little more than change Myanmar from the military crony capitalism of the 1990s to a neoliberal economy driven by global capital, which profited from the lifting of Western sanctions. The lower classes remained impoverished and neglected, and welfare programs were not prioritized. Despite promises by the transitional government to provide jobs through foreign investment in manufacturing, the main new sources of FDI and economic growth were actually the more capital-intensive industries such as petroleum and natural gas extraction. The transitional economy failed to create jobs for the people it displaced by appropriating agricultural land, so ruralites continued to emigrate *en masse*.

According to Ko Maung, “Myanmar has always needed a social revolution that addresses the question of redistribution,” but all the “democratic revolutions” since 1988 have focused entirely on political reform.

After the 2021 coup, foreign investors quickly abandoned Myanmar. American sanctions on the national bank did little damage to the junta, which managed to find loopholes while civilians were hit the hardest as always. This was especially true for workers who depended on Myanmar’s embattled garment sector, still reeling from the previous round of sanctions imposed after the Rohingya pogroms of 2017 and the pandemic disruptions of 2020.

Part III will be published in issue 3

Notes

1. Like Part I, this selection consists of revised and annotated excerpts from Diego Ge’s translation of Wu’s Chinese essay published last year as “Between Borders” on the funder’s website (frontlinefellowship.io, where the Chinese original can also be found as 國境之間).
2. As discussed in Part I, Lay Kay Kaw is a town in Karen State that briefly served as a “liberated zone” for revolutionaries fleeing central Burmese cities such as Yangon, until the military attacked in December 2021, after which they fled to the jungles or across the border to towns such as Mae Sot.
3. The last democratic election that was implemented took place in 1960, won by Prime Minister U Nu and his Clean Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League. In 1962, General Ne Win led a coup, eventually transitioning to a nominally civilian “socialist” regime but continuing to rule as dictator until the 1988 Uprising. After the resignation of Ne Win, the six-month uprising ended with a takeover by a younger faction of military officers (constituted as the State Law and Order Restoration Council—“SLORC”), who ended “socialism” and instituted post-ideological military rule. Meanwhile, opposition leaders (led by Aung San Suu Kyi) formed the NLD and organized a general election in 1990, where the NLD won 80% of parliamentary seats. The SLORC declared the vote invalid and prevented the NLD from sharing power until the democratic transition began with the 2008 Constitution, culminating in the 2015 election. For details, see “The Lady and the Generals” by Soe Lin Aung and Stephen Campbell, *Jacobin* (2016), and *A History of Modern Burma* by Michael Carney (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
4. The trip from Chiang Mai to Mae Sot takes about six hours by coach, although of course the higher-level employees of UN agencies and INGOs usually travel by air. (“INGO” stands for “international non-governmental organizations,” here referring to those headquartered in high-income countries).
5. Many revolutionaries who shuttle between Karen State and Mae Sot have been engaged in an armed resistance that will never be acknowledged on the international stage. If the revolution succeeds, their years of sacrifice will remain blank on their résumés, while those who participated safely within the INGO system (drafting reports, hosting workshops, posing for diplomatic

visits) will have polished activist profiles, rich in symbolic capital, celebrated as heroes of democracy while the true soldiers of the struggle remain invisible.

6. This separation of Mae Sot from international funding would later become an advantage when USAID withdrew, since activists there had already developed networks of mutual aid, which helped them to weather the disruption with less impact than those in Chiang Mai, who were more reliant on such patronage.

7. Prior to 2021, the largest uprising since independence was the “8888 Movement”—named for the peak of street protests on August 8, 1988—whether measured in terms of participants (millions), scale (nationwide), repression (thousands killed), or historical significance: in response to the protests, Chairman Ne Win (who had ruled since the 1962 coup) resigned, eventually leading to the takeover by a younger faction of military officers constituted as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), who dissolved Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Programme Party, dispensed with its pretensions to “socialism,” and instituted a period of predatory development under direct military rule. Meanwhile, participants in the 8888 Movement formed the NLD as the main organization of the underground opposition. Aung San Suu Kyi, who lived in Oxford at the time, just happened to be visiting her sick mother in Myanmar when the uprising broke out. As the daughter of Aung San, the widely respected anti-colonial leader and “founder of modern Burma,” Aung San Suu Kyi’s 1988 pro-democracy speech at Shwedegon Pagoda resounded among the many thousands of protestors gathered there—marking her entrance onto the political stage. Her subsequent arrest, the SLORC’s rejection of the 1990 election results, and her status as political prisoner on and off until 2010 only heightened her prestige among the general populace.

8. Burma is reputed to have been one of the wealthier parts of Asia during the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), more or less retaining this status under British rule (with a per capita GDP of \$685 in 1913 vs. \$552 for China and \$675 for India, calculated in 1990 international dollars), before falling well behind China and India by 1985 (\$920 vs. \$1,522 and \$1,079), and then even significantly below Laos after the imposition of the post-1988 sanctions (\$732 vs. \$934 in 1991). Angus Maddison, *The World Economy* (OECD, 2006), pp. 215 and 304–306.

The Anti-Imperialist Imperialism Club: on left internationalism and iran

Arya Zahedi

The recent “12-day war” between Israel and Iran represents the latest manifestation of the rapid descent into generalized barbarism to which the capitalist system has condemned the world. While there is a supposed ceasefire at the moment, every peace under this system is only preparation for the next war. The war between Israel and Iran is not isolated to a conflict between two countries, nor the wider Middle East for that matter, but is part of the expanding wars that are an outcome of capital’s own dynamic.

While recent conflicts have brought to bear the old question of imperialism, many of the confusions and illusions of the past have returned with it. Generally speaking, much of the left takes an approach to anti-imperialism that is *ideological*, meaning they fail to critique how “common sense” shapes their own presuppositions. In so doing, ideology both disguises and performs the fundamental processes

that give rise to it. “Anti-Imperialism” is ideological because it obscures social conflicts taking place *within* Iran, including but not limited to class struggles, and helps to mystify the place of the Islamic Republic within the broader order of global capitalist production and international trade. No sooner had the first Israeli bombs rained upon Iran than many of the larger left-wing organizations and media in the US—from the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) and Workers World, to Democratic Socialists of America, to Democracy Now!—wheeled out one regime apologist after another.

The conflicting tendencies of global capitalist production occur at a range of scales, but are driven fundamentally by the class relation. They take the form of borders, nation-states, and interstate competition for a variety of reasons, among them the need to maintain a system of in-

ternational labor arbitrage or to maintain privileged access to raw materials and supply chains. Real national conflicts can take on a fetish character, the form of appearance of the uneven and tumultuous nature of capitalist reproduction. Indeed, the externalization of social conflict—using conflict with an external enemy to maintain social unity—has been a mainstay of the Republic’s domestic policy since the Revolution, critical to maintaining its existence over decades of turbulence. Today, in the aftermath of the recent war, the state is once again using external conflict to establish internal order and social unity. This is the core logic of geopolitics—national *realpolitik* uncoupled from the social relations that constrain and condition it. These issues are far from just analytical, as the ideological form of anti-imperialism is an incredible obstacle to building a renewed internationalism.

For many on the US left, Iranian history apparently stopped with the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Closer inspection reveals that the ultimate victory of the Islamic Republic was the result of a counter-revolution, whose objective was to put back in the bottle the social movements that were released during the revolutionary upheaval. Some know better, but they are manipulators, giving partial truths to a naïve young audience. These charlatans have been around long enough, and love to discuss the Iranian communist movement to gain legitimacy, only to rally around their executioners.¹ The Islamic Republic repressed the Iranian left as the Shah wished he could. Even before the fall of the Shah, the Khomeinists, as well as the liberal Islamists, were open about their disdain for Marxism and communism. In truth, anti-imperialism was used, and continues to be used, not only as a form of establishing political dominance, but also as a means to further exploit labor. By illuminating the internal relations of Iran and its relation to the imperialist system globally, we can better see how “anti-imperialism” functions as the ideological form of the very social relations that it obscures and therefore reproduces.

Revolution

The Iranian Revolution was one of the great mass revolutions of the twentieth century. Whereas most of the revolutions of the global south had taken place under conditions of underdevelopment, where feudal relations were still dominant, the forces behind the Iranian Revolution were the product of two decades of rapid and uneven capitalist development. Unlike these other revolutions, feudal relations had already been transformed into capitalist relations through the development enacted by the Shah’s regime.

In the early 1960s, under pressure from the US, the Shah began to adopt liberal economic reforms.² This was the basis for what was titled the “White Revolution.”³ These reforms included the enfranchisement of women, creation of literacy corps, industrialization and development plans,

profit-sharing in certain industries, and land reform. The “White Revolution” was also an attempt to build a popular base and advance an image of the regime as a kind of benevolent despot reformer. Yet the reforms didn’t include any check on state power and they solidified the dictatorship even further. The reforms were opposed by the clergy, and the main points of contention were votes for women, the removal of requirements for civil servants, and most importantly land reform. Much of the upper echelons of the clergy had vast land holdings given to them as religious endowments. The dictatorial aspects of the reforms were the target of the secular nationalist and left-wing opposition, whose slogan was “Reforms, yes! Dictatorship, no!” The religious opposition opposed the reforms as a whole.

This opposition broke out into the uprising of June 1963, which was suppressed with extreme violence and dispelled any hope of democratic reforms for a whole generation of activists.⁴ Until the eve of the revolution, Iran continued on the path of rapid development which superseded people’s needs or redistribution. Most importantly, land reform succeeded in transforming Iran from a semi-feudal agricultural society into a modern capitalist nation. While Iran had been undergoing a process of integration and peripheralization into the capitalist world system since the 19th century, it was really only after the early 1960s that capitalist relations became dominant within the Iranian economy, fully extending throughout the countryside. The biggest aristocrats were able to keep their land if they transformed into capitalist agriculture and hired wage-labor or if they leased their land to multinationals. While there was some limited resistance from the aristocracy, most eventually followed suit and saw that it served their interest. Many from the landed aristocracy were encouraged to invest in industry and given ministerial positions for going along with the program. While they had to surrender their political autonomy in the countryside to the state, they gained substantial social and economic power.

Many of the landless who remained worked as agricultural wage laborers, but the vast majority swelled the ranks of a semi-proletariat who migrated into the cities. Tehran’s population doubled from 1963-1973; many searched for employment within the vast and expanding construction industry. Industrialization begets an industrial proletariat, along with white-collar workers and the professional middle class, expanding the number of students going abroad for education. Migrants flooded the cities and found the alienation of modern urban life; unlike the older generations of peasants and workers, they lacked stable forms of community, institutions, and socialization. Their old forms of community in the countryside were disrupted, and there was no radical alternative in the cities, creating conditions that would play an important role in shaping the revolution and giving the clergy an advantage in the struggle for hege-



mony. The entire weight of state repression was carried by the left and secular-nationalist opposition. No trade unions, political parties, or other forms of working-class association were permitted. In this environment, the mosque offered a form of community and a space for dissent, one controlled carefully by the clergy. The Shah believed that religion could be used as a way to circumvent the communist movement, giving relative freedom to clerics and religious figures.

As long as the price of oil continued to rise, the state could maintain relative social peace. While there was widespread dissent and frustration, the growing middle-class, white-collar workers, and even many technically-skilled blue collar industrial workers in key industries could be kept in check through the expanding economy. But growth never lasts forever. Unemployment began to rise in the 1970s as the price of oil stabilized and then declined. Inflation spread simultaneously and, in 1977, the government of Premier Amuzegar responded by manufacturing a recession. This compounded growing unemployment, particularly among the new or semi-proletariat. As proletarianization continued to draw former agricultural workers into the cities, the construction industry was the only industry that could absorb these new wage laborers who did not yet have the technical skills for service work or highly-specialized industrial labor. The slowing economy hit the construction sector hard. Increasing stagflation and labor unrest followed.

After 1977, the year inflation more than doubled to a staggering 27.3%,⁵ demonstrations by various forms of opposition became more frequent and ubiquitous. While industrial workers had orchestrated wildcat strikes since around 1973, it wasn't until 1978 that these strikes began to generalize, culminating in the mass strike of Fall 1978. The death knell of the regime sounded when oil workers joined the strike and shut off the most important economic resource of the state. The fall of the Shah's regime would be unthinkable without this mass strike. Over a year of strikes, demonstrations, and riots finally culminated in the general insurrection of February 9-11, 1979. The final nail was pounded into the coffin.

In the course of the mass strike and insurrection, partisan conflict spread and competition for a revolutionary vanguard function intensified. Throughout industry, the proletariat had transformed strike committees into worker's councils (*shora* in Persian). Councils, committees, and assemblies were not just limited to factories, but spread to schools, universities, farms, and even military barracks. But while the factory committees were shaped by the involvement of left-wing groups, the neighborhood committees were dominated by the Islamists, as many of them were organized through the mosques. These committees were controlled by a Khomeinist secret central committee. The Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*) formed out of these

committees, purging non-loyalists from their ranks. The RG were also a counterweight to the well-armed left-wing guerrilla groups who increased in numbers and popularity during the course of the revolution, particularly among younger non-religious people.

To firmly establish their hegemony over the revolution, the clergy and petit-bourgeoisie around Khomeini increasingly utilized the language of anti-imperialism and populism, co-opting terms and symbols from the left. In the ideological character of anti-imperialism, the Khomeinists found a ready-made tool of obfuscation and common-sense explanation of their appeal and eventual victory. Anti-imperialism was the midwife by which a new form of bourgeois dictatorship was established. It is not satisfactory to see the revolution in two, easily delineated moments, a heroic revolutionary period followed by a counter-revolution. Rather, the revolution and counter-revolution were, as they often are, intertwined.

The spectacle of anti-imperialism reached a climax with the US embassy hostage crisis. While it is often recalled as a great humbling of American imperialism, the reality had much more to do with domestic conflicts. Taking hostages allowed the Khomeinists to take the lead over their rivals as the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle. At a time when social conflicts were raging—with rebellions in the provinces, intensifying student movements, protests against new gender laws and dress codes, and ongoing conflicts in workplaces between management and the workers' councils—and disappointments with the course of the revolution were becoming more apparent, the hostage crisis unified the nation around an international spectacle that was beamed into their homes daily. The embassy became a spot of constant rally and mobilization. It brought about the fall of the liberal nationalists of the provisional government, and more importantly, it was a way to gain an advantage over the left. It came at an opportune time for the Khomeinists. Frustration was growing among the population over economic issues, but also the increasingly repressive environment. Strikes were increasing, and this was to the benefit of the left-wing groups. All of this was snuffed with the spectacle of the embassy siege.⁶

While the embassy crisis helped to strengthen its hegemony, it was the war with Iraq that solidified the Islamic Republic, institutionalizing the Revolutionary Guard and ushering in a dark period for class struggle. Strikes were banned and workers who organized any disruptions were accused of being agents of imperialism. Ideological mobilization was accompanied by severe repression, with imprisonment and summary executions becoming the order of the day. Even the left-wing organizations that had firmly supported the regime such as the Tudeh Party and the Fedaiyan Majority were not spared.⁷ Three years into the war, Iraq was willing to sue for peace, but Khomeini rejected the

offer. He and his supporters understood that, so long as the war continued, they could impose social unity.

The war finally came to an end in the fall of 1988, and along with it, one final bloodletting. Khomeini issued an edict instructing his supporters to purge the prisons of the left-wing opposition, with conservative estimates suggesting 5,000 executions in the summer of 1988 alone. The next year Khomeini died, and the charismatic leader that held together the ruling coalition was no longer there to mediate it.

Republic

The following decade witnessed an unfolding “economy first” policy. The remaining radical populist elements were tempered in favor of economic liberalization. The populist ideologies that valorized the poor and the oppressed were replaced with praise of the honest merchant, the consecration of private property, and the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund. During this period, privatization of Iranian enterprises and services rapidly increased, with struggles arising to protect subsidies for basic commodities such as cooking oil, flour, and gas. With the opposition defeated and the unchallenged rule of the state established, it was really the case that “Locke replaced Habakkuk.”⁸

The strain of economic liberalization throughout the 1990s came to a head with the student riots of 1999, which kicked off when right-wing thugs attacked students protesting the closure of a liberal newspaper. Despite being framed as a liberal reform movement of recently politicized stu-

dents, this sequence was the largest demonstration against the government since the immediate post-revolutionary years. It wasn't long until militant working-class activity returned to the scene.

Increased labor activism began in the mid-2000s and has continued since in many sectors. Beginning in this period, one major struggle has been to form independent unions separate from the state. As economic conditions worsened, populism regained strength and right-wing populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005. For all the rhetoric against elites, austerity continued for the working class. Ironically, austerity, in particular the removal of subsidies, was more successful under the populist Ahmadinejad than the liberal Khatami. Ahmadinejad increased repression as well as populist demagoguery. During this time, Ahmadinejad became the darling of the anti-imperialist left, particularly when Hugo Chavez embraced him and called him his “brother.” His second term began with what came to be known as the “Green Movement” claiming that the election was stolen against his reformist rival. While another sequence of protests ensued, this also represented an end for reformism. For Iranian workers and students, it was apparent that neither the reformists nor the conservatives offered any future.

Despite decades of privatization, the Iranian economy is today still heavily tied to the state via nationalized oil and natural gas industries. For example, the National Iranian Oil Company is the largest economic unit in the entire country. Essential to the economy of the Islamic Republic are the *bonyads* or foundations. Listed as “charitable” orga-



nizations, *bonyads* control about 20% of Iran’s GDP. After the revolution, the Pahlavi Foundation (*Bonyad-e Pahlavi*) which represented the economic interests and investments of the royal court, hidden from official scrutiny, was taken over and renamed as the Foundation of the Oppressed (*Bonyad-e Mostazafin*). In reality, *Bonyad-e Mostazafin* is functionally a holding company—the largest in the Middle East—involved in numerous sectors of the economy. Today, it is the country’s second-largest commercial enterprise after the National Iranian Oil Company. *Bonyads* are closely affiliated with the revolutionary guard, which in turn is under the control of the office of the Supreme Leader. While US firms may have been kicked out after the revolution, capital from other imperialist powers rushed in quickly to fill the gap. Foreign direct investment continues to flow from British, French, German, Japanese, and increasingly Chinese multinationals, attracted by “Free Economic Zones,” such as the South Pars Energy Zone. These massive complexes employ hundreds of thousands of precarious and poorly paid workers, crammed into dire living conditions to serve foreign capital in one of the hottest areas of the world.⁹

Over the past decade, austerity and police repression have become focal points of social conflict. Strikes and demonstrations have increased in frequency, periodically erupting into generalized uprisings or insurrections, as in the case of the 2018-2019 general strike or the 2019-2020 protests, which had economic hardship, corruption, or rising energy prices as their proximate causes. Each time, the state has responded with severe repression,¹⁰ which only feeds the anti-government sentiment that underwrites the next explosion. Indeed, the cycle of unrest has been characterized by a crescendo motion. The most recent apparent crest was the Jina Uprising of late 2022 and early 2023, sparked by the police murder of Jina Amini.¹¹ While triggered by particular grievances or demands, these protest sequences demonstrate that the issues of class conflict, environmental destruction, state repression, ethnic racism, or gender oppression cannot be cleaved from each other. This becomes more manifest with every explosion. Yet it is precisely this incongruent composition and aspirational unity that exposes contemporary Iranian social movements to the same counterrevolutionary forces that defeated the Revolution of 1979. The specter of national unity creeps in the shadows cast by every failed insurrection. The slogans of the left again become appropriated and devoid of their political content.¹²

Remains

In recent years, no other sequence of events has done more than the “12 day war” to resurrect what seemed to be a moribund ideology, another “blessing” to the regime.¹³ Quite predictably, a large section of the populace has rallied around the flag. Today, the ultra-wealthy who make their

profits through connections to the state can hide their exploitation behind the external threat of imperialism. While the working classes struggle to pay rent or afford basic commodities, the lavish lifestyles of the northern suburbs of Tehran remain hidden behind this conflict. The war gave the ruling class an opportunity to increase austerity in the name of national sacrifice. The Islamic Republic’s position as a central piece in the “Axis of Resistance”¹⁴ makes it even more difficult for many leftists in the west to get a clear picture of how it really operates. Iran maintains certain anti-imperial positions and at the same time facilitates fundamentally reactionary policies and developmental pathways—an anti-imperial imperialism.¹⁵ This is in fact the history of capitalist development. Taking these illusory forms at face value cost the Iranian left quite dearly during the Revolution.

Despite the anti-imperialist demagoguery, the Islamic Republic has always been willing to be integrated into the international bourgeois community. The idea that the United States is intransigent in its opposition to the Islamic Republic, and vice versa—that the current Iranian regime is intransigent in its “resistance”—is the stuff of comic books and bad spy movies. Iran has a bourgeoisie, and like all bourgeoisies, it is first and foremost concerned with preserving its interests; this supersedes ideological loyalty to any political power. There is certainly an element of the Iranian bourgeoisie, even those currently loyal to the regime, who would want to maintain the Islamic Republic but without some of the excesses and with a more “rational” administration of capital. Decades of IMF restructuring, liberalization, and austerity have demonstrated the current Iranian administration’s desire to join the global economic order. The capitalist class will work to preserve its interests, perhaps even jettison their fealty to the current regime if it suits them. To suggest otherwise is pure idealism.

With the recent resurgence in nationalism, the fissures *within* the working class are beginning to re-emerge, primarily along lines of fidelity to the Islamic Republic. The official and ossified organizations—the state-affiliated unions—have dawned the garb of the flag, while autonomous working-class organs continue the uphill battle of militant opposition. Under the cover of national security, Iran has deported over half a million Afghan migrants since the start of the “12 day war”.¹⁶ These latest attacks are but the most recent expressions of a well-worn strategy. The fact that both Iran and the United States are engaging in similar attacks against their most vulnerable migrant population is not a coincidence but reveals a general tendency shaping interstate competition and internal national reaction. Meanwhile, demonstrations and confrontations remain frequent occurrences in the face of the day-to-day indignities and miseries that accompany austerity, such as daily energy blackouts and water shut offs which frequently

take place during the hottest times of the year. The war may have smothered the threat of revolution for now, but the material conditions that spurred masses of Iranian society to rebellion remain.

We must ask fundamental questions. Who are *our* comrades in the struggle against capitalism? Is it our fellow workers, teachers, child rights activists, undocumented migrants facing racism and deportation, or is it generals, merchants, clerics, and bureaucrats? What is the social composition of the so-called “resistance” forces that appear on the global stage? To whom or what do they answer? These questions can be asked of every national medium of capital accumulation, not just Iran. We must move beyond a facile allegiance to anti-imperialism, otherwise we risk abandoning our fellow workers and students to their exploiters and executioners.

Notes

1. A prime example is someone like Vijay Prashad, who is knowledgeable about the communist movement in Iran, but uses this knowledge and history to somehow gain support for the very regime that crushed this movement.
2. The Kennedy administration’s foreign policy plans targeted specific strategic regions which were to undergo certain capitalist reforms from above. Brazil was another nation chosen under the Kennedy plan.
3. Also known as the “Shah-People Revolution” by the regime.
4. It was this generation that formed the base of the two main guerrilla groups that would play a central role in the 1979 revolution, the left-Islamist *Sazeman-e Mujahideen-e Khalq* (The Organization of People’s Mujahideen Guerillas), commonly referred to as the *Mujahideen* and the Marxist-Leninist *Sazeman-e Cherkha-ye Fedaiyan-e Khalq* (The Organization of People’s Fedaiyan Geuriallas) more commonly referred to as the *Fedaiyan*. They were frustrated with the reformism of the older generation of the nationalist National Front and communist Tudeh Party.
5. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?locations=IR>
6. At the same time that the US embassy was being occupied, the “Labor House,” *Khaneh-ye Kar*, which served as the de facto ministry of labor, was occupied by unemployed workers. Needless to say, this was just one among many examples of militant worker activity that was lost in the spectacle of the hostage crisis.
7. The Tudeh and Fedaiyan Majority were tolerated until 1983. After Khomeini rejected the ceasefire, the regime turned against these final remaining Marxist organizations. The central committee of the Tudeh were dragged in front of television cameras to denounce Marxism and confess to being Soviet spies. This was mainly to win the ideological war against Marxism.
8. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

9. Many of the workers here are on precarious temporary contracts. Indeed, the oil industry has a hierarchy between this floating surplus population and more stable skilled workers with permanent or long-term contracts and who receive much higher pay. The latter are even represented by government affiliated unions. The much larger pool of workers on temporary contracts who deal with poor conditions and precarity have been successful in organizing their own autonomous union and conducted a number of important strikes in recent years. In 2021-2022, they waged a large strike that spread to a number of other cities and even beyond the energy sector.
10. The worst incident unfolded in late 2019 with “Bloody Aban,” resulting in an untold number of protesters killed or disappeared.
11. For a balance sheet of the Jina Uprising, see Assareh Assa , “The Jina Rebellion: Elements of an Analysis of the Movement in Iran,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/field-notes/The-Jina-Rebellion/>
12. The slogan popularized during the Jina Uprising, “Woman, Life, Freedom,” has its origins in the radical feminist wing of the Kurdish movement. It was transformed into a general ideological slogan, an umbrella that includes workers and oppressed nationalities, while at the same time chanted by celebrities and the partisans of the deposed monarchy.
13. When the war began, Iran was in the third week of a nationwide truckers strike. The strike was gaining momentum at the time and was becoming a concern. Then the bombs fell.
14. The “Axis of Resistance” is an informal political coalition across the Middle East, formed by Iran and intended to undermine the influence of the US and Israel in the region. Member organizations include *Hezbollah*, *Islamic Resistance in Iraq*, the *Popular Mobilization Forces* (Iraq), Yemeni *Houthis*, and a range of Palestinian resistance groups, including Hamas.
15. One thing that distinguishes the Khomenist movement from the Shah’s regime, especially in its early phase, is that it was anti-developmental and anti-productivist. It embodies a kind of petit-bourgeois utopian populism that appeals to both the newly arriving migrants, lumpen or semi-proletarians, and the merchants and artisans of the bazaar.
16. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2025/07/iran-forcibly-deports-nearly-600000-afghan-migrants-amid-post-war-crackdown/>

Treatise for the Youth in Revolt¹

Colapso y Desvío



July, 2025

We need to provide context for international comrades. Between October 18th, 2019 and early 2020, Chile experienced a wave of social mobilization that marked a turning point in its recent history. What began as mass fare evasion in Santiago rapidly became a national revolt. Within days, millions took to the streets, expressing decades of discontent with a neoliberal model inherited from Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990), a discontent that had only deepened during the democratic transition.

October 18th marked the beginning of the *revolt*, which was much more than just a “social explosion” (Estallido Social)—a term widely adopted by the media and political sectors to strip it of political meaning. Unlike “social explosion,” which implies chaos and spontaneity, the concept of *revolt*—as developed by authors like Alain Badiou or Kristin Ross—points to a popular eruption with deep subjective, political, and social resonance. A revolt interrupts the given order; it doesn't follow a singular cause or reduce popular movements to one demand. It is the moment when the intolerable is no longer tolerated.

Faced with massive protests, Sebastián Piñera's (then president of Chile) government decreed a State of Emergency on October 18th, followed by an unprecedented curfew. Military presence on the streets and serious human rights violations—documented by national and international organizations—defined the first days of the revolt. Rather than quelling the unrest, this repression escalated the conflict.

On November 15th, 2019 (15N), aiming to channel the crisis towards safer institutional outlets, the main political parties in Congress—including current reformist president Gabriel Boric—signed the “Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution,” excluding social movements and victims of repression from the process. This deal called for a plebiscite on a new constitution, launching a constituent process that was later neutralized by several factors: traditional party control, a restrictive institutional design, and growing demobilization amid conservative restoration.

In March 2020, COVID-19 hit Chile and the world. Lockdowns and fear of contagion were mobilized to suppress protest. Yet the pandemic also exposed deep-rooted precarity—chronic debt, privatized healthcare, unemployment, and informal labor. The revolt didn't disappear; it shifted into everyday resistance, community organizing, and systemic critique.

More than five years later, and after a failed constitutional process that left open wounds, we continue to resist efforts to reduce the memory of *the revolt* to the so-called “Social Explosion,” an interpretation of events laundered widely by those in power. This text aims to preserve the living memory of a revolt that still pulses beneath the surface of everyday life for all Chileans.

October 18: Fracture of the Capitalist Social Relationship

*Conscripts of good will,
ours will be a ferocious philosophy;
ignorant as to science, rabid for comfort;
and let the rest of the world croak.
This is the real advance. Marching orders, let's go!*
Arthur Rimbaud, Democracy

The events that began in October 2019 were part of a global circuit of struggles that included the Hong Kong rebellion, the Sudanese Revolution, and the Yellow Vests in France. Our attempt to understand its cause comes not merely from a leftwing urge to vindicate the revolt, but from the need to clarify the nature of the uprising and its real scale, including the role of the youth in the crystallization of a generalized crisis. Perhaps even more importantly, we want to understand the recuperative forces of capitalism, which were intimately related to the outcome of the revolt and the immediate response to it from the sectors that make up the macabre body politic defending “public order.”

However, we are faced with the mythification of certain moments of the Chilean revolt and its protagonists, giving it an unreal and at times overdetermined interpretation. Without wishing to downplay its significance, we believe that the events of October 18th have been interpreted in a way that tends to give them a more revolutionary character than was actually the case. This is especially true regarding the subway evasions, an important milestone that quickly generated an ambivalent reaction among the “professionals of the show” (columnists, journalists, and parliamentarians), many of them making use of such ambiguous concepts as “delinquency” and “civil disobedience” to capture or criminalize it.

As Julio Cortés relates in a lucid article on the matter, Gabriel Boric, at that time a Congressman who built his public persona on “anti-capitalist” aesthetics, defended the turnstile jump in tweets and interviews.² Today, he would be ridiculed. Why is it that subway dodging was to some degree so vindicated in the initial narrative of the revolt by left-wing parties? And more importantly, what was so special about the subway evasions that they escalated into a nationwide revolt, if we assume the premise that this was indeed where it began?

The narrative sustained by the leftwing parties presents the *turnstile jump* as the greatest democratic milestone since the pseudo-transition to democracy after the end of Pinochet’s rule in 1990. This obviates its real character and historically isolates it, thereby turning it into mere symbolism. If this were only an act of youthful disobedience permitted within the legal framework of the status quo—which it was not—it would have culminated in nothing more than a

passing headline on the evening news. The revolt’s historical significance does not come from this particular form. We can trace the form back decades; the mass non-payment of fares was already present in the protests during the “Batalla de Santiago” (Battle of Santiago) in 1957. In truth, *this* evasion attempted, perhaps unintentionally, to overcome the process of capitalist valorization. It represented the collective abandonment of money in pursuit of free association, even if temporarily.³

Chanting “Evadir, no pagar, otra forma de luchar!” (Evade, do not pay, another way to fight!) the youth proletariat, superficially at first, aimed its criticism at capitalism directly. This focus was later amplified and intensified in different regions, where collective activity acquired a content more situated within the realities and contradictions that materialize from extractivism, the abrasive design of the cities, and local crises of reproduction. In these regions, social conflict threatened different forms of the Chilean export engine (e.g., against forestry and mining industries). Given rampant workplace sabotage, burning transportation infrastructure such as public buses, the seizure of land by the Mapuche movement, and the occupation of high schools and universities by students, the backlash was not surpris-

ing and came in the form of widespread media condemnation, intensified legal crackdowns, and violent repression.

The repression suffered in the first days of the evasions and protests by secondary students is essential to understanding the intergenerational character of the struggle. If there had not been the excessive response on the part of the government and the interpretation of the social body as an “internal enemy,” the revolt would not have generalized. During the most radical moments there was no prospect of reconciliation—it was openly expressed as social warfare. A “realistic goal” had to be created in order to suppress the revolt, because no such goal existed.

The media’s condemnation of all forms of protest that moved beyond inane electoral rituals or other equally futile appeals to power—campaigns to collect signatures to stop the extinction of a species or industrial pollution, to give some crude examples—culminated with the legal proscription of anything too disruptive. In other words, “everything that could have been even the least bit effective is forbidden.”⁴ The mass fare evasion celebrated by the Chilean left at the beginning of the revolt was by its nature an “anti-democratic” protest movement, a revolt against bourgeois rights and the democracy which exists to legitimate it.

The effectiveness of hopping the turnstiles was not just because of fare evasion, but because of the action’s virality. The rapid dissemination by the media—formal and informal—of the subway fare evasion spectacle, coupled with the collective rejection of police brutality against the youth, quickly spread the spirit of the revolt. It moved through every generation, spreading the action to other places outside Santiago that also had metro systems, such as Valparaíso. However, the act of jumping the turnstile itself was quickly surpassed, and by October 19th the protests had reached places without metro systems. In the early days of the revolt, the most noteworthy feature was the speed with which both the place and the practice itself overflowed. The protest went viral and suspended historical time, and in its course revived vestiges of previous cycles of struggle.

The different conflictual forms that emerged in the days following October 18th needed no explanation; those actions meant something to each of us and inspired us to a degree that had not been felt in a long time. The initial spontaneous actions among students were soon followed by coordinated autonomous and decentralized demonstrations against the capitalist order, from mass walkouts among high school students to serpentine marches, loot-



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ing, and tumultuous confrontations against the police and the military. The prolonged nature of the uprising made it necessary to acquire and generalize basic logistics to confront repression. This included the use of certain clothing, the manufacturing of “shields,” encrypted communication, and physical preparation.

The effectiveness of the turnstile hopping tactic gradually wore off. It was eventually superseded and complemented by other measures around the country. In the case of northern Chile, Antofagasta joined the protests the following day and quickly became one of the main centers of struggle. In the neighborhoods of Miramar, Bonilla, and Cachimba, clashes against the police continued until long after the protests died down in the rest of the country.⁵ It was precisely this extension to other cities across Chile, alongside adoption of forms and discourses different from those originating in the capital, which ensured that the first protest would generalize into a full revolt imbued with the “forces of drunkenness.”⁶ Having reached a certain maturity, the revolt, still lacking a head and with a cross-class composition, exceeded the classical categories of revolutionary subjectivity. It generalized throughout its body—or multiplicity of bodies moving to a common rhythm—a new collective sensibility that propagated new forms of organization, aesthetics, strategies, and ways of inhabiting/perceiving/configuring the world against and beyond the ruins.

The adoption of the turnstile hopping tactic by the reformist leftwing party vanguard (Frente Amplio and the Communist Party, which currently form the government) and the creation of an official narrative would serve to recuperate this initial moment of upsurge. This recuperation is evidenced by the repetitive use of images depicting the subway evasion in Santiago for the “Apruebo” campaigns and even in advertisements for several companies.⁷ This romantic retelling centers youth as its protagonist and denies—or is unable to caricature—the major instances of intelligence and solidarity in the wider general rebellion: forms of self-organization and mutual aid that emerged from the barricades, direct action, and the collectivization of commodities after the widespread looting of supermarkets and pharmacies. These were the first conscious attempts to overcome some of the essential aspects of the capitalist order and the law of value.

As shared in a report on the advance of the revolt in Northern Chile by *El Sol Ácrata*,⁸ the protestors did not need to look for reasons to take to the streets, because these had been obvious for years. The revolt in various sectors took the form, above all, of an assault against the capitalist way of life that had us submerged in a miserable existence. We highlight the experience in “sacrifice zones” such as Calama or Quintero, where the protest took on a character that attacked the concepts of “progress” and “development,” ideological avatars of capitalist industry, especially mining.

The fetishization of tactics results in their artificial repeti-

tion, worn out and temporarily emptied of content. This was the case, above all, of the different forms of militant action found within so-called “combative” territories, neighborhoods that became emblematic for their constant resistance against the repression of the military and police. Over time, confrontation was limited only to these areas and was unable to spread. At a certain point, unreflective repetition—rituals of self-destructive violence, which ultimately functioned to justify the repressive policies of the state, and more specifically, the persecution of protesters—led to an inability to expand outside of these neighborhoods.

The mere imitation of tactics will not reproduce the revolt, except in a farcical form. The movement must regenerate its subversive potential, which means thinking up new strategies, reinventing forms of organization, reimagining collective technique and practice conceived as an overwhelming attack on the basic relationships that structure the capitalist world. Thus, calling for a “return to jumping the turnstile” or urging a mechanical repetition of the cycle of revolts of 2019–2022, although it sounds good on paper, is practically useless and amounts to nothing more than a slogan. At best, “jumping the turnstile again” is a call to reactivate the tactical forms that generated the first moments of the revolt, but risks overemphasizing the gesture itself.

Counterinsurgency, response to the Chilean revolt

The revolt, especially since the 15N Agreement (so-called “Peace Accords” of November 15th, 2019), has been reduced to its most inoffensive moments.⁹ The evasion is partially accepted as a “just” action insofar as, in the long run, it was separated from its initial content and the confrontations, sabotage, and other insurrectional moments that endangered strategic infrastructure, police stations, and the daily commute of workers to and from work. The fetishization of its protagonists—students—is not harmless, but in fact vindicates the most reactionary character of the rebellion and the spearhead of the modernization process of capital since the early nineties.

The student body, be it secondary or university, is the subject-form par excellence of advanced capitalism. As “heirs of the classic workers’ movement, or even configured in its image and likeness,”¹⁰ they replicate its same limits and errors. There is no modern subject that more frequently advances towards the same dead end than the student movement, with a program perfectly integrable to the capitalist system, headed by those who will be the next administrators of capital. The nature of the Chilean student movement is ambivalent: always at the forefront in the dispute for the distribution of the fruits of the capitalist system, as well as the most radical and intransigent opposition to the spectacular order. This ambivalence has been recurrent for decades, emerging most acutely in the 2006 and 2011 iterations of the student movement.

If the proletariat has historically tended to fight for recognition within the system, the student movement—and youth in general—is a corollary of the unstable identity of the proletariat, “characterized by a self-critical, ‘tense’ and necessarily ‘uncomfortable’ quality, at once subject and object, commodity and commodity owner.”¹¹ Breaching the turnstiles can be seen as the ultimate limit of how much capital and its administrators would concede in constructing the official narrative about their undeniable crisis. Within the new narrative, the media face of the *Estallido Social* (social explosion) is reduced to harmless moments against institutional excess.

The process of restructuring capitalist social relations occurred through the double mediation of parliament and the street. What emerged was a fantastic discourse on the capacities of democracy, constituent power, and the “*cabildos*,”¹² that served as a preview of what would become the death of the revolt. Just as the movement was timidly beginning to think of itself as a revolution, the death knell of the revolt came with the 15N Agreement, the constituent process and, finally, the presidential election.

The restructuring was at the same time a *spectacle*. At a relentless speed, the public was bombarded by the media and major parties until it gradually accepted the narrative of the system and its reconstructed reality. Meanwhile, the rest of the industries engaged in production of the spectacle—television, cinema, publishing—created a generalized climate of insecurity that was used as a justification for the repressive and populist policies of the conservative parties, although finally adopted by the Left™, in order to justify

their repressive measures against the insurgent remnants of the revolt (anarchists, the Mapuche movement, students, etc.).

The constitutional change was a mechanism for capturing the movement. Since the 1990s, counterinsurgency has had a reliable method for transferring struggle to its playing field: democracy. The Constituent Assembly served as a filter to separate the revolt into extremists and moderates, between those who supported the struggle for a new constitution and those who rejected it. The disease of assemblyism was already present in 2006, and by November 2019, the main left-wing parties had dusted off their slogans in favor of constitutional change. However, their aspirations of transforming the capitalist order concealed the desire to be part of its management.

Faced with a process that was undermining the entire liberal democratic institutional system (polls at the time showed a disaffection with everything involved in it, including Congress, the president, political parties, the police, etc.), the only response was... more institutionalism. The constitutional convention that emerged from the “Agreement for Peace” of November 15, where the ruling party and most of the opposition parties—with the exception, initially, of the Communist Party—met with the supposed aim of solving the problems that the uprising had brought to light, but which, as we well know, were not achieved, if indeed they were ever attempted. Rather, its success was in making change no longer “desirable,” specifically in having for-



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mally failed; four years after the uprising, the situations it brought to light are not the same, but worse. There is an inability on the part of democratic sectors to fully understand the problem, an inability that can be perfectly understood but at the same time denied, because accepting that no solution can be found within the margins of liberalism and capitalism means accepting that both must be overcome in pursuit of a world beyond the state and the market.¹³

In this narrative, the constituent process and the current government are rescued while everyone else gets criminalized under the rule of law.¹⁴ The narrative surrounding the protest today is also the argument to subdue any spirit of revolt through the coercive, violent, and institutional force of the state and its private supporters. It reduces the political significance of the movement to a process of generational and aesthetic modernization and dissolves any possibility of repeating October 18th—at least in the same way it originally occurred.

Revolt and Revolution

The protests were an expression of generalized misery, despite their difficulties and limitations. They revealed “the ineptitude, now proven, of the economic vision of the world by not capturing anything of human reality.”¹⁵ The recognition of a discomfort embedded in the heart of the democracy-dictatorship of capital—or, rather, that discomfort which is democracy itself—was first manifested on a large scale several years after the civil-military dictatorship, translating into indignation and protest against domination in general, and specifically against a state of affairs that was denied and disavowed.

The advance of the revolt briefly broke the felicitous illusion of stability and progress that had been imposed during the dictatorship and had continued efficiently with the Concertacion (a coalition of center-left parties), that inverted image of capital and the democratic order that hides the sobs of the oppressed creature.¹⁶ The lie lies to itself by becoming true. The perpetuity of capital clarifies its vital truth: its need for illusions. That great carnival of farces is translated into the fantastic dominion of the world in the form of the economy. The elimination of these illusions is a precondition for any emancipatory project that seeks to put a brake on capitalism’s drive towards extinction. The dissipation of the mist in the leading aspects of the protest momentarily turned into absolute negation, becoming-conscious.

Judith Butler conceives of revolt as a rising up, the act of ceasing to lie face down on the ground, to shake off the dust and the leaves,¹⁷ a form of collective embodiment of rage and indignation that takes a step beyond to the systematic recognition of its causes and the movement against them.

But Butler’s definition may be problematic, since it seems to reduce revolt to a temporary opposition to forms of domination that always tends toward failure, thus configuring failure as the very essence of all revolt. What would differentiate revolt from a mere protest? What would be a revolt that succeeds? More than an irremediable destiny, the revolt, independent of its resolution, is a moment in the becoming of the revolution and, although its historical tendency may contain failure, it does not deny the possibility of its success.

The restriction of these categories to a narrow set of situations and methods makes “revolution” seem impossible. The main distinction drawn between revolt and revolution is usually centered, broadly speaking, on the failure or triumph of the uprising, ignoring the character of the uprising and its content. The reduction of the revolution to its result (triumph), condemns it to be historically only a recipe for a successful coup d’état in the manner of the Russian and French cases. The triumph of the revolt can be nothing but the possibility of the revolution,¹⁸ when the roads open and the revolution approaches not as a destiny, but as a reality. The revolution is communism making itself without “transition.”

The latest wave of global revolt, however localized and superficial some of its expressions may have been, was characterized by a tendency towards interconnection. Revolt always has a historical content, through which a line can be traced between the echoes of each action of rebellion and collective opposition. Each local revolt left a small signal to locate the next ones. Their defeat will always be partial; from failure and barbarism extends a historical legacy that gradually accumulates an enormous common account of experiences, tactics, and methods of struggles.

Spread throughout the world and history, revolts are cited among themselves; localized, but never isolated; interconnected, but never decontextualized. Though by themselves they were no more than “small episodic events, slight fractures and fissures in the hard crust of society.... *Together* they were enough, however, to reveal the abyss that lay beneath. They showed that beneath that surface, so solid in appearance, there were real oceans, which only needed to be set in motion to blow into pieces whole continents of hard rocks.”¹⁹

All these planetary milestones, which form a world constellation in acephalous, decentralized and unfocused mobilization, were not destined to result in failure. Present and future movements will not drift towards their irremediable defeat, but to an unknown horizon. Although the uprisings have repeatedly crashed against the limits of traditional political systems, rather than betting on their destruction and overcoming, nothing prevents the uprisings from becoming revolution. We must think about revolution based on the limits that determine its possibility today—that is, the way revolution can now overcome its obstacles and take shape as reality.

Notes

1. Translation by Colapso y Desvío of an excerpt from the book *Tratado para las juventudes en sublevación*.
2. Julio Cortés, “La dialéctica en suspenso. Revolución y contrarrevolución en Chile, a tres años del «Estallido Social»,” 2022.
3. A pamphlet in circulation since 2018, understood the turnstile as “the symbol of the misery of this capitalist system,” containing “the true spirit of this false community, it is the image that sums up our whole non-life: pay to live, live to pay.” Comunidad de Lucha N°3, “Salto del torniquete de la no vida,” March 2018.
4. Anselm Jappe, *Crédito o Muerte*, Ed. Pepitas de calabaza, p. 74.
5. This resulted in the longest conviction of a political prisoner. This is Deivy Jara, 19 years old, who was sentenced to 12 years in 2023, having already served 2 years in prison prior to his conviction.
6. Walter Benjamin, “El surrealismo. La última instantánea de la inteligencia europea,” 1929.
7. Apruebo Dignidad (Approve Dignity) was a democratic socialist Chilean electoral coalition created on 11 January 2021
8. El Sol Ácrata, Año VIII/Segunda época/N°5/ octubre de 2019. Véase
9. On November 15, 2019, most parties signed the “Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution” (N15). The N15, negotiated behind closed doors, committed to writing a new Chilean constitution.
10. Círculo de Comunistas Esotéricos, “Un largo octubre: Notas y apuntes sobre lo que abre y cierra octubre de 2019 en Chile”.
11. M. Bolt & D. Routhier, *Critical Theory as Radical Crisis Theory: Kurz, Krisis, and Exit! on Value Theory, the Crisis, and the Breakdown of Capitalism*, 2019..

12. The cabildos were local governing bodies established during the Spanish colonization of South America, representing Spanish and Creole (*criollo*) elites (primarily aristocrats, clergy, and military officials) and overseeing city administration. In Chile, the *Cabildo Abierto de Santiago* in 1810 marked the beginning of the independence process, serving as a transitional governing body. During the 2019 “Social Outburst,” the term ‘cabildo’ was reclaimed to describe self-organized citizen assemblies, where social demands and the drafting of a new constitution were debated.
13. Jesus Díaz and Bastián Venegas, “Between Revolutionary Nostalgia and Reactionary Nostalgia: Comments on the Current Process of Capital Modernization.” Published in July 2023 in Colapso y Desvío.
14. See: the territorial resistance in marginalized populations inside and outside Santiago, the direct confrontations with the forces of law and order, the burning of the subway, and the damage to small and medium businesses.
15. Tiqqun, “Órgano consciente del Partido Imaginario.” Ejercicios de Metafísica Crítica, 1999.
16. K. Marx, *Introducción para la crítica de la filosofía del derecho de Hegel*, Ed. Pre-textos, 2014.
17. Judith Butler, *Revuelta*, 2017.
18. Julio Cortes holds a similar position: “It is not a question of ‘revolt or revolution,’ but of deepening and connecting all the revolts, transforming them into a great revolution.” Julio Cortes, “La dialéctica en suspenso. Revolución y contrarrevolución en Chile, a tres años del «estallido social»,” 2022.
19. Karl Marx, “Speech at anniversary of the *People’s Paper*,” 1856.

“Fire to the Prisons” is a regular section of the magazine dedicated to prisoner struggles and support efforts. The name “Fire to the Prisons” is a nod to the popular anarchist magazine of the same name in circulation since 2007. While our project centers some struggles over others, we make no distinction between political prisoners and regular prisoners. For us, all prisoners are class war prisoners. In this installment, we hear from two different struggles that, while localized, are far from parochial. Fire Ant Movement Defense write about their efforts to support the Cop City 61 and the movement to Defend the Atlanta Forest. Care Not Cages offer a report about their efforts to stop jail expansion in Indiana. Indeed, each reflect the ways that repression and incarceration function at a systemic scale, as economic and fiscal crises increasingly force the state to intervene with violence to maintain a semblance of order as generalized social disintegration proceeds.

Movement Defense and the Trials of the Stop Cop City 61: What Happened, What’s at Stake, and What’s Next

Fire Ant Movement Defense

On September 9, 2025, Fulton County Judge Kevin Farmer dismissed racketeering charges against all 61 defendants accused of conspiracy in relation to the movement to Stop Cop City. Believed by legal experts to be the largest criminal racketeering case filed against protesters in U.S. history, the trials of the Stop Cop City 61 appear to have been suspended, for the moment at least. What does this all mean?

In the immediate, little is clear and caution seems warranted. Judge Farmer claimed that Republican Attorney General Chris Carr did not have the authority to secure indictments under Georgia’s Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) law. The case is not limited to racketeering charges, however. Under the indictment, five of the 61 defendants were also charged with domestic terrorism and arson in relation to an uprising that swept downtown Atlanta after the murder of Tortuguita in early 2023. Judge Farmer has dropped the arson and RICO charges, but as of this writing, it is uncertain whether he will dismiss the entire indictment or allow the domestic terrorism charges to stand. Either way, the AG will surely appeal. There are no easy victories before us.

For the state, the Stop Cop City trials are not about the guilt or innocence of the defendants. They’re about the state’s persistent nightmares of the George Floyd Uprising. It doesn’t matter to Chris Carr, who wants to be elected governor in 2026, that the youngest defendant, Ayla King, was sixteen years old and living in Massachusetts when the Minneapolis third precinct burned. His goal in accusing Ayla and sixty strangers of engaging in a criminal conspiracy which he alleges began the day George Floyd was murdered is quite simple: to assert at will authority to suspend the freedoms of assembly

and association. He seeks to establish a precedent that any person who attends a protest can be held legally responsible not just for any crimes committed that day, but for any crimes committed under similar banners or slogans years before or after.

This is not a new strategy. Prosecutors have been trying (and mostly failing) for years to do the same thing. The vast majority of the more-than-nine-hundred protesters arrested in Atlanta during the summer of 2020 were simply grabbed out of crowds and charged as if they were personally responsible for the actions of the whole crowd. These exaggerated charges allowed the state to extract plea deals and enact a certain amount of pre-trial punishment, but they largely failed to stick. Five years into the reactionary period following the 2020 uprising, within and against which the Stop Cop City movement emerged, Georgia went a step further in trying to use its RICO statute to redefine the de facto rules governing protest, a move that would surely cause ripples across the US.

To understand how we should respond to this situation, it’s important for us to make a detailed analysis of the repressive tools in use. On one hand, the state’s original case was weak. The entire RICO prosecution was a house of cards, built on preexisting bogus charges against people who were grabbed randomly at public protests, people who were in handcuffs in the back of cop cars when the crimes they are accused of occurred, people who had the misfortune of being in a public park when the police decided to do one of their multi-agency militarized raids, people who ran a by-the-books nonprofit. It might not be obvious to distant observers, so let us be very clear: the RICO charges against Stop Cop City protestors were not the result of some deep investigation into the inner workings of the movement. Prosecutors simply went through their files of previous arrests, picked sixty-one people, and worked backwards to invent a conspiracy to lump everyone into.

We can view the sloppiness of this RICO case as the result of the movement’s offensive capabilities and successes. Prosecutors were under extreme pressure from Georgia’s governor, Atlanta’s mayor, and the backers of Cop City to do something—anything—to stop the attacks on the project. The result is a stretch, even by the standards of the Georgia RICO statute itself. It’s hard to come up with similar examples without sounding absurd. It’s as if everyone who was arrested at the Philly sports riot after the Eagles won the Superbowl were charged with RICO. It’s as if everyone who got speeding tickets on the interstate were accused of forming a criminal conspiracy to drive too fast.

Therein lies the problem. Ask yourself, are comically overblown charges less threatening because they’re less likely to stick, or are they more threatening because the potential consequences are so dire?

This is exactly why the state finds it so useful to levy these charges. No matter how strong a defendant’s case, the threat of the worst-case scenario is

enough to disrupt every aspect of their lives and force defendants and the movement to redirect labor and funds toward legal defense.

It has become something of a truism that the way movements escape this trap is by growing in response to repression. Yes, but how? What kind of growth? In what direction? And how do we nurture it? We can all think of times when it just happened; when a particularly vile act of repression shocked large numbers of people out of complacency and into action: the dog attacks at Standing Rock that brought ten thousand people out the following weekend or the federal snatch-squads in Portland in 2020 that brought an influx of middle-aged moms and dads onto the streets. But we can’t rely on this dynamic alone, especially in this catastrophic era of accelerating, compounding atrocities. So how else can we grow? Can we grow qualitatively in response to repression, becoming more organized, more dedicated? Beyond spectacular moments of shock and outrage, how can we politicize repression to build class power?

The various answers to these questions are the basis of a movement defense strategy. Political repression may target individuals, but it’s aimed at the movement and must be addressed at that level. This doesn’t mean abandoning the aspects of anti-repression that operate at the individual level and are necessary to keep people out of jail in the short term, but such efforts are just some of the building blocks in a broader movement defense strategy. In the long term, it’s only by continually building the strength and offensive capabilities of our movements that we will be able to defend against repression.

We formed Fire Ant Movement Defense as an organization dedicated to continually asking the questions above and developing our collective capacities for answering them. We are starting with a focus on Stop Cop City, setting ourselves the task of identifying what’s lacking from a robust defense of the movement and filling those gaps. This will entail a process of growth in which we develop the capacity to do the many varied things that need to



be done, from mass-cooking for weeks of court-support rallies to researching and publishing detailed analysis of the inner (or outer) workings of the repressive apparatus. Our aim is to be expansive, to grow the organization and the movement to meet the task before us, and to carry those gains forward into other struggles.

We invite all opponents of Cop City to join us in this effort. There are many remaining charges from the movement to Stop Cop City (though many of these have not been indicted and may not move forward). Notably, Jack Mazurek has been indicted on arson charges in Fulton county, which carry a maximum sentencing of 20 years in prison. And in South Carolina, ‘Nile’ Spigner is awaiting trial on arson charges. She was 23 at the time of her arrest for allegedly destroying equipment owned by a Cop City contractor. Please support the accused. This can mean traveling to help ensure that defendants walk into court each morning to cheers from a crowd of supporters. It can mean watching the livestream video of court proceedings and editing clips for social media or ordering pizza to support rallies outside of court. It can mean donating to defendants or movement defense efforts. It can mean researching the Georgia Attorney General who is prosecuting these cases or the broader Fulton County system of injustice and mass incarceration. It can mean helping design flyers or holding a local action or fundraiser to support defendants and fund supporters traveling to Atlanta.

Follow Fire Ant Movement Defense at fireantmovement.org for event announcements and updates and get in touch at fireantmovementdefense@proton.me. Get updates on Jack's case at freejack.co

No New Jails

Care Not Cages

First, they filled the prisons. You know this part of the story. The US dumped the social problems it refused to address into the brutal system of mass incarceration now infamous for ruining whole communities, especially of Black and working people. But do you know about how they filled the jails?

Jails are smaller, local institutions that are supposed to cage people not yet convicted. As prison populations in the US exploded in the 1980s thanks to decades of sentencing “reform,” prison building sprees, and the notorious War on Drugs, jails increasingly held people convicted with short sentences. They became horribly crowded places, too jammed to offer treatment, counseling, or services people needed while inside. They became frequently more violent and depressing than prisons themselves.

As critiques of mass incarceration mounted, politicians looked for easy outs. One law, pioneered in California in 2011 and then embraced elsewhere, involved redefining crimes so that shorter sentences for more minor offenses could be served in jails instead of prisons. California’s jail population increased by 11,000 people in the two years directly following this sentencing “realignment.”¹ Jails were already bad by then. Boy, did they get worse.

In our red, midwestern state of Indiana, lawmakers passed sentencing redefinition legislation in 2014 that flooded our jails. In just three years following the new legislation, the prison population fell from 30,000 down to 23,000 while the jail population climbed from 15,000 to 18,500. Then the prison population rose again to 27,000 while the jail numbers stayed about the same.² Of the ninety counties in the state that have jails, over a third have built new ones since then, and many more are in the planning stages. This is our situation in Bloomington, the seat of Monroe County in south central Indiana. Small town life.

The attempt to decrease prison populations through sentencing redefinition just ended up shifting the burden to local jails, where populations skyrocketed. The carceral system as a whole didn’t get any smaller. And local governments had to foot the bill by taxing their residents and issuing municipal debt. Fuck the state-level politicians, their shallow promises to shrink incarceration, and their ultimate net-widening results.

Lots of counties building lots of jails. Lots of activists opposing them. Fighting jail expansions has been a front for abolitionist activity for two decades now, networked through national-level grassroots orgs such as Critical Resistance. Organizers argue for funding the treatment and prevention services that can keep people out of jail in the first place: housing, physical and mental health care, addiction services, transportation. Shrink the pipeline, duh.

One such group is our crew, a buncha activists practicing prison abolition on a local level under the banner of “Care Not Cages.” Our county proposed a new jail fifteen years ago, but we beat it. They began again in 2021, trying to buy a piece of property for a site even though they already owned a site they had purchased in 2002 for just that purpose. Eventually they spent \$11 million to buy a whole different site—before any plans were approved or the bond issued. Their current plan costs over \$330 million dollars, including interest, and that’s without new sewers, electricity, and transportation (there are inadequate roads to this new site, and no bus service). They lie to avoid the obvious conclusion: the county should renovate the existing jail and channel all available resources to prevention and treatment, the kinds of things that actually make our community safer.

For four years now, we’ve been tracking the fiscal cupidity of local elected officials, fighting their hypocrisy and exposing their lies. It’s a long list, including:

- Refusing to implement recommendations by their own hired consultants and professors from the state university to combat recidivism, keeping the population high.
- Suspending a committee they had convened to determine how to divert people from entering jail and help people leaving with what they needed for re-entry. That committee voiced a lot of opposition to new jail construction, so it had to go!
- Wasting money on building a parking garage next to the jail instead of upkeep.
- Refusing to provide adequate mental healthcare in the community; preferring to jail people with mental health and substance abuse issues, making the jail the largest mental health care provider in the community.
- Wasting money flying the county commissioners and staff to Arizona and Ohio to visit new jails that might serve as models for their expansionist ambitions.
- Choosing the contracting company behind closed doors without sharing selection criteria with the public. Sweetheart deal, anyone? Care Not Cages actually won a judgment against the county for violating the state’s “Open Door” law for public meetings, though they didn’t suffer any consequences.
- Claiming the old jail couldn’t be renovated because it was multi-story, then coming up with blueprints for a new jail that is multi-story.
- Claiming the old jail didn’t have sufficient outdoor space to treat people humanely and then designing a new jail in which people would *never* go outside.
- Commissioning the study, required by law, to determine whether it was cost-feasible to renovate the existing jail, and then when they didn’t like its conclusions, sending the consultant back to the drawing board with specific instructions to make renovation sound more expensive.

- Insisting repeatedly to the public that renovation was impossible, despite the findings of the revised feasibility study that renovation could be accomplished for less than \$80 million.
- Raising local income taxes *twice* to generate nearly \$18 million per year for bond (debt) repayment.
- Moving funds away from services for at-risk youth to earmark for the new jail.

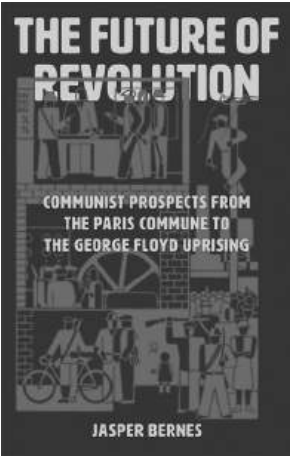
Care Not Cages works doggedly. We make our points. We go to county meetings and try to present our arguments. We write emails and compose newsletters. We go to the farmers’ market and art fairs and protests and hand out flyers. We use humor. Once we put on a series of skits timed precisely to the three-minute period people are allowed for public comment. That was fun. You can see some of our skits in videos on our website. We network with local orgs run by people with lived experience of incarceration and the issues that make people vulnerable to it. Nobody wants to leave the system as it is. The existing jail is horrible.

Recently, the state gave us a beautiful gift inside a horrendous piece of legislation. It was a huge budget bill with all kinds of cruel cuts to services people in the state desperately need. But it had one interesting provision: it set a limit on how much debt counties can take on based on the total assessed value of their properties. Our county wanted a debt service about double that. So now they can’t borrow enough money to build a new jail. The county does have enough money to renovate the existing one, though—and provide the treatment and prevention services people really need.

Remember how back in 1994 the Zapatistas had the last laugh? In Monroe County, Indiana, we say it again: First World, Ha Ha Ha!

Notes

1. Todd D. Minton, “Census of Jails: Population Changes, 1999–2013,” U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2015, NCJ 248627; online at <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/cjpc9913.pdf> (Accessed 8/10/25).
2. Prison Policy Initiative, “New data and visualizations spotlight states’ reliance on excessive jailing,” April 2024, “Indiana’s Prison and Jail Populations,” online at https://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/jails2024/IN_prison_jail_populations_1978-2022.html (Accessed 8/11/25).



The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising
by Jasper Bernes
(Verso, 2025)

*All sorts of round bits of brass, gold, bronze
lie in the earth sharing the same honor.
The age tried to bite through them, leaving its teethmarks.
Time gnaws at me like a coin,
and there's not even enough of me left for myself.*
—Osip Mandelstam,
“He Who Finds a Horseshoe”
(1923, trans. W. S. Merwin)

Dinner starts late on a humid weekday. We stand around, some sit. All in the dark, plates in hand and stomachs hungry, waiting. It’s pitch black, ninety degrees out, and Jasper Bernes is about to give a talk. Thirty-some people are gathering in a clearing on a lilting Appalachian hillside. Even at night we are drenched in sweat. Bernes announced the talk earlier in the day by popular request. He will discuss some of the practical implications from his new book, *The Future of Revolution: Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising*. This will be the fourth time this spring that we have seen Bernes talk about *The Future of Revolution*. No talk has been the same. The first was on a panel in a sold-out forum. The next was in the big, half-empty basement of a bookstore. Another was in the crowded streets of Seattle.

Tonight, Bernes sits cross-legged in the grass, dripping sweat with the rest of us and breathing heavy in the Southern heat. He discusses the travails and near successes of the KAPD, and the councilist composition of Germany’s interwar communist movements. The KAPD formed militia units and specialized detachments. They organized and armed factory

councils. They created a sweeping intelligence apparatus composed of shop stewards, masons, class-traitorous bourgeois, and billposters alike. Bernes talks with his hands, weaving stories in the dark: Jan Appel’s interventions in the KAPD, the time he hijacked a seafaring vessel, his courage in the face of expulsion by the Comintern; university workers and students under siege in Paris as they strived, and ultimately failed, to erode their immediate class dynamics through cultivating council organs to autonomously manage the reproduction of struggle itself; a military cleaved unevenly in Portugal and the popular, conciliar cells that came together to cultivate a bloodless, albeit ultimately stillborn, social revolution. We listen, quietly alive with the hills and tall grasses around us, for real histories of proletarian militancy. Specifically, we parse the accounts, anecdotes, and shibboleths for all the potential that the conciliar urge offered proletarian struggle in the 20th century, and all it might offer again in our current era of concrescent disintegration. Bernes listens, too, to our own stories, as animated as when he talks. He did not come tonight to bring us solutions, he says, so much as to bring what he considers *all these questions*, best matched to put us on the trails to find them. Something about his persona bleeds through the text. The man is much like his message for the future: heated but unresolved, grim and bright.

If you’ve never read anything by Jasper Bernes before, it is important to know that along with being a communist he is also a poet. Both of these qualities help explain what shapes his book. We hesitate to even call it a book—so does he! Throughout, you will find references to different sections as either chapters or essays, a choice of words that usually doesn’t matter but in this instance kept us thinking about what it was that we were reading. It isn’t a book just about History, although the history of workers’ councils is essential to its purpose. Nor is it necessarily a new playbook of communist strategy and tactics, although one of its goals is clearly for readers to create these things.

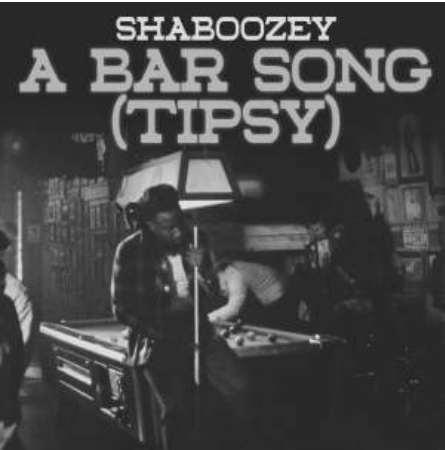
Bernes opens *The Future of Revolution* with the premise that communism is possible and examines how people have tried to make it a lived reality, with his cardinal focus on workers’ councils (what he terms, in ordinary language, a “revolutionary example”). A key to this possibility is sifting through the sands of time to identify the inventions, examples, and discoveries of past attempts toward communism while sorting and discarding what he holds to be unabashed failures, long propped-up dead ends, and red herrings. As the councils varied significantly in form and content from the late 19th to mid-20th century, Bernes provides evaluative criteria to make our sifting more possible, so those impatient admirers and aspirants of communist revolution can recognize the necessary, invariant dimensions of international proletarian activity today.

The inquiry is broken into three parts. First, the transition from the commune form of Paris in the 19th century to the council form of the 20th century exemplified in Russia and Germany. Second, a reading of Marx’s value theory which provides the conceptual basis for the two evaluative criteria: the “test of value” and the “test of communism.” Third, “the long shadow of 1968” in France and a peek into the 21st century. While May ’68 failed to produce world revolution, it did catalyze the “ultra-left” and the idea of comunization, which for Bernes is a key theoretical bridge between the 20th and 21st centuries. How can we understand movements such as the George Floyd Uprising while applying the tests of value and communism gleaned from the history of workers’ councils? And, reflexively, what about the shifting landscape of capital accumulation over the past fifty years will impact who makes up our future councils, how they might look, and what they might do?

While Bernes’ prose is both clarifying and lurid, the book’s structure will feel familiar to those politicized in the first two decades of the 21st century. For the already initiated, this cuts right to the chase, offering fresh, often novel analysis with clear, evaluative propositions for the future of revolution. For those with less exposure to this theory and history, it may at times feel like you’re having a conversation with someone who speaks at length and ends their sentences with “right?” but then barely leaves you enough time to agree or disagree. Even if you did, it wouldn’t really matter because you’re not so sure what you would be agreeing to. Bernes’ style can come off as brash, even antagonistic. Yet we hope readers will push through any apprehensions to plumb the depths that Bernes has somehow pumped into such a little book.

So what is at stake in this book? Borrowing from the poet Diane di Prima, the stakes of *The Future of Revolution* are ourselves. This includes not just self-described communists, anarchists, and socialists but all the comrades who have been and will be, “known and unknown,” bound up together in History’s maw as we find each other along the path of the one true common endeavor—those who share the yearning to make class civilization choke on itself and keel over, so that we might burst our way open from capital’s corpse, climbing out into fresh air, dragging the untold wealth of the world from the spilling trail behind us. We struggle in Time’s teeth, which bite down hard on militant spirits and chew us up in struggle, testing us like Mandelstam’s coins, to see if we are real. The stakes are carving revolution into our era of involution, into a period when such events are not possible. *The Future of Revolution* is a book for such times.

(Review by S & K.)



A Bar Song (TIPSY)
Shaboozey
(April 2025)

Shaboozey’s “A Bar Song (TIPSY)” answers that age-old question: what if Mumford and Sons went to the club? A direct reference to J-Kwon’s 2004 hit “Tippy,” “A Bar Song” takes the content of early 2000s club music and injects it into the sonic mold of 2010s stomp clap—with the club replaced by the bar, of course. This genre mixing is not novel, but rather the logical conclusion of a longstanding trend in country music, which has increasingly incorporated sounds from traditionally Black genres like rap and hip-hop, allowing Black music and musicians to breathe new life into the genre so long as they don’t rock the boat or seriously threaten the genre’s underlying whiteness. Go figure, then, that a song made by a Black country musician that explicitly highlights this trend would be the first to tie “Old Town Road” for the title of longest running number one song. Maybe more importantly, “A Bar Song” is distinctly of the moment, effortlessly combining contemporary nostalgia for both 2004 and the early 2010s, the recent country turn in pop music, and carefree summer party vibes. Underlying all of this is a deep sadness voiced by the fiddle but permeating the entire sound, a sense that this time around it isn’t such a party. That sadness is the impossibility of having a good time when you’re broke, of bringing back the teenage freedom of 2004, of being a Black country musician. For all that, it’s a fine song, and certainly better than anything by Benson Boone or all the other wannabe worship music currently dominating the charts.

(Review by J. Maro)



Creation Lake: A Novel,
Rachel Kushner
(Simon & Schuster, 2024)

Like all of us, Bruno Lacombe is trying to leave this world behind. Retreating deep within a sprawling system of caves, he places his ear against the limestone to hear echoes of the past. Much like we might comb through the ashes of 1968, or even 1917, Bruno looks to the past to navigate an uncertain future. His thoughts

are shared via long-form email with the denizens of Le Moulin, a commune in the southwest of France. In these emails, Rachel Kushner’s *Creation Lake* perhaps shines brightest—in long missives on Neanderthals, the persecution of the Cagots, and Bruno’s ultimate conclusion that “trying to dismantle capitalism from within capitalism is a dead end.”

It is a credit to Kushner that we are not exposed to Bruno’s innermost thoughts directly, but through her narrator, Sadie Smith, who, like us, reads Bruno’s emails without his knowledge, as a voyeur and spy. Sadie is a literal agent of capital, a hired gun paid by corporate interests to entrap the communards at Le Moulin into doing something that will land them in prison. The decision to make Sadie the narrator of this story is the most interesting choice among many in *Creation Lake*. By portraying Le Moulin through the eyes of an outsider and invader, the novel strips away the romance of the commune, asking readers to remain skeptical of both the radicals and their enemies.

Even if readers may be sympathetic to Le Moulin’s attempts to create a different life, we are forced to contend with its shortcomings. In one striking example, the promise that “no one is alone in parenting” is immediately undercut by the fact that a daycare just so happens to be run exclusively by tired mothers. These sorts of scenes are repeated all over the commune: the women are doing the reproductive labor while the men are doing the “hard work” of woodcutting and digging post-holes. The subsequent explanation that “the division of labor between the genders reasserts itself when you try to live in a communal structure” falls even flatter when we realize that Pascal, Le Moulin’s leader, spends his days secreted away in the library accompanied by a crew of posh Parisians with elite degrees and pedigrees.

In a book which will no doubt conjure many names into the mind of the reader, Tarnac chief among them, we never get Sadie’s. A glimpse into her psyche reveals a cynic, a narcissist, and a drunk who employs sex as a weapon. Reflecting on how she had attempted to ruin a young man’s life

earlier in her career, she concludes that he “had been innocent until I came along,” but is outraged when he thereafter escapes conviction by arguing she had entrapped him. Sadie’s real name then may as well be Zoe Elizabeth Voss, or maybe even Mark Kennedy, who also makes a thinly veiled appearance.

There is much to unpack in *Creation Lake*’s 400 pages. Just as Bruno looks to the past for clues about the future, *Creation Lake* contemplates the ashes of the milieu that produced *The Call* and *The Coming Insurrection*, leaving us to question whether we can indeed leave this world behind. Whatever answers we might find there, as we all settle in for another long, hot summer, *Creation Lake* is the perfect page-turner to be read poolside or by the flickering light of a burning precinct.

(Review by costanzaization)

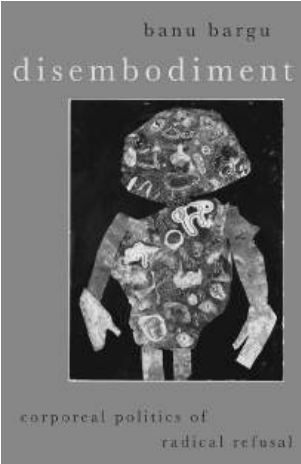


The Exhausted of the Earth:
Politics in a Burning World,
Ajay Singh Chaudhary
(Repeater, 2024)

The Exhausted of the Earth offers a climate politics suited for a world already in collapse—what it calls “the long now.” Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Chaudhary introduces the figure of the exhausted: global subjects worn down by the extractive circuit of labor, consumption, and displacement. Though situated at different poles of the global economy, they share a common condition of exhaustion under capitalism and ecological crisis.

The author presents a critical framework distinguishing two forms of climate realism. Right-wing “lifeboat climate realism” accepts climate catastrophe but responds with stronger borders, militarization, and luxury survivalism. In contrast, left climate realism calls for a politics that acknowledges collapse but resists despair, instead organizing the exhausted around material struggle and solidarity. Chaudhary sharply critiques what he terms “climate Lysenkoism”—technocratic liberal climate discourse that masks denialism under the guise of innovation and incrementalism. His alternative, “a minor paradise,” is the book’s greatest weakness; it fails to flesh out how the exhausted might meet the challenge of right-wing climate realism, instead simply envisioning a just transition led by the Global South through coalition-building. While his strategic vision remains underdeveloped, the book is still a timely call to shift climate politics from moral persuasion to organized power.

(Review by A.M.)



Disembodiment: Corporeal
Politics of Radical Refusal
by Banu Bargu
(Oxford University Press,
2024)

Disembodiment forces a permanent incision into the political meaning of “self-harming, self-destroying, and radically self-endangering performances,” like the scarred face of a close friend whom I have witnessed, tormented by patriarchy and poverty, resort to cutting her face with razorblades. The book asks, “how does the absence of a progressive philosophy of history impact the ways in which we view political agency or delimit what forms of agency can be considered political at all?”² Bargu explores this question through the corporeal act of disembodiment by way of immolation, starvation, and less extreme means of retracting oneself from being exploited by parasitic systems.

Bargu names these practices “somatization,” where “the body turns upon itself, thereby acting as subject while also taking itself as its own object... the body thus acting against the person, paradoxically, allows them to demonstrate and assert their humanity.”³ The book discusses how forms of somatization are utilized in political resistance movements and relate to canonical continental philosophical standards of the “meaning” of such acts, including a *dérive* into critical theory’s perspectives on the matter, “from Kant’s courage to think to Foucault’s courage to tell the truth.”⁴ Bargu claims that this structuring of her work “recasts the western/northern canon as derivative rather than formative... bringing out the invisible canon.”⁵ However, the book falls short of this goal as it relies heavily on explicating the Western canon. The long meditations on Western philosophy coupled with book’s excessive overall length results in a crawling pace at times, especially for those readers who will be revisiting a proverbial dead horse. Where this casting does land well is in the interchanges of a decentered historical timeline as it connects movements through political impact instead of causal relationship. One example of this method is Bargu’s effort to put the suffragettes into conversation with Gandhi and Fanon, a relationship I wouldn’t have thought of but that works well to foreground a pragmatism of tactics adjusted to differing contexts.

In the chapter on Gandhi, Bargu writes that Gandhi prefers “‘consistent, prolonged, and disciplined infliction of suffering on the self’... to extreme acts that can enact ‘only a single destructive blow’ because the former allows the establishment of moral authority through the demonstration

of commitment.”⁶ She then compares this to the forms of collective diffusion that Fanon found inspiring, noting that “Fanon’s remarks also point to the possibility of how the ritualized forms of displacement may also cultivate a sense of belonging to a community, translate individual experience into a collective one, and break out individuals from their isolated suffering, thereby preparing the groundwork for collective political struggle.”⁷ Inverting common understandings of Gandhi’s pacifism and Fanon’s militancy, Bargu argues that Gandhi egotistically insists on control and his singular sacrificial exceptionalism while Fanon advocates for a relinquishing of control. For Fanon, “the situation is unanswerable except by a loss of control,”⁸ which can only be regained through both the vulnerability of his own spontaneous crying and collective armed struggle. Connecting these observations to the suffragette movements, Bargu adds: “The suffering generated ‘a fierce determination to win the battle’ and paved the way for further acts of militancy.”⁹ These disparate examples effectively destabilize an essentialist meaning to these tactics and any progressive historical arch as they intermingle their application through diverse causes, political landscapes, and liberatory goals.

Together, these chapters present contiguous struggles of commitment to “displaced,” “prolonged suffering” as a preparation for “collective political struggle.” This suffering gives us an opportunity to find belonging by caring for those bodies directing a necessary, extreme, political violence towards themselves. In the end, Bargu asks us to view self-destructive violence—the displacement of violence toward the body instead of at the “structural configurations” that cause suffering—as a practice of committing to collectively preserving our access to enact such violence at all.¹⁰ These forms of self-harm and self-discipline thus point to the practices that can be turned on our enemies at the right place and time—not a singular time or “single blow,” but a sustained destruction of who we are as subjects and all the forms of domination that we are subject to.

(Review by Webster)

Notes

1. Bargu, *Disembodiment*, xxi.
2. xiv, xviii.
3. 201
4. 296
5. 35
6. 131
7. 197
8. 188
9. 120
10. xx



**Days Before
Dreamboy
Lil Nas X
(March 2025)**

If you’re anything like me, you might have missed Lil Nas X’s recent EP, *Days Before Dreamboy*. Released in March of this year, it serves as a preview for his upcoming album, *Dreamboy*, which is set to be released later this year. The whole EP is only 24 minutes long, so you’d be doing yourself a disservice not to listen through once or twice.

Long-time fans who might be hoping for a return to form will likely be disappointed; *Days Before Dreamboy* does not reproduce the pop sounds of *Montero* (2021) nor the “country trap” sound of “Old Town Road.” However, it has its own pleasures, with lush synths and laid-back beats combining to make an enjoyable, even squishy sound. Add this to the more rap-forward vocal style and you get something at once vibey and compelling. Is it groundbreaking? Maybe not. Is it worth a listen? Certainly.

While this album represents a shift in Lil Nas X’s sound, it preserves the clever, agile songwriting that made him his name. If anything, the shift toward rap only highlights his penchant for wordplay. The lyrics are alternately funny and earnest, often in the same song, as in the kaleidoscopic, genre-bending “DREAMBOY.” A clear nod to the upcoming album, “DREAMBOY” forms the thematic center of the EP, which reflects on his artistic career and search for a musical and emotional home. The album as a whole is sonically and thematically consistent, to the point that the songs often blend together, feeling like one long song or, more accurately, like refractions of “DREAMBOY,” single points spinning out from its kaleidoscope, reminding us that form and content are never quite as dissociated as they may appear upon first listen.

Having given us the song of the summer in 2019 and with no clear competition for this year’s title, it’s possible that the forthcoming *Dreamboy* will be Lil Nas X’s chance to get back in the spotlight after almost four years of obscurity. However, *Days Before Dreamboy* landed with so little stir as to have gone essentially unnoticed. This raises the question of why such a formerly dominant artist is now flying under the radar. Could it be an audience problem? *Days Before Dreamboy* is far more a rap album than his previous

work, although “Industry Baby” was already moving in that direction. It’s possible that he is now too much a rapper for the pop and country crowd, yet still struggling to be taken seriously by dedicated rap listeners. The fact that he often raps about fucking men probably doesn’t help his chances with either audience. We live in reactionary times, after all. If even cute white women like Sabrina Carpenter are catching flack for being too raunchy, then it’s not surprising that a gay Black man is having a rough time.

Yet, that explanation doesn’t seem sufficient. I have to wonder if the real reason for his obscurity is precisely because he dominated 2019 so totally. Is it just that we have come so far from 2020 that we can’t go back to the biggest thing to happen before everything went to hell? Have we relegated Lil Nas X to the before times? If so, hopefully we come around again in time for *Dreamboy*, if it’s anything like its teaser EP, it will be worth the listen.

(Review by J. Maro)



**Full Circle: A Life in
Rebellion by Ben Morea
+ 1000 Voices Collective,
edited by Ariel Uessler
(Detritus Press, 2025)**

Ben Morea, for those who have encountered him in New York City in recent years, appears as a figure out of place and time. In his mid 80’s, with a handlebar mustache, cowboy hat, snakeskin boots, and bolo tie, he looks like an aged outlaw biker. Known (and mythologized) as an anarchist tactician, counterculture luminary, painter and graphic designer, propagandist and psychedelic militant, Morea was born in 1941 and raised amid jazz and heroin in Harlem. In the 1960s, he turned toward avant-garde art and revolutionary politics, co-founding the print magazine *Black Mask* and the anarchist group Up Against the Wall Motherfucker. By the end of the decade, he went underground, disappearing into the Southern Rockies and living off-grid for forty years, eventually immersing himself in ceremonial practice with indigenous communities. He returned to New York in his 70’s to share his experiences and insights.

That narrative sketches the contours of a truly unique life. But to grasp its textures, this story should be traced and retraced carefully. *Full Circle* guides us well. The book is an extended interview with Morea, drawing from over a dozen conversations spanning several seasons beginning in 2020. These were painstakingly edited by 1000 Voices Collective members Ariel Uessler and Sabu Kohso in intimate collaboration with Ben Morea himself.

Full Circle presents the full spectrum of Morea’s uncompromising commitment to revolutionary existence. It is full of stories that are alternately inspiring, bewildering, and at times (and by his own admission) nearly unbelievable. Notable incidents include: breaking into the Pentagon; getting expelled from the Situationist International; encounters with Thelonious Monk, H. Rap Brown, Valerie Solanas and Ken Kesey; housing runaway youth in flats paid for by acid and pot sales; eating the still-beating heart of a deer. Such adventures are compelling, but also provide a deep well of insightful thoughts on the relationship between art and politics; theories of organization, freedom and autonomy; and relationships outside the bounds of white-settler supremacy and the nuclear family. Woven into every aspect of *Full Circle* is Morea’s spiritual wisdom, honed through decades of ceremonial life. And it’s these teachings that distinguish *Full Circle*, and Ben Morea, as an important voice. Morea is explicit about what he chooses to communicate about this major period of his life.

And slowly I began to articulate what I did, and what I learned during those forty years, that would not pose a threat to where I went. I formulated a conversation around general terms. Like animism. Where I came from, the people were animists. But I didn’t want to identify those people. They had made room for me in their world. In no way would I expose it. But animism is an understanding, I saw it could be introduced.¹

Morea’s animism resonates with the teachings of the Buddha, the enlightenment theology of Spinoza, and even with dialectical materialism. But Morea dismisses the impulse to reduce these insights to theory:

I think your idea is a little similar to Buddhism.

I would go the opposite: Buddhism is similar to it. Animism came first. Animism was the original understanding of man. It wasn’t just a thought, it was a way of being... You don’t have to talk about it. The fact that you are alive, you are carrying that energy with, so are part of creation.²

This insistence on interconnectedness and immanence permeates his thinking, and is inseparable from his discussion of revolution and politics.

So striving to live is a sort of resistance?

Yes, it’s a resistance. Resisting the death that’s before it. And that’s what our generation, our culture, our consciousness should be. The will to live.³

My idea was always ‘something has to be done.’ We’re not trying to build a movement forever, we’re trying to accomplish something... Life has to be changed. I don’t know what the future holds... And the conception of the time you need: That could be the mistake. You need energy, correct. But it’s ongoing. It’s perpetual. It’s movement.⁴

However, analysis can only get you so far, and Morea often expresses the limits of language and categorizations.

...[the elders] don’t tell you. It’s unspoken. You just watch and understand. Western culture is so enamored with words. They think words are so important. But they’re not!⁵

With Morea’s sparse words, wild past, and interwoven narratives, *Full Circle* presents itself as a timely document of intergenerational transfer. The 20th century is dead and buried, and its surviving witnesses and visionaries are fewer each year. We are now a full quarter into the 21st, and the landscape of struggle seems to have changed utterly from Morea’s heyday.⁶ It is not immediately clear what we can learn from this unconventional perspective. What, exactly, is he telling us? A linear account of a pivotal moment in his biography might help us.

Morea’s flight from New York and retreat from confrontational militancy is a vividly-depicted inflection point in his life, and one in which the shape of his personality and psyche are exposed. It reads as a vulnerable, contemplative period, even after 50 years.

I had this gnawing feeling that the political struggle alone was not sufficient. I really did. You can see, if you look at the posters I was making, there’s a consciousness of another entity – I didn’t completely understand it – but I was feeling it out. Before it actually came to be. I had that premonition.⁷

As the 1960’s came to a close, Morea and others began to grow weary of the constant police surveillance, fragmentation, and conflicts amidst political militants alongside the rapidly changing political climate. They began to worry that the revolution fomenting among disaffected youth, bohemian dropouts, revolutionary students, and a racialized lumpen-proletariat might not take shape.

One of Morea’s recurring secular concepts is something he calls “Pancho Villa syndrome”: the tendencies of militants, partisans of armed struggle, to fail to adapt and renew

themselves after the terrain shifts from revolutionary potential to counter-revolution and recuperation. They may lose themselves in fatalism, addicted to the intensity of conflict, and turn to anti-social banditry. Morea watched many of his milieu, especially those like himself who were criminalized as youths, succumb to this very syndrome. Some, including his own brother, did not survive. But Morea did. He went underground, shepherding some of the runaway youths he'd sheltered in New York to safe houses across the country (evading the FBI all the while), and made his way to the mountains of New Mexico to search for something different.

That began Morea's decades underground and off-grid. But unlike some of his (former) comrades, he was far from alone, alienated, or defeated. For several years, he and his wife survived in the mountains, hunting elk and living in rough shelters, evading law enforcement, and even joining with Chicano ranchers in a land struggle against a National Guard occupation. Eventually, he emerged from the mountains with other like-minded comrades and began homesteading.

It is here that Morea spent the next several decades, sustaining a rich and integrated communal life, practicing ceremony, raising children, and working the land. Morea does not dwell on interpersonal relationships. None of his comrades, companions, or intimates are mentioned by name. But the fundamentals of this commonality are discussed at length:

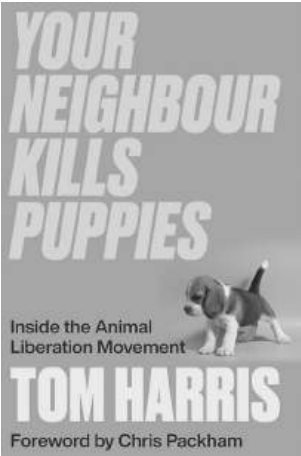
Morea's transition and his unlikely survival (both in terms of his very life, but also in his revolutionary, artistic spirit) do indeed provide lessons for us today. Whoever we are, we might ask ourselves: if not Pancho Villa syndrome, what morbid symptoms plague us now? Are we recovering from a period of intensive struggle? Are we battling complacency and alienation? Are we throwing ourselves into the furnace? Morea's life, for all its flair, adventure, and mystique, instructs us to search for what is missing in our lives and our struggles. Where might we locate it? What wisdom lies beneath the surface of things? And crucially: with whom can we discover it?

Full Circle should be widely read. It will resonate with radicals, weirdos, militants, rejects, lumpens, dropouts, freaks, artists, and others who wonder how to push our creativity, our relationships, our very survival into a revolt against Leviathan. Morea teaches us that to do so, we must learn to pay attention. We must never stop transforming. We should cultivate loving and materially substantive relationships. And we must take risks, and we must never turn back. Ben Morea is in his last years, and *Full Circle* is his definitive account. We should accept his gift, take the time to sit with him and listen. Another turn in the cosmic spiral. In every apocalypse, a new world is born.

*(Review by Dan of The Unseen Book Club Podcast.)*⁹

Notes

- 1. Morea, *Full Circle*, 104
- 2. 146
- 3. 121
- 4. 59
- 5. 149
- 6. The years 1968–2025 comprise a greater interval of time than do 1917–1968
- 7. 165
- 8. 125
- 9. *Full Circle* stands alone as text, but so much of its meaning is found in between the words. To deepen our understanding of the book, The Unseen Book Club Podcast spoke at length with Ariel Uessler and Sabu Kohso, members of the 1000 Voices collective, who worked intensively with Morea to produce *Full Circle: A Life in Rebellion*. They were powerfully affected by their relationship with Ben and this process of creation. You can listen to this discussion for free on unseenbookclub.buzzsprout.com.



Your Neighbour Kills Puppies: Inside the Animal Liberation Movement
Tom Harris (Pluto Press, 2024)

The communist movement does not react to the fate of victims—whether humans or animals.
—Gilles Dauvé

Today we are flooded with images of protesters swarming corporate enterprises with anything from bricks to manure. Especially since Israel's genocidal escalations in Gaza, Israeli arms manufacturer and defense contractor Elbit Systems has been subject to an international pressure campaign by the direct action network Palestine Action (PA), who have repopularized the strategy of focused, sustained economic disruption and secondary targeting. Their website claims many victories.¹ For years, "divestment campaigns" had become synonymous with campus advocacy efforts and institutional endowments. Supported by dubious characters like Ban Ki-moon, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Bill McKibben, the strategy of divestment seemed to have lost its teeth, treated by all but the most vociferous adults in the room as democratic common sense. The more militant aspects of the recent Gaza solidarity protest wave have upended this idleness and put the question of pressure campaigning back on the agenda. For this reason alone, you should read Tom Harris's comprehensive account of the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC) campaign, *Your Neighbour Kills Puppies*.

The animal liberation movement occupies an awkward place on the left. Gilles Dauvé once quipped that "protests against animal abuse parallel the general demand for a multi-cultural, more open, non-aggressive society," which is to say, they lack a clear communist potential. But this is true of every movement. The communist character of struggle can only be determined *ex post*. Dauvé was thus sympathetic to the objectives of the animal liberation movement, which in the 1990s was quite vibrant and militant in the UK and mainland Europe. A witness to these developments, he engaged in a spirited exchange with the journals *Antagonism* and *Practical History*, publishers of the text, "Beasts

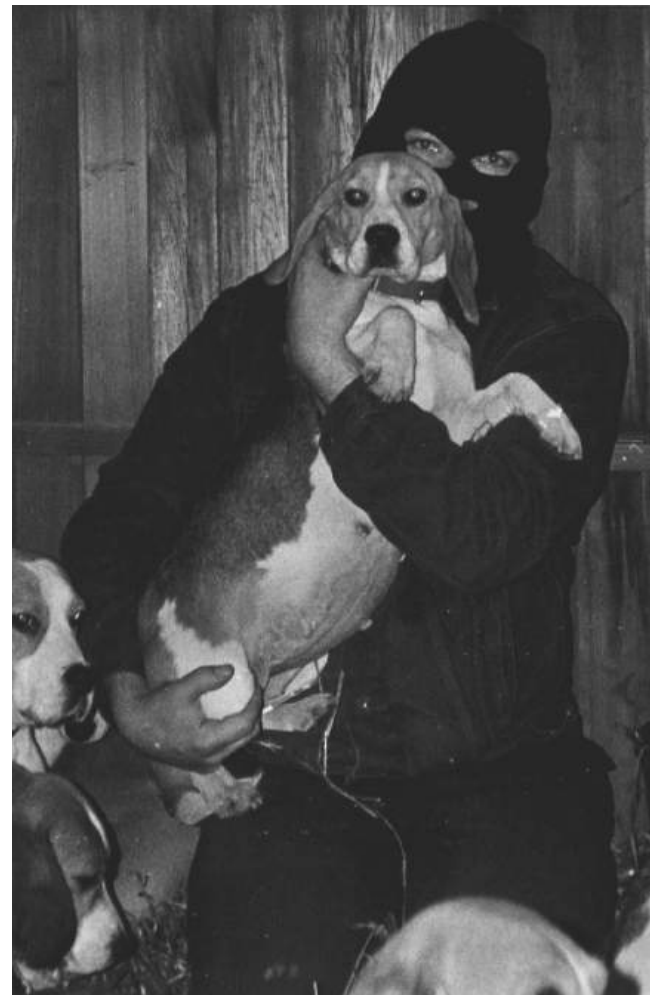
of Burden." There he laid out the basis of his critique, "no lifestyle is subversive."² Any subsequent engagement with the question of animal liberation has been conflated with veganism, especially as vegan commodities have become widespread in high-income countries. Perhaps following Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, concern for nonhuman animals has been largely disregarded by the left as bourgeois sentimentality. The actual course of events is far more complicated and interesting, especially in England, birthplace of the Animal and Earth Liberation Fronts.

Tom Harris's *Your Neighbour Kills Puppies* serves as a partial corrective to the under-historicization of the animal liberation movement, offering an "insider's account" of SHAC. Widely considered the most influential campaign to emerge from the movement, SHAC developed the strategy of "pressure campaigning" to its often absurd ends. Its history is part brilliance, part scandal, and part tragedy, and Harris does his best to represent these competing claims on its legacy without betraying comprehensiveness or clarity. The book is part journalism and part memoir, as Harris himself was a major figure in the campaign, being sentenced to four years in prison for "conspiracy to blackmail."

The story of repression is of course a major preoccupation of the text. Readers in North America and western Europe may be familiar with the specter of the "Green Scare" that hung over social movements since about 2005. Leaving a trail of political prisoners, the SHAC campaign played a major part in that wave of coordinated state repression. Important as they are, accounts of such repression have become ritualistic whenever paranoia seeps in. This book's more important contribution consists of details about the campaign itself, its historical context and the development of a tactical repertoire that once led the *Financial Times* to declare hyperbolically that SHAC "succeeded where Karl Marx, the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof gang all failed." At its most basic, SHAC was a campaign to shut down the largest contract research organization (CRO) in Europe and the third largest in the world—Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS). CROs provide outsourced research services for biotechnology, medical, pharmaceutical, chemical and food manufactures. HLS did this exclusively through animal research, involving egregious practices that became the topic of several media and regulatory investigations. One of these investigations revealed footage of researchers literally punching beagle puppies in the face to elicit submission.

What was unique about SHAC was not necessarily its strategy of concerted pressure campaigning, which originated in postwar union campaigns before being developed by the Anti-Apartheid Movement. A more proximate example was the global anti-sweatshop campaign against Nike during the 1990s. Where SHAC differed was the extent to which it applied both strategy and tactics. Strategically, SHAC moved up and down the value chain from its main

target, implicating linkages in finance, market making, insurance, breeding, shipping, logistics, and client contracts. SHAC even targeted HLS's laundry services, caterers, utilities, and crematorium providers. What SHAC accomplished, inadvertently, was to highlight the actual working existence of finance and logistics in a period of their growing economic importance. In practice, SHAC respected a diversity of tactics—before this became an empty slogan recited by organizers of every large protest. And unlike the latter, SHAC did not take ownership of the movement to strong arm and suppress more controversial elements. Tactics involved protests at the homes of key figures, mass demonstrations, office occupations and disruptions, road blockades, pranks, clandestine property destruction and ALF raids, and even a large riot in Little Rock, Arkansas. Arson was also quite common, including burning down the alpine lodge of the former Novartis CEO. And the former managing director of HLS was the alleged victim of assault. Before murdering CEOs became a cool meme, SHAC operated in a climate that personalized the impersonal violence of capitalist enterprise.



The book includes all the unprecedented highs: twice delisting HLS from the New York Stock Exchange, sinking the yacht of a fund manager of the Bank of New York, smoke-bombing the offices of Marsh (the largest insurance company in the world), and forcing the evacuation of two Seattle high-rises. It also includes the familiar lows: frequent police raids, violent arrests, and prison sentences. What Harris does not include is a retrospective analysis of the campaign, 25 years on. This is clearly not his aim, to be fair. Coming in at just over 400 pages, the book is a partial history of the animal liberation movement from the late 1990s to about 2012. Still, it is difficult to know what to make of that movement in the absence of coherent analytical framing. Harris seems to end on an optimistic note, suggesting that we will see a resurgence of not only pressure campaigning (he notes Extinction Rebellion and PA as examples), but the animal liberation movement as well. This betrays his inattention to historical context and the factors that contributed to the rapid spread of SHAC and the broader movement as a whole. We are left wanting a materialist explanation, but no such account exists.

Something that Harris gestures toward but does not identify is how the timeline during which SHAC developed its financial-logistics strategy overlapped with a period of sequential financial bubbles: the late 1990s to 2008. He calls attention to the importance of biotechnology and pharmaceuticals to the UK economy (England being one of the largest pharmaceutical exporters in the world and a major center of laboratory animal breeding and trade) to explain the repeated government interventions to pull HLS back from the brink. This much was certainly true. Government ministers and trade organizations formed the Pharmaceutical Industry Competitiveness Task Force (PICTF) to ensure that the UK remained an attractive investment location for research and development. This focus on R&D occurred against a backdrop in which the UK economy was shifting from manufacturing to services. With the country losing traditional manufacturing jobs to primarily low wage services, investments in biotechnology, medical devices, and pharmaceuticals promised to provide some counteraction to hemorrhaging wage growth; really, they provided political ballast for the “New Labour” regime. What Harris ignores is how this “New Economy” period was able to underwrite the SHAC campaign itself.

The efficacy of the SHAC model depended on the bullish though turbulent character of equities markets in the late 1990s and 2000s. When alternative investment portfolios are abundant, the “risk” associated with holding stocks in a publicly-targeted firm with a tarnished reputation appears greater. Like many other firms, especially those with high fixed-capital investments, HLS had a large debt-to-asset ratio even before SHAC launched. This only worsened over the course of the campaign, as banks, private financiers, in-

vestment fund managers, insurers, suppliers, logistics providers, and customers—some of the largest corporations in the world at the time—jumped ship, drove down the market capitalization of HLS, and made debt servicing nearly impossible. When new lenders could be found, with great difficulty, the greater risk associated with the company translated into exceptionally high interest rates. Over the course of the campaign, HLS was removed from the London Stock Exchange, failed twice to be listed on the NYSE, dropped to the Over-the-Counter Bulletin Board then to the even less regulated “pink sheets,” and finally fell further into grey financial markets, its debt eventually being acquired privately before going through a series of mergers and acquisitions. Today, “Huntingdon Life Sciences” no longer exists. But as Harris remorsefully reminds us, its former labs, equipment, and facilities do, and the contract animal research continues under different names.

In the US and UK especially, where law enforcement agencies prosecuted sweeping operations to destroy the campaign and make examples of prominent organizers, the initial victories and ultimate defeat of SHAC are viewed as part of the Green Scare. This is certainly the conceit behind analysis such as *Green is the New Red*, which has become canonical in understanding the trajectory of the animal liberation and radical environmental movements. But history does not add up so cleanly. Harris provides strong evidence that the campaign survived despite major waves of indictments from 2006 through 2008, with new organizational iterations carrying the torch and increased underground activities as legal activism became criminalized. The turning point appears to be the 2008 to 2010 window. Here we return to the conditions that gave rise to the campaign: the Dr. Jekyll boom in equities markets, now transformed back into the Mr. Hyde of bust, crisis, and recession. As liquidity tightened and growth reversed, risks in holding particular stocks flattened, restricting the ease with which lenders could cut ties with controversial firms. In a downturn, stability and risk mitigation militate against any undue movement in holdings. This was compounded by the highly leveraged character of lending throughout the period, on the one hand, and the high interest payments that HLS yielded to its existing lenders. It was not that HLS was unprofitable, though it was hit hard by the recession. The issue was that its debt to assets ratio was high enough to suggest that future debt servicing seemed risky to new lenders. Other aspects of the campaign—targeting services, logistics, customers, etc.—certainly did eat into whatever profits were gleaned from its operations. At its height, SHAC was pressing against HLS from both up and down the value chain. What the recession did was generalize many of the risks associated with HLS, reducing the gap between it and potential alternatives.

Concurrently, the recession also meant increased unemployment, consumer debt, foreclosures, and wage stag-

nation. While the crisis was undermining the efficacy of pressure campaigns, it was also giving rise to new popular mobilizations against austerity, stagnation, and the state violence that manages these conditions. In short, SHAC was eclipsed by the return of proletarian militancy. While it never disavowed its working-class origins, the animal liberation movement tended to operate on the terrain of a reified moral conflict between humans and nonhuman animals without developing a material analysis of the relationship between class, race, gender and species.³ It never cohered around a clearly anticapitalist set of objectives, despite its subcultural anarchist tendencies. Despite some dynamic cycles of struggle, particularly in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, “the animal people” arrived in the 21st century as a movement organized through the sphere of consumption, with no concrete analysis of production. As such, the movement imagined that animal use in production could be overcome by abolishing the status of animals as property, without necessarily abolishing property in general. It was in this sense that Dauvé characterized the movement as reformist. Because the object of reform was limited to animal use, class division and conflicts tended to be mystified in the figure of the “animal abuser.” This was carried on in the SHAC campaign and taken to its worst extremes, treating the “lowest rung” service workers only tenuously connected to HLS with the same vitriol as the CEOs of pharmaceuticals companies and the managing directors of banks. The slogan “your neighbor kills puppies” might have bounced off the mansions of opulent neighborhoods, but it was also a sentiment directed at anyone compelled to work in jobs even tangentially related to HLS's daily operations. While there were efforts to develop a more nuanced approach to “power mapping,” the campaign never advanced a clear strategy that reflected the social conflicts permeating the animal research industry. It was thus unable to seize the energy of the new mass movements, which may have provided a second wind, breathing new life after the worst waves of repression. Instead, outside of green anarchist milieus, it faded into insignificance as new class compositions crystallized and dissolved over more recent cycles of struggles.

Today, when SHAC is invoked, it is either as a cautionary tale of state repression or as an inspiration to reinvent the strategy. Pressure campaigning never really left, of course. From Resistance to Interstate 69 and the Wet’suwet’en solidarity actions to the wider #NoDAPL campaign and the #sHellNo campaign against arctic drilling, hyper-focused and high-intensity campaigning has been with us continuously over the last two decades. None of these campaigns have reached the level of spectacle achieved by SHAC, nor have they generated the sequence of victories so lauded by its adherents. They persist as a matter of necessity in our era of fragmentation. The pressure campaign is particularly effective at channeling limited disruptive capacity. When-

ever it appears as a prominent feature on the landscape of social conflict, this is symptomatic of underlying weakness. That it should be exhausted by the comparatively marginal animal liberation movement is unsurprising. If the post-recession decade has been characterized by the return of mass movements, then this has meant the eclipsing of the more limited aims and activist social base of the pressure campaign. In the fallout from the George Floyd Rebellion, we seem to be seeing some retreat from the long decade of mass movements and return to the more limited oppositional forms associated with the pressure campaign. PA and the campaign to Defend the Atlanta Forest/Stop Cop City (DAF/SCC), while attempting to develop a popular basis, have also adopted strategies of sustained disruption and diversity of tactics, pointing to SHAC as a model for emulation, or at least inspiration. Richard Barnard, a co-founder of PA, even lent a blurb in support of Harris’s book.

But the recent resurgence of the pressure campaign no more clarifies its limits than a cursory review of the SHAC experience. It appears today as a “forgotten” strategy, wildly effective at bringing down huge companies doing terrible things—all we need to do it pluck it from the shelf and give it a quick dusting. It would be one thing to study SHAC to avoid some of the blunders that facilitated repression, but now the model is often advocated as something to be emulated wholesale.⁴ Why did it apparently fade from view for so many years? Many partisans did continue to develop the model, with some such as Root Force even proposing that it be extended into a general strategy against capitalist infrastructure as a whole. Yet none of these efforts made much headway. Yelling “the SHAC model!” into the ether, they seemed to gain no response except disinterest or perhaps fear. But in reality, thunderous responses had begun roaring from all directions as proletarian rebellions ignited across the planet, burning down more structures and destroying more properties over single nights than protracted campaigns could claim after years of tireless organizing. Only now, as these flare-ups have burned out and mass protests have dissolved back into fragmented activist cults, do we see the return of the pressure campaign as an alternative outlet for our rage and disgust. It also just so happens to coincide with another sustained bullish market.

Here, our wager gets a little more acute: the pressure campaign, honed so well by the SHAC campaign and reincarnated by PA and DAF/SCC, offers great flexibility in targeted application, but extremely limited utility for any potential communist movement. We could characterize it as “market-mediated anticapitalism”—a movement against the ability of particular enterprises to capture the social profit. What SHAC or PA effect is a transfer of the total social profit away from firms deemed morally unworthy in a radical form of consumer advocacy. This is not to say that pressure campaigns are bad or a waste of time. The strategy certainly

has its place and can render real material gains. We merely hope to point out the incoherence of Harris’ claim that “the campaign established a model that had the potential to drive any business out of existence. It was a prototype which threatened to revolutionise the concept of radical protest, and it was anathema to the entire capitalist system” (p. xiii). This is a claim to which many radicals and leftists would likely assent. Call it the domino theory of communism. It gains traction during moments of general weakness and retreat, when the possibility of a world beyond capitalism seems distant or simply impossible. Hey, at least we can pick and choose how this intractable presence allocates social wealth. Despite the frequent occurrence of property destruction in these campaigns, their implicit *strategy* is one of market selection. Expropriation appears ancillary, paradoxically employed to do no more than discipline the market’s invisible hand according to our ethical prescriptions. When the efficacy of direct actions is determined through market mediation, the question is, how can these actions make the leap to becoming communist measures that would undermine market-based society? If that leap can be made, the meaning of the campaign, with all its brilliant strategy and heroic tactics, would entirely dissolve into new conditions of possibility. This is the horizon we must bring into view.

A balance sheet of the animal and earth liberation movements, a militant sequence that clustered from the 1980s through the 2000s, has yet to be drawn up. Such an undertaking would need to account for not only the leading forms of activity, such as the SHAC campaign, but also their social content, including their composition and class character. The history that Harris offers here will be indispensable for this task. Like Dauvé, we anticipate those moments when the militancy of the animal liberation movement, once a common feature, spills over into communist measures, judged not by their formal characteristics, but by their capacity to carry out the communist program and, only then, the desecration of anthropocentrism.

(Review by J.)

Notes

- 1. No doubt a result of these successes, on July 5 of this year the UK Labour government designated the group a terrorist organization under the Terrorism Act of 2000.
- 2. For a more detailed account and context of these debates, see the collected texts “Beasts of Burden: Communism, Domestication, and Animal Liberation” archived on the Decompositions blog.
- 3. “Tragic Theses,” Decompositions (2023).
- 4. See, for example, “The City in the Forest,” CrimethInc (2022).





In an era when many “radical” theorists were seeking out the peaceable expression of politics in “everyday utopias,” Joshua [Clover] stressed that politics was always, at root, a fiery confrontation with the powers that be. To these ends, he not only helped bring together a new generation of young communists but also pushed them to engage directly with the rising tide of class conflict, understanding full well that the street and the shopfloor are the true classrooms of the partisan.

Heatwave is, in a sense, an attempt to embody this spirit at a larger scale. Like Joshua, we hope to serve as an engine of engagement, linking our readers to their own history and to one another. Like Joshua, we adopt a principle of ecumenicism, refusing the false dividing lines inherited from the long dissolution of the last global communist movement. At the same time, like Joshua, we also insist on a theoretically rigorous approach that invokes the real complexity of revolutionary theory and history, actively seeks evidence for its claims, and engages in good faith with opposing positions. And, like Joshua, we maintain that the partisan project is inherently incendiary, requiring confrontation with the rulers of the world, rather than gradualist compromise or secessionist retreat. Finally, communism requires an unambiguous commitment to internationalism. Although our project is currently anglophone, we recognize that elaborating a partisan politics requires learning from the self-activity of the dispossessed at the global scale.

- *Comrades Known and Elsewhere*

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