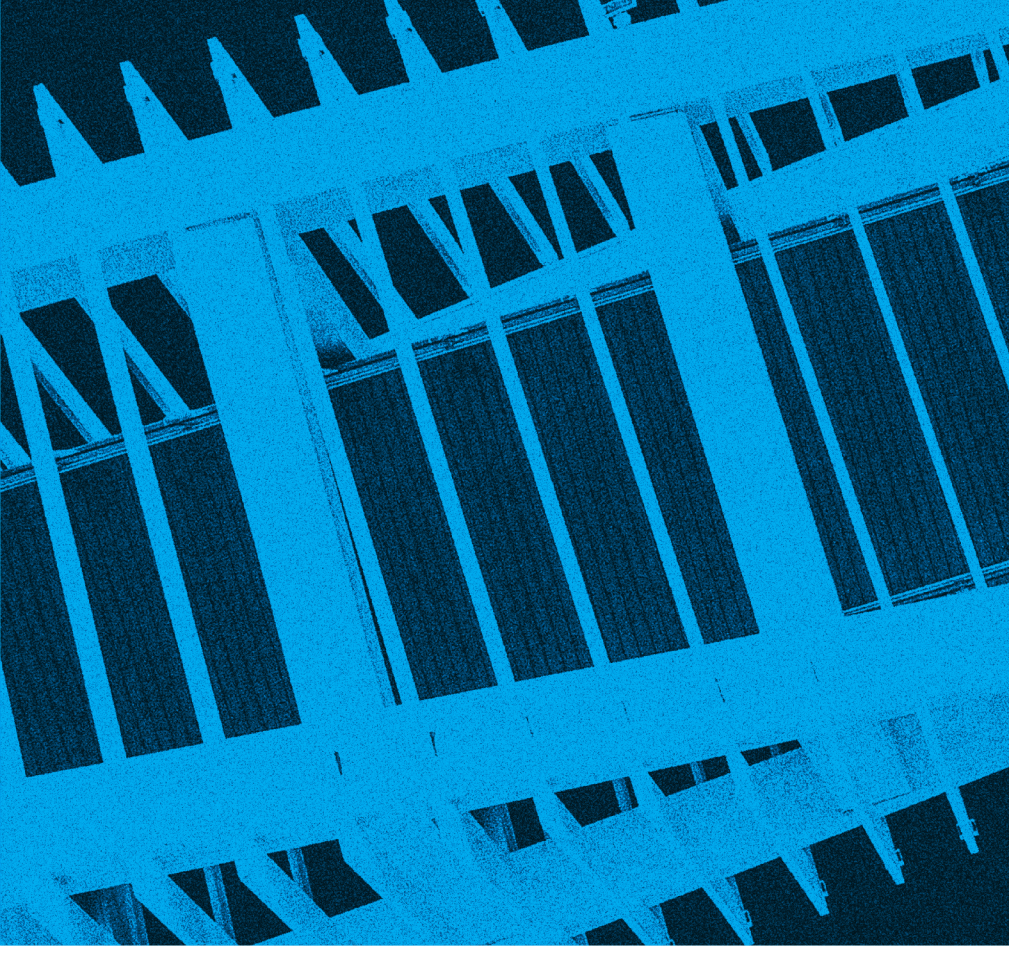


Catalyst

VOL 4 NO 1

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

$40 student
$60 sustainer
$100 institution

catalyst-journal.com/subscribe

subscriptions@catalyst-journal.com

MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO
Jacobin Foundation
388 Atlantic Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217

*Include your email and note Catalyst in the memo field

ISSN 2475-7365

Catalyst: A Journal of Theory & Strategy
is published quarterly by Jacobin Foundation.

CONTENTS

Catalyst

VOL 4
NO 1

Nicole Fabricant is an associate professor of anthropology at Towson University in Maryland.

David B. Feldman is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Bret Gustafson is an associate professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. He has written two books on Bolivia.

Suzy Lee is the director of the human rights program in the Department of Human Development at Binghamton University.

Bryan D. Palmer is a historian of labor and the Left, and author of the forthcoming *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1929–1939*.

Leo Panitch is coeditor of the *Socialist Register* and coauthor, most recently, of *Searching for Socialism: The Project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn* (Verso).

John Roemer is a professor of political science and economics at Yale University.

Between the winter issue of *Catalyst* and this one, the world has changed. The pandemic unleashed by the coronavirus has brought the world to a standstill, sending the global economy into a tailspin. It has also revealed, more starkly than any recent event, how deeply interdependent our lives are. It is impossible to imagine a more striking refutation of Margaret Thatcher's insistence that "society" is merely an agglomeration of individuals. It is, as Marxists have always insisted, a dense web of social relations that both constrain and enable the individuals embedded in it. And the particular social relations typical of capitalism have placed billions of us in a state of precariousness that the pandemic, and the economic collapse triggered by it, have made all too apparent. It's even more important that we explore alternative arrangements — models of society that might encourage forms of interdependence that enable individual flourishing.

In this issue, we take on the issue of social transformation: a concrete proposal for socialism, a diagnosis of a radical experiment in peril, and the story of a scholar dedicated to exploring the rise of, and challenges to, capitalism. In the opening essay, John Roemer updates and revises his model of market socialism, initially proposed a quarter century ago in his 1994 book *A Future for Socialism*. While there are changes in the institutional setup in comparison to his earlier approach, what is more novel is a shift in the model's behavioral assumptions. Whereas agents in the earlier work were competitive individualists, Roemer now examines the macro logic of allowing that agents might operate with a more cooperative orientation.

His proposal for a future socialism in this issue is complemented by a sober diagnosis of a current experiment that has spiraled into crisis. Nicole Fabricant and Bret Gustafson analyze the events leading to the ouster of Evo Morales in Bolivia, which has brought to an ignominious end a once-inspiring radical agenda. They note that, whatever his personal shortcomings might have been, Morales's chief weakness was his inability to recognize and engage the structural constraints on his experiment. This essay offers an excellent rejoinder to the sweeping analysis of the Pink Tide by René Rojas in *Catalyst*'s summer 2018 issue.

Two essays take on the question of class in our time. Leo Panitch rightly observes that while Marxist theory is anchored in a structural account of class, the challenge of understanding class formation is as pressing as ever, especially the boundary between working class and middle-class formation. His essay is a clarion call for socialists to advance theory in tandem with the practice of negotiating the relation between these classes. Bryan Palmer presents a deeply sympathetic yet critical essay on Eric Hobsbawm, one of the great historians of the twentieth century. By way of a review of Richard J. Evans's massive biography of the man, Palmer deftly relates Hobsbawm's awesome scholarly production to his lifelong commitment to socialism and immersion in the British left. And finally, David B. Feldman engages Suzy Lee's argument for an open borders labor strategy, expressing great sympathy for Lee's position while contesting her concrete proposals. Lee responds by agreeing that the present moment presents great challenges, but she nonetheless defends the essentials of her viewpoint.

ABSTRACT

Every socioeconomic formation has a foundation consisting of three pillars: a set of property relations and institutions that organize the allocation of resources, a distributive ethic that specifies the distribution of income and resources considered fair or just, and a behavioral ethos that specifies how economic actors make decisions. These pillars are linked: if economic actors behave according to the stipulated behavioral ethos, then the property relations should implement the distributive ethic. I present several blueprints for a socialist economy, using a theory of cooperative decision-making, and contrast the results with capitalism.

Market Socialism Renewed

John Roemer

Socialism is back on the political agenda in the United States. For the first time in a century, an avowed socialist, Bernie Sanders, was a viable presidential candidate, and another, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is a popular congressional freshman. These politicians and many others now advocate policies commonly viewed as socialist: single-payer universal health care, the Green New Deal, federally financed preschool and tertiary education, and large infrastructural investment, to name a few.

There is, however, little discussion of what was a central topic in earlier socialist movements: the nature of property rights in firms. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) devote a paragraph to property relations on their webpage, but this topic has

little popular salience.[1] Because American socialist politicians say little or nothing about property relations, the implicit assumption must be that their conception of socialism is *social democracy*: an economic system with capitalist property relations, but with significant taxation to finance the investments that comprise their policy proposals. In popular parlance, the closest reference to a change in property relations in firms is the discussion about stakeholder representation on corporate boards. Such representation, referred to in the DSA manifesto, would dilute the power of owners, the holders of firm equity, and could be a significant reform.

Every socioeconomic formation, I propose, has a foundation consisting of three pillars: a *set of property relations* and institutions that organize the allocation of resources, a *distributive ethic* that specifies the allocation of income and resources considered fair or just, and a *behavioral ethos* that specifies how economic actors are expected to make decisions. These pillars are linked: if economic actors behave according to the stipulated ethos, then the property relations should implement the distributive ethic. The behavioral ethos of capitalism is *individualism*: each actor is conceived as being in competition with all other actors, and the actions of all are constrained by nature. This ethos may be summarized as "going it alone." The key institutions are private property ownership, contracts, and markets. The distributive ethic is "from each according to his endowments of talents and wealth, to each what he can get." Law sets the rules — what Karl Marx called the superstructure. Katharina Pistor's 2019 book, *The Code of Capital:*

1 The DSA website says, "Social ownership could take many forms, such as worker-owned cooperatives or publicly owned enterprises managed by workers and consumer representatives. Democratic socialists favor as much decentralization as possible. While the large concentrations of capital in industries such as energy and steel may necessitate some form of state ownership, many consumer-goods industries might be best run as cooperatives." dsausa.org/about-us/what-is-democratic-socialism/.

How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality, explains how law under capitalism creates the conditions for capital accumulation.[2]

What are socialism's three pillars? The behavioral ethos is *cooperation* — people in solidarity are engaged in a struggle constrained by nature. The distributive ethic, classically, was "from each according to her ability, to each according to her needs." A variety of sets of property relations and institutions have been proposed as socialist, from state ownership of firms to worker-owned firms. The importance of the behavioral ethos of a social formation was emphasized by G. A. Cohen.[3] For Cohen, the socialist ethos was "community," an amalgam of reciprocation and altruism.

My goal in this article is to describe an attempt to conceptualize the ethos of cooperation and socialist property relations in a precise way, in order to provide a new set of blueprints of what a socialist economy could look like — an economy where economic actors cooperate in their labor supply and investment decisions, rather than going it alone, as they do under capitalism. My tools are the two major contributions of neoclassical economics: The theory of general competitive equilibrium and game theory. Of course, the standard application of these tools has been to capitalist economies, where economic actors are assumed to behave according to the individualistic ethos; they can, however, be used as well to analyze economies with socialist property relations, in which actors behave according to a cooperative ethos.

We are used to thinking of neoclassical economics as postulating capitalist property relations, but it is less obvious how they model the individualistic behavioral ethos. To see this, one needs to understand the central concept of game theory, which is Nash

2 Katharina Pistor, *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

3 G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

equilibrium. A game, formally, consists of a set of players, each of whom plays a strategy or takes an action, and a *payoff function* for each player, which measures his welfare or income as a function of the strategies taken by all the players. Consider a special case, where the players are workers, and their *contributions* are supplies of labor. A list of contributions by the set of players is called a *contribution profile.* The payoff to a particular player from a contribution profile is the value of the project (for which the contributions are made) to her. In the applications here, payoffs will be earnings in a market economy, or the utility to the consumer/worker of the goods she can purchase with her income.

The mathematician John Nash proposed that an *equilibrium* in such a game is a contribution profile with the property that no player can increase her payoff by altering her contribution, given the contributions of the other players. The equilibrium is thus a stationary point in a clear sense. Each player wants to stand pat, given the actions of all the other players.

The Nash optimization protocol is: given the actions of the other players, I play the action, or make the contribution, that results in the highest payoff for me. This protocol models individualism, or going it alone, because each person is treating the others' actions as parameters in his own decision problem. Each views the others' contributions as fixed and, on that assumption, decides what contribution he should make. A set of contributions comprises an equilibrium, when each "goes it alone," no person wishes to change what she is doing. There is no cooperation among the players. They do not communicate with one another. Indeed, the Nash equilibrium is also called, aptly, a "non-cooperative equilibrium."

This idea — which, to the uninitiated, may seem strange — in fact revolutionized economic theory. There are now thousands of applications of Nash equilibrium to economic life. John Nash

deservedly received the Nobel Prize in economics for it: he proposed the equilibrium concept in his doctoral mathematics thesis at Princeton University in 1951, the year in which he also specified the mathematical conditions on the payoff functions of the game that would guarantee such an equilibrium exists.

Shortly thereafter, Kenneth Arrow and Gérard Debreu put the finishing touches on the model of competitive economic equilibrium that had been maturing since its first statement by Léon Walras.[4] The model was one of a capitalist economy where firms are privately owned by households. The corporate form is assumed where, in general, a firm is partially owned by many households. Firms maximize profits at the going prices by hiring labor, renting capital, and combining these factors to produce goods that are demanded by households. Households supply labor and capital (investment) to firms. Each household decides how much of its factors of production (labor and investment) to supply to firms, knowing the wage for labor, the interest rate for investment, and how much of various consumer goods to demand in order to maximize utility. A set of prices reaches equilibrium in the economy if, for each production factor (including labor power), the total supply of the factor by consumer-worker-investors equals the total demand for that factor by firms, and for each consumer good, the total demand for the good by consumers equals the total supplied by firms. Arrow and Debreu proved that, under suitable conditions on the utility functions of consumers and the production functions of firms, such an equilibrium in prices exists, and along with it, an associated allocation of all factors and goods in the economy. In particular, this model comprises a complete theory of income distribution for the economy — a person's income is the value of

4 Kenneth J. Arrow and Gerard Debreu, "Existence of Equilibrium for a Competitive Economy," *Econometrica* 22 (1954), 265–90; Léon Walras, *Eléments D'économie Politique Pure, Ou, Théorie de la Richesse*, Lausanne: L. Corbaz, 1874.

the production factors she sells to firms plus the value of profits she receives as a (partial) owner of firms.[5]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vilfredo Pareto proposed a definition of economic efficiency that is still the central concept of efficiency used in economics. The concept is very general — it does not depend upon having specific property relations or other institutions, such as markets. The data needed to define Pareto efficiency are, first, the *production functions* or technologies, which describe how resources or factors can be combined to produce consumer goods; second, the *utility functions* of consumers, which give the preference orders that consumers have over all possible bundles of consumer goods; and third, the total aggregate endowment of each resource in the economy. An *allocation* consists of an assignment of all the resources to technologies, an output of consumer goods from each technology, and an assignment of the total bundle of consumer goods to all consumers. We say that the allocation is "Pareto efficient" if it is impossible to find another allocation in which every consumer has a bundle that she prefers to the bundle she received in the first allocation.[6] Pareto efficiency formalizes the idea of the non-wasteful use of resources.

---

5 The generic individual in the neoclassical model is called the "household" or the "consumer." This individual can supply labor and/or capital (investment) to firms and can also be a partial owner of firms. In contrast, the generic individual in the Marxist model of capitalism is a "capitalist" or a "worker," or someone who holds an intermediate class position (such as a member of the petty bourgeoisie or a small businessperson). Despite its class-obscuring language, the neoclassical model can be used to demonstrate that a Marxist class structure will emerge from competition in the neoclassical model, when three conditions hold: markets for commodities and labor exist, there is sharply differential ownership of firms (or capital), and capital is scarce with respect to labor. Those with sufficiently low wealth sell their labor power to those with high wealth, and the former are exploited by the latter. See John E. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

6 This can be weakened to say that "some consumers have a bundle in the new allocation that they prefer to their original bundle, and no consumer has a bundle that renders him worse off than before."

I can now state what is perhaps the most important contribution of economic theory to the justification of capitalism. It is this fact: in a general competitive equilibrium, if there is no taxation, no externalities, no public goods or public bads, and there is a complete set of markets, then the equilibrium allocation is Pareto efficient. This fact is known as the first theorem of welfare economics.

The two major desiderata for an economic mechanism are that it be efficient — that is, that it not waste resources — and that the distribution of income be just or fair. While capitalism arguably does well on the first desideratum, it does poorly on the second. The distribution of income, in a competitive equilibrium reflects the distribution of endowments or assets that households have, and the endowment distribution is not fair, as it reflects all the inequalities that are inherent in the "birth lottery" that assigns children to families. Under capitalism, those who are born into wealthy and highly educated families have massively better economic prospects than those who are born into poor and disadvantaged families.

The main ways that a capitalist system could rectify the unfairness of the income distribution in a competitive equilibrium are through redistributive taxation of income and wealth, massive investment in the education of the disadvantaged, and the provision of a robust selection of public goods (such as infrastructure and a health system). Aside from the fact that the wealthy will oppose the kind of investments and taxation that would be required to finance these goods, there is a limitation to the effectiveness of taxation under capitalism, due to what are called, somewhat inaccurately, "market failures."

If there is an income tax that a society imposes to finance public goods, or simply to redistribute income and provide transfer payments to unlucky individuals, the allocation, assuming Nash optimization by workers-investors-consumers, will no longer be Pareto efficient. Public bads, such as carbon emissions or pollution,

will not be controlled by the market: there must be government intervention to regulate them, or to charge effluent fees, and capitalist firms will attempt to lobby to prevent this and to control the state agencies that are supposed to regulate them. The financing of public goods must also be arranged by the state — and that will involve taxation, which introduces inefficiency — for Nash optimizers will not voluntarily contribute to the production of a public good. This failure is called the free-rider problem, and it is a general affliction of Nash optimization. I will explain in the next section why this inefficiency arises with Nash optimization.

I will then show that if economic players optimize according to a *cooperative optimization protocol* — what I call Kantian optimization — and if property relations are arranged in a socialist manner, then the market equilibrium that is brought about will be Pareto efficient. Moreover, I extend the reach of the first theorem of welfare economics, for this result holds even in the presence of income taxation, as well as public goods and public bads. In particular, with Kantian optimization, public goods will be efficiently supplied by the citizenry in a decentralized manner, and public bads can be regulated by them in a decentralized way.

In sum, my intention is to integrate a formal theory of cooperation into models of a socialist economy, and to show that the principal normative argument for capitalism — that it brings about a Pareto-efficient allocation — is strengthened under socialism. At the same time, socialism can rectify the highly unequal income distribution of capitalism without a sacrifice in efficiency. The efficiency–equity trade-off, familiar in the theory of public economics, dissolves.

In the process of reconstructing the economic theory of socialism, however, I am led as well to amend its classical distributive ethic. My proposal may be contentious; I'll wait until later (sections 3 and 5) to discuss the amendment.

1 A SIMPLE MODEL OF CAPITALISM WITH INCOME TAXATION

We suppose that there is an economy with n individuals. Each individual is endowed with an amount of labor power and a skill level, and an amount of a capital good (that may be zero). Her labor power may be sold to a firm for a wage; what she does not sell is consumed as leisure, to be thought of as all non-income-producing use of one's potential labor. Her capital endowment (her savings) may be invested in a firm or, if not, provides the individual with security that she values. There is a single consumption good produced by all firms, using inputs of labor and capital. Individuals are also endowed with ownership shares of firms, which may be zero. These entitle the citizens to shares of the firms' profits.

There are three prices in the market: p, the price for a unit of the consumption good; w, the wage for a unit of labor time at a standard unit of skill; and r, the interest or rental rate for a unit of capital investment. Each firm, which is owned in its entirety by citizens, possesses a technology with which it can produce the consumption good. Facing the price list (p, w, r), each firm demands an amount of labor and capital investment that maximizes its profits, which equal the value of the consumption good produced, minus the wage bill and interest paid on investments. The firm supplies to the market the amount of the consumer good that it produces with these inputs.

In general, citizens rent their endowments of labor power and capital to firms, and they receive from firms wages for labor, interest on their capital, and a share of the profits of firms in which they own shares. So, firms *demand* factors of production from households and *supply* produced goods to the market, and households *supply* production factors to firms and *demand* consumption goods through the market. Each consumer chooses the

basket of consumption goods that maximizes her utility, given her income. Her income, in turn, is determined by the supplies of factors she offers to firms.

While the firm's optimization problem is easy to state — to maximize profits — the consumer's is more complicated. It supplies labor and capital, which, at going prices, will bring an income, which is then used to purchase the consumer good. The consumer faces a problem of first determining what its income will be upon supplying production factors to firms, and then, subject to that, using its income to purchase the consumer good. It solves this problem in the best possible manner — the way that maximizes its utility, given the prices in the market.

More formally, a *general competitive equilibrium of a capitalist economy with zero taxation* is a list of prices (p, w, r), supplies of both production factors by all workers and investors, demands for the consumption good by all individuals, demands for the two production factors by every firm, and supplies of the consumption good by every firm such that:

a. Each firm demands labor and investment to maximize its profits, at the given prices;

b. The profile of citizens' labor supplies is a Nash equilibrium of the labor-supply game;

c. The vector of citizens' investment supplies is a Nash equilibrium of the investment game;

d. The individual's income equals her after-tax earnings, where earnings comprise wages for her labor, interest on her capital investment, and her share of the profits of the firms she has shares in, plus the demogrant; and

e. All markets clear: the demand for each factor of production equals its supply, and the demand for the consumption good equals its supply.

At the equilibrium, in other words, the demand for every commodity or production factor equals its supply. There is no unemployment: total labor supply offered by workers equals total labor demand by firms. Nor is there a shortage or glut of investment funds: the capital market clears as well.

This is a highly idealized picture of a capitalist economy. Nevertheless, it is a useful construction. When Marx studied capitalism in *Capital,* he likewise postulated a competitive economy in which profits of firms came about through competition, not cheating or monopolistic practices. The challenge for Marx was to explain how the highly unequal income distribution of capitalism comes about *even if* all commodities (including labor power) are exchanging at their competitive prices. The heart of his explanation is that exploitation of labor comes about even at competitive prices, and it was exploitation that was the source of profits, which accrued to a small class. Using the model of "perfect" competition to study capitalism follows in this tradition.

The important result is:

Proposition 1: *Any capitalist competitive equilibrium where the tax rate* t *is zero is Pareto efficient; any equilibrium where the tax rate* t *is positive is Pareto inefficient.*

The first part of this proposition is called the "first theorem of welfare economics"; the second part is called the "deadweight loss of income taxation." Here, I explain why the deadweight loss occurs. This is due, in fact, to Nash optimization by workers and investors in their factor-supply decisions.

For simplicity, let's assume that all workers have the same skill level and the same preferences for goods and labor expended. Suppose there is an income tax rate of t. If the wage per unit of skill is w, and if a worker offers an amount of labor power in amount L, her after-tax income will be $(1-t)wL$. The total tax revenue in the economy will be $tw\mathbf{L}$, where $\mathbf{L}$ is the total labor supply of all workers, since total wages will be $w\mathbf{L}$, and tax revenues will be t times this. This tax revenue will be the government's budget and will be invested in infrastructure, public goods, transfer payments, and everything else the state provides. When the worker is deciding upon his labor supply L, he sees that his choice will affect significantly his take-home income $(1-t)w\mathbf{L}$, but because he is a Nash optimizer, he also notes that his choice will have virtually no effect on the value of $\mathbf{L}$, because $\mathbf{L}$ is the total labor supplied by millions of workers (n is in the millions), and he takes the labor supplies of others as fixed. So it's rational for the individual worker to ignore the effect of his labor supply on the value of the state's tax revenue, and hence on the value of government provision that his small action will entail. The consequence is that if t is large, it becomes unattractive to sell labor power, because the after-tax wage is small. The worker would prefer to either live on transfer payments or survive outside the market.

When I say "it's rational for the worker to ignore ...," I mean that it's rational *given the worker is a Nash optimizer.* We see evidence of this kind of rationality in the general aversion to taxation that exists in the United States in the working class: many workers resent the taxes they pay and fail to make the connection between taxes paid and the provision of public services and transfer payments that tax finance. Leftists (and Democrats) often bemoan the failure of people to understand this connection. But one must understand that this failure is a direct consequence of the ideology of "going it alone," which is formalized by Nash optimization. When

one makes an economic decision, one ignores the fact that many others are facing the same or similar decisions, and it might well be more sensible to think of acting *in concert* with those others rather than of "going it alone." When a worker's take-home pay falls due to an increase in the tax rate, she may ignore the fact that the tax increase finances benefits that she will enjoy: a health or education system, national parks, or federally financed scientific research. This cognitive error is unsurprising, due to the going-it-alone optimization protocol of Nash.

Readers will recognize what I have described as a free-rider problem, which is a universal consequence of Nash optimization in problems concerning public goods. The tax revenues of the state are used to finance a public good. When Nash optimizers face financing a public good, they *always* produce too little of it — to be precise, the provision of public goods is Pareto inefficient (and too small from a social viewpoint) when those who must contribute to finance it decide upon their contributions by Nash optimization. "Free-rider problem" is just the popular phrase for this Pareto inefficiency. All would be better off if they each contributed somewhat more: in the case of income taxation, this means more labor.

The deadweight loss of taxation is also commonly explained as being due to "the incentive problem." But the incentive problem is not a fact of nature; it is a consequence of Nash optimization, which is the behavioral ethos of capitalism — that of conceiving of one's economic problem as one of "going it alone."

Proposition 1 appears every day, on almost every page of the *Wall Street Journal*. The first part of the proposition is an advertisement for capitalism of a laissez-faire variety. The second part warns us against trying to redistribute income. The conservative mantra claims not only that redistribution of market incomes via taxation is unjust, because people deserve what they get by

going it alone, but moreover that any attempt to redress income inequality will be wasteful, because of the deadweight loss of taxation. Conservatives and liberals are reduced to arguing over the magnitude of the incentive problem, and how inefficient taxation will be. The argument I offer here, however, does not engage in that controversy. Rather, I propose that under socialism, economic decisions will be made cooperatively, and the incentive problem will vanish, as we now show.

2 SOCIAL DEMOCRACY WITH KANTIAN OPTIMIZATION: SOCIALISM 1

In what I'll call "Socialism 1," the property relations of capitalism are maintained, but there is income taxation with a demogrant distributed to all citizens. Workers and investors, however, do not determine their factor supplies by Nash optimization as they do under capitalism, but rather by Kantian optimization.

Firms will maximize profits, as under capitalism. They will demand production factors of labor and capital, and produce output that maximizes the surplus over factor payments (profits) at the given prices. Households will continue to offer labor power and capital to firms. But their decisions will not be made via Nash optimization, but rather in a cooperative way.

Let's describe how workers will decide upon their labor supplies. To simplify the problem, let's assume (as above) that all workers have the same skill level and preferences. They face an income tax rate of t. When a worker decides upon her labor supply L, she asks herself, "What is the labor supply that I would like all workers to offer?" She does not take the labor supplies of others as fixed, or as independent of hers. She thinks as follows: "If all workers offer a labor supply of L, then my after-tax labor income will be $(1\text{-}t)wL$, and the total tax revenue will be $twnL$. My share of that, if I consume it as the provision of the public good it finances, will be

twnL/*n* = *twL*. So my real income will be (1-*t*)*wL* + *twL* = *wL*. This is independent of the tax rate. So I should just offer the labor supply that will maximize my utility, assuming I receive a real income of *wL*.

Why is this way of optimizing different from Nash optimization? Each worker is asking, "What is the labor supply I would like all workers to offer?" and it is therefore necessary for the worker to consider not only her after tax income, (1-*t*)*wL*, but the value of the public good generated by the total labor supply, which on a per-capita basis is *twL*. In contrast, with the Nash counterfactual, "What labor supply should I offer given the labor supplies offered by others?" the worker realizes that her labor-supply decision will have essentially no effect on the value of the public good, so she ignores this effect.

I call the cooperative way of reasoning "Kantian" optimization, because each worker is offering the labor supply that she "will be universally offered," which is Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative.

The effect of Kantian optimization is to internalize the positive externality of the public-good provision that is financed by taxation. The failure to connect the taxes I pay with the public provision that they finance is corrected, because each individual is not "going it alone," but rather is contemplating the effect of her actions as part of the concerted actions of all workers. The free-rider problem disappears, and it is not hard to show that the resulting allocation of resources is Pareto efficient.

This Pareto efficiency holds, regardless of how high the tax rate is. The tax rate must still be set democratically. But now, citizens can decide on how much redistribution they desire without fear of the deadweight loss of taxation. Any tax rate will engender a Pareto-efficient allocation of resources. Taxation will, indeed, alter the value of public provision, and hence the distribution of real income, but it will not waste resources. In economic jargon, the

trade-off between equity and efficiency no longer exists. The *Wall Street Journal* could no longer argue that taxation is wasteful. The propaganda value of Proposition 1 is vitiated.

The same argument is true for the optimizing investor. If investors optimize in the Kantian manner, then changing the tax rate will not change the supply of investment. This is not because workers and investors have altered their preferences for income and leisure or income and security under social democracy; it is because the investor is optimizing in a cooperative manner. (One might raise the question of whether it is less reasonable to suppose that investors could optimize according to the Kantian protocol.)

There is an important illustration of Kantian optimization in American history. At a convention to discuss the signing of the Declaration of Independence, there was, unsurprisingly, reluctance from delegates to put their heads on the chopping block by confronting King George III so aggressively. Benjamin Franklin spoke: "If we do not hang together, we will, most assuredly, each hang separately." Signing the Declaration was a situation inviting the free-rider problem. Franklin was urging the delegates to optimize in the Kantian manner, not in the Nash manner: take the action you would will that we all take. Do not think, "I would prefer that all others sign, and I do not," for that is the recipe for disaster. Franklin's speech is the earliest expression of the logic of Kantian optimization that I have found.[7]

There are two objections that one can raise against the proposal that citizens should optimize according to the Kantian protocol under socialism. The first is that, in reality, not all workers have the same wage or skill or preferences. The fact of this kind of heterogeneity turns out to be easy to accommodate, although doing so involves a certain amount of mathematical apparatus that I cannot

7 I invite readers to supply me with other historical examples.

present here. Suffice to say, there is a satisfactory generalization of the Kantian protocol I have presented here that will work — the consequence of optimizing in that manner will be Pareto efficiency, regardless of the tax rate. The second objection is that it is utopian to suppose that people would adopt this kind of cooperative optimization protocol. I will address this challenge in section 6 below.

To summarize:

A social-democratic equilibrium at a tax rate of t is a list of prices (p, w, r) and an allocation such that:

a. Each firm demands labor and investment to maximize its profits, at the given prices;

b. The profile of citizens' labor supplies is a Kantian equilibrium of the labor-supply game;

c. The list of citizens' investment supplies is a Kantian equilibrium of the investment game;

d. The income of each individual equals her after-tax income, where income comprises wage income for her labor, investment income for her investments, and her share of the profits of the firms she owns, plus the public good provision; and

e. All markets clear: the demand for each factor of production equals its supply, and the demand for the consumption good equals its supply.

We have:

Proposition 2: *The social-democratic equilibrium at any tax rate t between zero and one is Pareto efficient.*

We might ask whether existing social democracies — chiefly, the Nordic countries — are social democracies in the sense of the above

definition of the concept. Are workers and investors choosing their factor supplies according to the Kantian protocol? This is an open question for research. I can think of three pieces of evidence that this might be the case — or, more circumspectly, that the profile of labor supplies is closer to being a Kantian equilibrium than a Nash equilibrium in the Nordic countries.

The first piece of evidence is the coexistence of very high tax rates and high productivity and efficiency in the Nordic economies. The second is that the labor-force participation rates in the Nordics are exceptionally high. The average 2019 labor force participation rate in the OECD countries was 72.4 percent, approximately the US rate. All five Nordic countries (Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland) have rates between 78 percent and 87 percent. (The highest such rate among all OECD countries is Iceland's 87 percent.) This is indicative of there being a very weak incentive effect in response to high taxation in these countries, which is, as we have noted, a consequence of Kantian optimization in the labor-supply decision.[8] The third piece of evidence is that the negotiations between labor and capital are more centralized in the Nordics than elsewhere. Union density is very high, and negotiations over wages and hours take place between national unions, representatives of capital, and sometimes the state. It seems to me that Kantian optimization would be an attractive protocol for a national union, negotiating hours and conditions of work for the various occupations of its members. Kantian optimization represents a kind of solidarity that might well be attractive to a union that is negotiating for the entire working class. Such optimization does not preclude there being different annual labor supplies for different occupations, whose members have different degrees of stress or danger on their jobs. I am less inclined to think

8 See: data.oecd.org/emp/labour-force-participation-rate.htm.

that investors behave according to the Kantian protocol, in part because I do not know of evidence that investment decisions are coordinated the way labor decisions are in the Nordic economies.

More generally, a century of social democracy in the Nordics has succeeded in creating a degree of trust among citizens that is unparalleled. As I will argue in section 6, trust is the key ingredient necessary for a group to engage in Kantian optimization. Each must trust that the others in the group will also play the Kantian strategy, and not exploit her by playing the Nash strategy against her — for a non-cooperator will calculate that he can free ride by playing Nash against the cooperative crowd.

3 A SHARING ECONOMY: SOCIALISM 2

Only the behavioral ethos, but not the property relations, are different from those institutions under capitalism in Socialism 1. I now propose to change both the behavioral ethos and the property relations. In the model of this section, firms are no longer owned by shareholders, as in social democracy, but rather by those who invest in and supply labor to them. It's worth reviewing the distinction between investors and owners in actual capitalism. Owners own equity in the firm, which gives them a property right equal to a share of the firm's assets and income. Investors purchase corporate bonds: they are paid interest on their investments, and when the bond matures, the principal is refunded to the investor. Shareholders (owners) of the firm are the residual claimants: they are last in the queue to receive income from the firm. Workers' wages and bondholders' interest are paid first, and then if any revenue remains (profits), that is distributed to owners, or retained in the firm's bank account, which is the property of the owners. There are no shareholders in Socialism 2.

When firms initially create shares that sell to the public, it is to raise funds — it's an alternative to floating bonds. But once shares

are purchased in the initial public offering, the firm receives no further revenue when shares are traded. The stock market allows households to trade shares with one another, but these share purchases produce no capital for the firm. In contrast, issuing bonds always raises capital for the firm. (There is also a secondary market in which corporate bonds can be bought and sold, with no income repercussions for the firm.)

In the model I now present, there are no shareholders of firms. Firms will continue to maximize profits in a market economy, but the profits will be returned to the firm's workers and investors (that is, their factor suppliers) in proportion to the value of their labor or investment supplied to the firm. In Socialism 1, there was an exogenous tax rate, and in the present model of Socialism 2, there will be an exogenous parameter σ, which is the share of profits distributed to its workers, while the share 1-σ is distributed to its investors. The two polar cases are "labor-owned firms," when $\sigma = 1$, and investor-owned firms, when $\sigma = 0$. In both cases, workers and investors are paid wages and interest for their investments, at rates *w* and *r* determined by the market. After those payments, profits remain; in the case $\sigma = 1$, those profits are distributed to workers in proportion to the value of their labor supplies, and in the case $\sigma = 0$, they are distributed to investors in proportion to their investments. In general, we allow σ to be any fraction between one and zero: for example, if $\sigma = 75\%$, then 75 percent of the profits are distributed to workers in proportion to their labor supplies, and the remaining profits are distributed to investors in proportion to their investments.

Many socialists will bridle at the proposal that investors would be symmetrically treated to workers in this version of "socialism." Isn't it the case that all profits should be distributed to workers — and investors should be paid only the interest on their investments? I will address this important question below in section 5. This raises the most important issue for socialist finance.

To see this, let's note that, today in the United States, the average capital-to-labor ratio in the corporate sector is on the order of $400,000: the average worker works with capital worth two-fifths of $1 million. It would be crazy for each worker to carry a $400,000 mortgage to finance her owning the capital that she works with — it would be foolish to tie up all one's wealth in a single firm. The risk must be shared: either the state could own the capital, or millions of investors could — households that purchase corporate bonds.

Table 1 shows the distribution of financial wealth in the United States.[9]

Table 1 Distribution of Financial Wealth in the United States, 2017[10]

Fractile of the wealth distribution	Fraction of total financial wealth owned by fractile
Bottom half	2.5%
.50–.90	26.1%
.90–.99	30.3%
.99–.999	17.7%
.999–.9999	10.5%
.9999–1.0	12.9%

From Table 1, we see that the richest centile (the sum of the last three rows) owns 41 percent of the financial wealth. I will argue below that much of this wealth must be redistributed under socialism. However, the middle and upper-middle wealth classes,

9 Financial wealth consists of the value of corporate equity, corporate bonds, pension funds, and the like. It does not include residential wealth, the value of one's real property net of mortgage debt.

10 Computed by the author from Gabriel Zucman, "Distributional National Accounts," 2017, gabriel-zucman.eu/usdina/.

defined as those in the fiftieth to ninety-ninth centile of the wealth distribution, own 56 percent of the wealth. That wealth must be profitably invested, assuming it continues to exist in a socialist economy, and this is the main reason that — as I will argue below — investors should receive a share of profits in any feasible socialism.

I now define an *equilibrium for a sharing economy with sharing parameter* σ. First, I define the "Firm's Workers' Fund" as a share σ of the profits of the firm, and the "Firm's Investors' Fund" as the remaining share 1 - σ of the firm's profits. In this economy, there are, as before, three prices: *p*, the price for a unit of the consumption good; *w*, the wage for a unit of labor of normalized skill; and *r*, the interest rate for a unit of capital (or a $1 bond). Firms will, as before, choose their factor demands and the supply of the good (or goods) to maximize profits. Households will supply labor to firms: their labor supplies will comprise a Kantian equilibrium of the labor-supply game. Similarly, the supply of investment to firms by households will comprise a Kantian equilibrium of the investment game.

The income of households will consist of four components: wages for labor supplied, interest for capital supplied, a share of the Firm's Workers' Fund proportional to the worker's supply of labor to the firm, and a share of the Firm's Investors' Fund proportional to the investor's supply of capital (via purchase of corporate bonds) to the firm.

In competitive equilibrium, the total supply of labor is equal to the firms' total demand for labor, the supply of investment is equal to the firms' demand for capital, and the supply of consumer goods is equal to the consumers' total demand for consumer goods.

As I said, if the parameter 1 = σ, then the firm is worker owned. Investors receive interest income on their investments, but they do not share in the profits. If σ = 0, the firm would be investor owned: profits would be distributed entirely to investors, and workers

would be paid only a wage. Society must choose this parameter through a democratic procedure.

We have:

Proposition 3: *For any value of σ between 0 and 1, the sharing equilibrium is Pareto efficient*.

I will not attempt to give an intuition for this proposition. The mathematical argument is not easily translated into non-mathematical language. It depends upon the workers and investors using the Kantian protocol. The equilibrium would not be efficient if factor suppliers were using the Nash protocol.

We now have two socialist variants, illustrating how we can combine a formal model of cooperative optimization with various regimes of property relations to achieve Pareto efficiency.

I do not, however, know how to impose redistributive taxation in the model of Socialism 2 and preserve efficiency. What must take the place of income taxation, as a way of achieving a reasonably equal distribution of income, is redistribution of financial wealth. Simulations show (see section 9) that if we keep the wealth distribution of financial capital displayed in Table 1, then even for the "labor-owned sharing economy," when $\sigma = 1$, the Gini coefficient of income without taxation is too high (over 0.50). This is unacceptable for socialism. If, however, we tax away about half of the financial wealth of the top 5 percent of the wealth distribution and distribute it equally to all households, then the sharing equilibria have income Gini coefficients of between 0.36 and 0.41. Not only would the income distribution be more equal than it is in the United States today, but there would be no deadweight loss that occurs with Nash optimization.

Clearly, if there is no income taxation in the sharing economy, then the degree of income equality in the sharing equilibrium — even if σ is close to 1 — depends upon the degree of redistribution

of wealth, which can be accomplished, as Piketty argues, through wealth taxation.[11] And we can impose income taxation in the sharing economy, which will reduce income inequality, but with an efficiency cost (as we have under capitalism). There is, of course, a sharp disagreement among economists as to the true efficiency cost of income taxation. Piketty, Saez, and Stantcheva argue that the richest households in the United States do not reduce their factor supplies enough to reduce their tax payments until the marginal tax rate on high incomes reaches above 82 percent.[12] If that is true, there's not much reason to abstain from substantially higher income taxation of the very rich, as was imposed until 1980.[13]

The question that many will raise is why I propose that investors share in the profits of firms in the sharing economy, to be discussed below in section 5.

4 PROFIT MAXIMIZATION AND PUBLIC BADS

There is an important fact about these models of market socialism. Pareto efficiency of the allocation of resources and income is a consequence of the combination of profit maximization by firms and Kantian optimization by households that supply factors of production. (I have not given an intuition for why this is the case — again, that would necessitate a further attempt to translate economic reasoning into words.) Moreover, the reliance

11 Thomas Piketty, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

12 Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Stefanie Stantcheva, "Optimal Taxation of Top Labor Incomes: A Tale of Three Elasticities," *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 6, no. 1 (2014), 230–71.

13 In 1950, the *average* income tax paid by those in the top 0.1 percent of the US income distribution was 60 percent. The top marginal rate was much higher. By 2010, the average rate for this fractile had fallen to about 35 percent. Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, *The Triumph of Injustice: How the Rich Dodge Taxes and How to Make Them Pay*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019, Figure 2.2.

on profit maximization by firms is essential: I do not know of any model that gives Pareto efficiency of economic equilibrium in the absence of profit maximization. I think that the tendency of many socialist economists to ignore the issue of Pareto efficiency in their models of market socialism is a serious error. It may be the result of viewing efficiency as a right-wing idea, which is nonsense. We have only to look around the world, and over time, to understand the importance of designing the economic mechanism to be non-wasteful. Efficiency and equity are the twin requirements of a good economic mechanism: the most powerful defense of capitalism with low taxation is that these desiderata are in conflict. Capitalism elects to favor efficiency over equity, and that may be due to the interests the capitalist class. But socialists must not commit the knee-jerk response of favoring equity over efficiency. Both are important, and the central message of this article is that they are not in conflict if the behavioral ethos is cooperative.

It is worth mentioning that a reliance on profit maximization by firms has been standard since the earliest model of market socialism, from Oskar Lange and Fred M. Taylor.[14] Although their model postulated that firms were owned by the state, firm managers were assumed to report their demand for production factors and supplies of output by maximizing profits, given the prices for output, labor, and capital announced by the central planners.[15]

The reliance on profit maximization may disturb some socialists, because we rightly associate profit maximization with many evils — evils that are called, in economic lingo, public bads.

14 Oskar Lange and Fred M. Taylor, "On the Economic Theory of Socialism," in Benjamin Lippincott (ed.), *On the Economic Theory of Socialism,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1936 [1956].

15 See John E. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) for a discussion of the Lange-Taylor model and the debate that took place around it.

Examples are child labor, fast assembly-line speeds, and environmental degradation — conditions that reduce the welfare of workers and citizens more generally, and that profit-maximizing firms "produce" unless otherwise controlled. In the presence of unregulated public bads, profit maximization is *not* Pareto efficient. (This is why the first theorem of welfare economics postulates an absence of public bads.) I have avoided this question until now: public bads have not been associated with production in the models proposed thus far. We have ignored, among other things, the fact that the profits of capitalist firms are used to lobby politicians to advocate rules and regulations that create a favorable environment for profitability, regardless of the side effects (negative externalities) on the population at large. Under capitalism, the effectiveness of state regulation and law in controlling public bads depends on who controls the state, as the current American administration makes abundantly clear.

In this section, I will argue that Kantian optimization by workers and investors suffices to regulate the production of public bads in a decentralized manner. Consider an economy that is like the one employed in the previous sections — there are firms producing a consumer good, using labor and capital. In addition, however, there is a public bad that is produced as a "joint product" with the firms' output. Think of production of the good as being enhanced if the firm pollutes, or increases the speed of the assembly line, or employs child labor. Therefore, if a firm maximizes profits, it will choose to produce the public bad along with its other (desirable) output. One standard way of controlling such behavior is to render it unprofitable, by charging the firm steep effluent fees for polluting, or fines for employing child labor. Or the workers' union can refuse to supply labor if the assembly-line speed is too high.

I will argue that another strategy can be effective using Kantian optimization. We must now realize that the public bad appears

as an argument over which workers and investors have preferences. That is, citizens' welfare is increasing in consumption, decreasing in labor, and *decreasing* in the level of the public bad. We assume that the level of the public bad is a known function of the firm's output.[16]

I must discuss briefly the tragedy of the commons, which is the other face of the "free-rider" coin. The free-rider problem is the fact that, in problems involving the financing of public goods, Nash optimizers contribute too little — the provision of the public good is inefficiently low. Now suppose we have a public bad, such as carbon pollution of the biosphere. It turns out that if those who contribute production factors to the firm produce the public bad, and do so using Kantian optimization, the outcome will be Pareto efficient.

Suppose we introduce the public bad into the social-democratic economy of section 2. We continue to have income taxation at some rate t. The definition of the equilibrium is otherwise unchanged — that is, factor suppliers optimize in the Kantian manner, so at equilibrium, both factor-supply profiles are Kantian equilibria of the relevant games, as defined in definition SD. Now, when workers supply labor, they take account not only of the effect on their after-tax income and the public good provided by taxation but, in addition, of the effect on the level of the public bad. Other things equal, they will *reduce* their factor supplies in order to moderate the level of the public bad. In this way, they take account of the effect of their labor supplies and investments on the emissions of carbon dioxide and planetary warming. Since they are choosing their labor supplies in the Kantian manner, there is

16 For instance, in the United States at the time of writing, every dollar of output on average produces CO_2 emissions of 300 grams. Citizens' welfares decreases with the level of carbon emissions, which increases global temperature, and hence the risk of various climate catastrophes.

no commons' tragedy with regard to the level of the public bad, as there is with Nash optimization.

One might make two objections to this argument. The first is that even a national economy may be too small a unit for the level of production to have a significant effect on a global public bad, like carbon emissions. We would have to require Kantian optimization by all the workers in the world in concert. The point is well taken, and it shows that addressing the problem of global warming requires international cooperation, something much more difficult to organize than cooperation among the workers in a single economy. The second point is a skeptical one. Consider the issue of closing down coal mines in the United States to reduce fossil-fuel emissions. We know many workers in the coal industry oppose doing so: they would rather have the carbon pollution and keep their jobs, even if they understand the dangers of increasing concentrations of atmospheric carbon. This means that the Pareto-efficient allocation of output, labor, and carbon dioxide may still cause temperature increases that will adversely affect future generations, who have no say. Convincing the present generation to reduce fossil fuels sufficiently may well require substantial economic reform so that, for example, former coal miners are not thrown onto the street, and more generally, the standard of living of the less well-off is protected. On a global level, this would require substantial transfers from the rich North to the poor South. In the United States, preferences of many do not properly reflect the true reduction in welfare that will accompany continued carbon emissions at the present rate, and so Pareto efficiency (with today's preference orderings) is an inaccurate measure of welfare.

Although I agree that American preferences about global warming may be in large part due to the go-it-alone ethos that comprises American individualism, I would contend that the principal

problem exhibited by the coal-miner example may not be that miners have bad preferences, but rather that they see the contribution to climate change they would make if the coal mines were to close as having very little effect on climate change. They naturally view their potential contribution to reversing climate change as trivial — because they are Nash optimizing, by assuming nobody else changes their behavior. It would be a very different question if closing the coal mines were one decision among many, part of a grand plan to eliminate all fossil fuels and retool the global economy in a green way. That would be the Kantian approach with regard to the carbon emissions problem. If coal miners were part of a cooperative action to solve the problem of excessive carbon emissions, in which their action was one small part of a global plan, their opposition to closing the mines might well disappear. We should not underestimate the logic of "going it alone," and the difficulty people have of conceiving a cooperative effort to control global emissions, given the prevalence in the United States of the going-it-alone ethos. How can the American coal miners see closing the coal mines as part of a global cooperative action, when their own president attempts to scuttle the international effort to craft a cooperative response to addressing this huge public bad?

We have the following result:

> **Proposition 4:** *If a public bad is a joint product with output, and preferences belong to a certain class, the social democratic equilibrium with taxation is Pareto efficient at any tax rate t in the interval [0,1].*

That is, Kantian optimization can handle efficiently both redistribution of income and regulation of the public bad.[17] Nash optimization

17 Some might ask, why speak of the efficient level of a public bad, like carbon pollution? Because there *is* a positive efficient level. If we had no carbon emissions, with the present technology, there would be very little production and consumption.

is incapable of doing this, because when considering reducing her labor supply, the worker assumes that she is doing this alone, which has a miniscule effect on total carbon emissions. A commons' tragedy is the consequence.

It is also possible to show that public *goods* can be efficiently produced when factor suppliers use Kantian optimization. I will not present that result here, but the logic is similar to that justifying Proposition 4.

5 WHY SHOULD INVESTORS SHARE IN THE PROFITS OF FIRMS?

Marx wrote, in part VIII of *Capital*, volume 1, that capital is born "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt."[18] In nineteenth-century Britain, considerably after "the so-called primitive accumulation" of capital had occurred, it was probably the case that most investment came from the aristocracy, those with landed wealth. But today, as Table 1 shows, 56 percent of financial capital belongs to the middle and upper-middle class. It cannot be said that the wealth of these classes came into being "dripping from head to foot," etc.

This does not mean that the current distribution of financial wealth is just — not to speak of its concentration in the top 1 percent, but even its relative concentration in the middle-income class. The argument for the injustice of the wealth distribution, however, is more nuanced than Marx's blood-and-dirt argument: it's a Rawlsian argument, based on the morally arbitrary distribution of advantage that is produced by the birth lottery, capitalist property relations, and the distributional ethic of capitalism, which

---

Eventually, with well-developed alternative energy sources, the optimal level of carbon emissions may be zero, but it is not at present.

18 Karl Marx, *Capital,* vol. 1, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, 760.

we might rephrase as "to each what she can get with the endowments with which she is born." Rawls, to the contrary, argued that the distribution of advantage in the birth lottery had no ethical justification: a person has no moral right to full possession of assets so distributed.[19]

Piketty argues that a progressive aspect of economic development in the twentieth century was the emergence of a wealth-owning (patrimonial) middle class (see Table 1).[20] Capitalism has done almost nothing to enable wealth accumulation by the bottom half of the income distribution: — that will have to await a socialist transformation.

Socialism must be a regime with pervasive compensation for those who have bad luck in the birth lottery, which surely characterizes most of those who occupy the bottom half of the income distribution. G. A. Cohen defines three levels of equality of opportunity. *Bourgeois* equality of opportunity "removes socially constructed status restrictions, both formal and informal, on life chances." *Left-liberal* equality of opportunity "also sets itself against the constraining effect of social circumstances [e.g., the wealth of the family into which one is born, JR] by which bourgeois equality of opportunity is undisturbed." *Socialist* equality of opportunity seeks to correct for *all* unchosen disadvantages — disadvantages, that is, for which the agent cannot herself be reasonably held responsible, whether they be disadvantages that reflect social misfortune or those that reflect natural misfortune.[21] Now, even if socialist equality of opportunity has been approximately achieved in a socialist society, different occupations will

19 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

20 Piketty, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*.

21 Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, 15–18.

pay different salaries, and there will be differential accumulation of wealth. This wealth must be efficiently invested, and therefore households will have investment income. Marx's argument of the bloody creation of capital will not apply if socialist equality of opportunity exists, so long as citizens have freedom of occupational choice. In the models of Socialism 1 and Socialism 2, there are degrees of freedom in how profits are distributed, but the wage rate and the rental rate of capital are determined by profit maximization and the supply of the production factors to the market.

The alternative to households' owning wealth is for the state to confiscate savings and become the only investor. I believe there will be an important role for state investment under socialism, but my task here has been to focus on the degree to which a socialist economy can operate in a decentralized manner. I have argued that many of capitalism's so-called market failures are due to Nash optimization, and they can be corrected if citizens employ a cooperative optimization protocol. The deadweight loss associated with income taxation and the inefficient production of public goods and bads can be reversed with Kantian optimization. But there are other market failures that will not be amenable to Kantian optimization: first, there is an argument that industries that have large-scale economies in production should be state-owned; second, market failures associated with asymmetries of information will still require intervention in the form of social insurance that is state-financed;[22] third, some important goods, such as education and perhaps medical care, should be state-financed and controlled.

22 One might be able to argue that moral hazard would vanish or be reduced if all citizens choose their lifestyle behaviors in the Kantian manner, and adverse selection might likewise be reduced if all citizens choose whether or not to purchase (voluntarily) insurance in a Kantian manner. But I do not consider these issues here.

One might argue that, in the model of Socialism 2, investors should be paid interest (rent) on their investments, but all profits should go to labor — that is, one should set the parameter σ equal to 1. However, if it is the case that (approximately) all disadvantages that are unchosen have been corrected for, and socialist equality of opportunity holds, I do not see why savings from one's labor that are invested in production should not share in the economic surplus. Surely, there must be very high estate taxation, and gift taxation *inter vivos*, in order to preserve the conditions of equal opportunity for the next generation. As well, I believe that income taxation should be high, in order to sustain the cooperative ethos, for it would be difficult to maintain that ethos in a society with large differences in living standards. I do believe that human nature is sufficiently plastic to accommodate popular adoption of Kantian optimization, but perhaps it is insufficiently plastic to sustain that behavior in the presence of large income differences. These are empirical questions.

There is, finally, a political argument for respecting the principle that both investors and workers share in the economic surplus. Is it conceivable that socialist property relations would be democratically adopted by a polity used to capitalism if this were not the case?

I am not the first socialist to propose that households should be free to accumulate savings, and to invest, under socialism. James Meade proposed a model of a property-owning democracy, which was a variant of social democracy.[23] Meade proposed a clever scheme for reducing wealth differentiation through inheritance taxation. Jacques Drèze presented a general-equilibrium model of an economy of worker-owned firms, in the spirit of the models

23 James Meade, *Efficiency, Equality and the Ownership of Property,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.

that I have discussed here, but without the Kantian component.[24] Anthony Atkinson, Giacomo Corneo, and Joseph Stiglitz have also proposed social-democratic models in which households continue to be a major source of investment, even if, perhaps to minimize opposition, they do not always use the socialist nomenclature.[25]

6 IS KANTIAN OPTIMIZATION PSYCHOLOGICALLY FEASIBLE?

Most (perhaps virtually all) economists have come to think that Nash optimization is *the* unique rational protocol in games. I propose, on the contrary, that the optimization protocol varies with the economic structure, as do property relations. My critique of earlier models of market socialism (my own included) is that they varied only the property regime from capitalism's, but not the behavioral ethos.[26] That this was the case shows the tremendous grip that beautiful models have on the mind, and hence on the way we interpret reality. John Nash's model of equilibrium in games is beautiful, and it has seduced most economists into thinking it is the ur-conception of rational behavior that should apply in all social systems.[27]

This does not settle the question posed in this section's title. Some, perhaps many, will argue that Kantian optimization is not psychologically feasible for human beings. Evolution, they will say, has programmed us to "going it alone." The "selfish gene" has only an individualistic protocol. This view, however, is sharply contested

---

24 Jacques Drèze, *Labour Management, Contracts and Capital Markets*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962.

25 Anthony Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015; Giacomo Corneo, *Is Capitalism Obsolete?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017; Joseph Stiglitz, *People, Power and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019.

26 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*.

27 Sylvia Nasar's 1998 biography of Nash is entitled *A Beautiful Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster).

today. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis give anthropological, biological, and economic arguments and evidence that human cooperation is prevalent, if not ubiquitous.[28] The evolutionary psychologist Michael Tomasello argues, on the basis of experiments with human infants and the other great apes, that humans have evolved — probably uniquely among the five species of great ape — an ability to cooperate, based on their capacity to construct joint intentionality with others. Nicholas Christakis has a similar message.[29] For me, the main piece of evidence for our ability to cooperate in economic matters is the existence, in the advanced democracies, of collective decisions to gather approximately half the society's gross domestic product through taxes that are used to finance projects from public goods to social insurance. Another striking fact is that the size of the human group within which peaceful behavior is the norm has increased, over the last ten millennia, from only several hundred souls to more than a billion. As Pinker points out, in 1400 in Europe, 25 percent of male aristocrats died violently, by homicide or in battle. In 2000, the global homicide rate was 8.8 per 100,000.[30]

Many people today behave cooperatively in many of the roles they have and competitively in others. Has the orbit of roles in which we cooperate increased over time and with economic development? There is evidence that, in dictator and ultimatum laboratory games, the degree of trust in others, and hence cooperation, increases with economic development.[31]

---

28 Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and its Evolution,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

29 Nicholas Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society,* New York: Little Brown Spark, 2019.

30 Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined,* New York: Penguin Group, 2011, 81–7.

31 Joseph Henrich, et al. (eds.), *Foundations of Human Sociality: Economic*

The prerequisites necessary for establishing cooperation and Kantian optimization are understanding, desire, and trust. A fourth condition that is ameliorative, if not strictly necessary, is that those involved believe they are all in the same boat. People must *understand* that cooperation will produce better outcomes than going it alone, in the sense of Benjamin Franklin's warning to the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, and this will engender a desire to cooperate. However, understanding and desire together are insufficient: each person must trust that if she cooperates, the other players will as well — others will not optimize, à la Nash, against her. A Nash player can almost always exploit a Kantian, by taking the Nash action against her Kantian one (if I cooperatively recycle my trash, the Nasher next door may not, free riding on my contribution to the public good). Finally, being "in the same boat" is a synonym for the symmetry of the individuals with respect to the threat or the challenge: symmetry in that regard may induce those involved to act in concert with others.

Trust is most easily established in communities or societies that are homogeneous ethnically, religiously, and/or linguistically; with homogeneity, it is more likely that each will believe that others think the way she does. Heterogeneity frustrates the understanding that we are all "in the same boat," and hence reduces the propensity to act in concert with others. Recall Martin Niemöller's famous words: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out — because I was not a socialist … Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out — because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak out for me." Nevertheless, even in heterogeneous populations, cooperation is achievable. Often, it has emerged out of war or crisis: think of the

---

Experiments and Ethnographic Evidence from Fifteen Small-Scale Societies, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Great Depression, World War II, and even COVID-19, although the jury is still out on the last example, at the time of writing.

We must understand the tremendous effort that the capitalist class and its ideologues have expended to proselytize the citizenry concerning their behavioral ethos and distributive ethic, and to venerate in the extreme those who have succeeded in playing the capitalist game.[32] Capitalist ideologues (at least in the United States) have succeeded in convincing a large part of the citizenry that the state destroys rather than creates value, and so taxation is an unalloyed bad. Along with this ideological campaign, American capitalism has destroyed trade unions, one of the few institutions that taught a solidaristic ethos, however inadequately. The concerted effort the Republican Party has expended in order to destroy or repeal the Affordable Care Act is surely not explained merely by the material interests of private insurance firms, but rather by the fear that successful universal health insurance, only achievable with significant state participation, would chip away at the anti-collectivist prejudice of Americans.

Mao Zedong wrote that "power comes out of the barrel of a gun." Perhaps that was the case in 1927 China, but it is surely an incorrect diagnosis for the advanced capitalist democracies today. The most powerful weapon the capitalist class has today is the ideology it purveys — its distributive ethic, which can be paraphrased as the view that the market with private ownership is not only efficient but delivers a fair distribution of income, and its behavioral ethos of individualism, which is said to be not only ethical but prudent, because "you can't trust human nature."

32 In the economics curriculum, we so proselytize by teaching students that Nash optimization is the unique conception of rationality in games. We do not point out that Nash optimization models the protocol of "going it alone," a behavioral ethos associated, perhaps almost uniquely, with capitalism. It has been noted that economics majors are the most selfish players in laboratory games, such as the prisoner's dilemma and the dictator game.

7 SIMULATIONS OF SOCIALIST INCOME DISTRIBUTIONS

In this section, I report simulations of socialist income distributions for a model of the American economy. The details of the economy's specification can be found in section 7 of "What Is Socialism Today?".[33] I assume the distribution of financial wealth is as specified in Table 1 above: about 41 percent of total financial wealth is owned by the wealthiest 1 percent of the population. I assume that the distribution of real wages — reflecting marketable skills — is lognormal, with the median skill equal to 69 percent of the mean skill. I further assume that financial wealth is monotone, increasing in the real wage.[34] There is a single consumption good produced by a firm using capital (wealth) and labor as inputs. The firm's technology exhibits decreasing returns to scale, and so, at all the equilibria I study, there are positive profits. Every consumer-worker-investor maximizes a utility function that is linear, increasing in consumption, and decreasing and concave in labor time. The utility function is a standard quasilinear function.

I simulate two kinds of equilibrium:

A. Socialist-1 equilibrium, with the same distribution of skills and financial wealth as under capitalism, with various tax rates (see section 2); and

B. Socialist-2 equilibrium, with various distributions of financial

33 John E. Roemer, "What Is Socialism Today? Conceptions of a Cooperative Economy," Cowles Foundation Discussion Paper No. 2220, New Haven: Cowles Foundation, Yale University, 2020.

34 This is a simplifying assumption. The financial wealth of the population at a given real wage must be understood to be the average financial wealth of all individuals at that real wage, so the assumption is probably approximately correct in the present-day United States, where those with large wealth also receive large salaries. This would have been a poorer assumption in Victorian England or the French *ancien régime*, where the wealthy did not work.

wealth and with various values of the sharing parameter (see section 3).

The benchmark to which I compare the various socialist income distributions is the capitalist income distribution with a tax rate of 30 percent (see section 1). Recall that the capitalist allocation is Pareto inefficient, while all the socialist allocations are Pareto efficient.

A. Income distribution in social democracy (various tax rates)

In Figure 1, incomes in the US capitalist economy at an income tax rate of $t = 30\%$ are normalized to be 1 for everyone in the economy, as represented by the dotted line in the figure.

Figure 1 shows that the post-fisc[35] incomes of almost everyone are greater under social democracy, at either a 30-percent or 50-percent income-tax rate, than under capitalism at a 30-percent tax rate. This is due to the Pareto efficiency of social democracy, in contrast to capitalism's inefficiency with taxation. Note that at a 30-percent tax rate, social democracy does very little to increase the income of the lowest skilled, but their incomes increase by at least 70 percent when the tax rate increases to 50 percent (Nordic style). At a 90 percent tax rate, the incomes of the lowest skilled triple; the incomes of those in the top 7 percent of the distribution are lower than under capitalism at a 30-percent tax rate. I remind the reader that with a flat tax, at any rate, post-fisc incomes are increasing as one's quantile increases: that is to say, the decreasing curve at 90-percent taxation is the *ratio* of two incomes, not the absolute value of income.

35 "Post-fisc" means after income taxes are collected and the demogrant is distributed to citizens.

Figure 1: Income distribution in social democracy

The ratio of post-fisc income in Social Democracy (section 2) at tax rates of 30 percent, 50 percent, and 90 percent to post-fisc income under Capitalism at a tax rate of 30 percent (section 1). The abscissa is the quantile of the real wage (and wealth) distribution.

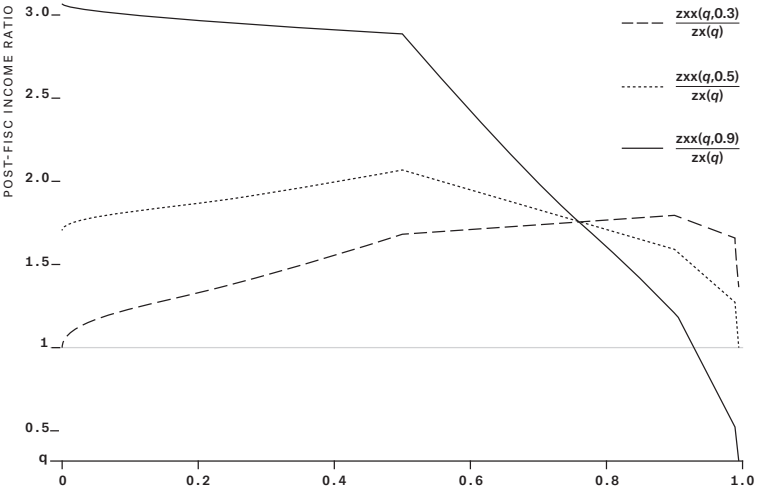


Figure 2: Income distribution in the sharing economy

Ratio of income in the sharing economy to the income under capitalism at a tax rate of 30 percent, by quantile of the real wage (and wealth) distribution, for sharing parameters σ = 0,0.5, and 1.

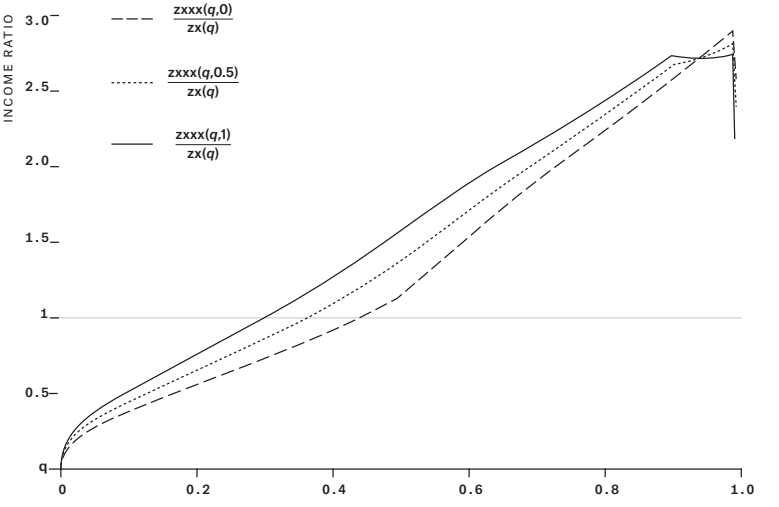


Figure 3: Socialism 2 with leveling down of top 5%

Leveling down the top 5 percent of wealth. Ratio of income in the sharing economy to income under capitalism (with t = 30%), by real-wage quantile, for three values of the sharing parameter σ.

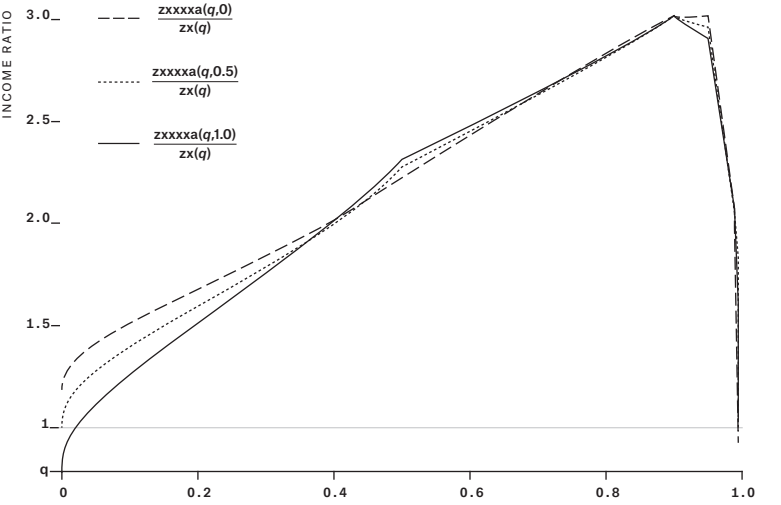
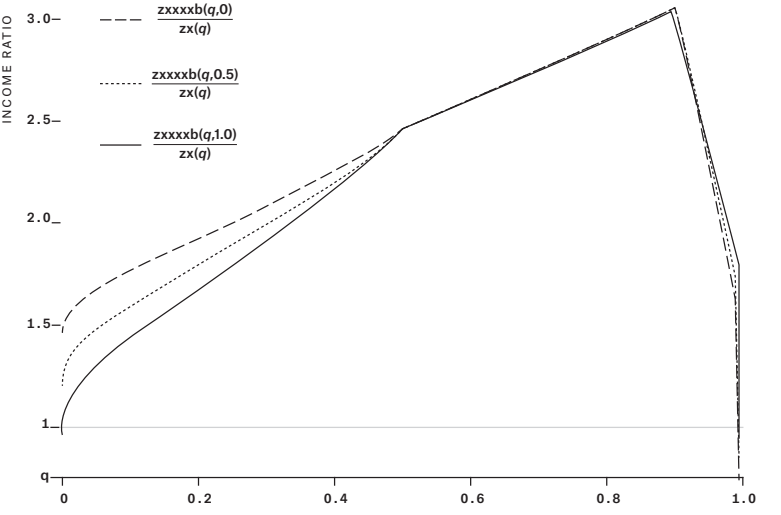


Figure 4: Socialism 2 with leveling down of top 10%

Leveling down the top 10 percent of wealth. Ratio of income in the sharing economy to income under capitalism (with t = 30%), by real-wage quantile, for three values of the sharing parameter.



The income Gini coefficients of the social democratic equilibria at the tax rates of 30, 50 and 90 percent are 0.48, 0.34, and 0.07, respectively.

B. Income distribution in the sharing economy (Socialism 2)

The distribution of financial wealth for the simulations in Figure 2 is the same as in the capitalist economy. There is no income taxation in the sharing economy. The consequence is that the gains from efficiency go entirely to the top 60 percent of the income distribution: the bottom 40 percent of the skill distribution does better under capitalism with redistributive taxation. Workers do slightly better when firms are labor-owned (when $\sigma = 1$) than when investors share in the profits ($\sigma = 0.5$) or when all profits go to investors ($\sigma = 0$). But the sharing parameter makes little difference because investors are, in all cases, paid rent (interest) for their investments. The economy with sharing parameter $\sigma = 1$ is one where all profits go to labor, but the ownership of capital is still as in Table 1, and hence the wealthy have large incomes from investing capital in firms. This shows that the sharing economy is regressive without a substantial redistribution of wealth.

How much redistribution is needed? In Figure 3, we have the income ratio of the sharing economy when all the "excess wealth" of the top 5 percent of the wealth distribution is redistributed equally to the entire population, where excess wealth is defined as the amount of wealth owned by the top 5 percent that exceeds the wealth at the 0.95 quantile.

In other words, the simulation confiscates wealth from the top 5 percent in order to bring their wealth levels down to the level of the individuals at the ninety-fifth centile. This constitutes 44 percent of the nation's financial wealth, so the redistribution is substantial. We see in Figure 3 that all individuals in the

investor-owned economy (when $\sigma = 0$) except those at the very top of the wealth distribution now fare better than they do under capitalism with $t = 30\%$ — the gains from Pareto efficiency are now shared widely. It is interesting to note, in contrast with Figure 2, that with this wealth leveling, the least skilled workers do better when firms are investor-owned than when they are worker-owned. This is unsurprising when one understands that, with the redistribution of wealth, the capital owned by the least skilled citizens is significantly more valuable than their labor power.

A critic might note that, if 44 percent of the nation's financial wealth were redistributed as an equal demogrant, then poor households would likely consume much of the demogrant rather than invest it. An alternative would be for the wealth confiscated to be held by the state, which would invest it in firms. The state would then receive both interest on its capital investment and its share of profits (when the firms are not worker-owned), which it would distribute as a demogrant to households (or invest in public goods and services). The resulting income distributions would be the ones of Figure 3. Of course, this ignores the question of the state's behavior as an owner of capital.

Finally, Figure 4 presents the relative income distributions when the top 10 percent of wealth distribution is leveled down: this would involve capturing 54 percent of the entire financial wealth of the economy and redistributing it as an equal demogrant (or, as above, there is the state-ownership option).

The picture when the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution is leveled down is similar to Figure 3. This is not surprising, because leveling down the wealth of the ninetieth to ninety-fifth centiles, as occurs in Figure 4, only produces an increase in the fraction of total wealth redistributed from 44 to 54 percent. To be precise, compared to Figure 3, Figure 4 implements a further redistribution of income from the top 10 percent to the bottom 90 percent.

Let me attempt some summary of these simulations:

- Social democracy with taxation (Figure 1) appears to be an effective way to achieve significant improvements in the income distribution, compared to capitalism. At a tax rate of 50 percent (as currently exists in the Nordic economies), the incomes of those in the bottom half of the skill (and wealth) distribution would increase by between 70 percent and 90 percent, compared to capitalism with a 30 percent tax rate. A critical question is whether a tax rate of 50 percent is politically accessible, given the wealth distribution of the United States. The societies that today have tax rates of this magnitude have a considerably more equal distribution of wealth than the United States, and also considerably more trust in others and in government.

- A sharing economy — even a fully worker-owned economy — is regressive compared to capitalism with a 30 percent tax rate. The regressivity would be reduced with income taxation, which does not exist in the simulations of Figure 2. If there is not either a significant redistribution of wealth or substantial income taxation, a worker-owned economy is not good for workers. The driving force here is that the US economy is very capital-intensive, and as long as capital remains owned by households in a highly regressive manner, investors will extract a large share of the social product in a market economy. This is even the case if all profits go to workers.

- If the capital of the top 5 percent of the wealth distribution is leveled down via wealth taxation and redistributed equally to all, and households invest that capital rather than consuming it (Figure 3), then the investor-owned sharing economy is good for workers. Ironically, the lowest skilled fare better in the

investor-owned economy than in the worker-owned economy, because their capital would be worth more than their labor power.

- If the capital of the top 10 percent of the wealth distribution is leveled down via wealth taxation (Figure 4), the income distributions are qualitatively similar to those of Figure 3; income is, however, higher for the bottom 90 percent than in Figure 3. The advantages of this further leveling down would not be solely with respect to the static income distribution, but they could make the cooperative ethos more robust.

- None of these simulations changes the distribution of skills from what it currently is in the United States. Because socialism will reform the class nature of education, the skills of the least-skilled workers should increase substantially, and this will reduce income inequality to a degree that I do not try to predict.

- Recall that the Arrow-Debreu model of capitalism is a much cleaner system than actual American capitalism, replete as the latter is with monopoly elements and non-competitive rents in general. The gains of a socialist economy with respect to this beast are not modeled here. All the models are ones of perfect competition, with no monopoly elements.

8 THE ROLE OF THE STATE

I have said very little about the role of the state in the economy, because I have wanted to emphasize that Kantian optimization can decentralize in an efficient way important aspects of resource allocation that, when Nash optimization is the behavioral ethos, *must* be handled by the state. I do, however, think that the state's economic role will be important in market socialism, although I have nothing original to add to what others have written about this.

In particular, the state will be largely responsible for education, health, research, and social insurance. Moreover, the degree to which citizens engage in Kantian optimization will surely, in reality, be incomplete. It will take time for people to learn to cooperate thoroughly in their economic decisions, and to design the institutions (such as labor unions and investors' unions) that will facilitate such behavior. I have said that many inefficiencies that we call market failures are more accurately called failures of Nash optimization, but not all inefficiencies are of this kind. The absence of certain markets (for insurance and credit) will probably continue to require state intervention. Regarding pervasive economic planning in normal times, I am more agnostic.

My aim has been to construct alternative blueprints of what a socialist economy could be. The blueprint that most socialists thought they knew evaporated with the failure of the twentieth-century planned economies. Socialist blueprints are necessary to inspire people to organize for an alternative to capitalism: you can't fight something with nothing. Having the blueprint, and the inspiration it hopefully creates, is only the first step. But the second step, how to realize the blueprint from the status quo, is another issue. That path will surely require major state participation in the economy. Whether human society will ever reach a point at which the state can wither away is a question I do not find particularly interesting. This eventuality is too distant from our historical experience to discuss scientifically.

Indeed, my adherence to market socialism is motivated by a belief that change must be incremental. Markets have evolved over centuries, even millennia, and they do certain things very well. We have no precise ideas about how Pareto efficiency can be achieved without markets. As I wrote, Pareto efficiency is a concept that is independent of markets and property relations: it is a general conception of non-wasteful allocation of resources.

Unless we have an alternative to the first theorem of welfare economics in its various forms, which are truths about market economies, capitalist or socialist, we would be insane to discard markets. If some leftists believe that markets are not essential, this is because they have not properly understood the importance of efficiency as a desideratum, which is, as I've said, an unfortunate error in the history of socialist thought.

9 FINAL REMARKS

Socialism has always been conceived of as a cooperative society. The first contribution of this article is to construct a precise model of how economic agents can cooperate in their economic decisions. This model can be embedded into general-equilibrium models of economies with socialist property relations, thus showing precisely how various negative features of capitalism as a resource-allocation mechanism can be rectified under socialism: the deadweight loss associated with income taxation, and the failure of the market to properly decentralize the production of public goods and the regulation of public bads.

A corollary is that economists should cease to conceive of Nash optimization in games as the universal characterization of rationality, independent of social system. Many would agree that Nash optimization is not appropriate within the family: I propose to extend this claim to the socialist economy as a whole. The skeptic may respond that my models are pie in the sky. I reply that the view economists have of reality has been shaped by the mathematically beautiful concept of Nash equilibrium. With a fine hammer, as they say, every problem looks like a nail. Now that we have a precise formulation of cooperative optimization, we must reexamine history to see where we can observe cooperation in economic activity. Armed with this new hammer, we will, I predict, find many examples of cooperative behavior.

The second contribution of this analysis — and this may be sharply contested — is a view of socialist finance. Socialist ethics, I claim, require a radical interpretation of equality of opportunity, as proposed by G. A. Cohen. But it would be unrealistic to believe that, once such equality has been achieved, people will all save to the same degree out of their labor earnings. People will still choose different occupations, achieve different levels of education, earn different wages, and save at different rates. Unless savings are confiscated by the state, households will invest differentially, and investments must afford a market return. Capital will no longer be born encrusted with blood and dirt. While wealth taxation must be substantial, in order to sustain the cooperative ethos, it should not be confiscatory. I do not know enough to recommend precise rules: I have proposed general principles.

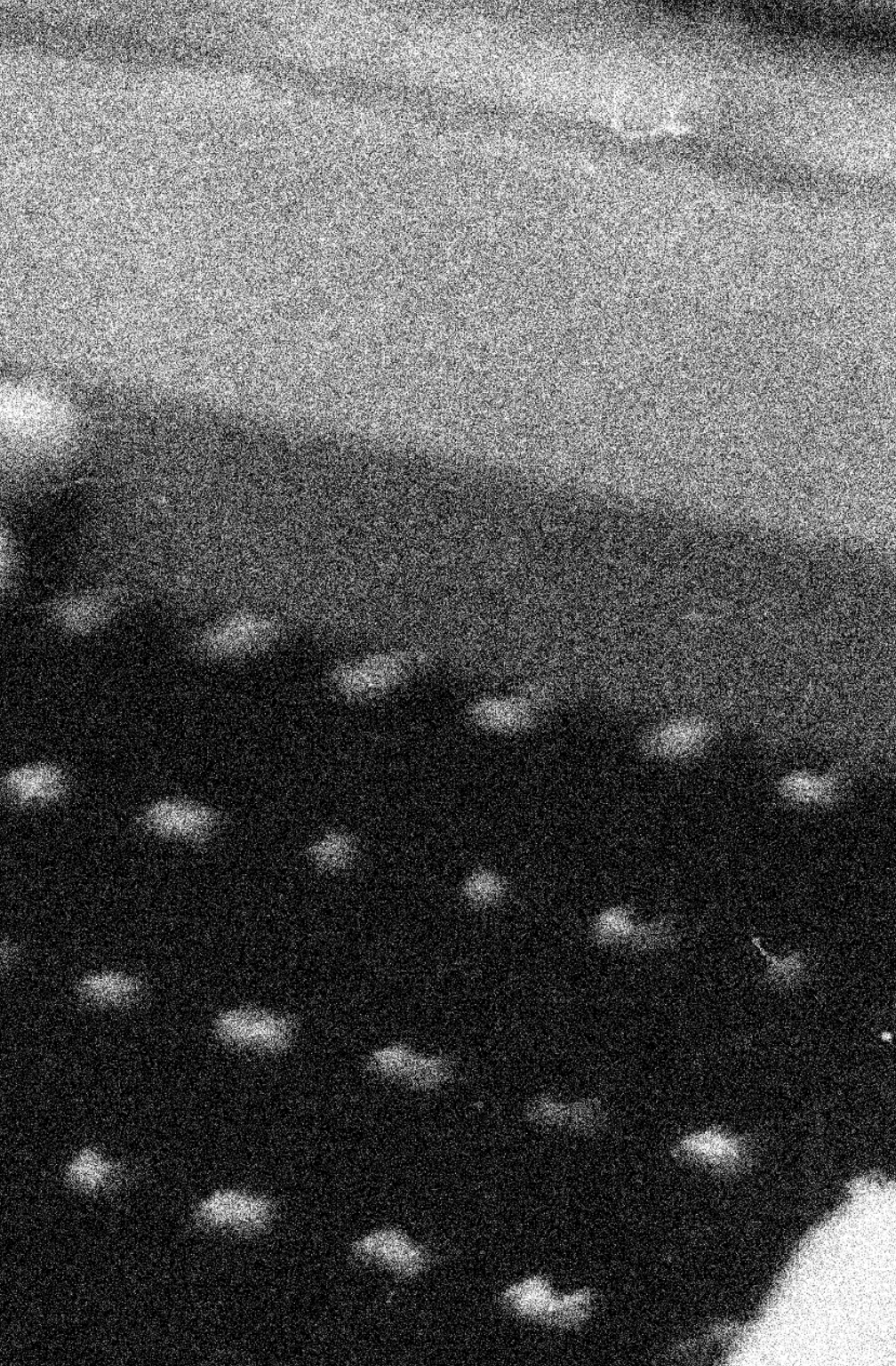
Let me also offer a final thought regarding the comparison of social democracy (Socialism 1) and the sharing economy (Socialism 2). These are quite different economic mechanisms. In the former, capitalist property relations prevail; in the latter, firms are not for sale to shareholders but are effectively owned by those who contribute factors of production to them: their workers and investors. There will be a stock market in social democracy, but not in the sharing economy, as there exists no property right in the firm that outsiders can purchase. In both blueprints, workers and investors will decide upon their factor supplies cooperatively, according to the Kantian protocol.

I have not raised until now the issue of sustainability of the cooperative behavioral ethos. It might be the case that the cooperative behavioral ethos is more sustainable in the sharing economy than in social democracy, precisely because the entire economic surplus is distributed to those who contribute to production in the former, but not in the latter. The principle of cooperation is clear in the property relations of the sharing economy, in contrast

to the existence of a right to receive a share of profits, which can be bought and sold, without contributing to production, in social democracy. Will it therefore be easier to sustain the cooperative ethos in factor provision in the sharing economy than in social democracy? I cannot say, but it seems to me that this might well be so. The right to private firm ownership in social democracy may infect its behavioral ethos.

Models must make radical simplifications of real life. The cooperation I have modeled with Kantian optimization is, I think, only the tip of the cooperative iceberg that would evolve in a socialist society. Presumably, cooperation would spread in ways we cannot imagine at present, just as, under capitalism, the individualistic ethos has created horrors that were impossible for any reasonable mind to imagine.[36] Non-economists may perceive the way I have modeled cooperation as mechanistic and overly formal — bloodless, one might say. I am sufficiently Marxist to believe that cooperation is the key ingredient in constructing socialism, and sufficiently an economist to believe in the power of formal models to clarify our thinking.

36 Who imagined that Nash optimization could have resulted in the 2009 subprime-induced financial crisis? Very few economists. The Nash protocol was aptly described by Charles Prince, former Citigroup chief executive, who said about his bank's participation in dangerously risky lending in 2007, "When the music stops, in terms of liquidity, things will be complicated. But as long as the music's playing, you've got to get up and dance. We're still dancing." *Financial Times*, July 9, 2007.



ABSTRACT

Richard J. Evans's biography of *Eric Hobsbawm, A Life in History*, has been heralded as the definitive study of a great Marxist historian. Forged in relation to world-historic events such as the Russian Revolution of 1917, World War II and anti-fascism, and the rise and demise of Stalinism and social democracy, Hobsbawm's scholarship charted new ways of looking at history. Evans provides a fascinating portrait of this influential figure, but one that falls short of the probing and critical examination that his subject demands.

REVIEW

Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Hobsbawm's Century

Bryan Palmer

Were the British Marxist historians a coherent lot, congealed in the sameness of their affiliation to historical materialism? How like-minded were Eric Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, Dorothy Thompson, Rodney Hilton, Maurice Dobb, George Rudé, John Saville, Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan, Dona Torr, and Margot Heinemann? Conventional wisdom tends to lump these figures together; recent discussion gestures lightly toward differentiation.[1]

1 A standard overview of the British Marxist historians is Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984). Recent studies parse homogeneity with insightful commentary on particular issues, such as the national question, revealing significant differences among the British Marxist historians. See, for instance, Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013). See also

There was, of course, mutual regard among these dissident historians. All shared a certain outlaw status during the Cold War years in which their research and writing largely first appeared. Commonality registered in their project of injecting a strong dose of class inequality into the weak tea of High Table histories preoccupied with the bland fare of one-class societies and their *longue durée* continuities. But to assume that the British Marxist historians produced histories out of some common template obscures important distinctions relating to research methods, stylistic sensibilities, and analytic orientations. The Marxisms of these distinguished practitioners of historical materialism parted ways intellectually and, over time, politically. Many left the Communist Party in 1956; some did not. Contentions simmered below the surface of an apparent, always uneasy, consensus.[2]

First among equals in this extraordinary Marxist contingent was Eric J. Hobsbawm. Widely recognized as the world's premier Marxist historian, Hobsbawm's intellectual range was unrivaled. Never one to pander to prevailing considerations, he was often a brave voice of dissent challenging convention. Well received throughout the Global South, where his writings were eagerly translated and sold exceedingly well, Hobsbawm's influence and regard was resolutely international. There were few Marxists accorded the respect Hobsbawm garnered in distinct layers of the literary marketplace; his histories were embraced by disparate publics, among whom were many not especially committed to a radical reconstruction of the status quo.[3]

Bryan D. Palmer, "Hobsbawm's History: Metropolitan Marxism and Analytic Breadth," in Palmer, *Marxism and Historical Practice, Volume II: Interventions and Appreciations* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017), 251–53.

2 Christopher Hill, "The Shock Tactician," *Times Higher Education Supplement,* 7 October 1994.

3 Note, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm, "What is the Workers' Country?" in

Hobsbawm was early anointed a "chosen one." The Cambridge student weekly, *Granta*, with Hobsbawm as editor, profiled him in 1939, declaring, "There's a freshman at King's who knows about everything." Eric was elected to the Cambridge Conversazione Society, a secretive body known as the Apostles, whose supper meetings he enjoyed attending. Eventually, Hobsbawm would rub shoulders in these Apostolic gatherings with the likes of John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, and the later-to-be notorious Russian agents Anthony Blunt and Guy Burgess.[4]

Decades later, Hobsbawm's unparalleled capacity to synthesize capitalism's development earned him accolades from his counterparts. They appreciated his project of producing a totalizing "history of society," where recognition of economic determination did not end up slighting "art, science, religion, ideology, and even social psychology." Hobsbawm's insistence on approaching history as a holistic narrative came at a time, moreover, when many *soi-disant* leftists were succumbing to the faddish particularism of postmodernism.[5] As Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones conclude, "[P]erhaps one of Hobsbawm's outstanding and least commented upon achievements has been his ability to bring

---

Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 49–65. See also Perry Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *London Review of Books,* 3 October and 17 October 2002, in Anderson, *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 311.

4 Pieter Keuneman, "Eric Hobsbawm: A Cambridge Profile, 1939," from *Granta,* 7 June 1939, reprinted in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 366–8. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 98–9, which also addresses the Apostles, 101, 107, 120, 187–90.

5 Eugene D. Genovese, "The Politics of Class Struggle in the History of Society: An Appraisal of the Work of Eric Hobsbawm," in Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud, eds., *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13–36. Hobsbawm advocated that social history break out of its fragmenting impulses. See Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971), 20–45.

together the propositions of classical Marxism and the empirical preoccupations of social and economic historians into a virtually seamless web." This meant that the transition from feudalism to capitalism, class formation and industrial capitalist development, protest and rebellion, unionization, urbanization, left-wing parties, and insurgent mobilizations became, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, "almost part of the 'common sense' of academic inquiry and research."[6]

Like the jazz he so loved, Hobsbawm's historical improvisation encompassed hot and cool, notes of swing and blues, a call-and-response engagement with conventional understandings that served as a stage for dissonant arguments. In the polyphonic orchestration of his presentation of the past, Hobsbawm delivered a sweeping periodization of capitalism's economic, political, and social rhythms, harnessing development's discords in ways that never forgot the price of "progress." Modern historical experience, Hobsbawm insisted, necessitated "the expectation of apocalypse."[7] Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* (1994), an account of "the short twentieth century, 1914–1991," ends with an admonition:

> If humanity is to have a recognizable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail. And the price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness.[8]

A recent biography of Hobsbawm by a politically conventional European historian and one-time colleague of "Eric the Red,"

---

6 Samuel and Stedman Jones, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Politics,* ix; Henry Abelove et al., eds., *Visions of History: Interviews with E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm* … (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 39–40.

7 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1995), 330.

8 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 585.

Richard J. Evans, provides an opportunity to take the measure of this preeminent Marxist historian.[9] Something of an "official" account of Hobsbawm's life, Evans obviously had the support of the Hobsbawm family. His generous rendition of a twentieth-century man of left letters relies on an extensive personal archive, including a diary Eric kept for much of his youth and sporadically thereafter. A previously published autobiography, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (2002) concentrated on the public man of ideas and politics, offering Hobsbawm's self-presentation. It was as unrepentant as it was often unreflective, at least for the period of his adulthood. In delving deeply into the private person, Evans elaborates on what Hobsbawm appeared reticent to reveal. Yet in confronting the politics and publications of his fascinating subject, it is difficult not to see Evans as Hobsbawm's handler. *A Life in History* is an orchestrated attempt to mainstream a Marxist, revealing how distant Evans is from the left-wing milieu in which Hobsbawm was immersed and where he often created oppositional waves.[10]

Evans also produced this biography quickly. Unforced errors inevitably creep into the text. Was a seventeen-year-old Eric really reading "an early work by the American Communist Farrell Dobbs"? Unlikely, for by the year cited, Dobbs had published little, if anything, that Hobsbawm could have come across, was never a member of the Communist Party, and was involved in a 1934 Teamster insurgency

9 Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Hereafter, specific page references to this text will be provided in parentheses.

10 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*. Perry Anderson, in a brilliant review essay addressing this account, notes that the first one hundred pages of *Interesting Times*, roughly one-quarter of the book, provide a "deeply felt, imaginative recreation" of Hobsbawm's youth, but what follows constitutes a kind of cleansing of the personal, in which "we never glimpse the same interior landscape again … [a] misleading … suppression of … subjectivity." Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 277–320, quote 279–80. Evans notes: "This biography … focuses above all on his personal experiences and indeed on his inner life." (ix)

that would lead to him becoming a Trotskyist (57). Evans must have misread Hobsbawm's diary, which likely referred to writing by the British Communist Maurice Dobb. He also errs in dating Eric's gift of Stalin's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* to a cousin in 1935, the book not being published until later in the 1930s (87). Labor history, Hobsbawm's original field of study, is not something Evans is particularly attuned to (he mistakenly refers to the West Coast leader of the American International Longshore and Warehouse Union as Harry Bridge). Yet he is altogether too quick to offer pronouncements — on the basis of little appreciation for the nuances of historiographic judgement — that the study of the working class had "entered a period of crisis — terminal crisis" in the 1980s (385, 533).[11] Sheila Rowbotham, identified as a coauthor of a feminist critique of a 1978 Hobsbawm essay on socialist iconography and images of women, was not involved in the publication of the rejoinder Evans references (538).[12] Slipups aside, and notwithstanding the accent Evans places on the intimate sphere, it is the political that is paramount in conveying the meanings of Hobsbawm's life and critically engaging with the study of that history.

(OVER)DETERMINATIONS: A LIFE IN HISTORY

Born in the year of the Russian Revolution, Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm would live in the shadow of Soviet Communism's

11 No doubt, working-class history is not the vibrant area of study that it once was, but Evans is clearly unaware of the trajectory of this subdiscipline, including the development of transnational global histories of labor, which Hobsbawm would certainly have appreciated. See, for instance, Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

12 See Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography," *History Workshop Journal* 6 (Autumn 1978), 121–38; Sally Alexander, Anna Davin, and Eve Hostettler, "Labouring Women: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop Journal* 8 (Autumn 1979), 174–82.

experiment for his lengthy adulthood. A Central European by upbringing, Hobsbawm's Austrian mother was an aspiring novelist, his father a piteous English man's-man type who enjoyed Rudyard Kipling, music hall songs, and sports, and valued masculine physicality. Both parents were Jews, but neither was "observant."[13] His far more influential mother conveyed to Eric the necessity of never doing anything that suggested shame in being Jewish. Hobsbawm later associated Jewishness with a domestic "network stretching across countries and oceans [and] that shifting between countries was a normal part of life" (8–10). Orphaned at fourteen, his father succumbing to what was vaguely described as "heart trauma" and his mother falling prey two years later to pulmonary tuberculosis, Hobsbawm lived for the rest of his youth with relatives and his sister, Nancy, in Berlin and London. A decade later, his Marxism a substitute for sexual love, his affiliation to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) a replacement for the nuclear family he had lost, Hobsbawm was, in spite of his political certainties, "alone, drifting, with an uncertain future" (75, 182).

"I grew up at the most sectarian point of the socialist-communist split," Hobsbawm recalled in the mid-1980s. He added, "It's now clear to everyone that that was a disaster. It was my most formative political experience" (43). At the time, however, Hobsbawm's diary echoed the Comintern's tragically defeatist view that Adolf Hitler's ascent to power in Germany would pave the way for revolutionary breakthroughs: "Perhaps fascism will bring some good — it will be the school through which the proletariat passes, then to emerge victorious under the leadership of the C.P." (59). A few years later, Hobsbawm participated in the 1936 Paris Bastille Day parade. He rode on the lorry filming the day's inspiring events,

13 See Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew: And Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

his privileged, exhilarating placement secured through an uncle's status in the official camera unit of the Socialist Party (102–4). Hobsbawm later wrote that he "belonged to the era of anti-fascist unity and the Popular Front. It continues to determine my strategic thinking in politics to this day."[14]

It might be possible to square this circle of political origins and influences, explaining two quite different formative moments in affiliation to Communism: the sectarianism of the Third Period and the subsequent ecumenical Popular Front. This demands a certain accounting. Hobsbawm never delivered it. To claim that one's politics were forged, for specific reasons and with quite particular consequences, in *both* Berlin in 1932–33 *and* the Paris of the Popular Front in 1936 is difficult. This juxtaposition is all the more problematic if you allude to *each* formative moment as an explanation of why you have remained affiliated with the Communist Party through the thick and the increasing thin of Stalinist degeneration and depressing denouement. Yet this is what Hobsbawm does, and what Evans accepts at face value. In failing to interrogate rigorously, let alone challenge, Hobsbawm's allusions to how his seemingly contradictory, if telescoped, history determined an ongoing allegiance to the Soviet Union and a politics of Stalinism, Evans never seriously scrutinizes the life inside history that he is presenting. As Perry Anderson has commented trenchantly, there are dichotomies evident in Hobsbawm that are layered in all aspects of his work, intellectual and political. They cry out for serious analytic and political cross-examination. The assertions of the subject of study are, in the end, no substitute for a more detached dissection of what too often seems to be a convenient, even self-serving, sense of inevitability.[15] Evans is

14 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 218.

15 Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 285.

either ill-equipped or unwilling to take up this kind of surgical incision into Hobsbawm's body politic. He wields nothing like an analytic scalpel, instead serving up his treatment of the making of a Marxist with a cake lifter.

A Life in History does, at times, give us detailed, and sometimes insightful, commentary on Eric's private thoughts and intimate life, drawing especially on the Hobsbawm diary. Evans provides accounts of youthful sexual encounters, among them an escapade in a brothel that Hobsbawm first recounted in his 2002 autobiography. More important is the slow death of Hobsbawm's 1943 marriage to his first wife, Muriel Seaman, a fellow Communist about whom *Interesting Times* is surprisingly silent. Something of a union of political convenience, Muriel and Eric's match weakened, the two growing apart; by 1950, their differences, at least in Muriel's assessment of the situation, were irreconcilable. Sexually unfulfilled for some time, she told Eric, for whom she still had considerable affection, that she needed to be "fucked all night long" (274–5).

Tough love, indeed. Hobsbawm found the news difficult to take; engulfed in depression, he considered suicide. He managed to find his way out of this personal malaise, and companionship was not lacking. His sister, Nancy, understated Eric's attractions, which included being a riveting conversationalist and an iconoclastic wit, blessed with physical vigor if not conventionally good looks. "He's such an ugly man," Nancy proclaimed in wonderment, "I just can't understand why all these women are attracted to him!" (391). In Paris, Eric sustained an intense affair with a married woman who traveled in circles of unorthodox Marxists, Hélène Berghauer; her husband (with whom Eric was also very friendly) was a student of Henri Lefebvre. Evans labels this a *ménage à trois*, with Hobsbawm acknowledging that his time with the couple in the aftermath of the dissolution of his first marriage provided him with "the

closest thing to a family I had."[16] Later, as the CPGB fractured in 1956–57, he took up with a mature student studying psychology at Birkbeck, Marion Bennathan. This liaison lasted a few years, with Marion giving birth to a son fathered by Eric. She would not leave her somewhat psychologically fragile husband, however, and the relationship inevitably petered out, Eric venturing on to new terrain in Soho's jazz clubs (323–9, 354–5).

As Evans necessarily grapples with the politics of the far left that Hobsbawm's political development drew him into, he finds himself treading on unfamiliar terrain, where each interpretive step demands careful consideration. Most serious is the balancing act evident in Evans's approach to Hobsbawm's relationship to Stalinism. Evans acknowledges, on the one hand, the regard with which Hobsbawm and his circle held the Soviet *líder máximo* while, on the other, ultimately downplaying the extent to which Joseph Stalin and/or Stalinism were influential in Eric's emerging worldview and the later politics of the Marxist historian.

A 1934 diary entry, for instance, records Hobsbawm's admiration for Stalin, whom he regarded as one of "the great statesmen of this century," ostensibly a man of principle who was flexible enough to utilize a variety of means to achieve his important ends. Yet Evans follows this with the assertion that "Eric's intellectual formation owed little to Stalin" (58). Hobsbawm's faith in the Soviet Union "had all the uncompromising absolutism of an adolescent crush" (59).

Perhaps. Yet as Hobsbawm made unambiguously and routinely clear, this youthful infatuation lasted a lifetime. Hobsbawm defended the absurd Moscow Trials (1936–38) allegations that leading Bolshevik cadre aligned with Leon Trotsky to subvert the Revolution, going so far as to work in concert with Hitler's Germany

16 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 328.

to deliver the Soviet Union to fascist aggression. During the Popular Front class struggles that rocked Paris in 1936 and 1937, Hobsbawm reduced the role of Trotskyists to that of "provoking risings & riots among strikers" (99, 148–9). He insisted, to the end of his days, that in the Spanish Civil War, there was no alternative to standing with the USSR, whitewashing the role played by the Comintern in suppressing revolutionary initiatives and caricaturing Catalonian anarchist and other non-Communist militants as little more than saboteurs (150–1). When the Soviet Union finally imploded as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the Marxist historian found it one of the most devastating blows suffered in the slide into the political abyss of the late twentieth century.

Never drawn to the activist component of Party membership, Hobsbawm developed, from his time at Cambridge, a disdain for the "humdrum, everyday tasks" that Evans suggests it was the tedious "lot of ordinary rank-and-file Communist Party members to carry out" (138). "I had no natural taste or suitable temperament" for orthodox Party activities, Hobsbawm later confessed, noting that after 1950, he "operated entirely in academic or intellectual groups."[17] Hobsbawm's place within the CPGB was increasingly that of a convenient hybrid, the insider-outsider. Evans does not so much interrogate this dualism, asking how and why Hobsbawm was able to straddle certain awkward fences of belief and identification, as he tailors it in his ongoing effort to fit his subject into what he considers the best possible political presentation.

We are told, through citation of a 1990s recollection, that Hobsbawm came to the conclusion early in his World War II soldier's training that "the Party line was absolutely useless" (200). A few pages later, however, Eric is writing to his cousin Ron that "Stalin's speech means a people's war in every sense — technical

17 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 190.

and political," and he organized the sending of a football, signed by his entire unit, to fraternal counterparts in the Red Army. "Every day that they hold out, every victory they win, every plane they bring down," thought Hobsbawm, "brings the English and Soviet people closer" (210). His boredom with his war training palpable, Hobsbawm promoted the Communist view that a Second Front should be opened up, echoing the official position of the CPGB, in pieces written for the wall newspaper he edited in his camp (215). This brought him to the attention of the secret service, Section 5 of British Military Intelligence. MI5 considered Hobsbawm's postings and their espousal of the Soviet line, however logical, as subversive.

Described by security state spooks as "a keen and very active member of the Party and well thought of at Party Headquarters," Hobsbawm was now a man marked for close watching by the authorities, who deemed him sufficiently dangerous to warrant keeping him on English soil and restricting deployment overseas. Tired of the charade, Hobsbawm applied to be a research student at Cambridge, and he was released from the Army early in 1946. Privately, Hobsbawm was supposedly questioning the Party leadership's capacities, suggesting that the membership needed the revitalization of democratic discussion, prompting Evans to claim that "Eric's independence of mind was rubbing up against the Stalinist rigidity of the Party leadership" (239). Hobsbawm recalls in *Interesting Times* that he, like many fellow Communist intellectuals in Britain, was growing increasingly skeptical about the immediate postwar Soviet assault on Josip Broz Tito and his Yugoslavian revisionism. Also apparently troubling was the onslaught of Stalinist show trials in Eastern and Central Europe between 1949 and 1952, many of which targeted Jews and put on

display a repugnant antisemitism.[18] Yet at the time, Hobsbawm was contributing articles to the Communist-controlled journal *New Central European Observer*, defending the Soviet orientation to the "people's democracies," something that Evans skirts (303–9). Along with Christopher Hill and others, Hobsbawm was in sufficiently good standing with Party officialdoms in both Britain and the USSR to be invited to Moscow by the Soviet Academy of Sciences, although the trip, his first to the cherished socialist fatherland, left him dispirited and in no hurry to return (313–15).[19] It is but a short step for Evans to claim that Eric Hobsbawm was one of the leaders, if not the principal inspiration, behind a 1956 mobilization of dissent in which the Communist Party Historians' Group he chaired figured prominently. This began as criticism of the CPGB leadership's failure to respond adequately to the revelations of Stalin's crimes, aired publicly in Nikita Khrushchev's February 1956 speech before the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It ended with Hobsbawm's ambivalent, at best, relationship to the subsequent New Left, which emerged in part out of the Party crisis of 1956. In his presentation of Hobsbawm's role in these late-1950s and early-1960s developments, Evans largely misconstrues where Eric was situated and why.

Soviet repression of a liberalization initiative in its satellite Hungary brought things to a head. As student protests erupted amid workers' strikes and anti-Soviet protests in Poland, Red Army tanks rolled into Budapest. Hungary's reform-minded prime minister, Imre Nagy, was sacked on Moscow's orders and later executed; more than 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops died in ensuing street battles, and 200,000 Hungarians fled their

18 See, as well, Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 192–5.

19 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 192–200; Gregory Elliott, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics* (London: Pluto, 2010), 33.

country. This was the final straw for many CPGB members. When the smoke cleared inside the British party, in 1957, one-quarter of the ranks had resigned; one-third of the staff of the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker,* walked away from their desks; and virtually the entire corps of intellectuals won over to the ostensible party of the revolutionary left in the 1930s and 1940s refused to be affiliated with the cause of their youth. The Historians' Group was divided, but the bulk of its leading figures could no longer work under Party auspices. Hobsbawm could and did, albeit with reservations and regret. He resigned as chair of the Historians' Group, which, in any case, was now fractured beyond repair.

Evans's contribution to an extensive historiography on these events of 1956 is to situate Hobsbawm within the intra-Party conflict. He does this by drawing extensively on MI5 transcripts of bugged conversations inside the CPGB's King Street offices. His account illuminates how the Marxist insider-outsider pushed the envelope of dissent in 1956, with Hobsbawm clashing with the Party hierarchy. Yet Evans exaggerates significantly Hobsawm's leadership role among the dissident communist anti-Stalinist critics and obfuscates the limits of Hobsbawm's political opposition in the 1956 crisis of British communism. Many regarded Eric's stance as lacking resolve. He was seen as waffling, tending to justify Soviet actions, especially with respect to the intervention in Hungary. There is also an important downside to Evans relying so heavily on state evidence that accents testy, if cloistered, conversations taking place within British communism's inner sanctum, where private exchanges clandestinely recorded by MI5 were never meant to be part of public discussion. Privileging this behind-the-scenes dispute between Hobsbawm and Party leadership, Evans looks only superficially at the groundswell of CPGB members' public opposition that was decrying Stalinism *outside* the Party. In this more open and rancorous discussion, historians such as

E. P. Thompson and John Saville played a role very different than what Christopher Hill dubbed "Ericism."

Evans, as Hobsbawm's handler, presents Eric as a go-between linking the rebels and the Moscow loyalists, elevating this into a primacy within the opposition. Hobsbawm genuinely embraced de-Stalinization, but to depict him, as Evans does, as a "dangerous" opponent of the bureaucratic CPGB regime, largely because this was the view inside the increasingly hunkered-down King Street party officialdom, misses much of what was going on. It fails to address how Hobsbawm was *negotiating* a political crisis that others saw as irreconcilable. Hobsbawm managed, in the aftermath of 1956, to present himself as a critic of Party bureaucracy and the worst excesses of Stalinist retrenchment, while remaining associated with the official Soviet-aligned Communist movement, both in Britain and in other countries around the world. Hobsbawm thus had his cake, and he was able to eat some of it as well. This could be regarded as an achievement of sorts, but it might also be seen as a mark of Eric's appetite for political accommodation that would ensure self-preservation, even self-advancement. For the rest of his life, Thompson considered the struggle of 1956 as a badge of anti-Stalinist honor to be worn proudly by all those who fought dissident communism's difficult battles. Hobsbawm's understandings were entirely different. He regarded the CPGB crisis as an occurrence that left thirty thousand British Communists troubled, a regrettable event best relegated to the category of "bad memories."[20]

20 Evans cites little of the voluminous secondary literature on the CPGB and 1956. Elliott, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics,* 38 stands as a blunt rejoinder to positions staked out by Evans, who too often takes Hobsbawm at his self-interested word. For a recent discussion (one that can be read against the interpretive grain of Evans's presentation), see Paul Flewers and John McIlroy, eds., *1956: John Saville, EP Thompson &* The Reasoner (London: Merlin, 2016). Contrast E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978); Cal Winslow, ed.,

Evans grapples with little of this. In the aftermath of 1956, he situates Hobsbawm in the New Left that emerged out of the dissolution of that year similarly. This new movement consolidated in clubs and publications, which evolved from the Thompson-Saville edited *Reasoner* and *New Reasoner*, broadening in the parallel formation of *Universities and Left Review* and the eventual fusion of these currents in the *New Left Review*. Eric, according to Evans:

> remained personally and politically close to his friends in the New Left, including Edward Thompson, John Saville, Rodney Hilton and many others. They had no real political differences beyond the merely symbolic one of membership in the Party, and they were engaged in a common enterprise to build a new kind of radical social and political history "from below." (351)

This is simply not true. Historiographic sympathies and congruencies aside (and these are easily exaggerated), to suggest that Thompson and others would have regarded ongoing membership in the Communist Party in the late 1950s as "merely symbolic" exposes how removed Evans is from any understanding of the heated politics of the time.

In the aftermath of 1956's convulsions, Hobsbawm's relationship to the emerging New Left was one of distanced involvement, to be sure, but it contained too much fence-sitting, not a little condescension, and even some questionable sleuthing for the Party that he continued to support. Hobsbawm thus contributed to the odd New Left publication, but he also offered up "intelligence" to the CPGB leaders about meetings and mobilizations of his former comrades now engaged in struggling to build an alternative politics. In his reports to King Street, Hobsbawm presented the New Left as being in an organizational shambles,

---

E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays and Polemics (New York: Monthly Review, 2014); and Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 210–11.

a kind of political chaos that nonetheless attracted progressive and rebellious people in ways the CPGB no longer could (459). Hobsbawm, however, was never a major builder of any of these initiatives. His insider-outsider status within the CPGB was in some ways replicated in the New Left, allowing him to mount political fences without the feet of activist involvement touching ground. If Evans attempts to situate Hobsbawm at the crossroads of the New Left's formation, *Interesting Times* is a more reliable account of its author's jaundiced assessment of this political experiment.

The first British New Left, Hobsbawm concluded in 2012, reformed neither the Labour Party nor the Communist Party; it failed to establish new organizations, lasting institutions of significance, or even national leaders of prominence. Evans acknowledges that Hobsbawm was indeed skeptical of the otherworldliness within which the New Left incarcerated itself, but he implies that Eric was influential and involved, citing the case of the movement's Partisan Coffee House, in which he notes Hobsbawm was a "company director" (459). But the Coffee House endeavor, the brainchild of one of Eric's PhD students and future founder of the History Workshop movement, Raphael Samuel, was not really something that Hobsbawm had anything to do with. The Partisan needed some "suitable left-wing personalities" to preside over it, and Hobsbawm let himself be "talked into one of these directorships, against my better judgement." So did some well-heeled ex-Communists. Like Hobsbawm, they were to find that "Raph took not the slightest notion of any of us." The scheme was "designed for disaster," condemned by Samuel's allergic reaction to anything smacking of commonsense practicality. "Only nostalgia and the need to maintain contact between the pre- and post-1956 generations of the left can explain why I found myself in this lunatic enterprise," concluded Hobsbawm illuminatingly, if

uncharitably. Politically, Hobsbawm ultimately wrote off the New Left that emerged out of 1956 as a "half-remembered footnote."[21]

If Hobsbawm was an outsider within British Communism, his marginalization within mainstream academic life at mid-century was arresting. Evans provides an understated if devastating indictment of the petty and nasty anti-communist intolerance that infused an ostensibly value-free scholarly environment in the late 1940s and early to mid-1950s. It was at this time that Hobsbawm, always drawn, like so many of the British Marxists, to literature, opted to study history, concentrating his first researches on Fabian reformers and the condition of the working class. Hobsbawm's quickly produced doctoral thesis, highly critical of the Fabians, sailed through examination, even as some of its readers thought the study "too severe on the Society's leaders." R. H. Tawney scotched its publication, damning it as "slick, superficial, and pretentious." Eric was turned down for a junior research fellowship at King's College, Cambridge, on his first application because a don there declared that his "memory of the Fabians bore no relation to Hobsbawm's analysis." Enough said! Undaunted, Hobsbawm rewrote the fellowship dissertation demanded of all applicants, using his knowledge of the printed material Sidney and Beatrice Webb amassed for their late-nineteenth-century study *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894) and its subsequent revised editions, the last appearing in 1920. In what would be a defining methodological decision, Hobsbawm focused on a body of published sources to produce a "structural, problem-oriented history" that broke decisively with the conventional wisdom in the field. Entitling his "preliminary sketch" "Studies in the 'New' Trade Unionism, 1889–1914," Hobsbawm tackled the question of why a

21 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 211–14. Anderson thought this barbed commentary displayed "a disconcerting lack of any sense of proportion." Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 287.

new form of labor organization surfaced in Britain after 1870 and how it registered successes among previously largely unorganized workers in the ways that it did.[22] Tawney (again!) was asked to assess the project and offered it some backhanded compliments, recognizing that it had been written under pressures of time. A second reader, the conservative economic historian T. S. Ashton, dismissed it more categorically. Eric nonetheless managed to secure the junior fellowship, which, while poorly paid, provided meals and rent-free accommodation at King's College (245–8). It was a beginning.

Hobsbawm's labor history found its way into the pages of the *Economic History Review*. He landed a teaching appointment at Birkbeck, where all instruction was in the evenings. Eric managed to structure his teaching into three, eventually two, nights. In 1954 the Hutchinson Library commissioned him to produce a study called "The Rise of the Wage Worker," part of a series edited by the eminent libertarian socialist and prolific political-theorist-economist-historian G. D. H. Cole. Submitted in 1955, the book was rejected. It supposedly contained "objectionable" material. Acceptable scholarship had to "be written without any point of view," an assertion Hobsbawm rightly thought absurd, easily disproven by examination of Hutchinson's list. Hobsbawm was becoming a controversial figure, clashing with conservative historians in public disputes (329–37). One of these was Hugh Trevor-Roper. They argued over Karl Marx's significance in academic circles, although Trevor-Roper was sufficiently liberal in his Cold War postures to recommend that his co-combatant in the culture wars

22 See E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (New York: Basic, 1964). These essays had been preceded by a documentary collection Hobsbawm put together under the direction of Dona Torr, in the CPGB-sponsored series "History in the Making: Nineteenth Century"; Eric J. Hobsbawm, ed., *Labour's Turning Point, 1880–1900* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948).

of the 1950s be admitted to the United States to deliver a series of lectures at Stanford University. MI5 was aghast that Hobsbawm slipped through the cracks of the international anti-Red brigade: his visa application had not been vetted by the British security apparatus, and the Americans were caught off guard, unaware of Eric's Communist record (385).

Small successes aside, Hobsbawm's 1950s were years of ennui. The personal (Muriel's departure) and the political (the crisis of 1956, the increasing precariousness of his insider-outsider status in both the CPGB and the New Left, and the Cold War's constraint on his academic career) dovetailed in discontent. As an antidote to unhappiness, Hobsbawm turned to the work of ideas and the pleasures of the sensual realm. One of the best parts of Evans's account of Hobsbawm's private life explores how these spheres came together in the jazz scene, where Eric's outsider political self could range free. Most people with a passing knowledge of Hobsbawm are aware that he published *The Jazz Scene* in 1959 under the pseudonym Francis Newton, borrowing the nom de plume from a Communist trumpeter featured on the Billie Holiday recording "Strange Fruit." Newton/Hobsbawm authored well over one hundred articles on jazz for the *New Statesman* from 1956 to 1966, bending his pen as well around the business essence of the Soho strip club. A jazz lover from his teenage years, when he discovered Duke Ellington, Hobsbawm had no time for the Soviet disdain of jazz evident throughout the Stalin years (saxophones were banned by the USSR in 1949, thousands of the instruments confiscated, and some musicians marched off to the gulag). With Stalin dead, however, the official Communist attitude toward jazz softened in the mid-1950s, emboldening Hobsbawm to record a program for the BBC on "The Art of Louis Armstrong" in December 1955. Dutiful detectives at MI5 let the broadcasters know that Eric was an active

Communist, promoting cultural relations with the Soviet Union (358). The show went on. Still, Hobsbawm kept his jazz writing and night crawls through the London clubs somewhat to himself, in both Communist and academic circles.

Eric's conviction was that jazz, especially its more orthodox variants, offered a radical aesthetic as an antidote to the crisis of an artistic modernity overtaken by mass consumption. This was congruent with his Communist beliefs. He also found the Soho clubs liberating, and he enjoyed frequenting "places where the day people got rid of their inhibitions after dark" (362). The booze, the drugs, the music, the dropping of racial guards, the "chicks" — in short, the scene — obviously captivated Eric. He was an observer, but he was also a participant, willingly and happily so. Hobsbawm, now in his forties, consummated an ongoing relationship with a twenty-two-year-old part-time sex worker and jazz aficionado he met in a Wardour Street club in 1958. Jo, as Evans names her, worked the streets to support herself and her young daughter, as well as to feed her drug habit. Hobsbawm, whose relationship with Jo commenced as a friendship, eventually suggested, "I'd like to make it with you," eliciting the resigned reply: "Well, sooner or later it had to come." The affair, never quite a blaze of sexual passion, was destined to run its course, but while it lasted, Jo and Eric played off of each other's needs and provided each other companionship, sealed less with a kiss than with a mutual attraction to jazz and the ways it could transcend differences in age, background, politics, and character. For Hobsbawm, it certainly was not love, but it was never boring. They parted company when Jo and her daughter relocated to Brighton, and the two lost contact. When they reestablished a connection, Hobsbawm supported Jo with occasional funds and introduced her to his second wife, Marlene, who was welcoming and friendly to her husband's old girlfriend (356–79).

Hobsbawm's writings on jazz were conservative and uneven, subject to criticism from those who found his intolerance of innovations such as bebop tiresomely stodgy. Jazz for Eric was a traditional genre, drawing on African rhythms, a folk idiom that expressed the trauma experienced by the black poor. He had little time for anything that diluted and displaced this essentially political history, regarding the rising stars of the jazz firmament of the 1940s and 1950s — figures like Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk — as disappointingly narrow.[23] His obituary of Billie Holiday, a tragic but towering talent, conveyed what was best about Hobsbawm. Nothing that he wrote captured so succinctly Hobsbawm's passionate feeling for the oppressed. In confronting the vicious and violent unfairness that burdened and disfigured the great singer, Hobsbawm looked to the root causes of what destroyed human potential. This elicited a hatred of the system, capitalist at its core, stacking the deck so brutally against masses of people: "To be born with both beauty and self-respect in the Negro ghetto of Baltimore in 1915 was too much of a handicap, even without rape at the age of ten and drug-addiction in her teens. But, while she destroyed herself, she sang, unmelodious, profound and heartbreaking. It is impossible not to weep for her, or not to hate the world which made her what she was."[24]

Hobsbawm remained an insider-outsider within the British Communist Party for decades after these late 1950s Cold War academic put-downs, King Street clashes, and Soho excursions and encounters. If the latter provided solace, the former clarified his relationship to socialism. Isaac Deutscher apparently told

23 In contrast, see Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography* (London: William Collins, 1998); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

24 E. J. Hobsbawm, "Billie Holiday," in *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), 294.

Hobsbawm in 1957 that he had erred in allowing himself to be expelled from the Polish Communist Party. Regretting that he had not stayed inside the Comintern, the better to struggle for a politics of revolutionary rejuvenation, Deutscher supposedly convinced Eric not to leave the Party (353). Yet Hobsbawm was not animated by the same political intent as Deutscher. His relationship to the Party, in the decades following 1956, involved little, if any, disciplined involvement.

Hobsbawm's affiliation with the CPGB registered largely in intellectual contacts, about which more will be said below, as well as in MI5's interest in his travels abroad, which included, throughout the 1960s, trips to the United States, Cuba, continental Europe, and elsewhere. When the anti–Vietnam War protests surged to the forefront in 1967 and 1968, Hobsbawm cast his lot, predictably, with the anti-imperialist forces, and he marched with his wife, Marlene, and their small children. Conscripted into teach-in duty, Hobsbawm struggled to convey to student radicals that the examples and lessons of nineteenth-century protests might have some relevance to their cause, now known as another, second New Left. Hobsbawm's anti-war positions, almost instinctual, seemed to involve little direct connection with the CPGB — he apparently went to demos as an individual, not so much as part of Party contingents. His marriage to Marlene and the births of a son, Andy, and a daughter, Julia, in 1963 and 1964, along with his increasing prominence as a particular kind of historian, situated Hobsbawm in a more settled relationship to his place in British society than he had ever before experienced. This, as well as his age, placed him outside of the youth revolt of the mid-to-late 1960s, an effervescence of rebellion that, if he later came to appreciate it, left Hobsbawm puzzled and politically discombobulated at the time. Bluntly put, "Whatever the appearances, my generation would remain strangers in the

1960s." Hobsbawm later confessed, "I am surprised how little direct political activity there was in my life after 1956." He took no part in a bitter conflict inside the CPGB in 1968, his Marxism largely confined to "writing books and articles."[25] These would establish his reputation as the world's most accomplished Marxist historian of synthetic transnational histories, characterized by their grandiose, metropolitan vision.

Hobsbawm's status on the Left in Italy, where Eurocommunism was sinking significant roots, was given a bump by his publishers' promotions of his writings and the Italian Communist Party's (PCI's) receptiveness to his commentaries on British politics. They appeared regularly in the Italian party's monthly journal. Hobsbawm was also routinely cited in *L'Unità*, a Communist daily, and he regarded Italy and its anti-fascist traditions as something of a political home, more congenial than Britain. Cultivating a friendship with leading PCI intellectual Giorgio Napolitano, who would later serve two presidential terms, Hobsbawm saw the road to socialism paved with intermediate solutions rather than decisive anti-capitalist ruptures. The political imperative demanded the creation of broad progressive alliances reaching beyond class to create the possibility of parliamentary majorities. Italian Communism seemed to be working to this end, and Hobsbawm cast his lot with the reform impulse, albeit with some trepidation, worrying that the PCI was turning itself into "just another reformist, gradualist party, into a new type of Fabianism."[26]

Hobsbawm's trial run with Eurocommunism coincided with what would be his last, and perhaps most ill-fated, political

25 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 252–4, 263.

26 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Italian Road to Socialism: An Interview by Eric Hobsbawm with Giorgio Napolitano of the Italian Communist Party* (London: Journeyman Press, 1977), 80; David Broder, "Hobsbawm in Italy," *Jacobin,* 18 November 2018; Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 357–61.

intervention. On March 17, 1978, Hobsbawm delivered the Marx Memorial Lecture. Titled "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" and later published in *Marxism Today* and by Verso, the lecture elicited strong opposition and critical commentary. Its argument was analytically uncomplicated. The advance of the British working class, evident in the rise of a respectable trade union movement, had wound down by the mid-twentieth century. Because of a changing economy, the classical industrial proletariat, which had led the labor movement for decades, was now diminished and divided. It could not "realize the historic destiny once predicted for it." Political parties, most emphatically the Labour Party, that staked their all on the traditional working class, now faced the necessity of reconsidering long-standing policies and expectations. Soon after Hobsbawm's warning, preceded by what he referred to as the "strike-happy 1970s," Labour suffered a massive defeat in the 1979 election. This ushered in a new era of class war from above, Thatcherism being the ruling ideology of the 1980s. The Labour Party was now in a mess, split by secessions and struggling to survive.[27]

Something of an external brain trust for the Labour Party, Hobsbawm took his stand against "the Left," composed of Tony Benn, "entryist" Trotskyists, and industrial militants whose experience bridged the Communist and Labour parties, such as Arthur Scargill. Dubbed "Neil Kinnock's favourite Marxist," Hobsbawm proved useful in vanquishing the Labour left in the 1980s, his arguments posed against what he regarded as an extremism that threatened to concede the terrain of actually existing politics to Thatcherite reaction. Central to this supposedly rational choice was denial of the primacy of class, and, of course, class struggle. The need was to orient the Labour Party to wider constituencies

27 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 264–5.

(that had never really been all that marginalized), in which intellectuals and "new classes" would have prominence.[28] Martin Jacques, editor of the revamped *Marxism Today*, which often showcased Hobsbawm in these years, christened him "an intellectual guru in the Labour Party … From being a Communist intellectual he became *the* intellectual of the Left" (522). The question, of course, was which Left Hobsbawm served. In pushing the Labour Party to revive and reconstitute itself as a "broad people's party" dedicated to "a fair, free, socially just society," Hobsbawm certainly helped to thwart any advance within Labour of the Bennite left.[29]

After the 1992 electoral collapse of front-running Labour under the leadership of the hapless Kinnock, a radical reordering of Labour Party politics was on the agenda. With the arrival of Tony Blair's New Labour, socialism's obliteration within the Labour Party was assured. Hobsbawm's *Interesting Times* is far more cogent in its abject assessment of what happened than is Evans, who sidesteps the extent to which Eric bore some responsibility for Blairism's ascent, which Hobsbawm bemoaned (522). Looking back on what happened, Hobsbawm counted the failure of Kinnock and Labour to win the 1992 election as "the saddest and most desperate" political experience of his life, a rather astounding confession for someone who had lived through 1933, 1937, 1956, 1989–1990, and other milestones of disappointment. Anderson

28 See, for the full text of "The Forward March of Labour Halted?," as well as commentaries and congruent essays: Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, eds., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (New York and London: Verso/*Marxism Today,* 1981); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writings, 1977–1988* (London and New York: Verso/*Marxism Today,* 1989).

29 Benn would likely have been defeated without Hobsbawm's intervention, so concerted was the attack on him in the mainstream media, from the *Sun* to the *Guardian.* But Hobsbawm contributed. Leo Panitch, "The Impasse of Social Democratic Politics," in Ralph Miliband, John Saville, Marcel Liebman, and Leo Panitch, eds., *Socialist Register 1985/86: Social Democracy and After* (London: Merlin, 1986), 60; Elliott, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics,* 82–6.

rightly comments that "Such absurd inflation is a measure of the loss of contact with reality that his 'crusade to save the Labour Party' — Gaitskell's old slogan dusted off again — seems temporarily to have induced in the historian."[30]

The politics of the Left had undoubtedly stalled at the *end* of the twentieth century. But *the idea* that class had been stopped in its tracks at mid-century, as Hobsbawm suggested and as the most significant political intervention of his twilight years highlighted, was unconvincing analytically and a conservative retreat politically. A young Eric first aligned with workers in the early 1930s, and in Hobsbawm's subsequent development into the world's best known Marxist historian, the working class had been his initial subject of study, a pivotal social force as well as a vitally important analytic category. To indicate that its forward march had been *halted* was not necessarily wrong as a description of the political situation, however simplified and historically premature the argument may have been. But to imply that this disappointing reality was now etched irreversibly in the stone of a hard politics of reversal, necessitating an entirely new orientation displacing the politics of class struggle, was to stop the related project of conceptualization *and* politics at precisely the point where a deeper scrutiny was demanded.

Assimilating Hobsbawm to his own moderate social democratic politics, Evans insists that Hobsawm was always "closer to the British Labour Party" than he was to anything resembling a communist organization. This claim, asserted rather than demonstrated convincingly, rests on the untenable proposition that Hobsbawm broke definitively from communism in 1956, even though Evans acknowledges that Eric transferred his political loyalties from the British to the Italian Communist Party (661). A

30 Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 289.

look at the histories Hobsbawm wrote suggests another way of understanding his relationship to international Communism, the forces that controlled it, and the politics that factored so forcefully into his life within history.

AGENCY AND DETERMINATION: POLITICS AND THE MAKING OF A METROPOLITAN MARXIST

If Evans falters in situating Hobsbawm and his politics *within* history, his commentary on his subject's written histories is also lacking. A bourgeois sensibility pervades *A Life in History*, with Evans even providing a graph plotting Hobsbawm's salary and pension, freelance income, and declared expenses over the course of the years between 1962 and 1987 (493). Since Hobsbawm kept fairly meticulous records of his book contracts, earning his living in the last three decades of life from royalties, lecture fees, and teaching stints in the United States, Evans has a treasure trove of detail on sales, advances, and earnings, supplemented by access to a literary agent's archived records. He revels in retailing this accounting data. It conveys well how one British Marxist went from being an author with disappointing sales in the late 1950s and early 1960s to a publisher's star, commanding advances in excess of £100,000. Yet it also establishes that even Eric, with his record-keeping and his eye on the prize of payment, might slip up. When Hobsbawm contributed to Verso's best-selling list by writing a lengthy introduction to a slick reissue of the *Communist Manifesto*, the left-wing press failed to pay Eric his contractually stipulated royalties. After twelve years, as Hobsbawm's agent ascertained, Verso owed him a whopping £20,678.19 (607).

Such information, and there is a great deal of it on offer, tends to overwhelm actual discussion of the substance of Hobsbawm's writings, which get rather short shrift. Most of what Evans has to

say about Hobsbawm's books takes the form of summaries and quotes of reviews, rather than any insightful, engaged reading. It is the volume and monetary value of Hobsbawm's pages that captivate Evans, not their analytic contribution or methodological approach. This is unfortunate, because Hobsbawm's contribution and distinctiveness as a historian can be related to his political life within history and to his capacity to address historical interpretation in particular, often unique, ways.

Hobsbawm's written histories, from the beginning of his writing in the 1940s and 1950s, grappled with the bifurcation of agency and determination that animated much writing within the Communist Party Historians' Group. In his original forays as a labor historian, he explained agency through recourse to determination. Articles gathered together in what was his most influential contribution to working-class history, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (1964), often situated particular class practices and labor mobilizations within trade cycles and other economic determinants. In an original and impressive labor history essay, "Custom, Wages, and Work-Load in Nineteenth-Century Industry," Hobsbawm explored the changing rhythms of the labor process. As capitalist rationalization established itself, imprinting on the consciousness of both employers and employees that work was a commodity, both its product and its remuneration came to be determined through struggles increasingly codified in industrial relations as "rules of the game." This wide-ranging essay, touching down in continental Europe, the United States, and (mainly) Britain, rested almost entirely on printed primary sources and a wide canvassing of secondary literature; it contained virtually no archival research. Hobsbawm's method was to survey class experience from the vantage point of what printed material could be assembled out of a metropolitan library system, focusing not so much on new and fresh discoveries of obscure

peoples and happenings as building a broad overview that targeted a problem, addressing it in ways culminating in historical reinterpretation.[31]

Hobsbawm, of course, was never simply a labor historian narrowly conceived, and one of his most impressive and painstakingly argued essays of the 1950s was an excavation of the crisis of the seventeenth century, the resolution of which cleared the way for capitalism's subsequent triumph. In this analytically sweeping article, once again orchestrated by an interpretive problem to be resolved and drawing on published sources in English, French, Portuguese, and German, Hobsbawm outlined how an older European feudal economy collapsed in upon itself, a victim of its internal contradictions. Progressive new economies emerged, strengthening absolutism and its continental metropolitan centers, expanding home markets, especially in socially transformed England, and spawning a new colonialism, whose twin pillars were the plantation productions of the New World and the slave trade that both sustained its harvests and stimulated the eventual rise of mainstays of the Industrial Revolution, such as the cotton manufactory.[32]

Hobsbawm's wrestling with agency and determination understandably took its most voluntaristic turn in the late 1950s. His discontents with King Street Marxism's bureaucratic ossifications were peaking, and his personal life was saturated with the sounds of rebellious jazz, reverberating in a willingness to challenge

---

31 See Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, which reprints the "Customs, Wages, and Work-Load in Nineteenth-Century Industry" essay. Hobsbawm's collaboration with George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), relied more on archival, manuscript sources but was undoubtedly the product of a fusion of Hobsbawm's broad knowledge of early nineteenth-century class formation and Rudé's sensitivity to crowd mobilizations and popular forms of resistance.

32 Hobsbawm's "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," which first appeared in two parts in *Past & Present* in 1954, was reproduced with a postscript as the lead essay in Trevor Aston, ed., *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books and Doubleday, 1967), 5–62.

conventional behaviors. His labor histories ran into something of a brick wall of Cold War animosity. This was reinforced by publication rejections that probably had something to do with Hobsbawm's metropolitan method, distanced as it was from immersion in original archival research. All of this, perhaps, prompted Eric to look for and justify a new approach, one in which agency, at first granted an upper hand, would gradually be confined within the boundaries of determination.

Italian connections pushed Hobsawm toward a study of peasant cultures, especially as they intersected with stands of rebellion, however "pre-political." An early engagement with the voluminous, if opaque, prison writings of Antonio Gramsci (decades before it was fashionable to cite the Italian revolutionary) piqued his interest in the subaltern. As much as any advice from Deutscher, retrospectively alluded to by Hobsbawm as decisive in his resolve to remain affiliated with the CPGB, this new research interest may well have impressed upon Eric a pragmatic reality. His Communist connections provided access to people, even places, that he would be restricted from and shut out of if he broke all connections with Moscow and its affiliated parties.

Primitive Rebels, written and published at the same time as many of his *New Statesmen* Francis Newton pieces and *The Jazz Scene*, followed Hobsbawm's metropolitan method, relying mainly on printed sources. It complimented this body of published texts with many discussions and talks (if not formal interviews) with people knowledgeable about and, in some cases, directly involved with the bandits, mafias, millenarians, anarchists, fasci, mobs, and labor sects he addressed, not a few of them being Communists. The book also allowed Hobsbawm's historical framework to be enriched by his attractions to anthropological sensibilities.[33]

33 Marlene Hobsbawm, *Meet Me in Buenos Aires: A Memoir* (London: Muswell

Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* took pains to have readers "think and feel themselves into the skins" of the archaic agitators he found so appealing.[34] Christopher Hill, reviewing the book in *History Today*, thought *Primitive Rebels* inspired "by a humanity and a deep sympathy for humble people."[35] In this, it resonated with Hobsbawm's obituary for Billie Holiday and, as such, explored agency through a tribute to the resilience of the oppressed. This analytic accent was also evident in *Bandits*, published in 1969, an accessible if wide-ranging text that extended Hobsbawm's reach into Mexico, Brazil, Peru, China, and other non-European countries — writing that had taken Hobsbawm to Latin America and impressed upon him the revolutionary possibilities of the region. From this point on, Hobsbawm's attraction to countries like Brazil, Peru, and Colombia was pronounced, and he traveled there over the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s. As much as any of his writings, *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* helped establish a field of study, "social banditry," of great consequence in the Global South, solidifying Hobsbawm's international reputation and ensuring future sales of his books in populous marketplaces where the dispossessed predominated. MI5 was its usual worried self, especially when Hobsbawm was featured on BBC broadcasts, while the CPGB, although apprised of the peripatetic partisan's views on Latin America, paid Hobsbawm no heed. When a Popular Front government under Salvador Allende promised a peaceful transition to socialism in Chile, Eric thought this a "thrilling prospect" (404–9). The subsequent bloodbath no doubt left him demoralized.

Press, 2019), 85. See, as well, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

34 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 175. The first edition was published in 1959.

35 Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels,* back cover blurb quoting Hill.

Hobsbawm thus grappled with agency and determination in his writing as he did in his politics. His metropolitan Marxism, in which the conceptualization of capitalist development provided a coherent scaffolding of economies, politics, and ideologies, as well as developments across cultural and social life, suited Hobsbawm's vociferous appetite for consuming available writings and his methodological penchant for generalization. Interpretive problem-solving was the *raison d'être* of historical writing. He clearly enjoyed the view of any chosen historical subject from a perch in the British Museum, the Widener Library at Harvard, or Rome's Giustino Fortunato Library. From this vantage point, determination was always going to overshadow agency. Whether it was a conscious decision or not, in the early 1960s, Hobsbawm opted for a specific kind of history, one in which his talents of analytic distillation and sweeping synthesis, developed out of a wide reading of available printed sources, were put to good use. Like his politics, his writing proved to be overdetermined. Hobsbawm's method was destined to come down on a particular side of the agency/determination dualism.

In the preface to *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (1962), Hobsbawm described his approach as an example of what the French termed "haute vulgarisation." Written for the educated reader rather than the scholar, books conceived in this vein would not be burdened by excessive citation of relevant literatures. In Hobsbawm's hands, such studies were Marxist in their concerns and ordering assumptions at the same time that they refused to elaborate on anything that might be construed as theoretical posture. Decades in the making, the cumulative result would be Hobsbawm's signature Age series, a tetralogy of modern history that expanded from an original focus on Europe to a widening, ostensibly global, reach. Base and superstructure clearly ordered Hobsbawm's original presentations on the long nineteenth century

(1789–1914), but the concepts were not so much dominating the narrative as they were embedded within it. Even class struggle was presented in ways that suggested its limitations rather more than its transcendent striving to reach beyond the determinations of the times.[36] In *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (1975), Hobsbawm concluded his remarks on 1848 and the revolutionary "Springtime of Peoples" with a sober insistence that constraint, not challenge, prevailed:

> As for the labouring poor, they lacked the organization, the maturity, the leadership, perhaps most of all the historical conjuncture, to provide a political alternative. Strong enough to make the prospect of social revolution look real, they were too weak to do more than frighten their enemies.[37]

The Age of Capital never lost sight of capitalism's hegemonic hold over the momentous developments of the mid-nineteenth century, opting not to end the narrative class arc of accumulation and its accomplishments with a theater of resistance, however attractive. "The demands of drama and reality are, as so often, not the same," Hobsbawm declared, eschewing the impulse to bring his study to a close on the class-struggle high note of the Paris Commune.[38]

Hobsbawm's treatments of the ages of revolution and capital, respectively, commenced with developments (economy, politics, and large changes) and concluded with results (on the land, in cities, through class activities and ideologies, and within science and the arts). *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (1987) dissolved this heuristic structuring into a single sequence of chapters that, while

36 E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 204, 216.

37 E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 21.

38 Hobsbawm, *Age of Capital,* 303, 308.

they continued to privilege the economy, retained broad coverage of politics, society, and culture. A settled comfort and confidence of mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois society gave way, in *The Age of Empire*, to new forms of corporate organization and threatening social movements. This expanded the facade of equality in ways that cracked the foundations of patriarchal power, ushering in a crisis of liberalism. Hobsbawm attempted, for the first time, in *The Age of Empire* to address women, but the effort fell flat in the eyes of many feminists, who saw his gesture of inclusion as too little, too late, and too uninformed about the now vast literature relating to gender.[39] The result is a book that, in its anticipation of an event beyond its boundaries, 1917, takes satisfaction in seeing the bourgeoisie hoisted on its own revolutionizing petard. "[W]e observe the curious phenomenon of a bourgeoisie, or at least a significant part of its youth and its intellectuals," plunging "willingly, even enthusiastically, into the abyss," concluded Hobsbawm.[40]

Determination had clearly triumphed. It largely overwhelms any serious scrutiny of working-class agency. Globalization, well before the term gained a stranglehold on the politics of defiance, ran through *The Age of Empire* like a jolt of electric current. When it came to the treatment of "The Workers of the World," this left out much in the way of meaningful engagement with working-class life. Even conservative commentators were a bit surprised that Hobsbawm paid so little attention "to the proletariat" (539).

In *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994), Hobsbawm darkens this narrative of determination. Wars and famine; revolutions and depressions; cultures of hedonism and the cult of personality; welfare and working-class entitlements won but invariably lost; the end of socialism and the acceleration

39 Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 298.

40 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire,* 190.

of mayhem — over it all looms the threat of social death and impending demise. From the sundering of the bourgeoisie presented in *The Age of Empire*, Hobsbawm proceeds, in *Age of Extremes*, to outline the dissolution of civilization. The bourgeoisie as a class features barely at all. Workers, of course, come on to the stage of this disturbing tragedy periodically, but their agency can hardly hold a candle to the impersonal forces railing against their struggles to sustain the light. Class politics is largely extinguished — save for the advances registered with the creation of the Soviet Union — as the world "stumbled from one calamity to another" between 1914 and 1945. The ruthlessness of Stalin's leadership aside, the Soviet Union defeated fascism militarily during World War II. Thereafter, it was nothing if not a Cold War foil necessitating the kinds of reforms the advanced capitalist economies of the West offered workers and wide swaths of the dispossessed, the better to keep them chained to acceptance of their lot, seemingly superior to anything imaginable under Communist "totalitarianism."[41]

Evans presents *Age of Extremes* as Hobsbawm's most successful book: its translation into more than thirty languages and its phenomenal sales, not to mention its prestigious awards, helped canonize Hobsbawm internationally. Yet reviews were often less than laudatory. Many are unconvinced that Hobsbawm has a sufficiently global reach. The Eurocentric focus of Hobsbawm's analysis was evident in *The Age of Revolution*'s choice of geographic focus, but this inevitably relegated crucial developments in Haiti to the margins. Subsequent volumes, less restricted spatially, nonetheless push China and Japan somewhat to the sidelines, passing

41 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), 7, 371.The theme of dissolution also runs through the essays gathered together in Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York New Press, 2014).

over large swaths of Africa and even giving the United States less than its developments warranted. Few of those familiar with studies of nationalism consider that Hobsbawm gave this subject its due.[42] Feminists continue to hammer Hobsbawm on a failure to integrate women and gender into his analysis, at least in ways they think reflect a broad reading and awareness of contemporary insights. These and other criticisms aside, *Age of Extremes* solidified Hobsbawm's stature as a public intellectual; no other historian commanded either his readership or his global relevance. In Brazil, where Eric achieved celebrity status and became friends with the Workers' Party leader and eventual president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, sales of the book surpass 300,000. If all of his publications are considered, with well over a million of his books bought, Hobsbawm outsells any other nonfiction writer in the country (577–9).

How to explain this ascendancy in the public arena? As Marxism was being dismissed, and actually existing socialism was seemingly on the skids almost everywhere, an undeniably communist historian remained a revered and internationally acclaimed public intellectual. Certainly, Hobsbawm's talents warrant the kind of recognition he rightly received. Erudition, clarity of argument, and insistence on the primacy of material considerations are enhanced by a cosmopolitan reach across the spectrum of artistic and scientific developments. Couple this fusion of form and substance with a convincing and impressive marshaling of empirical evidence, orchestrated by conceptual rigor and sober reflection, as well as a metropolitan mastery of extensive and multilingual writings, not only in history, but in economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science, and the result cannot but be impressive. This considerable bank of extraordinary features in Hobsbawm's later

42 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1870: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), satisfying few critics.

publications necessarily elevated him to preeminence among late capitalism's chorus of critics.

It was also the case that, in his relentless drive to detail determination's descent into evil, Hobsbawm's moral outrage tended to dwarf his Marxist analytic framework. In his later years, Hobsbawm often wrote, as Terry Eagleton has remarked, as if "History itself" was speaking "in its wry, all-seeing, dispassionate," albeit increasingly dark, "wisdom."[43] The result is analysis less attentive to the kinds of challenging explanation evident in previous Age volumes. Hobsbawm's publications of the 1990s and 2000s do not so much press his readers with the kind of historical materialist interpretation that demands a stretching of their interpretive muscles, as they abstain from addressing the causality of capitalist crisis, the anvil on which determination resolutely pounded the world's peoples into the shapes that limited and conditioned their agency.[44] In conjunction with his undeniable strengths as a writer and chronicler of modern times, this downgrading of Marxism goes some way to explaining how Hobsbawm's stature soared with what is possibly his least Marxist book, elevating him to what Evans designates a "National Treasure."

The chaotic brutality and vicious inequality of the late twentieth century lent itself easily enough to a justifiable anger at barbarism's balance sheet, registering in the 187 million deaths that Hobsbawm attributes to the short twentieth century's wars, famines, massacres, and executions. As understandable as Hobsbawm's animus was, this translated into a kind of interpretive retreat. Explanation was replaced by recourse to bewilderment, as irrationality, absurdity, and incomprehension are appended to historical events, leaving them "beyond the ken of the historian." With the publication

43 Terry Eagleton, "Indomitable," *London Review of Books* 33 (3 March 2011), 13.

44 Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes,* 87.

of *Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm was writing as a passionate advocate of humanity, but one increasingly unable to articulate capitalism's trajectory or explain socialism's demise. As determination devolved into destruction, the hounds of the apocalypse seemed, to Hobsbawm, unleashed by the implosion of the Soviet Union. What Anderson considered a variant of the "end of history" that left acquisitive individualism's "feral instincts" unfettered, Hobsbawm bemoaned as "tragedy," the "true magnitude" of which was little understood on the eve of a new century.[45] This undoubtedly provided a mass readership with a comfort zone in which the demanding analytic rigor of Marxism receded. Hobsbawm's evolution as a writer and his later publications tended to substitute a one-sided depiction of historical process as degeneration that appealed to progressive indignation, but they sidestepped the more difficult multidimensional, historical materialist responsibility to address capitalism and the structural inevitability of crisis as the *raison d'être* of socialism's necessity.

JUST TO THE RIGHT OF MARX

Hobsbawm outlived his Communist Party Historians' Group contemporaries, staving off death until, at the age of ninety-five, he fought his last uphill fight in 2012. His remains reside in a plot secured for him by his wife, Marlene, in Highgate Cemetery. "Just to the right of Karl Marx" was the wry comment of his son-in-law, Alaric Bamping, a former Trotskyist and now Brexiteer (654). Ironies abound in Hobsbawm's life, but the greatest of them all is perhaps that, as much as determination ordered his existence, he did a great deal to keep its limitations at bay. He *made* histories — not always as he would have chosen, but make them he did. We live in his

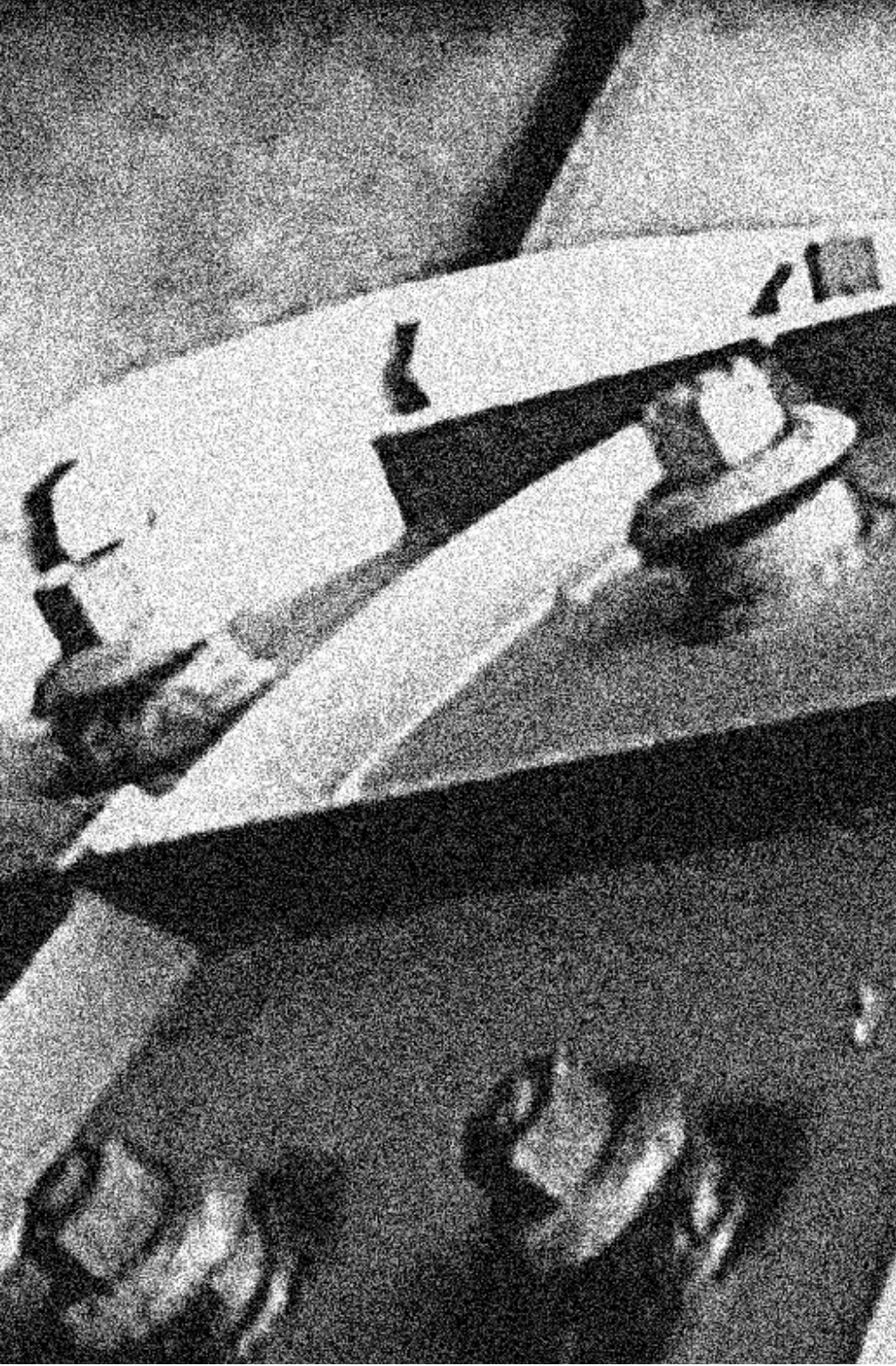
45 See, for instance, Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 313, 311; Eric Hobsbawm with Antonio Polito, *On the Edge of the New Century* (New York: New Press, 2000), esp. 45.

shadows. Few manage to cast their adumbration as widely, as influentially, and almost certainly as continuously as did Hobsbawm.

Evans provides the final irony. Hobsbawm resisted handlers all his life, but he has succumbed to one in death. If he had any choice in naming his biographer, Hobsbawm may well have given Evans his blessing in taking up the task, for he could probably intuit that Evans would do little to disturb his reputation as a "National Treasure." Such a designation, for a Marxist of Hobsbawm's internationalist sensibilities, would surely have elicited public mockery from "Eric the Red," who treasured no identification with *any* national entity, considering himself always "someone who does not wholly belong to where he finds himself."[46] Yet at the same time, the Hobsbawm we have come to know better through Evans's account would undoubtedly have taken a certain private pleasure in being fêted in this way.[47]

46 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times,* 416.

47 As Anderson has commented wryly: "Great men have foibles for which they can be forgiven; including an occasional failure to see where their greatness lies, or what might diminish it." In Hobsbawm's case, the contrast developed over time between political loyalty and social accommodation, with Anderson concluding: "Just because he remained so steadfast in an execrated cause, entry into the acceptance world seems to have acquired all the more value." Anderson, "The Vanquished Left," *Spectrum,* 286.



ABSTRACT

This article traces the shifting political-economic dynamics of extractive capital in Bolivia that reconfigured politics toward a coup. As MAS (Movement for Socialism) support for these industries realigned elites, its policies atomized and demobilized social movements, leaving them powerless to counter growing business influence. Since the coup, militarization and violence are threatening civil and political rights of the working masses, whose livelihoods improved under MAS. Bolivia faces an uncertain future, with scheduled elections in doubt and a pandemic exacerbating deep and persistent inequalities.

The Fall of Evo Morales

Nicole Fabricant and
Bret Gustafson

For almost fourteen years, Evo Morales and the MAS (Movement for Socialism) party held the presidency and a legislative majority in Bolivia. During his presidency, Morales and the MAS took advantage of high commodity prices and deep popular support to reassert the role of the state in economic distribution and provide social supports to some of the most vulnerable populations. Though not without missteps and critics — and deep ideological and political shortfalls — Morales oversaw the most politically and economically stable period in Bolivia's history. Yet in November of 2019, in the wake of fraud allegations, annulled elections, and widespread protest, Morales resigned in the face of public pressure, a police mutiny, and military intimidation. The Bolivian right asserts

the ouster is the proper counter to a fraudulent concentration of power. And though not all on the Bolivian left share this view, most leftists denounced Morales's toppling as a concerted putsch aimed at blocking further progressive change and reclaiming power for elites. By any reasonable measure, it was a coup.

In just a few short months, everything the MAS worked toward has begun to unravel. The "interim government" established by the Bolivian right wing launched a revanchist assault on the symbols and policies of the Morales era. The regime began persecuting and imprisoning former officials and announced the possibility of reprivatizing many firms that had come under control of the state during Morales's presidency. Though she initially stated that she would not run, interim president Jeanine Áñez declared herself a candidate for the May 2020 elections. With Morales in exile in Argentina, the MAS party candidate, former minister of economy Luis Arce, is leading the polls. Amid the public health crisis that has erupted, and increasing militarization, the elections are postponed until August at the earliest. Right-wing backers of the coup regime have suggested that they will do everything necessary to prevent the return of a MAS government.

The reforms adopted under the MAS regime helped Bolivia's impoverished masses and marginalized indigenous populations, and its opposition had to resort to a coup to take power. Why, then, has Morales's ouster proved so unshakable? What led us to this moment? Part of the answer lies in understanding Bolivia's political and economic structures and their role in shifting political forces and coalitions. Beyond the shortcomings that many critics, even sympathetic ones, point out about Morales himself, it was his dependency on extractive industries (gas, soy, minerals) that consolidated elite power in the country's East and created the conditions for the right-wing putsch. In addition to this consolidation of elite power, Bolivia's social movements — which, when Morales was elected

in late 2005, were some of the world's most militant — became weakened, demobilized, and atomized. Under Morales, they lost their ability to push for radical change, ultimately providing the elite entrée to the state apparatus without much resistance.

THE RIGHT-WING PUTSCH

On Sunday, October 20, 2019, Evo Morales stood as a candidate for a fourth term, after fourteen years in power. The vote was polarized. Morales's popularity had suffered since he narrowly lost a 2016 national referendum to do away with term limits (51 percent of the voters said no). But Morales used the courts to overrule the referendum result and declared himself a candidate anyway, which many saw as an illegal power grab. Many in the urban middle and upper classes adopted the slogan "Bolivia Said No" (*Bolivia dijo no*) to denounce his candidacy and probable victory. Prominent political figures, most on the Right and center, but also many on the Left, announced their intentions to protest the election no matter the outcome. In hindsight, the extreme factions of the Right were uniquely prepared for a more violent response.

To avoid a runoff, Morales had to win more than 50 percent of the vote, or at least 40 percent and a ten-point margin ahead of the second-place candidate. On election night, a preliminary tally showed Morales leading with 45.3 percent of the vote. Carlos Mesa, a historian and former vice president, was in second place with 38.2 percent. Bolivia's electoral procedure calls for a switch from a preliminary to an official count. So, as is usually the case, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) stopped the preliminary count with 83 percent of the votes counted, shutting down the tally to the public for several hours. The long delay before the shift to the official count prompted Mesa and the already-mobilizing opposition to cry fraud. Violence erupted from both sides. In major cities, some TSE offices were set on fire. The opposition, mostly

in Bolivia's largest cities of La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, took to the streets to call for a nationwide shutdown. When the official count was concluded and released several days later, it showed Morales with 47.08 percent of the vote and a 10.54 percent lead over Mesa, meaning the vote wouldn't need to go into a runoff. Morales declared himself victorious.[1] But the die was already cast, and the right wing, in particular, intensified its tactics to protest the results.

In response to critics questioning the validity of the election results, Evo Morales agreed to an electoral audit by the Organization of American States (OAS), a body with a history of partiality against left-leaning governments.[2] As the audit proceeded, and amid the turmoil, the right wing deployed organized gangs in the city of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, aimed at enforcing a national work stoppage and intimidating and attacking MAS supporters. The most recalcitrant sectors came from the eastern city of Santa Cruz, where a group known as the Civic Committee — basically an unelected chamber of commerce and civic organizations — placed itself at the head of demands that Evo Morales resign. A former leader of the committee, Luis Fernando Camacho, sporting a polo shirt and a baseball cap, a new uniform of the fascist right, traveled to La Paz with an entourage of thuggish bodyguards. Much like military troops had done during coups of the past, he carried a letter of resignation that he demanded Morales sign within

1 For an account of the electoral process, see Dan Beeton, "New Study Finds No Evidence of OAS Fraud Claims, 'Very Likely' Evo Morales Won Bolivia's October Elections in the First Round," Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2020, cepr.net/press-release/new-study-finds-no-evidence-of-oas-fraud-claims-very-likely-evo-morales-won-bolivias-october-elections-in-the-first-round/. See also Vladimir Díaz-Cuellar, "Requiem para el 'Proceso de Cambio,'" *Control Ciudadano* 13, no. 32 (2019). Election results are available at oep.org.bo/elecciones-generales-2019/.

2 Linda Farthing and Olivia Arigho-Stiles, "Bolivia's Tragic Turmoil," NACLA, Nov. 15, 2019, nacla.org/news/2019/11/15/Bolivia-Morales-Camacho.

forty-eight hours.[3] The stunt intensified clashes between the two sides. On November 8, after almost three weeks of protest, the police in various cities declared themselves in mutiny and refused to maintain order.

That was the first decisive domino, later shown to have been backed by the right-wing elite. The second domino was the card played by the OAS. The OAS issued its preliminary report early in the morning of November 10. Though it noted "serious irregularities," the OAS report nonetheless failed to document any clear fraud that would have invalidated the outcome. As Linda Farthing and Olivia Arigho-Stiles noted, "Although the Morales government accepted the OAS audit as binding, questions have been raised about the organization's impartiality and accuracy."[4] Even so, a conciliatory Morales called for new elections. By then it was too late. With uncertainty and chaos in the streets, the military high command entered a period of internal upheaval, with those opposing Morales gaining strength. On the same day, November 10, the head of the armed forces appeared on television to suggest that Morales resign, despite the fact that two months remained in his presidential term. Morales yielded and sought asylum, first in Mexico and later in Argentina. A slew of resignations followed, including the nation's vice president, Álvaro García Linera, and the

3 "Camacho da 48 horas a Evo para renunciar y advierte con radicalizar medidas," *Los Tiempos*, Nov. 2, 2019, lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20191102/camacho-da-48-horas-evo-renunciar-advierte-radicalizar-medidas.

4 The final report can be found at Organization of American States, "Electoral Integrity Analysis General Elections in the Plurinational State of Bolivia," oas.org/fpdb/press/Audit-Report-EN-vFINAL.pdf. The preliminary report, and its flaws, are examined in detail in the CEPR 2020 report. As CEPR codirector Mark Weisbrot stated: "The OAS greatly misled the media and the public about what happened in Bolivia's elections, and helped to foster a great deal of mistrust in the electoral process and the results … An important analysis from MIT election researchers is the latest to show that the OAS's statements were without basis, and that simple arithmetic shows that there is no evidence that fraud or irregularities affected the preliminary results, or the official results."

heads of both chambers of the MAS majority congress. As right-wing protesters burned houses and threatened their relatives, top MAS elected officials in Congress also stepped down. This paved the way for the second vice president of the Senate, Jeanine Áñez, a fifty-two-year-old fervent Catholic from the northeastern region of Beni, fifth in line to the presidency, to declare herself interim president. There was no quorum in the Senate to approve this move, and the legality of her designation is, at the very least, questionable. Nonetheless, she was draped with the presidential sash by uniformed military officers on November 12, officializing the coup government. Reflecting a racial and religious backlash against Morales's supposed indigenous ideologies, she followed the lead of Camacho's evangelical Christian rhetoric at her swearing-in and thrust a massive Bible into the air, proclaiming that "The Bible has returned to the palace!" It was quite a provocative statement for Áñez, whose party only received 4 percent of the vote in the election.

Within twenty-four hours of her swearing-in, the streets of La Paz and Cochabamba filled with angry protesters, and violence on both sides continued. Two days later, Áñez issued an executive order allowing the military to use force without legal consequence, granting them immunity from prosecution. The mounting repression exploded when the military responded with lethal force against two protests — one in the town of Sacaba, near Cochabamba, and the other outside the Senkata gas distribution center in El Alto, outside of La Paz. Nineteen unarmed civilians were killed. Between October 20 and November 27, thirty-six protesters died, and more than eight hundred were injured. In the following weeks, the coup government persecuted MAS officials and government employees, moved to silence critical journalists, and opened the door for the return of former right-wing leaders and officials who had been exiled during the Morales years, most

for charges of corruption or the instigation of violence during the MAS government.[5]

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF RIGHT-WING PRAGMATISM

The complexity of this upheaval requires going beyond simplistic narratives about grabs for gas, lithium, or some other valuable resource. Although the putsch must be described as a coup, it is important to understand how political and economic factors shaped the conditions for its success and weakened the prospects for mounting an effective popular resistance. While the international left correctly expressed outrage at the coup, many Bolivian leftists have rejected the coup narrative and refused to blindly defend the Morales government. This is, in part, due to electoral irregularities under his watch and his obstinate insistence on staying in power, but it was more centrally because of the degradation of crucial components of the original MAS political project, which we describe further below. The possibilities for radical and progressive change were constrained by economic structures — some of which were reproduced by MAS policy decisions, others as the result of the MAS's relative weakness in the face of global capital. These constraints cannot be reduced to Morales alone, but they speak to a failure to transform the structure of the economy, still largely dependent on gas, mining, and soy.

---

5 The impunity decree (Decreto Supremo 4078) was issued on November 14, 2019. After global outcry — and the killings at Sacaba and Senkata — the decree was abrogated on November 28, with Áñez announcing that "we have achieved the desired pacification." ("Añez abroga el Decreto 4078 que eximía de responsabilidad penal a FFAA," *Los Tiempos*, Nov. 28, 2019, lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20191128/anez-abroga-decreto-4078-que-eximia-responsabilidad-penal-ffaa) Decree 4078 available at: gacetaoficialdebolivia.gob.bo/edicions/view/1214NEC. On the killings and other human rights violations, see Inter-American Court of Human Rights, "The IACHR presents its preliminary observations ..." Dec. 10, 2019, oas.org/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2019/321.asp.

The process of change (*proceso de cambio*) that took place under Evo Morales was, in part, driven by the return of the state's role in the economy, a new constitution that enshrined political rights for indigenous peoples, and redistribution of resource wealth. Shaped largely by older paradigms of the nationalist left, the government framed this process as part of a historical project of decolonization to end centuries of racism and marginalization of Bolivia's indigenous and peasant populations. In 2009, Bolivians ratified a new constitution that claimed to "refound" Bolivia as a "plurinational" state, promising improvements in indigenous rights while enshrining social rights to health care, education, housing, and water to the entire population.[6] In public discourse, Morales and MAS officials spoke of the pursuit of a "good life" (*buen vivir*), promising to dismantle the orthodox neoliberal capitalism that had dominated Bolivian politics since 1985. In addition, Morales promised economic development in harmony with nature.

The MAS's alternative to the conventional neoliberal economic model was called an "Economic, Social, Communitarian, and Productive Model" (Modelo económico, social, comunitario y productivo). This plan initially included the redistribution of lands and the provision of critical resources such as tools, machinery, and expertise to small-scale producers, mainly in the East. Its intention was twofold: 1) to make the Bolivian economy less dependent on the industrial agribusiness model, and 2) to free Bolivia from its dependence on raw material exports by transferring the profits from surpluses in mining, hydrocarbons, and electricity exports — channeled through the state — into other, more labor-intensive sectors, including manufacturing, tourism,

6 The plurinational state recognizes the multiethnic nature of the country and all the indigenous nations as part of the state.

and agrarian development.[7] These policies led to an increase in rents and royalties channeled into the national treasury, much of it from natural gas exports, but also linked the process of change ever more firmly to capitalist hydrocarbon markets and actors. Paradoxically, Bolivia's progressive nationalist turn required an embrace and entrenchment of extractive industries, and, in particular, natural gas.[8]

The refiguring of the state's role in the economy, in some ways, amounted to a shift away from neoliberalism. Adopting some features of developmentalism, it included state ownership or expanded participation in strategic sectors (utilities, telecommunications, gas, and mining), and involved expansion of the public sector, heavy state investments in infrastructure, and subsidized credit that was made available to specific industries. According to CEDLA researchers, public investment between 2005 and 2015 went from $629 million per year to around $6.2 billion, a tenfold increase.[9] Most of the public investment was generated directly through state revenue, with only about 20 percent financed through external debt. In the early years, a significant amount of the state's income came from the special tax on hydrocarbons, which nonetheless decreased from 44 percent to 12 percent between 2006 and 2015.[10]

---

7 Angus McNelly, "Neostructuralism and Its Class Character in the Political Economy of Bolivia Under Evo Morales," *The New Political Economy* 25, no. 3 (2020): 419–38.

8 Bret Gustafson, *Bolivia in the Age of Gas*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

9 CEDLA (*Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario*, Center for Labor and Agrarian Development Studies) is a highly respected research organization of leftist economists, sociologists, and other scholars. They have been a primary source of critique of the MAS from the left. See: cedla.org.

10 Enrique Ormachea and Pablo Poveda, "Inversión pública y crédito agropecuario en el gobierno del MAS: una aproximación a los resultados del 'modelo económico, social, comunitario y productivo,'" *Control Ciudadano* 13, no. 33 (2019).

This model was especially dependent on primary commodity production, in particular the extraction and export of natural gas from the Bolivian southeast. In fact, as CEDLA documented, in 2018, primary exports had risen to 93 percent of all exports, up from 83 percent fifteen years before. Bolivian gas exports, primarily to Brazil and Argentina, comprised the largest share of foreign trade, having exploded from approximately 5 million cubic meters of gas in 1995 to 30 million cubic meters in 2015, coming to account for 40 percent of all exports. Though Morales and the MAS talked about "nationalization" of certain industries, the state had not taken full control of operations or infrastructure, but had instead simply renegotiated contracts with large multinational firms. These negotiations apportioned a larger share of royalties from private gas companies to the state, which created a veritable public revenue bonanza as global prices soared. Taxes and royalties were distributed to various public institutions and programs, such as the military, state universities, pensions, and cash transfer programs. The government also guaranteed cheaper gas and gasoline by subsidizing the prices.[11]

Despite its benefits, Bolivia's growing dependence on gas required a constant influx of private foreign investment into the extractive industry. Morales's deepening reliance on multinational capital constrained the government's willingness to make more radical changes — particularly when it came to the environment and indigenous rights, and with respect to investing in sustainable agriculture among small-scale producers. Despite its rhetoric of resistance to neoliberalism, the economic model was embedded in transnational and national webs of extractive capital, not just in gas, but also in mining and agro-industry.

11 Gustafson, *Bolivia in the Age of Gas*.

The MAS played a less assertive role in economic planning and the political agenda of the mining sector, where it had an ambivalent support base, and sometimes even faced outright opposition. Taxes, rents, and royalties from mining were much less significant than those from the gas industry. Bolivia's long history of tin mining was shaped by the rise of militant miners' unions, a reliable core of left power crucial for struggles against dictators and neoliberal reformers. Yet tin's decline accompanied the dismantling of the state mining industry that had been established in the 1950s, alongside the growth of private multinational companies exporting new minerals like zinc. Alongside big businesses, smaller-scale, more precarious mining "cooperatives" emerged around the edges, where underemployed miners tried to scrape together an existence with few protections.[12] The MAS sought to maintain the support of the cooperatives by avoiding any radical policy shifts, much less outright nationalization. These cooperatives were allies of the MAS for much of Morales's time in office, though the relationship often turned tense and violent. Recently, a MAS effort to extend state power in the mining sector and establish labor regulations sparked a conflict with cooperative miners that led to the death of a vice-minister. While miners have a militant and revolutionary history in Bolivia, these structural changes made them fickle allies for the MAS.

Though much global attention has been paid to lithium, disputes over how and if the country might industrialize the product itself rather than export the raw material have delayed both its extraction and its production. Here the government's tension was not with labor, but with opposition political leaders of Potosí, the department where the bulk of lithium deposits are located. While the MAS government established an agreement with a

12 Díaz-Cuellar, "Requiem."

foreign company to extract and process lithium, Potosí's civic committee, led by Marco Pumari, who later became an ally in the coup, argued that the deal shortchanged the department in favor of the national government. As with the mine workers, this segment of the "civic" opposition in the mining region had also become a focus of opposition, and actively opposed Evo Morales when the right-wing challenge erupted.

The agrarian sector, for its part, was a critical part of Morales's program of progressive transformation. The MAS had arisen from a long history of peasant struggle and made many overtures to small-scale farmers. Highland agriculture predominantly focuses on crops like potatoes, quinoa, and other grains cultivated in the slopes and foothills of the Andes. Lowland agriculture typically produces beans, rice, yucca, vegetables, and some fruits. Much of the large-scale production in the lowlands is dominated by agro-industrial farming, primarily of soy. Agro-business was first bolstered by US investments in the 1950s that aimed to align the Bolivian economy with Washington's designs for the hemisphere. In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, large-scale export-oriented agriculture became critical for the nation's modernizing growth model.

Morales and the MAS proposed a new "agrarian revolution"[13] in the East, promising radical land reform to redistribute unproductive land to the poor, and restrictions on large-scale landholdings known as latifundia.[14] Supporting peasant land occupations and

13 Bolivia's rural structure prior to the 1952 National Revolution was dominated by large landholdings in which "neo-feudal" social relations predominated, "based on established modes of colonial extraction and exploitation in the countryside." Pre-revolutionary Bolivia had the highest inequality of land concentration in all of Latin America, with 82 percent of land held by 4 percent of landowners. (Honor Brabazon and Jeffery R. Webber, "Evo Morales and the MST in Bolivia: Continuities and Discontinuities in Agrarian Reform," *Journal of Agrarian Reform* 14, no. 3 (2013): 435–65).

14 Morales revived agrarian reform initiatives when he took office in 2006. That same year, the Bolivian Senate passed a measure authorizing the government to

indigenous territorial movements was a key component of the MAS strategy for balanced national development and to extend its influence and secure hegemony against right-wing challengers.[15] Yet promises for indigenous territorial autonomy were greatly watered down in Bolivia's new constitution.[16] Overall, while agricultural production grew by 35 percent during MAS rule, the expansion was both uneven and inconsistent with the official aims of national development. Traditional food crops, for instance, increased by 50 percent. The MAS government did heavily invest in agriculture in the western highlands of the Andes, most of it in much-needed irrigation projects. Yet it was also unable to transform the agrarian structure of the highlands, where much of the production is aimed at providing for the cities, and production expansion is limited because of the lack of arable land. But in the Bolivian East, the heartland of soy, a key commodity long dominated by latifundistas, the government largely ceded its reform agenda to existing power holders. Export-oriented soy production is characterized by a weak connection to internal markets, relatively low labor demand, and fragile linkages to downstream processing. As with the gas industry, a pragmatic détente with soy barons left the MAS government hamstrung in its dealings with them and their multinational backers.

---

present land titles to sixty indigenous communities, accounting for a total of almost 3 million hectares. In addition, Morales hoped to distribute 20 million hectares of land among the nation's mostly poor indigenous populaces over the next five years. The 2006 bill, which was first passed by the MAS-controlled lower house of the legislature, was later blocked by a number of conservative groups.

15 Bret Gustafson, "Spectacles of Autonomy and Crisis: Or, What Bulls and Beauty Queens Have to Do with Regionalism in Eastern Bolivia," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 11, no 2 (2006): 351–79; Nicole Fabricant, *Mobilizing Bolivia's Displaced: Indigenous Politics and the Struggle Over Land* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

16 Fernando Garcés, "The Domestication of Indigenous Autonomies in Bolivia," in Nicole Fabricant and Bret Gustafson, eds. *Remapping Bolivia: Resources, Territory and Indigeneity in a Plurinational State* (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2011), 46–67.

The state did redistribute a significant amount of public land to poor peasants, while leaving the power of the large landowners relatively untouched.[17] The linchpin of MAS agrarian policy was neither radical land reform nor a restructuring of rural economies, but a reassertion of state support for large- scale agro-industrial growth, primarily through expansion of the agrarian frontier.[18] Here the MAS not only failed to rein in powerful actors, but even consolidated their power, while undermining measures toward more progressive agrarian reforms and a more dynamic and mixed economic structure. As late as 2019, several MAS policy shifts laid the groundwork for wider expansion of the soy frontier, which some see as partly to blame for the intensity of the massive forest fires that spread on the eve of the ill-fated October election.[19]

The result was the retrenchment of land inequality in the West, where land is abundant. By 2018, 2 percent of landowners in the East (the wealthy latifundistas) still controlled 71 percent of the land, while 78 percent of small farmers controlled only 9 percent.[20] Reflecting classic cases of barriers to development in Latin America, the extractive export system, which funded MAS social reforms, intensified a process of "semi-proletarianization," whereby small-scale landowners are forced to find informal and unprotected wage labor in cities and urban peripheries.[21] It relies on ongoing

17 Some 134 million acres of state land had been redistributed to peasants and indigenous communities from 2006 through 2013 under Morales, compared to just 23 million between 1996 and 2005 under past neoliberal governments (Emily Achtenberg, "Bolivia: The Unfinished Business of Land Reform," NACLA, March 31, 2013, nacla.org/blog/2013/3/31/bolivia-unfinished-business-land-reform).

18 Ben M. McKay, *Extractivismo agrario: dinámicas de poder, acumulación y exclusión en Bolivia* (La Paz: Fundación Tierra, 2018).

19 Bret Gustafson, "Bolivia's Amazon: Power and Politics Stoking the Flames," *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America*, 2020.

20 McKay, *Extractivismo,* 125.

21 Ben McKay and Gonzalo Colque, "Bolivia's soy complex: The Development of Productive Exclusion,'" *Journal of Peasant Studies* 43, no. 2 (2000): 583–610.

semi-subsistence farming to repress wages but fails to transform and diversify the economy so as to absorb excess labor into decent and sustainable employment. The failure of MAS agrarian policy to follow through on many of the promises to support economies of scale with seeds, machinery, and access to markets fueled the anger of small-scale producers, some of whom are indigenous and some of whom are proletarianized former peasants.[22] The trade-off is quite clear here: Under Morales, there was far more investment in low-value-added export-oriented agribusiness, with land-use priorities and marginalization of peasant farming ultimately increasing dependency upon international food prices. Similar to the pattern observed among fragmented and non-solidaristic cooperative miners, MAS agrarian policy undermined a fledgling militant agrarian movement that had helped bring it to power (more below on this). Instead of cultivating that base of support, the MAS opted for moderation and thus weakened its ability to organize rural communities, which remained engaged in precarious forms of daily survival.

Morales's limited redistributive growth model fragmented his support base among progressive and reform-oriented movements, while strengthening the power of extractive elites by deepening the connections between the state and both domestic and international private capital. Morales stayed in power through the pragmatic calculus of disenfranchising radical projects and empowering those who were once the sworn enemies of the process of change.[23] These emergent alliances demobilized peasant movements or absorbed them into networks of state patronage, and elevated the most extreme sectors of right-leaning elites, whose positions had been

22 Fabricant, *Mobilizing Bolivia's Displaced*.

23 Linda Farthing, "An Opportunity Squandered? Elites, Social Movements, and the Government of Evo Morales," *Latin American Perspectives* 46, no.1 (2019): 212–29.

strengthened amid the gas boom. The structural reconfigurations overseen by the MAS laid the foundation for the political realignment that proved decisive in October 2019. With organized social movements relatively weakened and elite power and influence consolidated, the only thing left was seizure of the state.

REALIGNMENTS ABOVE AND BELOW

Organized labor had already been weakened during the neoliberal era, including Bolivia's main trade unions — COMIBOL, the mining corporation, and COB, the labor federation. The newer social movements of indigenous and peasant organizations were the more powerful base for the MAS. Yet once in power, the MAS demanded absolute loyalty of the movements, extending patronage to those who fell into line and excluding those who did not. Dissident factions and those who opposed certain policies — such as unfettered gas exploration or polemical projects like the TIPNIS highway — were targeted for persecution or excluded from decision-making processes. This created a deep schism with CIDOB, the main indigenous organization of the Bolivian East.[24] As Angus McNelly has argued,

> This was an important part of the nature of the relationship between MAS and social movements, stifling the creative

24 Despite the fact that previous consultation with indigenous communities had been enshrined into the new constitution, Morales moved forward with a plan to build a massive highway through the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) in the Bolivian Amazon. Some one thousand indigenous TIPNIS residents and their supporters began a 360-mile trek from the Amazon lowlands to oppose Morales's development agenda and protect the territory and a national park. Morales used the aggressive "arm" of the state to halt or quell protesters, and this move split campesino and *cocalero* (coca grower) sectors. Those who supported the highway remained embedded in the MAS state, while those lowland indigenous group who resisted were labeled "dissenters" of the process of change. (Emily Achtenberg, "Road Rage and Resistance: Bolivia's TIPNIS Conflict," NACLA, Dec. 8, 2011, https://nacla.org/article/road-rage-and-resistance-bolivia's-tipnis-conflict)

> power of independent movements and limiting their ability to set the agenda from below. [Through] displacing organic alliances as the recognized voice of indigenous social movements … these two new state instruments became mechanisms to control and direct struggles to advance the political goals of the MAS or otherwise resolve social conflict quickly and efficiently but rather as a means to foster transformative potential of social struggle.[25]

Political parties on the Right exploited these schisms. Many movements split into an "organic" leadership (usually the dissident faction) and an "official" leadership (the faction affiliated with the MAS). In cases observed by the authors, these schisms were deepened by the influx of money or support from right-wing parties or political authorities spreading their own patronage. Government-aligned indigenous peasants, some factions of the miners, and the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) were all incorporated into the apparatus of the state, all too often pacified by modest reforms and bereft of capacity for independence and mobilization.

It is instructive to visit a concrete example in which Morales demobilized the MST, one of the most militant movements, which modeled itself on the more well-known Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement. In the early 2000s, before the MAS came to power, the MST used radical direct action as a method of pressuring the government to redistribute latifundio lands in the East. MST campesinos deployed the principle of socioeconomic utility enshrined in the Bolivian constitution — which posits that any land that doesn't provide a socioeconomic function can be seized and redistributed — to question whether owners were *legally* entitled to idle land held for speculative purposes. MST campesinos occupied the property of some of the Right's heavy hitters, including

25 McNelly, "Neostructuralism," 10.

vegetable oil magnate Branko Marinkovic and Rafael Paz, one of the most powerful *soyeros* of the region.[26] The theatrics of these occupations effectively forced the government to negotiate with movement leaders the terms of land redistribution as well as the dissolution of elite political and economic power in the East. Once MST set up an agro-ecological collective in the early 2000s, the movement began organizing alternative means of production, local rule, and social provision, including access to education and health care. The MST's tactics intensified as the MAS expanded its power, and they were also instrumental in exerting pressure against right-wing agrarian elites between 2005 and 2010.

Yet as it overcame elite challenges and consolidated power, the MAS moved to halt land occupations, eviscerating one of the most militant and radical arms of revolutionary activity. Deferring to the MAS's new pragmatism, MST militants shifted tactics, embracing the political hope that they could simply "negotiate" with this friendly government for land titles.[27] The demobilization of movements like MST wasn't simply about the criminalization of land occupations, but also the government's simultaneous failure to support small-scale production. This limited the capacity for these communities to survive, even as producers, leading to depoliticization and atomization,[28] as members of the MST agro-ecological

26 Fabricant, *Mobilizing Bolivia's Displaced*, 2012.

27 It is important to note that each occupation, although geographically isolated, was an opportunity to build support for the larger movement and connect each agro-ecological community to a broader movement (Fabricant, *Mobilizing Bolivia's Displaced*, 2012; Brabazon and Webber, "Evo Morales," 2013).

28 In addition to feeling targeted by the MAS, individual MST members who critiqued the government claim that they have faced persecution. For example, several MST leaders say that they have been labeled right-wing neoliberals, corrupt, and liars by the government when they attempted to mobilize, and they believe the government may have attempted to divide and eliminate the movement. Government observers have noted that this type of response to government critique is not limited to the MST, and is consistently on the minds of activists in other organiza-

collectives dispersed across urban landscapes in search of work in the informal sector. Some brought their organizing skills into urban squatter spaces and neighborhood coalitions advocating for basic services in the peripheral spaces of Santa Cruz. However, the rural areas were stripped of the capacity to resist the economic power of eastern elite land acquisition.

After a period of violent clashes between 2006 and 2013, the MAS government reached a form of détente with the right-wing agro-industrialists in the East. Some of the region's most extreme leaders — including Marinkovic — had been sent into exile because of their involvement in plotting to overthrow Morales in 2008.[29] Those who remained, among them Santa Cruz's governor, Rubén Costas, came to a working relationship with the MAS. Costas's right-wing party, the *Demócratas*, had carved out a space of national and departmental-level power, and hoped to expand its base in the most recent 2019 elections. Though traditionally hard-line opponents of Morales, the Agrarian Chamber of Commerce (CAO) and industrial sectors were reaping the benefits of economic stability and a heavily spending state, as banking and real estate expanded and consumption increased. Yet as the political tide turned in late 2019, Santa Cruz's most reactionary leaders — backed by exiles like Marinkovic—didn't hesitate to show where their allegiances lay.

---

tions who feel the need to watch what they say. Threats to dissenters range from having their taxes audited to public accusations by the government that they are "neoliberals," or that they are being manipulated and funded by external groups such as USAID. (Brabazon and Webber, "Evo Morales," 2013).

29 Branco Marinkovic funded this coup, providing $200,000 to thugs to carry out a plot to kill Morales. Marinkovic's original fortune came from the Santa Cruz agro-industrial boom of the 1950s, when his late father set up what is now one of the country's largest soy and sunflower oil plants in the country. After the Bolivian-Croatian oligarch's plot failed in 2009, he fled to the United States, where he was granted asylum, and then relocated to Brazil. Today, Marinkovic is an ardent supporter of Brazil's far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro. (Nicole Fabricant, "The Roots of the Right-Wing Coup in Bolivia," *Dissent*, Dec. 23, 2019, dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/roots-coup-bolivia-morales-anez-camacho)

Shifting political and economic incentives drove realignments. With the gas-fueled period of economic growth coming to an end, and the prospects for a Morales reelection threatening to restrict elite access to the state, the more extreme factions sought to disrupt the party-based détente and reinsert themselves by force. At the forefront of this faction was Luis Fernando Camacho, a leader of the unelected Civic Committee, a body with decidedly fascist components.[30] The other right-wing faction, represented by Rubén Costas and his party, was at first hesitant to join the more radical demands against Morales, perhaps because it hoped for a party-mediated outcome.

The more extreme factions, led by Camacho and backed by the exile Marinkovic, mobilized quickly and effectively, rapidly closing the space for any dissent on the Right. In the midst of the putsch, Camacho's father (whose son later said he had "closed the deal" with the police so they would mutiny) wrote an accusatory letter to Santa Cruz's chamber of commerce, accusing them of doing nothing to help bring down Evo Morales. Clearly, the planning had long been in the works, including visits by Camacho to Brazil and Colombia in months prior to the coup. Camacho's fiery rhetoric was one of thinly veiled calls for violence, including evangelical paeans to the restoration of Christianity.

Neither Camacho nor Marinkovic represented a single established political party. Both represented capitalist interests that hoped to disrupt the status quo. They also hoped to capture control

30 The Civic Committee has a youth organization called the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* (the Cruceñist Youth Union, or UJC), a body with deep historical ties to Bolivian fascist parties (Gustafson, "Bulls and Beauty Queens," 2006; Bret Gustafson, *Bolivia in the Age of Gas*. Camacho was himself once a leader of the UJC. Carlos Valverde Barbery, the Cruceño who founded the UJC in 1957, had close ties to Klaus Barbie, the notorious Nazi "Butcher of Lyon," who escaped to Bolivia with a false US passport after the war. UJC tactics included weapons training and the use of literature from Nazi youth brigades to inculcate members into the group — tactics that have survived to the present day (Fabricant, *Dissent,* 2019).

over taxation and credit (Camacho owed much to the state), land, and the law (Marinkovic was legally proscribed for his participation in the 2009 mercenary plot, and much of his land had been seized by the state). This more extreme faction was slightly more astute than it has been in its first coup attempt in 2008 and 2009, then motivated by a racist rhetoric of separatism. Now, the return of Christianity and a call for radical federalism was the discourse. So, despite historic anti-Andean and anti-indigenous racism voiced by these sectors, Camacho joined with a faction of the "civic" opposition from Potosí (the lithium-rich Andean state) and its clearly indigenous leader, Marco Pumari, to stage a series of stunts aimed at toppling Evo Morales.

As this more extremist right came to the fore of the opposition in the days after the contested vote, their key demands quickly shifted from new elections to Morales's resignation. Eventually, they went so far as to demand the incarceration of the president, the vice president, and the entire cabinet. After the coup was carried out, on November 10, Luis Fernando Camacho (or "Macho Camacho," as he is popularly known) was paraded on top of a police car through the streets of La Paz, escorted by the mutinous police and accompanied by cheering supporters of the opposition. Outside, the indigenous Wiphala flag was torn off buildings and set aflame by Camacho supporters as they announced the defeat of "communism." Openly racist sentiment, which might have been tamed during the Morales period for the first time in Bolivian history, had returned with a vengeance.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

What is the path forward for Bolivia? On the Right, things have become a bit more complicated than Camacho and Marinkovic might have hoped. Jeanine Áñez, who now occupies the presidency, is a member of the *Demócratas* party, the slightly moderate

right of Santa Cruz. Initially allied with Camacho, Áñez's declaration of her candidacy in the next elections created a schism, restoring the existing divide between the *Demócratas* and the Camacho-Marinkovic faction. Camacho himself has formed a political party and is now a presidential candidate. Carlos Mesa, the centrist candidate and runner-up in the 2019 election, is also still in the mix, so those who opposed Morales are now divided into three major segments.

On the Left, things are equally complex. The MAS remains a powerful political force, and the only one with a truly national base. Yet the fragmented social movements still confront the pressures of the party's realignment, as some leaders have moved to support one or another opposition party. Other movements seek more autonomy from party politics, rather than strong party alignment with the MAS or otherwise. Therein lies the dilemma. Without the MAS, the Right will return to power. With the MAS, the movements had been largely co-opted. Even so, if the elections had been held in May, as planned, the MAS may have eked out a first-round victory, given growing discontent with the transition government.

At this writing, that discontent appears to be growing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has upended lives and workplaces around the world, with more than a third of the globe under lockdown. It is unclear how this public health crisis will affect the upcoming Bolivian elections, which have been postponed. (At the time of writing, the Bolivian congress was debating a ninety-day extension, but there is still much political uncertainty.) Many leftist intellectuals, like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, cited below, had hoped that Morales's departure would open space for a reconfiguration of progressive politics not mediated by the dominance of the MAS. Yet a unified social movement base is crucial for countering the resurgence of the Right. The

original coalitions that linked highland indigenous communities to lowland land claims like the Pacto de Unidad, or "Pact of Unity,"[31] would have to resurface. Young urbanites, an often-ignored component of Morales's ouster, many of whom are facing un- or underemployment, would have to redirect their discontent with the MAS toward the right wing and embrace the possibility that a MAS return might bring new hope. Organized labor, specifically within the COB, is always fickle. More than a few former indigenous leaders, like the equally fickle Rafael Quispe, have aligned themselves with the opposition. The urban centrist middle classes in La Paz will likely maintain their support for Carlos Mesa, while the more conservative middle classes will divide their votes between one or another faction of the Right (Áñez or Camacho). This so-called dispersal of the anti-Morales vote might help the MAS. Assuming elections happen anytime soon, an electoral victory for the MAS would be preferable to a win for the Right. But progressives do not want to return to the deeply flawed MAS politics of the past, which were as much about deepening the power of capital in commodity-export sectors as they were about promoting progressive social policy or economic redistribution. The political stagnation of the MAS project, characterized by largely patriarchal networks of patronage distribution and top-down rule — rather than revolutionary coherence — had become disturbingly clear. As Cusicanqui articulated during a women's forum held just after the coup in La Paz:

> I am very sad because Evo is gone, but the hope of a pluricultural Bolivia is not gone, the hope that the Wiphala represents to us has not gone, the hope of ending racism has not gone.

31 The Pact of Unity was a highland and lowland national alliance of Bolivian grassroots organizations formed prior to Morales, which pushed for agrarian rights, land reform, the rewriting of the 1967 constitution through a Constituent Assembly, and a left-indigenous transformation of the Bolivian state.

> We have to continue to fight in the trenches of anti-racism, we must continue to join forces to articulate a sense of recovering our democracy on a day-to-day basis … The plurality of the Wiphala is what we have to recover, sisters, and also the possibility of twinning between women and natives.[32]

Rivera was making reference to conjoined issues of race, class, and gender inequalities, part of the structural contradictions that the MAS had yet to resolve. Taking up this challenge and conjoining it with the question of ecological degradation is more pressing than ever.

The pandemic has exacerbated the uncertainty facing the recomposition of popular forces. Even prior to the pandemic, challenges mounted, including the aggressive use of force by military and police, jailing and arrests of former MAS officials, and Left and independent media blackouts, as civil and indigenous rights were radically scaled back under this regime. COVID-19 has given the so-called transition government a new pretext to militarize the state and rely on heavy-handed policing. Like much of the world, most Bolivian citizens have been under a state-ordered and military-enforced lockdown or required to self-quarantine for the foreseeable future. Many who work in the informal sector have no choice but to figure out how to make ends meet, and food is scarce, particularly in the highlands, leading to an incredibly volatile climate. In Bolivia, such conditions would normally lead to radical disruptive tactics like taking to the streets, blocking traffic from highlands to lowlands, or occupying the seats of power. Bolivian organizers need to be present in physical space together; digital organizing will not suffice, as many Bolivians lack access to the internet.

---

32 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "Bolivia's Lesson in Triumphalism," Toward Freedom, Nov. 15, 2019, towardfreedom.org/blog-blog/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-bolivias-lesson-in-triumphalism/.

The lack of outright resistance has meant that the coup government can continue to crack down on any dissenters to the regime. At this writing in April 2020, more than 1,500 people have been arrested for violating the quarantine. The minister of the interior, a former hotel owner named Arturo Murillo, has threatened to declare a state of siege in regions that refuse to quarantine, many of which are predominantly indigenous and poor. Conveniently, many of these regions are also MAS strongholds.

The dangers of a military state in a moment of public health crisis will exacerbate preexisting inequalities throughout the country and will be particularly salient in areas like El Alto in the highlands, as well as irregular migrant settlements in the lowlands that lack basic amenities like sanitation services and running water. The phenomenon emerging in Bolivia resembles a scenario recently narrated by Arundhati Roy:

> The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things. As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual. Many [were] driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight.[33]

Racism will harden in everyday interactions between mestizos and indigenous peoples, as they will be blamed for spreading the disease and further criminalized.

---

33 Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," *Financial Times*, Apr. 3, 2020, ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

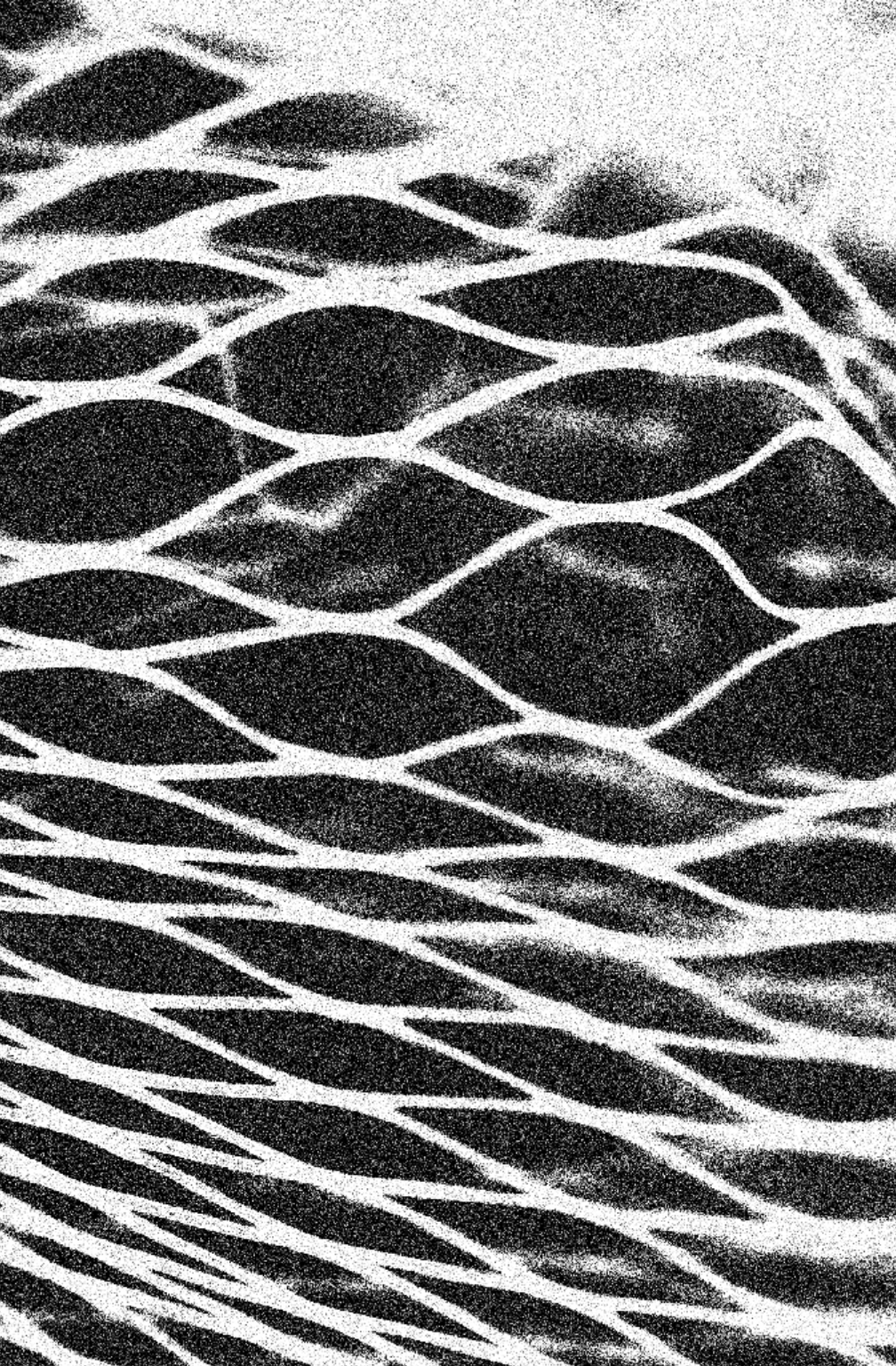
The coup government has already postponed the May 2020 elections. To do so indefinitely would require dissolving Congress, still unlikely given the MAS's continued popular support. Yet, as many commentators such as Naomi Klein, have articulated in the Global North, COVID-19 is remaking our sense of the possible.[34] While it is not inconceivable that the military and police could return to the political fore, the moment is also ripe with potential. Bolivia's rich and militant history of organizing could surface in this moment of crisis, as communities are forced to seek medical care, resources, and foodstuffs independent of the interim government. For the moment, however, the country appears to be sinking further into a public health nightmare, compounded by a militarized government that hopes to avoid a MAS return at all costs.

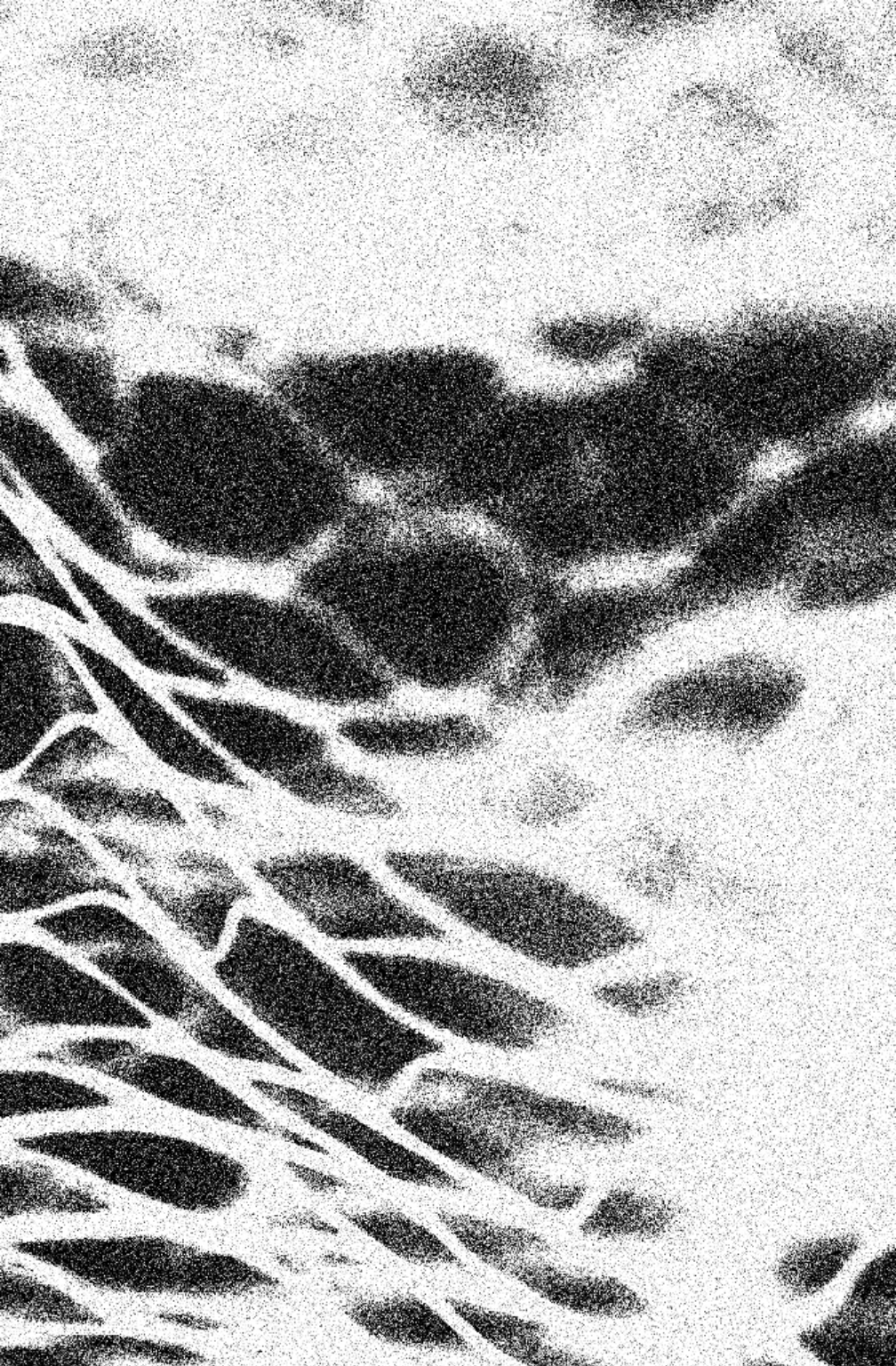
The political and economic realignments under Morales and the subsequent demobilization of the Left allows us to understand the landscape that set the stage for the rise of a fascist right. The first lesson lies in the MAS's failure to end a longer history of commodity dependence and diversify the economy further. Of course, this is no easy task. Yet many policy choices made by the MAS government deepened the extractive turn without exploring alternatives. A second lesson can be gleaned from the weakening of radical social movements. Though perhaps to be expected, the urge to establish hegemony through party unity and a restoration of an older system of party-mediated democracy represented a failure in participatory democracy or other modalities of autonomous self-government, and ultimately a failure in a more robust political agenda. The rise of the MAS was not a revolutionary process. Indeed, that would have required more revolutionary violence than the MAS had the power to muster. Other strategies might

34 Naomi Klein, "Coronavirus Capitalism and How to Beat It," *The Intercept*, March 16, 2020, https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-capitalism/.

have been able to weaken the most intransigent sectors of the Right, but the MAS chose a more conservative path. This political scenario was exacerbated by the fact that Bolivia's economy, which had some of the highest growth rates in Latin America, had been poised to slow down, a trend now intensified by the outbreak. Any government that takes the reins going forward will confront a severe economic challenge.

In considering all of this, it is worth highlighting the stubbornness among some sectors of the international left who may not be open to reflecting critically on the mistakes, missteps, and shortcomings of the Morales era. The point is not to excuse or justify the coup, nor to suggest that we should qualify calling it such. There is, indeed, an intense ideological struggle underway. Yet if socialist change — or even something more progressive than the status quo — is desired, it is clear that Bolivia under the MAS was in many ways heading in the wrong direction. If the Left is unable to critique the MAS regime while also acknowledging its victories and conquests, we open the doors to compromises that, as with Morales, will strengthen the forces we hope to transform.





ABSTRACT

As capitalism persists well into the twenty-first century, the most important questions for class analysis concern not only the changing structures of capitalist classes internationally but also of the working classes and middle classes. This article argues that there is less and less value in drawing tight sociological nets categorizing class locations rather than concentrating on what contemporary struggles reveal about actual processes of class formation, and especially the possibilities of developing new forms of working-class organization.

Class Theory for Our Time

Leo Panitch

Near the beginning of his outstanding book *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason*, David Harvey quotes a very famous passage from Karl Marx's *Capital* that describes how the capitalist deployment of technology degrades workers to the level of a machine's appendage.[1] It alienates them from their intellectual potential just as science is incorporated in production, and it deforms the conditions under which they labor, be the payment high or low. Later in the book, Harvey quotes another very insightful passage, in which Marx went beyond the dehumanizing impact

1 David Harvey, *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason*, London: Profile Books, 2017.

of technology as deployed by capital to address its ultimately destructive implications for capitalism itself.

As large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and the amount of labor employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time, whose "powerful effectiveness" is itself out of proportion to the direct labor time spent on their production. As Harvey notes, in this context, the capitalist is trapped: there is a limit to how much surplus value (profit) can be extracted from that one worker who is putting the mass of social labor to work. Marx concluded from this that capitalist production will ultimately have to come to an end. Of course, a century and a half later, we know better. Capitalism will never come to an end of its own accord — even if it ends up resembling a dystopia like *Blade Runner* — until we end it.

CHANGING STRUCTURES

As capitalism persists well into the twenty-first century, one of the most important questions for class analysis today concerns the changing structure of capitalist classes themselves and its transformative impact on capitalist political rule.[2] Class analysis in this context requires close attention to the changing configuration of the capitalist classes. This means careful study of the ways in which capital is organized, amidst the interpenetration of old and new capitals across both finance and manufacturing, and of its strategies for exercising hegemony at a global level.

That is not to claim that there is now anything like a global capitalist class with a cohesive identity and agenda. Indeed, as we can see from meetings of the G20 finance ministers, these political actors are engaged in a difficult process of trying to align

2 The remit of two recent *Socialist Register* volumes — *The Politics of the New Right* (2016) and *A World Turned Upside Down?* (2019) — has been to survey this development on a broad international scale.

and coordinate the interests of distinctive ruling classes — a very difficult task in today's world.

Profound changes in the way capital accumulation takes place, both technological and geographical, have brought about the reorganization of capitalist classes. Those changes have also interwoven working classes at an international level, not only through the global value chains of networked production, communication, and distribution, but also in much more localized ways, reflecting new patterns of migration. Contemporary migrations that are simultaneously induced and resisted amid a globalizing capitalism — so central to the rise of "patriotic" scoundrels like Donald Trump — have rendered a great many households increasingly connected across borders.[3] But globalization and migration do not make it any less important for us to recognize the specificities of class formation, and the role they play in changing the forms of political rule in each particular nation-state.

The history of class formation cannot be understood without incorporating the history of migration, which includes its oppressive, even genocidal, impact on indigenous peoples — as we know in this hemisphere especially, all the way from Argentina in the South to Canada in the North. Yet the very specificities of class structures and relations in these two countries alone should remind us that classes are always distinctively shaped — whether we like it or not, whether we are internationalists or not — by their historical formation within particular nation-states that have emerged over the last two centuries.

CLASS FORMATION

Our discussion of class in the twenty-first century needs to go far beyond what can be captured by contrasting old and new labor

3 See especially Adam Hanieh, "The Contradictions of Global Migration," in Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (eds.), *A World Turned Upside Down?: Socialist Register 2019*, London: Merlin, 2018.

processes, or by probing the effect of those changes on workplace relations. However important all of this is, it needs to be placed in the context of ongoing class formation, not least the specific contours and modalities of what is happening to the "middle classes" economically, socially, and politically, as well as to capital and labor.

The Left should not consider the use of the term "middle class" to be simply an ideological device, a trope of political discourse intended to obscure fundamental social relations and potential conflicts between capital and labor. Nor can the formation of middle classes as distinctive collective actors in each nation-state be registered by superficially mapping either the "old" or the "new" middle class in terms of simplistic and unhelpful polarities (white-collar versus blue-collar, or service versus industrial workers — still less "unproductive" versus "productive" labor). Class theory in the 1970s described the "contradictory social locations" of the "new middle class," a phenomenon that can increasingly be observed among those who occupy positions of coordination and supervision in production, distribution, logistics, and communication, as well as among those who perform comparable roles within many agencies of social reproduction and administration, public and private.[4]

However, this trend coincides with the persistence and even growth of "independent commodity producers" and "petty-bourgeois" vendors of many kinds, old and new. This includes the small-entrepreneur-cum-manual-laborer — famously identified in the United States as "Joe the Plumber" — who is more concerned about taxes on small business than labor standards. But it goes well beyond that, embracing a whole range of occupations, from local shopkeepers and market stallers all the way to traders and gamers in global cyberspace; and from those who provide cleaning,

4 Guglielmo Carchedi, *On the Economic Identification of Social Classes*, London: Routledge and Kagan Paul, 1977; and Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, London: NLB, 1978.

hairdressing, or physical-training services as independent producers all the way to those on contract in both private and public sectors as consultants, instructors, and researchers.

MIDDLE CLASS OR WORKING CLASS?

The forms in which these social relations will take shape, in terms of new middle-class or working-class formation, is one of the most important questions for this century. The gig economy's new putting-out system — epitomized by companies like Uber and Lyft — is explicitly designed to induce middle-class formation. Yet those drivers who are struggling to organize as Uber or Lyft employees are engaged in working-class formation. I have been told there is a similar struggle over class formation taking place among the vendors in the La Salada market outside the train station here in Buenos Aires, to determine whether they will be organized by La Confederación de Trabajadores de la Economía Popular (CTEP).

We can see another dimension of this in the new public-management practices of outsourcing state and parastate work — service, clerical, and maintenance alike — to individual contractors, from management consultants and data processors to nonunionized cleaners, who often work side by side with unionized state employees. Their coworkers can even be militant trade unionists.

The organization of traditionally middle-class professionals like teachers and nurses also reflects struggles over class formation. Staunchly status-conscious, schoolteachers in the twentieth century were often the main socializing agents of xenophobic nationalism. It is one of the most positive political developments of our time that this seems to be changing in the twenty-first century — not least in the United States, where many teachers' unions have become militant and even created a new sense of working-class community by painstakingly building links with parents. This sense of community has often embraced and protected recent migrant families.

Jane McAlevey led and chronicled another recent example of struggle for working-class formation at private hospitals in the anti-union, "right-to-work" state of Nevada, which involved the collective organization of *all* the relevant workers, from nurses to cleaners.[5] The setting of work-time shifts was the most important common issue for the predominantly female labor force in these hospitals, who were still carrying the burden of social-reproduction work for their families. Mobilizing around this demand proved crucial in uniting the intensive-care nurse with the cook in the basement kitchen preparing the patients' food.

Yet most teachers' and nurses' unions remain distinctly craft-oriented, even when they are militant. I was once invited to give a keynote address at the convention of the United Nurses of Alberta in Canada, shortly after they had undertaken a very successful, albeit illegal, strike that enjoyed enormous popular support. In my address, I suggested that for the next round of collective bargaining, they should build on their success by making it a priority to secure an hour a week of paid time during which all the workers on each hospital ward would be brought together to discuss the labor process. In the following round of bargaining, their priority should be to win another hour of paid time, to be used for collective meetings of workers with the patients on the ward.

I got a standing ovation for this proposal. However, the very first item on the agenda was a resolution from the executive, supporting an application from the hospital orderlies to become part of the union (orderlies are responsible for tasks such as moving patients, sterilizing medical equipment, cleaning rooms, and changing bed sheets). To facilitate the debate over this, there

5 Jane McAlevey, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*, New York: Verso, 2014. On the teachers' strikes in the United States, see McAlevey's more recent book, *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy* (New York: Ecco, 2020), as well as Eric Blanc, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics* (New York: Verso, 2019).

were two microphones on the convention floor: one for speakers in favor of the resolution and one for those against. Not a single nurse took the "yes" mic; they all wanted to argue against the motion. This, too, was a struggle between middle-class and working-class formation.

INVENTING NEW FORMS

How does this relate to the increasingly precarious conditions workers face today, even when they belong to unions? It's not useful to identify a "precariat" as a new class that is distinct from the working class or middle class.[6] Employers have always tried to gain access to labor when they want it, to dispose of it as they please, and to use it with as few restrictions as possible during the period in between.

There is less and less value in drawing tight sociological nets to determine who is in the working class and who isn't (or doing the same for the middle class, for that matter). Instead of limiting our strategic discussions to whether we should concentrate at any given time on organizing nurses or baristas, teachers or software developers, farmhands or truckers, salespeople or bank tellers, our main concern should be visualizing and developing new forms of broadly inclusive working-class organization and formation for the twenty-first century.

The mass trade unions and working-class parties that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the first permanent organizations of subordinate classes in world history were trying to do exactly this. There are a multitude of struggles taking place today, rooted in the different facets of workers' lives that encompass so many occupations, identities, and diverse communities in

6 See Bryan Palmer, "Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization" in Leo Panitch, Greg Albo, and Vivek Chibber (eds.), *Registering Class: Socialist Register 2014*, London: Merlin, 2013.

the face of an increasingly exploitative, chaotic, and irrational capitalism. But our inability to discover novel organizational forms that might facilitate processes of class formation has once again allowed far-right political forces to mobilize popular anger and frustrations.

We have seen, over the last decade, some credibility being restored to the democratic-socialist case for transcending capitalism — even in the United States, of all places. After the Occupy movement, there was a marked turn from protest to politics on the Left, and this still defines the new conjuncture. There is a growing sense that capitalism can no longer be bracketed while we protest against the many other oppressions and ecological threats of our time, combined with a feeling that you can protest forever outside the halls of power, but you won't change the world. As opposition to capitalist globalization thereby shifted from the streets to the state, this transition from protest to politics has especially targeted massive inequalities of income and wealth.

But as Andrew Murray, chief of staff at Unite, the UK's largest trade union, has noted, this turn has been "more class-focused rather than class-rooted."[7] The strategic question raised by this relates to what the *Communist Manifesto* identified as the first task of all communists: to engage in "the organization of the proletariat into a class."

Given the tremendous and manifold changes in class composition and identity, as well as the great limits and failures of the old working-class parties and unions, how does a class-focused politics actually become rooted in the working classes again? The profound defeat suffered by so many working-class organizations in the final decades of the twentieth century was an important landmark in paving the way for a fully global capitalism under the aegis of the US informal empire. Yet there are more workers

7 Andrew Murray, "Jeremy Corbyn and the Battle for Socialism," *Jacobin*, 7 February 2016. See also Murray's "Left Unity or Class Unity? Working-Class Politics in Britain" in *Socialist Register 2014.*

on the face of the earth today than ever before. And while new technologies restrict job growth and employment in certain sectors, they foster job growth in other sectors, as well as introduce entirely new ones with the potential for collective organization.

Also of great strategic importance, as Kim Moody has shown, have been strikes at component plants or interruptions of supplier chains at warehouses and ports can force shutdowns through a globally integrated production network.[8] Similarly, whistleblowing among data processors can expose vast stores of information that are kept hidden by corporations and states.

Working-class organization has suffered from an Achilles' heel: even when it has gotten into the state, it has not known what to do with it. Above all, it has not known how to transform *the labor process inside the state*, so that the state becomes an agency for socialist transformation rather than the reproduction of capitalism. Linking the ambitious aim for renewed working-class formation, inside as well as outside the state, with the development of new creative strategies for state transformation must be a priority for intellectuals in trying to make historical materialism a better analytical tool for the twenty-first century.[9]

This a revised and updated version of a keynote address presented to the 36th International Labor Process Conference, "Class and the Labor Process", Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires, 23 March 2018.

---

8 Kim Moody, *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017.

9 See Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, "Marxist Theory and Strategy: Getting Somewhere Better," Deutscher Memorial Lecture, *Historical Materialism* 23, no. 2 (2015); Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, "Capitalist Crises and the State," in Matt Vidal et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; and Leo Panitch, "The Challenge of Transcending *Capital*," in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx's* Capital *After 150 Years: Critique and Alternative to Capitalism*, London: Routledge, 2019.

ABSTRACT

The abolition of borders is a basic socialist principle. Yet with a liberal establishment concerned mainly with “protecting” the most upstanding of the 10 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, framing the ongoing fight for migrant justice around open borders, as advocated by Suzy Lee, is not a strategic route to working-class power. The contemporary socialist movement must reclaim the universalist battle cry of the 2006 immigrant mega marches: immediate, total, and unconditional amnesty for all.

The Question of Borders

David B. Feldman

The struggle to achieve justice for migrants and immigrants in the United States remains an uphill battle, with raids, deportations, and state violence at the southern border continuing unabated. Direct action against the vicious border and immigration regime has heated up in recent years, but substantive victories remain few and far between, and the extremely heterogeneous immigrant justice coalition has found it difficult to articulate a clearly defined vision for *what* it seeks to achieve and *how* it plans to win it. The question of immigration controls has resurfaced as a particularly thorny issue; acrimonious debates erupted after Bernie Sanders called open borders a "Koch brothers proposal" in 2015, and they reached a fever pitch three years later with

the publication of Angela Nagle's "The Left Case against Open Borders" in *American Affairs*.[1] On the other side of the Atlantic, Aufstehen's refusal to adopt an open borders position took the wind out of the sails of Germany's stillborn project of left renewal, while both La France Insoumise and the UK Labour Party have faced criticism for refusing to get on the open borders bandwagon.[2]

These debates have subsided somewhat over the past year or two. By the time the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) passed its "Support for Open Borders" resolution at its Atlanta convention in July 2019, it raised few eyebrows, demonstrating the degree to which the principle has come to stand in for migrant and immigrant justice more generally on the Left.[3] The upshot of this is that the slogan has lost much of its concrete content as it has become more ubiquitous. What does it mean to call for open borders in a world dominated by capitalist nation-states? Is the literal interpretation of scrapping immigration controls enough to overturn the highly exclusionary global regime of national citizenship underpinning a grossly unequal capitalist world economy? Perhaps it is better to think of open borders as shorthand for a radical but practical politics for the early twenty-first century — one that keeps on the horizon of political possibility a world in which territorially bounded and citizenship-conferring capitalist states no longer exist. In this version of open borders, fighting for a domicile-based form of

1 Angela Nagle, "The Left Case against Open Borders," *American Affairs* II, no. 4 (2018).

2 For a critical assessment of the critiques of these left parties as anti-immigrant, see Pierre Rimbert, "Gauche antimigrant, une fable médiatique," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 2018, 10.

3 Elijah S., Marvin G., Madi M., Eva L. S., and Brandon R. R., "Support for Open Borders," DSA Resolutions for the 2019 Convention, Resolution #73.

citizenship that guarantees full rights to all residents becomes an absolute necessity.[4]

Few proponents of open borders from the Left would argue against this vision; however, there has been little critical discussion about how to put it into practice. This is all the more remarkable when one considers how seriously the rapidly maturing socialist movement has begun to grapple with the long-neglected question of actually winning and exercising power, taking care to distinguish long-term goals from more immediate ones, and constantly reevaluating strategy and tactics. If we have made great strides when it comes to thinking strategically about, for example, how to democratize finance and avert climate catastrophe, the same cannot be said about our plan to achieve justice for migrants and immigrants. It is one thing to support the abolition of immigration controls as a rule because they reinforce hierarchies among workers and violate socialists' commitment to radical equality. It is another thing altogether to argue that socialists ought to frame the ongoing fight for migrant and immigrant justice around open borders. The widespread conflation of these related but distinct claims has meant that, notwithstanding the sometimes overheated rhetoric, the recent debate over open borders has clarified very little.

Suzy Lee's essay in the pages of this journal is a major exception to the general trend.[5] In her view, the abolition of borders is more than a basic socialist principle; it also happens to be good strategy for the contemporary US left because it stands to increase the power of the working class and organized labor. Lee's presentation of the problem in these terms is a breath of fresh air, but while I wholeheartedly agree with the spirit of her intervention, I come to

4 Harald Bauder, "The Possibilities of Open and No Borders," *Social Justice* 39, no. 4 (2014): 76–96. Bauder makes a useful distinction between "open borders" and the radical, long-term vision of "no border" politics.

5 Suzy Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," *Catalyst* 2, no. 4 (2019): 6–38.

a different conclusion regarding the supposed convergence of a long-term vision and a short- to medium-term strategy around the abolition of immigration controls. To be clear, *this is not a socialist case against open borders*. Socialists must actively struggle against the lethal regime of restriction currently in place in the United States (and elsewhere), demanding a decriminalization of unauthorized entry, the demilitarization of border zones, the closure of *all* migrant detention centers, a reversal of the de facto ban on seeking asylum at the southern border, and, ultimately, abolition of the quota system responsible for the illegalization of millions of immigrants over the past several decades.

Yet we must not allow the most spectacular images of racialized state violence and exclusion to overshadow the everyday struggles of those living in the country without a permanent legal status, and consequently suffering some of the most overt forms of exploitation and oppression. Lee is heartened that a majority of the US population already supports a "pathway to citizenship" for undocumented immigrants living in the country, but aside from noting in passing that the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 included a far more generous amnesty provision that was "offered without restrictions on age, employment history, or education," she does not critically assess the limitations of contemporary proposals.[6] I show below that, while seemingly inclusive, a so-called pathway to citizenship is essentially a euphemism for an expansion and institutionalization of stopgap measures such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED),

6 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 8. Moreover, she does not maintain this key distinction throughout her essay, implying that the DREAM Act would constitute an amnesty for those who meet its requirements, and mistakenly arguing that "the Democratic Party has … champion[ed] amnesty for undocumented workers" over the past two decades (30).

explicitly temporary programs created by the federal government to appease grassroots movements pushing for more radical change. These do provide some important material benefits, but they are woefully inadequate, and reinforce the notion that certain groups of immigrants are more deserving than others. In this regard, programs such as DACA, TPS, and DED have little in common with socialist ideals of radical egalitarianism, and effectively constitute new mechanisms of social control. The fact that DSA has expressed critical support for DACA[7] and used the "pathway to citizenship" language in its open borders resolution is indicative of the general failure of socialists to adequately theorize the stakes of the struggle over immigration policy in the current historical conjuncture — despite the obvious good intentions. Rather than allowing corporate Democrats to set such terrible terms of inclusion, socialists ought to reclaim the universalist battle cry of the 2006 immigrant mega marches: immediate, total, and unconditional amnesty for all. Otherwise, we stand little chance of building enough power to win substantive victories that actually move us toward a borderless and post-capitalist world.

THE SOCIALIST CASE FOR OPEN BORDERS

Lee's argument goes against the grain of much liberal — and even many left — analyses of the reigning anti-immigrant climate in the United States by placing most of the blame at the feet of the ruling class rather than disaffected white workers. It is not that the

7 DSA's statement on the effort to repeal DACA — which Barack Obama's administration rolled out in response to the occupation of his reelection campaign offices by undocumented youth — characterizes it as "a program that allows undocumented immigrants who came to the United States as children the opportunity to work and live in peace." "DSA stands with immigrants – no DACA repeal!" September 7, 2017. TPS was included in the Immigration Act of 1990, after years of sustained organizing by the Central American–led Sanctuary Movement. For an excellent overview of the legal history of such programs, see Geoffrey Heeren, "The Status of Nonstatus," *American University Law Review* 64, no. 5 (2015): 1115–1181.

latter and other social strata play no role in policy development, but that the economic, political, and cultural power of the former allow it to largely determine the rules of the game. An analysis of the interests and strategies of capital — as variable and divergent as these may be — is thus far more illuminating than concepts such as "racial resentment" and "white anxiety."[8] As a whole, the capitalist class generally seeks access to a large supply of relatively rightless migrant and immigrant workers. This makes it predisposed to push for a loosening of immigration restrictions when the labor supply is low, but just as likely to support a punitive enforcement regime to intimidate immigrant workers already here. Community and workplace raids have a particularly strong and chilling effect on those who lack legal status and may face deportation as punishment for resisting exploitation. While it is tempting to denounce the "overzealous implementation" of immigration laws, Lee argues that repressive interior enforcement is simply "the logical consequence of any system that restricts migration."[9] As such, ending the attack on migrant and immigrant workers requires opposition to all immigration controls.

In order to move from a general rule to the historically specific claim that socialists in the United States ought to demand open borders right now, Lee gives a broad outline of how migration patterns, the labor needs of capital, and organized labor's stance toward immigrant workers have evolved over the course of US history — all the while maintaining an important analytical distinction between immigration *flow* and immigrants' *rights*. " The

8 I cannot overstate how important this seemingly obvious point is, and how grateful I am to Lee for stating it so plainly. For a recent example of one socialist's analysis of "the politics of immigration" that pays much more attention to "white reaction against demographic change" than the complex and ever-shifting interests of capital, see: Daniel Denvir, *All-American Nativism: How the Bipartisan War on Immigrants Explains Politics as We Know It* (New York: Verso, 2020).

9 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 29.

question of rights was secondary to questions of immigration flow" for much of the nineteenth century, as factory owners on the East Coast in particular required a steady supply of immigrant workers from Europe. Most capitalists opposed measures to restrict immigration while the country was undergoing its first wave of industrialization and were even willing to enter into an alliance with the nascent labor movement on this point. In Lee's words, "rights could be expanded as long as they were consistent with supplying an adequate pool of labor." For the more radical wing of the labor movement, the question of immigration flow was actually secondary to that of rights.[10] It supported freedom of movement as a general principle but opposed the contract labor systems that created a subclass of bounded and hyper-exploitable workers often used as strikebreakers by capital. Insofar as these mildly restrictionist elements of the labor movement's position were an unintended consequence of its struggle for equal rights, its "strategy presented no conflict between rights and restriction." Despite their fundamentally different starting points, there was enough overlap between the positions of capital and labor during this period to allow them to coalesce around a relatively open immigration regime.

One of Lee's key claims is that a qualitative transformation occurred around the turn of the twentieth century, as widespread mechanization and land dispossession combined with decades of mass immigration to produce domestic labor surpluses for the first time. Capital became a "much less reliable defender of open borders," and even organized labor began to support various restrictionist measures. Lee characterizes this new regime as one "in which capital (apart from a few unique sectors) has little interest in increasing immigration flows, while labor struggles to balance

10 Lee does not state this explicitly, but it follows from her analysis.

flows and rights."[11] She believes that this system remains more or less intact today, pointing out that in those sectors of the economy where migrant and immigrant labor is still important — such as agriculture, construction, direct services, and time-sensitive garment production — "negotiations around flow and rights have, until recently, remained more similar to what existed in the nineteenth century generally." That is, capitalists have been "willing to exchange expansions in the rights of new immigrants in order to secure immigrant labor supply."[12] Given that a new wave of immigration over the last half century — in the main from Latin America and Southeast Asia — has largely solved the latter problem for capital, it now has little reason to compromise with labor on the question of rights. Its interests, Lee contends, now lie with the development of an overwhelmingly punitive regime that renders migrant and immigrant workers ever more vulnerable to state repression and employer intimidation.

Within this changed context, the main challenge for workers becomes building the power necessary to "secure immigrant rights *over the objections of capital*."[13] Lee believes that organized labor has made important steps in the right direction over the past two decades: it has reversed its earlier support for the criminalization of the hiring of undocumented workers, called for "amnesty" for the undocumented, advocated for strong protections for new arrivals, and largely supported immigrant organizing drives. For its part, the Democratic Party has advocated for a pathway to citizenship for certain undocumented immigrants and has "positioned itself definitively as the party of immigration." Nonetheless, Lee views the tacit acceptance of the principle of immigration restriction as

11 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 20.

12 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 24.

13 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 27, emphasis added.

a thorn in the side of the labor movement, and of the Left more broadly. Even the more radical-sounding call to abolish ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) is "ultimately only a critique of how restriction is enforced."[14] Partially walking back her earlier assessment of the minimal role played by working-class racism in the development of anti-immigrant policy, Lee contends that organized labor's failure to go the whole nine yards and call for the abolition of borders stems from its "fear of a nativist backlash." Without dismissing the possibility that mass immigration may have contributed somewhat to the stagnation in US wages since the 1970s, she points out that this "*is dwarfed by the economic consequences of a weak and divided working class*." A nativist response is thus far from inevitable. The way forward is "bringing immigrant workers into the fold," not erecting barriers to their freedom of movement.[15]

OUTLINE OF A CRITIQUE

Notwithstanding all of its merits, Lee's argument suffers from several conceptual and empirical flaws.

Faulty Logic

In positing that "the political economy of contemporary capitalism" makes it no longer possible "to support immigrant rights while also agreeing to strict limits on immigrant flows,"[16] Lee seems to imply that a restriction-with-rights regime is acceptable in *theory* — but that it is no longer possible in *practice*. This is a rather odd way to set the stage for embracing open borders as a "basic socialist principle." More important, it demonstrates a lack of clarity surrounding

14 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 30.

15 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 38.

16 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 6.

the thesis that a restriction-with-rights regime came to replace a relatively open and rights-based one when labor surpluses began to appear around the turn of the twentieth century. For example, Lee suggests that immigrants began to lose rights after this transition,[17] but she does not address this directly. Did immigrants in the era of relatively open borders enjoy more political rights and better working conditions than those who arrived during the more restrictive era? What were the specific mechanisms by which immigrants obtained political rights in the nineteenth century, and how have they been kept from doing so since then? Moreover, what does Lee mean when she contends that immigrant rights have been under even greater attack since 1986 than they had been throughout most of the twentieth century?

Lee sidesteps these basic questions by simply using restriction as a proxy for rights. That is, since repression is "the logical consequence of any system that restricts migration," immigrants necessarily experienced a degradation in rights as immigration policy became more restrictive throughout the twentieth century. This may or may not be the case — the point is that Lee provides no evidence for it when recounting the proverbial "closing of the gates" to southern and eastern Europeans beginning with the Emergency Quota Act of 1921.[18] In other words, Lee's presentation of the restriction-with-rights thesis is little more than a logical derivation — and a rather vague one at that. It is not always clear if the claim is that a restriction-with-rights *regime* has been in place for nearly a century, or simply that organized labor has adopted a *strategy* of pushing for restriction with rights during

17 Lee does not state this outright, but it is hard to interpret her characterization of this era as one in which "labor struggles to balance flows and rights" as anything but a recognition that the overall level of rights has declined.

18 Restrictions on Asian immigration had begun to appear nearly half a century prior to this.

this time period. The crux of her argument for open borders is that the material basis for such a regime no longer exists, but she leaves us guessing as to when the political economy of the United States was *ever* conducive to it. It cannot be prior to the late nineteenth century, because capital's aim during this time was to ensure a relatively *un*restricted immigration policy. One might understandably conclude that a restriction-with-rights regime only became viable with the appearance of labor surpluses, but this flatly contradicts Lee's assertion that it is precisely the existence of labor surpluses that makes a restriction-with-rights strategy unworkable. This is turning out to be quite an elusive regime after all! Now you see it; now you don't.

Even if we accept uncritically that capital is less dependent on migrant and immigrant labor now than it has been in the past, it does not follow that this uniquely affects the viability of a restriction-with-rights regime — whatever this may be. It simply means that capital will likely put up greater resistance to *any struggle* to achieve immigrant justice. Certainly, one can expect a tougher fight against a left-wing open borders scenario than a restriction-with-rights regime. Powerful working-class organization and mobilization will undoubtedly be necessary to overcome this inevitable ruling-class resistance, but it is not clear why this would require the immediate adoption of an open borders position. Indeed, Lee's contention that capital "no longer needs immigrant labor" actually suggests the opposite, since this would make refugees and new arrivals surplus populations, and thus extremely difficult to organize into actually existing labor unions.

Empirical Difficulties

Let us put aside the logical problems associated with Lee's restriction-with-rights thesis for the time being, and examine more carefully the key propositions that flow from it: capital in general is

no longer very dependent on migrant and immigrant labor, and those capitalists who are have largely solved their labor supply problems — and thus have no reason to compromise with labor and support granting immigrants more rights.

It is true that immigrants comprise a smaller percentage of the US working class today than during the second half of the nineteenth century. This is misleading, however, because proletarianization was not nearly as widespread then as it is now, with the vast majority of the population either forced to sell their labor power for a wage, or dependent on someone else who must do so. Between 1870 and 1910, the percentage of the US population that was foreign-born fluctuated between 14.4 and 14.8 percent. These are historically high levels that stand in stark contrast to the 4.7 percent registered in 1970, when there were fewer *total* residents born outside the United States (9.6 million) than there had been in 1900 (10.3 million).[19] However, they are practically indistinguishable from the 13.6 percent of the US population in 2017 that was born outside the country.[20] The general trend also holds for labor force participation: whereas only 5.2 percent of the labor force was foreign-born in 1970, the 28.2 million foreign-born workers in 2018 represented 17.4 percent of all workers in the country.[21]

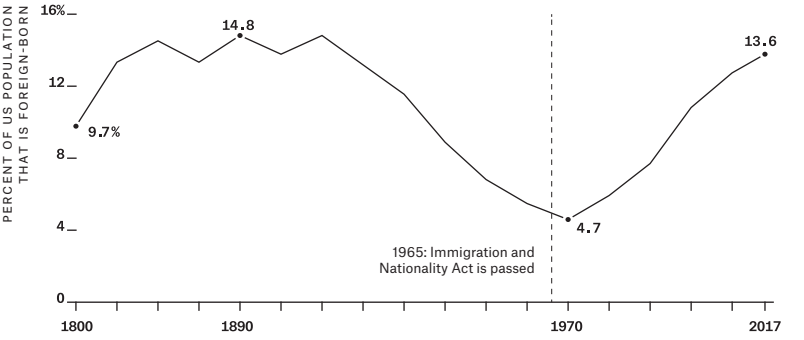
---

19 census.gov/newsroom/pdf/cspan_fb_slides.pdf. There are many reasons for the decline in the size of the foreign-born population during the middle of the twentieth century, including the imposition of quotas on European immigrants during a time of increasing immigrant radicalism, and the mass deportations of Mexicans during the early years of the Great Depression. This time period also coincided with the mobilization into the industrial workforce of black workers from the southern states and — particularly during World War Two — women. Temporary contract labor programs for Mexican agricultural workers and Filipina nurses were also in place during this time.

20 Jynnah Radford, "Key Findings About U.S. Immigrants," Pew Research Center, June 17, 2019 .

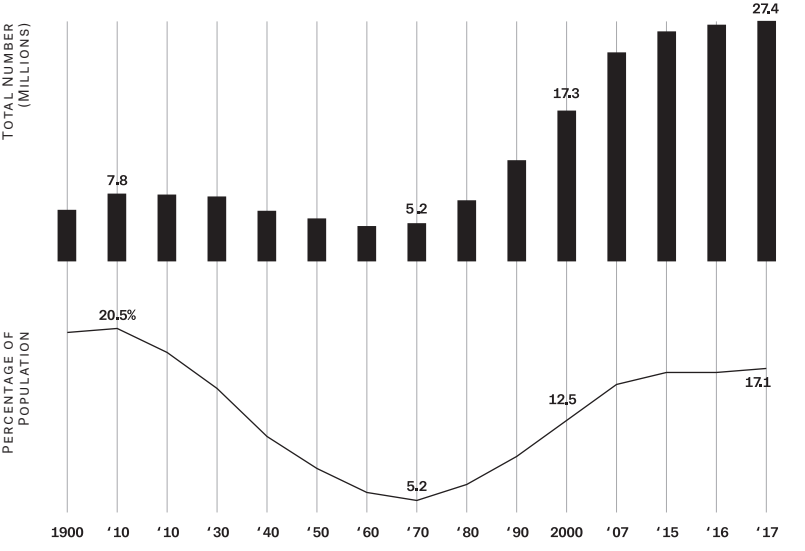
21 "Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics — 2018," U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 16, 2019.

Figure 1: Immigrant Share of US Population Nears Historic High



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010 and 2017 Amer can Communlty Survey (IPUMS). From: Radford, "Key Findings."

Figure 2: Foreign-Born People in US Labor Force



Source: Wikipedia, combining US Census data from 1900–2007 with more recent Bureau of Labor Statistics data: wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Chart_of_foreign_born_in_the_US_labor_force_1900_to_2007.png.

This not a negligible figure by any stretch of the imagination, and the direction of movement suggests that capital's dependence on migrant and immigrant labor has drastically *increased* over the past half century.

The above graphs call into question Lee's claim that the same structural transformations in US and global political economy that have resulted in greater capital mobility and mechanization since the late 1960s have also loosened US employers' dependence on immigrant labor. The best critical scholarship has shown that the *opposite* is largely true: automation and outsourcing during the final quarter of the twentieth century mainly destroyed high-paying unionized jobs for US citizens, while the export of capital abroad sparked a large wave of immigration back to the United States. In other words, the creation of a low-wage and vulnerable immigrant workforce inside the United States was *complementary* with the transfer of production to areas of the former Third World, with lower labor costs and fewer protections for workers.[22] As Lee herself points out, immigrants remain concentrated in sectors that *cannot* be outsourced: agriculture and food production, construction, style-sensitive garment production, and direct services. With the arguable exception of the former, these have all grown in importance over the past several decades — and have even been reclassified as "essential" since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.. It is simply not true that "only a small number of industries [and unique sectors] remain dependent on immigrant labor."[23] Such an assertion is only possible if one interprets the political economy of the post-Fordist era as some sort of aberration from an idealized conception of a bygone age of industrial capitalism.

---

22 Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Immanuel Ness, *Immigrants, Unions, and the New U.S. Labor Market* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

23 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 22.

With the size of the foreign-born population at near-record highs, it is tempting to follow Lee in concluding that employers have largely solved their labor supply issues. Yet this position ignores the empirical reality of ongoing and impending labor shortages in many immigrant-heavy industries. A case in point is agribusiness, which probably employs a greater percentage of foreign-born workers than any other sector, and which has relied heavily on undocumented workers for decades. Influential growers and industry associations have been sounding the alarm for quite some time now over the inability of the contemporary labor pool to reproduce itself. They point to simple demographic processes, such as the aging of the current workforce and the widespread refusal of many in the younger generation to follow in their parents' footsteps. At the same time, growers are often quite critical of the hardening of immigration enforcement practices: the militarization of the US-Mexico border has rendered unauthorized migration much more difficult and dangerous, while the periodic spikes in ICE worksite enforcement inject another layer of uncertainty into the production process.

Corporate agriculture's strong support for a revamped and expanded H-2A "guest-worker" program coupled with some sort of legalization for long-term undocumented workers suggests that the interests of employers do not, in fact, lie with the development of an endlessly punitive migration regime.[24] If the assault on undocumented workers becomes so intense that it begins to

24 All of these themes are readily apparent in much of the industry literature, and have also been constantly raised in my own personal interviews with executives. See also US House of Representatives, "Agricultural Labor: From H-2A to a Workable Agricultural Guestworker Program." Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, First Session, February 26, 2013, Serial No. 113-3 (Washington DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013). This is not to deny the punitive aspects of guest worker programs and most legalization proposals, which I discuss in greater detail below.

cut off access to a stable supply of workers, capital will organize itself in protest. We saw this play out during the Obama administration, when employer associations in states such as Arizona, Georgia, and Alabama joined forces with advocacy groups to roll back some of the most draconian aspects of local anti-immigrant laws, such as Arizona's SB 1070.[25] Even less overtly repressive state practices can lead to serious ramifications. For example, a delay in the Department of Labor's release of H-2B seasonal visas for "low-skilled," nonagricultural work in the spring of 2018 caused chaos for many businesses in landscaping, hospitality, and other sectors. H-2B workers have become such an integral part of the labor force for the crab industry on the eastern shore of Maryland over the past two decades that many processing plants were unable to open without them.[26] Make no mistake: securing an adequate labor supply remains at the very top of the list of concerns for businesses that rely heavily on migrant and immigrant labor.

Theorizing Immigration Regimes

Simply put, Lee casts far too wide a net with her restriction-with-rights immigration regime. In the first place, it ambiguously alternates between describing an actually existing immigration policy and a long-standing strategic orientation of organized labor.

---

25 Raymond Michalowski, "Ethnic Cleansing American Style: SB 1070, Nativism and the Contradictions of Neo-Liberal Globalization," *Journal of Crime and Justice* 36, no. 2 (2013): 171–93; Paul Reyes, "'It's Just Not Right': The Failures of Alabama's Self-Deportation Experiment," *Mother Jones*, March/April 2012; US House of Representatives, "Regional Perspectives on Agricultural Guestworker Programs," Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement of the Committee on the Judiciary, 112th Congress, Second Session, February 9, 2012, Serial No. 112-92 (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 2012).

26 Maya Rhodan, "Landscaping Businesses Are Losing Money because of U.S. Visa Policy," *Time*, July 19, 2018; Scott Dance, "Crab Crisis: Maryland Seafood Industry Loses 40 Percent of Work Force in Visa Lottery," *Baltimore Sun*, May 3, 2018. My visit to Hoopers Island, Maryland, in July 2019 confirmed the crabbing industry's utter dependence on the H-2B program.

Second, the restriction-with-rights thesis hews too closely to the line of mainstream US immigration literature, taking the period of relatively open policy toward (European) immigration in the nineteenth century as its benchmark, and placing an overwhelming amount of importance on the "closing of the gates" in the early twentieth century. Migration patterns and their regulation began to change dramatically during the 1960s, but these important transformations receive short shrift in Lee's account of the supposed long decline of migrant and immigrant labor over the past century.

Equally problematic is Lee's limited theorization of the concept of an immigration regime, which she essentially reduces to a mechanical relationship between immigrant rights and immigration flow. Yet in a capitalist society built on domination and exploitation, an adequate labor supply always presupposes particular systems of control for producing workers who are able and "willing" to toil for the boss under the latter's harsh terms. Insights from the more radical, Marxist variants of French regulation theory and the social structure of accumulation school allow us to conceive of an immigration regime more comprehensively as an ensemble of the institutions, structures, practices, and ideologies for supplying and controlling migrant and immigrant labor.[27] Each regime is intricately linked to a particular phase of capitalist

27 Recent examples of critical reformulations of French regulation theory include: David Neilson, "Remaking the Connections: Marxism and the French Regulation School," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 160–77; and Brett Heino, "Capitalism, Regulation Rheory and Australian Labor Law: Towards a New Theoretical Model," *Capital & Class* 39, no. 3 (2015): 453–72. For a critical overview of SSA theory, see Terrence McDonough, Michael Reich, and David M. Kotz, *Contemporary Capitalism and Its Crises: Social Structure of Accumulation Theory for the 21st Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For other useful studies of immigration regimes in the United States, see Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York and Cambridge, MA: Russel Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2006) and Mathieu Bonzom, "Le régime d'immigration des États-Unis," *Politique Américaine* 25 (2015): 91–116.

development but also possesses an internal logic of its own. Of course, these regimes do not appear magically out of thin air: they are ultimately the product — and object — of class struggle, with periods of relative stability inevitably giving way to total disarray.

The immigration regime that has produced and sustained millions of undocumented immigrants as a cheapened and hyper-exploitable — albeit not exactly meek and submissive — stratum of workers is on its last legs. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the generalized crisis of global capitalism, the political organization of unauthorized workers, and the ongoing federal crackdown on them. Despite the apparent polarization in Congress over funding for the border wall and the fate of DACA, there are indications that a new immigration regime may be under construction. As capital increases its reliance on vulnerable but authorized noncitizen workers, the state is working diligently to expel the most criminalized sectors of the undocumented population from US soil, and to deny entry to those who seek to arrive without papers. The political economy of the contemporary conjuncture demands that the movement for migrant and immigrant justice forcefully resist this nascent regime of militarized migration management, whether it come dressed up in the explicitly racist and exclusionary language of the far right, or in the superficially inclusive garb of the liberal establishment and its vaunted pathway to citizenship.

ON THE RISE AND FALL OF IMMIGRATION REGIMES[28]

I cannot aspire to a full-fledged analysis of the contemporary US immigration regime here. In what follows, I will mainly focus on

28 For a more in-depth treatment of the argument, see David B. Feldman, "Beyond the Border Spectacle: Global Capital, Migrant Labor and the Specter of Liminal Legality," *Critical Sociology* (2019): doi.org/0.1177/0896920519884999.

the illegalization and policing of low-wage immigrant workers as an unofficial form of state regulation. Undocumented immigrants have been an essential source of labor for several decades, and their fate has been fiercely contested in the ongoing political crisis over immigration policy.[29]

Capitalist Globalization and the Production of Migrant Illegality

In 2016, 7.8 million of the approximately 10.7 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States were part of the labor force, constituting nearly 4.8 percent of the national total.[30] The majority of this population hails from countries in Latin America and Southeast Asia, regions that have received a good deal of foreign direct investment from US-based capital since it embarked on a process of globalization in the late 1960s that disrupted countless livelihoods and uprooted millions from the land.[31] For a time, certain changes to US immigration law facilitated the arrival of millions of these new migrants to the shores of the United States. On the one hand, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 removed the last vestiges of the earlier quota system, which had limited migration from Southern and Eastern Europe and essentially barred entry to most individuals from Asia. Between 1965 and 1973, authorized immigration from Asian countries increased by a factor of five.[32]

On the other hand, Hart-Celler imposed a general quota on immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, and Congress

29 Due to lack of space, I present this hotly contested and contradictory policy in a rather straightforward manner.

30 Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Total Drops to Lowest Level in a Decade," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 2018.

31 Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*.

32 Denvir, *All-American Nativism*, 27–8.

canceled the Bracero Program — which had regulated the seasonal migration of largely male agricultural workers from Mexico since 1942 — during the same year. Former braceros and their families began settling down in the United States by the end of the decade — some without papers, but others with green cards through sponsorship from their employers. In 1976, however, legislators closed a loophole that had allowed many long-term undocumented immigrants to regularize their legal status and sponsor family members, while simultaneously imposing a quota of twenty thousand visas on each individual country in the world. This hit Mexicans — of whom the United States was legally admitting seventy thousand a year at the time — especially hard.[33] It should come as no surprise that as migration from Mexico increased dramatically over the next two decades, millions would be forced to arrive without authorization.[34]

The ostensible goal of IRCA was to address the political problem of undocumented migration — from Mexico in particular. The legislation adopted a three-pronged approach: a generous but far from universal amnesty that allowed 3 million undocumented immigrants (2.3 million Mexicans) to obtain legal permanent residency within a year and a half; the enactment of employer sanctions that made it a crime to knowingly hire undocumented workers; and a sharp increase in funding for the Border Patrol and its parent agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service

33 Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 182.

34 Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the INS* (New Orleans: Quid Pro Books, 2010 [1992]); Juan Vicente Palerm, "An Inconvenient Persistence: Agribusiness and Awkward Workers in the United States and California," in *Hidden Lives and Human Rights in the United States: Understanding the Controversies and Tragedies of Undocumented Immigration*, ed. Lois Ann Lorentzen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

(INS). Missing from the mix was a mechanism for accommodating the soon-to-be forced migrants of capitalist globalization. For its part, the Mexican government wholeheartedly embraced a neoliberal model of development after defaulting on its debt and accepting an IMF structural adjustment program in 1982. The country joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades in 1986 and signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993.[35] From 1995 to 2000 alone, nearly three million Mexicans migrated to the United States. After a brief decline in the late 1980s, the size of the undocumented population in the United States began to rise again in 1990, before eventually peaking at roughly 12 million in 2007 — including nearly 7 million Mexicans.[36]

The Policing of Illegality

The wide-scale production of migrant illegality during the 1990s and early 2000s provided capital with a bountiful but relatively rightless workforce as it transitioned to a more services-based,

35 Susan Ferguson and David McNally, "Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class," in *Socialist Register 2015: Transforming Classes*, ed. Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (London: Merlin Press, 2014): 1–23; Raúl Delgado Wise, "Forced Migration and US Imperialism: The Dialectic of Migration and Development," *Critical Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2009): 767–84. IRCA did create the H-2A and H-2B nonimmigrant visa programs, and also included a provision allowing for "replenishment agricultural workers" (RAW) to enter into the country in 1990 if deemed necessary. However, the Department of Labor never invoked the latter provision, and both H-2 programs have been historically underutilized — until recently — due to their bureaucratic nature and the availability of a large pool of unauthorized workers. It is also worth pointing out that while the family reunification system in place since Hart-Celler has been a source of green cards for well over a million Mexicans in recent decades, it was unable to process all of the petitions from the beneficiaries of IRCA's amnesty in a timely manner, and current backlogs translate into wait times of two decades for applicants from both Mexico and the Philippines.

36 Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero — and Perhaps Less," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, April 23, 2012.

post-Fordist regime of accumulation. Selective policing of illegality over the past several decades has been essential to ensuring undocumented immigrants' status as desirable workers. In the first place, IRCA's employer sanctions only criminalized the *deliberate* hiring of unauthorized workers, and set the bar to prove intent extremely high. This has allowed businesses to call ICE on unauthorized workers — or simply threaten to do so — without much risk. In fact, the branches of ICE responsible for enforcing the sanctions provisions have been so chronically underfunded that the agency has relied heavily on the tips of employers looking to retaliate against their own workers.[37] The massive October 2019 operation at the Koch Foods poultry plants in Mississippi is only one recent example of ICE raiding employers facing organizing drives,[38] a practice that the Supreme Court essentially sanctioned in 2002 when it ruled that undocumented workers fired for union-related activity would not be eligible for back pay under the National Labor Relations Act. Even when the federal government does issue fines to employers for violating IRCA, these are normally too low to have a serious deterrent effect. All in all, employer sanctions have actually given businesses greater power to discipline undocumented workers.

The first two decades following IRCA also witnessed the progressive militarization of the US-Mexico border and the rise of a formidable deportation apparatus. Congress passed a string of

37 Stephen Lee, "Private Immigration Screening in the Workplace," *Stanford Law Review* 61, no. 1103 (2009): 1101–46. The ineligibility of undocumented immigrants for most public benefits — including payments through the CARES Act during the COVID-19 pandemic — is another reason why they have long been desirable as workers. Even legal permanent residents also face many restrictions on access to public benefits. Although I cannot discuss it here, the criminalization and privatization of immigrant social reproduction is an essential element of immigration policy.

38 Eduardo Segura, "ICE: The Bosses' Weapon of Choice," *Jacobin*, August 14, 2019.

repressive laws in 1996, and within a decade, the total number of individuals removed from the interior or denied entry at the borders had jumped from 114,432 to 280,974.[39] Yet many studies have shown that the militarized policing of the southern border during this time did not prevent unauthorized entry so much as it encouraged undocumented immigrants to put down roots in the United States, rather than risk repeated crossings. This has led some critical observers to argue that the main effect of highly visible acts of exclusion — what Nicholas De Genova calls the border spectacle — is not to remove undocumented immigrants as a whole, but rather to instill fear in the vast majority allowed to remain as vulnerable workers.[40]

The Contradictions of Illegality

Underscoring the role of the state in creating and policing a highly tractable undocumented workforce is an important corrective to mainstream analyses that view undocumented migration as the product of individual transgressions of the law. At the same time, it is important to not flatten out the contradictory nature of state policies and their historically contingent outcomes. Illegalization was not a premeditated strategy. Moreover, we must avoid the instrumentalist view that ICE simply acts as the personal police force for ruthless employers — an image that may help explain particularly egregious union-busting events, but that cannot

39 "2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, August 2014. These laws mandated detention in many immigration cases; provided the legal framework for the deputization of police officers as federal immigration agents; and increased funding for the Border Patrol's militarized Southwest Border Strategy. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act changed reporting practices by lumping together removals from the interior and denial of entry at the border. For comparison, the total number of removals from the interior in 1996, the last year before the change in reporting, was 69,680.

40 De Genova, *Working the Boundaries*.

capture the complexity of the state/capital relation and political struggle over the long term.

ICE raids do not target undocumented workers exclusively: since at least the second half of the George W. Bush administration, the agency has also used them to drum up support for guest-worker programs among employers.[41] Bush's secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, explained the strategy as such: "Open the front door and you shut the back door."[42] Although the Obama administration preferred audits, or "silent raids," to its predecessor's high-profile actions, it largely stayed the course, and even doubled the fines for I-9 violations in 2016.[43] Less than a year into the Trump presidency, the acting director of ICE called for a 400–500 percent increase in the number of worksite inspections for "illegal hiring." With the stated goal of making business owners "fear an ICE immigration audit as much as they fear a tax audit,"[44] the agency increased its auditing staff by 50 percent, and began implementing new technology to speed up and streamline the process. This intensifying crackdown on the employment of unauthorized immigrants is more than just political theater. The key point that observers on the Left have been largely unwilling to make is that such increasingly

41 There are many historical precedents for this. In 1953 and 1954, the Border Patrol's Operation Wetback led to an intense standoff with growers in the Rio Grande Valley that ultimately saw the latter embrace an expanded and streamlined Bracero Program. Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

42 David Bacon and Bill O. Hing, "The Rise and Fall of Employer Sanctions," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 38, no. 1 (2010): 76–106.

43 John Fay, "Latest I-9 Penalty Case Leaves Cleaning Company Hung Out to Dry," LawLogix, March 5, 2019. There have been periodic small increases since then. Although it is rare, some administrative audits can result in fines of tens, and even hundreds, of thousands of dollars.

44 Alan Gomez, "Feds Targeting More Worksites Crack Down on Undocumented Workers — but Not Their Employers," *USA Today*, December 11, 2018.

unpredictable — and consequential — state enforcement does, in fact, render the undocumented less desirable workers in the eyes of many business owners.[45]

Likewise, the ratcheting up of border militarization since 2006 — when the Secure Fence Act mandated the construction of seven hundred miles of border fencing — has qualitatively transformed the effect of this deadly policy. Lee's assertion regarding the impossibility of "actually *stopping* labor migration in the medium-to-long run"[46] is misguided on two accounts. In the first place, it essentially ignores the fact that unauthorized apprehensions during the first half of the Obama administration dropped to levels not seen since the 1970s. To be fair, the eventual exhaustion of the wave of migration from Mexico, hastened by the global crisis of 2008, surely played a large role in this. A more fundamental problem is that Lee implicitly equates labor migration with unauthorized migration. It is quite possible, however, for the state to promote alternate ways of facilitating and regulating labor migration while simultaneously launching an assault on unauthorized crossings and undocumented workers.

Toward a Regime of Militarized Migration Management?

The political backlash against undocumented workers is undoubtedly related to the more generalized crisis of capitalist globalization, which is producing ever-larger numbers of surplus populations that, from the perspective of the transnational capitalist class and the global elite, must be contained and repressed.[47] In the United

45 A notable exception to this is Josiah Heyman, "Capitalism and US Policy at the Mexican Border," *Dialectical Anthropology* 36 (2012): 263–77.

46 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 26–7.

47 William I. Robinson, "Accumulation Crisis and Global Police State," *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 6 (2019): 845–58.

States, the lower demand for immigrant workers in the immediate aftermath of the global crisis of 2008 partially explains the record high level of deportations during the Obama administration, which saw the total number of removals surpass four hundred thousand in 2012.[48] However, it would be a mistake to think that migrants have become totally superfluous to capital, which still depends on workers to create value and must constantly reproduce differential hierarchies among them to keep them divided. There are limits to how much offshoring, automation, and the exploitation of other oppressed and stigmatized groups — such as the formerly incarcerated — can replace migrant workers. If undocumented immigrants are, in many ways, the quintessential scapegoats for capitalist crisis, there is a stubborn contradiction between the impulse to ideologically legitimate the system through their expulsion from the body politic — an increasingly profitable endeavor for the immigration industrial complex — and the desire of certain fractions of capital to continue to exploit their labor power.[49] The nascent project of militarized migration management seeks to resolve such contradictions by caging criminalized migrants in concentration camps, ramping up deportations, and turning border regions into virtual war zones, but also creating pools of authorized — yet ultimately deportable — noncitizen workers subject to a wide array of restrictions and surveillance.[50] In recent

48 Tanya Golash-Boza and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Latino Immigrant Men and the Deportation Crisis: A Gendered Racial Removal Program," *Latino Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 271–92.

49 I develop this point further in David B. Feldman, "Between Exploitation and Repression: Migrant Labor, Capitalist Accumulation, and the Rise of the Immigration Industrial Complex." Manuscript in preparation for *Marxism and Migration*, edited by Shahrzad Mojab, Sara Carpenter, and Genevieve Ritchie. See also Nicole Trujillo Pagán, "Emphasizing the 'Complex' in the 'Immigration Industrial Complex,' *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 1 (2014): 29–46.

50 My schematic presentation of militarized migration management is not meant to trivialize the importance of very real contradictions within it, nor to sug-

years, the US state has been a prime mover in the development of this global system of social control.

It is analytically useful to distinguish at least two different types of worker here, beginning with the so-called guest worker. These migrants must remain employed in order to keep their lawful status, but they are generally prohibited from settling permanently, and even from changing employers during their stay. This position of structural vulnerability facilitates super-exploitation and systematic abuse — and throws up serious obstacles to labor organizing.[51] The number of guest workers in the agricultural sector has exploded in recent years: the H-2A program has expanded more than twentyfold since 1996, and has almost doubled in size since the start of the Trump administration. It now brings more than a quarter of a million migrants a year to labor in the fields, and it is fast approaching the size of the Bracero Program at its peak. After years of industry lobbying efforts to make the system friendlier to large growers — including opening it up to year-round workers — the House of Representatives passed a bill in December 2019 that

---

gest that it is an inevitable outcome. I want to be absolutely clear, however, that the superficially pro-immigrant liberalism of the Democratic establishment is an integral part of this deeply anti-migrant regime — not a viable form of resistance to it. There is a tendency of some on the Left to understand the Democrats' terrible record on immigration as a classic example of political triangulation and capitulation to Republican demands, but this overly generous assessment unjustifiably assumes that the party elites want a humane policy. More important, such analysis remains entirely at the level of surface appearances. As such, it is unable to grasp the deeper roots of the structural transformation afoot, and the way in which superficially contradictory policies may obscure the existence of an underlying unity — making the latter all the more difficult to resist.

51 For an exposé of the abuse suffered by migrant women in the aforementioned Maryland crabbing industry, see American University Washington College of Law International Human Rights Law Clinic and Centro de los Derechos del Migrante, Inc., *Picked Apart: The Hidden Struggles of Migrant Worker Women in the Maryland Crab Industry*. Nonetheless, guest workers do find ways to resist their extreme exploitation. See Immanuel Ness, *Guest Workers and Resistance to U.S. Corporate Despotism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

streamlines many of the program's regulations.[52] While the various industries that use H-2B visas are less politically organized than Big Ag, they have begun to organize collectively as well, and have recently launched a campaign to lift the cap of 66,000 non-exempt visas for this program. They succeeded in inserting language into a DHS appropriations bill doubling the cap to 132,000 and establishing a more flexible distribution of visas throughout the year. Had it not been for the government shutdown in December 2018, the legislation would have likely passed.[53]

The second pool of workers is comprised of settled immigrants with precarious legal status. Consider recipients of DACA and TPS — programs that provide authorization to live and work in the country for short periods of time (eighteen months and two years, respectively) in exchange for submitting to background checks and paying costly application and renewal fees. If these pseudo-legal statuses are explicitly temporary, many other measures touted as a real pathway to citizenship offer little more than a backhanded institutionalization of such legal limbo. For example, the Registered Provisional Immigrant (RPI) status included in the comprehensive immigration reform package that passed the

52 Both Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar voted for the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, most likely because it also includes (extremely inadequate) legalization measures for some undocumented agricultural workers. The Food Chain Workers Alliance and other farmworker groups such as Migrant Justice / Justicia Migrante opposed the bill. "FCWA Stands with Farmworker Members in Opposing the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2019," Food Chain Workers Alliance, February 19, 2020. The House also passed a bill in 2019 that created expedited pathways to citizenship for DREAMers and TPS recipients.

53 sealabor.com/. The specific language included in the Tillis-Harris amendment can be viewed here: drive.google.com/file/d/1MwcZ3OF9bme59LPAi-W8NQ_5vGCF-cY51/view. The recent history of the H-1B program, which brings in "high-skilled" migrants to work in the tech industry and related sectors, is more complicated, and outside of the scope of this paper. H-1B workers also face many legal restraints and grueling working conditions, but can make over $100,000 a year.

Democratic-controlled Senate in 2013 (S. 744) was a six-year probationary period that could only be renewed if individuals maintained a clean criminal record and met several other stringent criteria. With exceptions for primary caregivers, individuals must have avoided more than sixty consecutive days of unemployment and earned at least 125 percent of the federal poverty level. In theory, after meeting these and other requirements for ten years, and after paying all back taxes and a thousand-dollar fine — on top of the thousand-dollar fees for both the initial application and renewal — one could have applied for lawful permanent residency. In practice, two important clauses concerning border security — which S. 744 funded to the tune of $46 *billion* — and the clearing of current backlogs would have at least doubled the length of legal purgatory for RPI immigrants, exposing this pathway to citizenship as more akin to a mirage.

It should be clear that these restrictions are not incidental to RPI and similar proposals: their whole purpose is to require precarious immigrants who are always one step away from falling out of status to submit indefinitely to capitalist discipline at all costs. Meanwhile, a well-oiled deportation apparatus would progressively remove the large portion of the undocumented population ineligible for pseudo-legalization,[54] and hyper-militarized borders would limit unauthorized crossings to an absolute minimum. Even prior to the measures instituted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration's astonishing attack on the right to claim asylum — and the growing power of the US state to restrict

54 Peter Schey estimated that, for RPI in particular, this number may have been as high as 5 million. Peter Schey, "Analysis of Senate Bill 744's Pathway to Legalization and Citizenship," mexmigration.blogspot.com, June 22, 2013. See also: Moratorium on Deportations, "Immigration Reform 101: Unmasking S. 744," YouTube, June 26, 2013. S. 744 did create expedited pathways to citizenship for DREAMers and agricultural workers, but drastically increased funding for interior enforcement as well.

entry more generally — had become impossible to ignore, with increasing numbers of refugees stuck south of the border or languishing in concentration camps just north of it.

Social Movements, Organized Labor, and the Democratic Party

There are three important dimensions to the recent struggle for migrant and immigrant justice that remain largely absent from Lee's essay. First, the strength of the labor movement has been at a historic low, as it has scrambled to adapt to the newfound mobility of capital, a radically transformed — and increasingly globalized and segmented — labor market, and a harsh political climate. There is simply no need to conjure the specter of a nativist backlash to explain organized labor's refusal to call for open borders in recent decades. Second, the more conservative unions have been largely outflanked by grassroots social movements and autonomous organizing by immigrant workers, who have been largely responsible for the AFL-CIO's growing support for immigrant-led organizing drives.[55] Still, the moderating effect of certain union leaders absolutely pales in comparison to the *profoundly reactionary* influence of a Democratic Party that has not "embraced a consistently pro-immigrant policy"[56] so much as it has paid lip service to immigrants' rights while actively working to defang the grassroots and channel its energy into a more tepid direction palatable to capital.

This latter dynamic was clearly on display in the spring of 2006, when massive mobilizations culminating in a May Day strike that

55 Ness, *Immigrants, Unions, and the New U.S. Labor Market;* Ruth Milkman, ed. *Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Nonetheless, support has not always been forthcoming.

56 Lee, "The Socialist Case for Open Borders," 9.

paralyzed immigrant-heavy industries around the country left the House's extremely anti-immigrant Sensenbrenner Bill dead in its tracks. Congressional representatives such as Luis Gutiérrez teamed up with establishment advocacy groups in an effort to upstage the working-class organizers and their unapologetic call for "an immediate and unconditional amnesty for all undocumented immigrants" by putting together their own protests in support of a pathway to citizenship.[57] The insurgency of 2006 was truly a watershed moment in US politics, raising the specter of a sustained, immigrant-led, working-class rebellion. Yet with an organized Left nowhere to be seen, this threat quickly dissipated, as the grassroots movement was unable to build the institutional power required to prevent the passage of the Secure Fence Act in the fall of 2006 — let alone to beat back the wave of deportations that soon followed.[58] Let us not forget that ICE and the Border Patrol were already in the business of disrupting immigrant organizing drives, carrying out community raids targeting immigrant rights activists, deliberately separating families, caging children in reconverted warehouses, torturing detainees, and murdering with impunity under the watch of a purportedly progressive black Democrat, soon to earn the moniker of "deporter in chief."[59] Even

57 William I. Robinson, "Aquí Estamos y No Nos Vamos! Global Capital and Immigrant Rights," *Race and Class* 48, no. 2 (2006): 77–91; Jesse Díaz and Javier Rodríguez, "Undocumented in America," *New Left Review* 47 (2007): 93–106.

58 The 2006 marches are conspicuously absent from Lee's essay. A convincing argument that the sharp increase in deportations after 2006 was a repressive response to the mass mobilizations can be found in Alfonso Gonzales*, Reform without Justice: Latino Migrant Politics and the Homeland Security State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

59 See, inter alia, Bacon and Hing, "The Rise and Fall of Employer Sanctions"; Seth Freed Wessler, *Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System,* Applied Research Center, November 2011; Tania Unzueta Carrasco and B. Loewe, *Destructive Delay: A Qualitative Report on the State of Interior Immigration Enforcement and the Human Cost of Postponing Reforms*, National Day Laborer Organizing Network, October 2014; *A*

the most "immigrant-friendly" national politicians worked closely with liberal foundations such as Reform Immigration for America to fight *against* amnesty during the Obama administration.[60]

Open Borders Reconsidered

It is within this context of demoralizing defeat that the abolitionist turn in the movement for migrant and immigrant justice took place.[61] The embrace of radical but abstract principles is understandable as a coping mechanism, but it can lead to the perpetuation of a vicious cycle if it obscures the very fact of defeat, and thus precludes the kind of critical reflection necessary to move forward. Principled socialists ought to have responded to the White House's efforts to cancel DACA, TPS, and DED by categorically refusing the exclusionary logic upon which they rest — namely, that some immigrants are more deserving than others — and reclaiming the rights of *all* migrants as workers and human beings. Yet these voices have been few and far between; in the rush to defend special

---

Culture of Cruelty: Abuse and Impunity in Short-Term U.S. Border Patrol Custody, No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, 2011; "The Border is the Problem: Resisting the 'Humanitarian' Solution to Child Migration," Moratorium on Deportations Campaign, June 14, 2014; John Carlos Frey, "Over the Line," *Washington Monthly*, May/June 2013.

60 Gonzales, *Reform Without Justice*. Muneer I. Ahmad shows how the punitive concept of "earned citizenship" — which reached its apotheosis in S. 744's pathway to citizenship — emerged around the turn of the twenty-first century as a conscious bid on the part of liberals to distance themselves from IRCA's relatively expansive amnesty, a term that had acquired a pejorative connotation in the late 1990s. See Muneer I. Ahmad, "Beyond Earned Citizenship," *Faculty Scholarship Series* 5257 (2017): 256–304. While "amnesty" is not a perfect term, I use it because it implies a universal, full, and immediate legalization with no penalties, and it is what the organizers of the 2006 marches called for.

61 The abolitionist turn was not limited to the United States. An important text here is Jenna M. Loyd, Matt Mitchelson, and Andrew Burridge, eds., *Beyond Walls and Cages: Prisons, Borders, and Global Crisis* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2012). See also the special issue of *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 26, no. 2 (2009). A similar point could be made about the modern prison abolition movement, which has flourished during the era of mass incarceration.

classes of immigrants from Trump's targeted attacks, the liberal language of "protection" and moral outrage has eclipsed that of radical egalitarianism and class struggle.[62] Even the Bernie Sanders campaign, which has always understood that the designation of certain groups as worthier than others undermines the solidarity necessary to achieve universalist policies such as Medicare for All has stumbled here. While the Sanders platform did call for "a swift, fair pathway to citizenship for the 11 million unauthorized immigrants currently living, working, and contributing in America today," it placed much greater emphasis on reinstating and expanding DACA (one of its five key points) and "prioritiz[ing] expedited citizenship for undocumented youth."[63]

The general failure of socialists to critique the notion of a pathway to citizenship — even while calling for the abolition of borders — is particularly concerning. Yet I do not mean to be all gloom and doom: advocates of open borders are constantly putting

62 It is important to keep in mind that, while the loss of work permits would cause immediate and significant hardship if the Supreme Court effectively revokes the DACA program, "[t]here is scant evidence that the Trump administration is planning a removal, en masse, of DACA recipients. On the contrary, it wants to use undocumented youth as a bargaining chip in a broader immigration deal, offering some sort of 'permanent relief' to this special group in exchange for funding to expand the existing wall on the southern border." David B. Feldman, "Review of 'Banned: Immigration Enforcement in the Time of Trump,'" *New Political Science* (2020), doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2020.1760445. For an excellent critique of DACA from the radical grassroots, see: "Knowledge is Power — Defer the Bullshit!" Moratorium on Deportations Campaign, 2012.

63 "A Welcoming and Safe America for All," BernieSanders.com. If the normal pathway is truly swift and fair, there is no need for the prioritization of certain immigrants — let alone programs such as DACA and TPS. The Migrant Justice Platform is similarly torn between universalist impulses and a desire to single out special populations. "A Unity Blueprint for Action on Immigration," Migrant Justice Platform, 2019. Whereas Sanders continues to speak of comprehensive immigration reform, the Migrant Justice Platform proposes a host of targeted institutional fixes. Yet the problem — at least from the standpoint of social justice — is not the "single bill" strategy that has defined immigration politics for two decades, but rather its rejection of universalist principles, and the overwhelming degree to which capital has been able to shape the particular *content* of recent bills.

their bodies on the line to halt detention and deportations, in addition to providing direct service and demonstrating solidarity in countless other ways.[64] The point is that we need ambitious goals and strategies that are grounded in a deep understanding of contemporary political economy in order to bridge the gap between the urgent measures required to stop the everyday bleeding, and the abstract principles of a socialist society that will take decades — if not longer — to construct. This is especially true today, with working-class consciousness on the rise, but the COVID-19 pandemic and an epochal crisis of global capitalism simultaneously threatening to kick the project of militarized migration management into overdrive. In some respects, things looked more encouraging at the beginning of the Trump presidency, when tens of thousands of immigrant workers organized autonomously to go on strike on February 16, 2017, followed by strikes and marches with the participation of various labor unions and organizations, such as the Movimiento Cosecha, on May 1. These actions briefly resurrected the radical, universalist impulse of the mega marches of 2006, and unmistakably wedded the struggle for migrant and immigrant justice to the broader movement to build working-class power.[65]

An unapologetic demand for immediate and unconditional amnesty for all would represent a much-needed frontal attack on the state's efforts to divide and conquer undocumented immigrants through deportation and targeted pseudo-legalization measures. It will by no means be an easy sell to the many US-born workers who are not yet staunch supporters of immigrant rights, but one can easily frame it as equal rights for all workers to increase their collective strength vis-à-vis the bosses. While the call to abolish

64 A. Naomi Paik, "Abolitionist Futures and the US Sanctuary Movement," *Race & Class* 59, no. 2 (2017): 3–25.

65 Dan DiMaggio and Sonia Singh, "Tens of Thousands Strike on Day Without Immigrants," *Labor Note*s, February 23, 2017.

borders pushes this logic to its natural conclusion, it operates at a very high level of abstraction, and it is not particularly intuitive to skeptical workers who have seen a drastic decline in their living standards coincide with the arrival of large numbers of immigrants in recent decades — and who may understandably associate open borders with NAFTA and free trade rather than a democratic socialist utopia. None of this is meant to diminish the need for solidarity across borders, which is more vital than ever to combat a global ruling class that delights in pitting workers from around the world against one another. Yet if the slogan of open borders performs the important ideological work of hinting at a global working-class consciousness, it simultaneously obscures the role of capitalist globalization in creating the structural conditions that force so many people to leave behind their places of origin in the first place. In this regard, the call for open borders puts the cart before the horse, and the right to stay home is more radical and more urgent than the right to freedom of movement.[66] Political demands can only accomplish so much without a powerful social force capable of implementing them, but organizing around immediate and unconditional amnesty for all could at least go a long way toward building the solidarity and institutional strength necessary to eventually make the slogan a reality, and ultimately bring us one small step closer to ushering in a socialist world without borders.

66 David Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

ABSTRACT

In his critique of my article on immigration in *Catalyst* Vol. 2, David B. Feldman argues that the immigrants' rights movement should be built around a demand for radical amnesty, rather than the more abstract demand for open borders. A campaign for radical, unconditional amnesty of the kind that Feldman requires, however, is not logically coherent or politically viable unless it is justified by a wholesale challenge to the legitimacy of borders.

Socialists and Immigration

Suzy Lee

It is a little disconcerting to try to write this piece, in response to a critique of an article published in what now seems like a different political lifetime. So much has changed, and so profoundly, that one wonders whether the debates of the pre-coronavirus-crisis era have any relevance to the present moment. With regard to immigration, of course, the answer to the question is yes; the unresolved issues remain as troublesome as ever, connected in some way to nearly every aspect of the coronavirus response.

The Trump administration's first instincts in dealing with the pandemic were to address it through migration policy, focusing almost exclusively on migration bans from affected

regions.[1] Public health experts have expressed concerns that the chilling effect of immigration status on utilization of health care facilities will affect efforts to treat the sick or to track and manage the spread of the virus in communities with significant immigrant populations.[2] The social impact of these effects is exacerbated by the overrepresentation of immigrant workers in service and production sectors essential to the basic functioning of society — including care work and food — which demonstrates immigrants' importance to society, but also increases their likelihood of exposure to the virus. And because the question of immigration is, most fundamentally, about social and political membership, every nation-state's effort at providing relief to people affected by the pandemic — either through the expansion of health care and employment leave benefits to the sick, or through financial assistance to those affected by the pandemic-induced economic downturn — has had to confront the question of immigrant eligibility.

In the United States, the federal government has already made decisions to exclude undocumented immigrants from its first efforts at relief, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, by limiting eligibility for the lump-sum stimulus payments to individuals with social security numbers,[3] as well as

1 Called "nonimmigrants" and "immigrants," respectively, in US immigration law. "Proclamation — Suspension of Entry as Immigrants and Nonimmigrants of Certain Additional Persons Who Pose a Risk of Transmitting 2019 Novel Coronavirus."

2 law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/area/center/ghjp/documents/final_covid-19_letter_from_public_health_and_legal_experts.pdf

3 Immigrants not authorized for employment are still required to pay taxes on their earned income. Because they are not eligible to receive social security numbers (SSNs), the federal government issues taxpayer identification numbers (TINs) for unauthorized workers to identify their tax documents. The CARES Act precludes the distribution of "recovery rebates" to taxpayers who do not have SSNs, effectively barring undocumented immigrants from receiving this aid (S. 3548, Sec. 6428).

prohibiting universities from distributing emergency aid to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients.[4] Responses that push in the other direction have also emerged: California has created an alternative fund to provide cash payments to undocumented immigrants (who comprise approximately 10 percent of the state's workforce).[5] In Portugal, the center-left government has temporarily regularized the status of all migrants with open residency applications, giving them immediate access not only to work (scarce as it is), but to national health and social services.[6]

These examples not only highlight the need for a more just and humane immigration policy, they also indicate the ways the crisis has changed the terrain on which we can talk about available policy options. The responses of Portugal and California represent acknowledgments of the legitimacy of immigrants' claims to social and political membership in their countries of residence, and they suggest that policies to expand the rights of immigrants — like amnesty or social benefits for different categories of immigrants — might garner renewed public support. At the same time, the pandemic provides new justifications for regulating, surveilling, and restricting the movement of people. It seems safe to surmise that the pandemic will permanently reshape the global economy, and this, in turn, will reconfigure the patterns of labor migration that had been established in the

4 Erica L. Green, "DeVos Excludes 'Dreamers' From Coronavirus College Relief," *New York Times*, April 22, 2020, nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-funds-colleges-dreamers.html.

5 Madeline Holcombe and Catherine E. Shoichet, "Why California Is Giving Its Own Stimulus Checks to Undocumented Immigrants," CNN, April 16, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/us/california-stimulus-undocumented-immigrants/index.html.

6 Joana Ramiro, "Faced With Coronavirus, Portugal Is Treating Migrants as Citizens — We Should, Too," *Jacobin*, April 2, 2020, jacobinmag.com/2020/04/coronavirus-portugal-regularize-migrants-citizenship-covid-health.

neoliberal era. At the same time, the economic crises triggered by the pandemic — and the political and social unrest that is likely to follow — could generate entirely new flows of mass migration.

Yet as long as capitalist relations structure the global economy, the basic tools of analysis with which we can understand this new world still apply. The struggle over immigration policy is, fundamentally, a struggle over the treatment of a uniquely vulnerable subset of the working class. As such, capital's interests lie where they always do with regard to workers — in maximizing the pool of available labor while minimizing any power labor might have to demand better conditions or a greater share of the surplus. With regard to immigration, this translates into support for migration *flow* combined with opposition to the extension of social and political *rights*. The balance between these two interests can shift depending on conditions of labor demand and scarcity. For example, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the mobility of modern production — by decreasing capital's dependence on immigration flow, combined with the stabilization of that flow at a relatively high rate — allowed capital to pursue a more aggressive agenda with regard to the restriction of immigrants' rights.

Workers' orientation toward immigration policy, as with any issue that is integral to the class struggle, depends on a combination of its structural position and its organizational strength. Labor has an interest in all workers, whatever their status, having the political *rights* to organize and struggle against their exploitation. With regard to *flow*, however, labor's interests are less straightforward. The expansion of the labor force through the migration of workers can increase labor market competition.[7] How that

7 Research suggests this effect is much smaller than the weight it is given in the public discourse.

ultimately impacts workers, however, depends on the intensity of labor market competition and its centrality to workers' chances for decent lives. The gains workers can make by bargaining with capital, and pressuring the state, as a unified class nullify any negative impact that immigration may have. But immigration can pose challenges to securing this unity — not only because immigrant workers, as newcomers, may need more time to develop the social networks that facilitate trust and solidarity, but because the division between foreign and native is weaponized by capital to undermine solidarity. The Trump administration's villainization of immigrants, even prior to the pandemic, is one obvious example of how this works, but the media's representation of the Trump base, imagined as a powerful and virulently racist white working class, is also part of this process. It makes us forget that the vast majority of working Americans support immigrants' rights, and, more important, that the outrages of American immigration policy are driven by capital, not by the working class, whose united mobilization remains our only hope for a humane and just solution.

It is for this reason that I argued for a strategy of embracing open borders. In previous eras, it was possible for labor to dodge the tricky question of restriction, and to focus on the humanitarian issue of rights for existing migrants. The erosion of immigrants' rights in recent years, however, reflects fundamental changes in the American economy that no longer necessitate most sectors of capital accepting the expansion of immigrants' rights. In the neoliberal era, immigration ceased to be a significant *material* issue for most sectors of capital, meaning that labor and the Left can no longer leverage a potential shortage of immigrant workers to secure the human rights of migrants. Consequently, the only route left for defenders of immigrants' rights is to focus on building workers' power, and in this project, the native/immigrant distinction is unnecessary and toxic, serving only the interests of capital. Those

who are serious about securing immigrants' rights can no longer concede the principle of restriction, but rather must insist that there is no distinction between native and immigrant workers — and demand an immigration policy that reflects this politics.

David Feldman, in his defense of amnesty as a viable strategy for defenders of immigrants' rights, critiques my argument on a number of different grounds: its logic, its empirical support, and its political analysis. I will respond to each of these points in turn. To begin, I don't believe that Feldman and I have a fundamental disagreement about the interests of capital with regard to immigration. He rightly points out that when we use the language of "open borders," we must be careful what we mean, as regimes that legalize large flows of migrants can be combined with strict limits on the rights of those who enter, and this is precisely the direction in which US policy seems to be moving. While my original analysis was focused on "illegal" immigration, it was an illustration of only some of these processes through which class interests affect migration. I do not fundamentally disagree with Feldman's account of the ways in which border militarization and the expansion of temporary and guest-worker programs contribute to a growing population of vulnerable immigrant workers.

Where we do have significant disagreement is on the question of strategy. In working to protect immigrants' rights, advocates and the Left should also demand an end to restrictions on immigration. Feldman insists that a less radical approach, one that demands amnesty without challenging the basic legitimacy of restriction, remains superior. His position rests on two arguments: 1) Despite major transformation in the United States' political economy, my characterization of capital as no longer dependent on immigrant labor is incorrect. Because capital still "needs" immigrants, we should not assume that it cannot be moved on the question of rights. 2) The demand for open borders, which became more

prominent after the defeat of the 2006 immigrants' rights mobilizations, reflects the weakness of labor, of the immigrants' rights movement, and of the Left in general — and it is an unrealistic, abstract, and politically confusing demand.

On the empirical point, I will argue that Feldman is simply wrong. The data he presents in arguing for capital's continued dependence on immigrant labor is scant, essentially based on the existence of mass migration. It is a common argument made by immigrants' rights advocates — the fact that the vast majority of immigrants finding jobs in the United States indicates a demand for immigrant labor is true, but it's insufficient to explain the modern impasse over immigration policy. Employers may be willing to hire, or even prefer to hire, immigrant workers precisely because, lacking citizenship rights, they are more vulnerable. This preference, however, will only translate to a willingness to expand the rights of immigrants in cases where employers have no alternatives to hiring immigrants to meet their labor needs.[8] I have offered an account that takes into consideration the technology and geography of production, and Feldman offers no alternative mechanism, apart from some nonspecific references to neoliberalism and globalization.

On the question of political strategy, Feldman offers "radical amnesty" as an alternative to the demand for open borders, arguing that such an amnesty is a more effective way to build solidarity. His primary argument is that, while these two demands theoretically complement each other, in practice, there is only space in the political debate for one of them. Between the two, Feldman argues, amnesty, as the more concrete demand, has the greater potential to

8 Pushing for a formal guest-worker regime to replace undocumented migration and increase the capacity of the state to surveil immigrant workers is not an alternative account of capital's relationship to immigration, but merely a different form in which the balancing of flows and rights takes shape.

"lay bare the simple logic of equal rights for all workers to increase their collective class power." While the second claim — that the connection between amnesty and workers' power is more straightforward — may be true, it is not possible to talk about amnesty without talking about the illegitimacy of restrictionist policies. Ignoring one because we fear that it will displace the other would impose an artificial limit on the political debate that would render it incoherent. More important, because securing a more humane immigration regime requires a confrontation with capital, winning will require not only the mobilization of those immigrant communities directly affect by immigration policy, but active engagement of the labor movement as whole. If Feldman's position is that we cannot galvanize such a movement on the basis of a call for open borders alone, I agree. But neither can a call for amnesty do this heavy lifting. Working-class power will be built around a broad, inclusive vision for human emancipation, and the free movement of workers is a necessary requirement for achieving that vision. It should not be a principle from which the socialist left disengages.

THE LOGICAL CRITIQUE

Feldman begins his critique by expounding on what he finds to be a logical flaw in the claim that a regime of "restriction with rights" is, while acceptable in theory, no longer practicable. This is, I believe, a sound critique of such an argument — I agree that a "restriction with rights" regime should not be acceptable in theory, neither for socialists nor defenders of immigrants' rights. I can agree with Feldman here because the argument he critiques is not the one I made. When I used the terminology "restriction with rights," I referred to a *strategy* for protecting immigrants' rights — which it was the purpose of my paper to rethink — rather than to the actual policy regime that exists today or that may have existed in the nineteenth century. I disagree with Feldman's claim

that I was unclear on this point in my original article. From the first lines of the abstract, I emphasized that my goal was to discuss the question of open borders as a left *strategy*, and my only effort to characterize or define an immigration policy regime was the broad distinction I made between the assumption of admission that underlay the American immigration regime before the adoption of the quota system in the early twentieth century, and the assumption of exclusion that came after. This is not a novel argument I developed, but rather a standard interpretation of legal history.[9] In discussing this point, moreover, I made no general claim about the *rights* regime that accompanied the relative openness of the nineteenth-century immigration policy. Rather, my point was about how, even with a less restrictive approach to entry, the other rights that immigrants were granted varied and fluctuated, reflecting changes in the national political economy and the balance of power between labor and capital.

I admit that the distinction between regimes and strategies, in the case of immigration policy, is a tricky one. The various versions of comprehensive immigration reform currently being debated would, if passed and actually implemented, alter the existing immigration *regime*. However, support for and opposition to these types of reforms, or any other, is a *strategy.* A strategy is not merely a position based on an assessment of a proposed policy's moral or ideological underpinnings — it balances those values against a host of other factors, including feasibility. In the case of immigration, it considers the impact a particular stance might have on solidarity and mobilization. It was to *this* debate that my article was oriented, as I made clear at the outset. Given this goal, I thought it obvious that a "restriction with rights" regime would not, even in theory, be

9 Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; David Weissbrodt et al., *Immigration Law and Procedure in a Nutshell*, St. Paul, MN: West Academic, 2011.

acceptable to those who are serious about international solidarity. However, I believed that the socialist left had been reluctant to embrace more radical demands because, *strategically*, they were seen as too far from the general public opinion to succeed, and worse, likely to fuel a nativist backlash that would lead to a greater restriction of immigrants' rights. The purpose of my article was to reveal the errors in this strategic calculation, to show how the "restriction with rights" compromise was, at least in part, to blame for the ground the immigrants' rights movement has lost in recent years, and to argue for a more radical approach.

Having set this goal, the paper attempts to describe the material conditions under which a "restriction with rights" *strategy* — such as support for CIR (comprehensive immigration reform) — might have been able to win some measure of humanitarian protection for immigrant workers, and to demonstrate that those conditions no longer apply. This is considerably different from a discussion about what material conditions might underpin an immigration *regime* that places restrictions on entry but secures the rights of those who do manage to enter. Feldman takes me to task for avoiding this latter analysis in my account of the nineteenth century. Apart from the impossibility of offering a material analysis for a nineteenth-century "restriction with rights" regime that I never identified in the first place, he misses the mechanisms I do identify. The decision to extend homestead rights to immigrants was based on the *labor needs* of Northeast capitalists — the possibility of access to land served as a draw for new immigrants, who would need to spend years laboring in factories to save the money to fund their homestead hopes. This calculation was made explicit in policy debates. Of course, this argument does not go as far as Feldman demands; it does not offer an account of the material conditions for a "restriction with rights" regime.

This is because there are *no material conditions* under which restriction could be combined with secure rights for immigrants. Pointing out the consequences that immigration restriction will have on immigrants' rights is not an elision; it is the most important reason why the Left must oppose any restriction policy. Any sort of restriction, by creating a class of people for whom *presence* in the United States is conditional and discretionary, makes it more difficult to defend against rights violations. Because the system is not static but under constant pressure from capitalists, restriction, by inherently accommodating immigrants' vulnerability, sets the stage for the erosion of any rights that might be won through prior struggle.

THE EMPIRICAL CRITIQUE

Feldman challenges the empirical basis for my argument that capital's interests, with regard to labor supply, no longer require it to support large inflows of immigrants. The primary evidence he marshals for this critique is the share of the general population and the labor force that is foreign born. These numbers have soared since the 1970s, returning to levels comparable to those at the end of the nineteenth century. Feldman argues that we should interpret the *presence* of immigrants and immigration in the United States as evidence of capital's reliance on immigrant labor, and thus, he questions my argument that capital should be seen as an obstacle to a more open (and potentially more humane) immigration policy.

While I do not deny that mass immigration has occurred in the past half century — indeed, no serious student of modern immigration would deny this fact — it does not follow that capital's relationship to immigration is the same as it was during the United States' periods of industrialization. For one, the actual flow of migration at any given time is affected by a number of different

factors, only one of which is the economy's labor demand. The size and direction of migration flows are also affected by "push" factors in the sending regions — high rates of unemployment and poverty, political or economic crises, natural disasters — as well as factors that facilitate the actual movement of people, such as robust migrant networks and advances in transportation technology.[10] While I argue that, for many sectors of capital, mechanization and offshoring have rendered immigrant labor less crucial, I also argue that changes in other migration-promoting factors have made it much easier for capital to obtain immigrant labor. Although Feldman is correct that undocumented migration is only one portion of the overall immigration picture, I chose to elaborate on this aspect because it demonstrates how modern migration flows to the United States persist without significant investment from employers or the state in terms of recruitment or transportation, and *despite* the state's explicit effort to curtail it. This contrasts markedly with migration during the era of industrialization, when both the federal government and employers were heavily involved in recruiting workers and coordinating (as well as often funding) their transportation.

A closer look at the empirical data Feldman employs helps us to see the distinctions between the two periods of mass migration. While the share of foreign-born people in the United States population may be comparable (immigrants constituted 14.6 percent of the total population and 20.5 percent of the labor force in 1910, compared to 13.5 percent of the total population and 17.1 percent of the labor force in 2017), there are major differences in the distribution of immigrant labor between these two periods. For example, in 1910, more than 60 percent of laborers in the iron

10 Douglas Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

and steel industries were foreign born. While changes in the census occupational categories make direct comparisons difficult, looking to the foreign-born share of workers in metals and plastics production — at 16.4 percent in 2000 — gives us a sense of how much employment patterns of immigrant workers have changed.[11] The only occupational categories in which immigrants constituted more than 60 percent of the labor force between 2012 and 2017 were "miscellaneous personal appearance workers" (mainly cleaning and support staff at nail salons and in other beauty-related services) and graders and sorters of agricultural products. The example of Western agriculture in the 1980s I used was intended to point out how employers for whom immigrant workers comprise such a dominant share of the labor force — whether they be iron and steel producers in the nineteenth century or Western growers today — behave in similar ways, advocating for increased immigration flow, and where necessary, supporting the expansion of immigrants' rights. This is true regardless of the relative importance of these sectors to the national economy.

I think Feldman would agree with me on these points. Where he disagrees, however, is on the conclusions I draw about the impact these sectoral differences can have on state policy. He claims that I have idealized the Fordist era in arguing that the importance of immigrant workers to heavy industry, combined with the difficulty of migration itself, induced capital in the nineteenth century to aggressively push for policies that promoted migration flow. Feldman argues that the overrepresentation of immigrant workers in agriculture, low-wage service, construction, and textile production has less to do with the relative geographical immobility of these industries than it has to do with transformations in the American political economy.

11 US Census, from IPUMS.

I don't disagree with Feldman's basic account of these transformations — outsourcing and automation destroyed unionized jobs for native-born workers, and the export of capital to developing countries (as well as military interventions) contributed to waves of mass migration. Where we disagree, it seems, is on the question of capital's relationship with the resultant low-wage, politically vulnerable American workforce. We both use the word "dependent," but it is not specific enough to capture our differences. Yes, capital "depends" on the weakness of labor, both organizationally and structurally, to ensure that wages are low enough to secure their profits. To the extent that distinctions like immigration status can be used to further divide and weaken the working class, capital is "dependent" on an immigrant flow. But in terms of actual production, there is a difference between those firms that can offshore the *actual work* that is being done, and those firms for whom such moves are prohibitively costly or impossible. The first group of employers may support a continuous *flow* of immigrants, but they are likely to promote regimes, like guest-worker programs, where immigrants' *rights* are limited — and under conditions where mass migration occurs regardless of policy, they may even support immigration restriction. The second group of employers — those who lack viable alternatives to immigrant labor — may behave like the first group under conditions of mass migration, when the flow of immigrants is secure. When that flow is at risk, however, these employers will be more likely to accept an expansion of immigrants' rights if such concessions can secure their labor force. Western growers in the era of modern migration made precisely this exchange in accepting the expansion of the amnesty provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, and their support for guest-worker programs and opposition to the Trump administration's aggressive border policies are all consistent with their direct dependence on immigrant farmworkers.

What Feldman's critique reveals, perhaps, is the imprecision of the terms I chose to extend this sectoral analysis to the different positions of capital, as a class, during the two periods of mass migration. Blanket statements like "capital needs" or "capital prefers" may be misleading. What I mean here is that, first, capital's interest in the labor flow is not a binary phenomenon, but rather runs along a spectrum that varies in the intensity of dependence on immigrant labor. Second, different sectors of capital sit at different positions on that spectrum — from those sectors that can mechanize, offshore, or pay wages high enough to attract native labor with relative speed, to those that are less able to do so. Employers will advocate for policies that serve their labor needs, and to the extent that there is variability in the interests of different sectors, it is not possible to identify a monolithic capital with regard to immigration. This is one of the reasons why I noted the distinctions between those sectors that were geographically tethered, and those that were less so.

However, what I did mean to convey in using these blanket statements about "capital" is the *relative weight* of the sectors pushing for a continuing flow of immigration in these two periods of mass migration. In the nineteenth century, iron and steel production was *the* leading sector of the US economy, if not the world.[12] Twenty-first-century agricultural production, on the other hand, represents less than 1 percent of US GDP.[13] The manufacturing sector, diminished as it is, still represents a greater share of the national product than agriculture, construction, and retail trade combined. Given these numbers, it does not seem correct to say that manufacturing's central role in the American economy was

12 Rafael Reuveny and William R. Thompson, "Leading Sectors, Lead Economies, and Economic Growth" *Review of International Political Economy* 8, no. 4 (2001): 689–719.

13 fred.stlouisfed.org/release/tables?rid=331&eid=211.

replaced by these low-wage, high-employment sectors. Rather, the scholarly and policy consensus is that manufacturing was primarily displaced by the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, and real estate) and information technology, industries that are characterized by low labor needs and high capital mobility. This means that, for an immigrants' rights movement hoping to work with capital on immigration reform, reliable partners with sufficient resources and influence over the state to shift the direction of existing policy will be hard to find.

Feldman also takes issue with the second explanation I offered for capital's unreliability on the question of immigration flow: that even those sectors of capital that rely on immigrant labor need not work to defend migration flow because the size of the immigrant population has proven to be impervious to restrictionist policy interventions. For this critique, Feldman offers data on the decline in border apprehensions in recent years to suggest that the intensification of border enforcement, in particular the impact of the Secure Fence Act of 2006, was successful in stopping undocumented migration flows into the United States. This is an unusual reading of these statistics, which goes against the interpretations offered by leading scholars of migration at the United States' southern border. While Border Patrol apprehension rates have declined since 2006, this is only a continuation of a pattern of decline that began in 2000, and is more typically explained by transformations in Mexico's demography[14] and the multiple economic crises the United States has experienced since the turn of the century.[15] Even a more generous reading of Feld-

14 Douglas Massey, "Today's US-Mexico 'Border Crisis' in 6 Charts," *The Conversation*, June 27, 2018, theconversation.com/todays-us-mexico-border-crisis-in-6-charts-98922.

15 Andrés Villarreal, "Explaining the Decline in Mexico-U.S. Migration: The Effect of the Great Recession," *Demography* 51 (2014): 2203–28.

man's argument, suggesting that the decline beginning in 2000 reflects investments in enforcement, is contradicted by the fact that levels of investment in border patrol increased throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, during a period when yearly apprehensions were trending upward.

Of course, using border apprehensions as a proxy for actual rates of undocumented migration is extremely imprecise, as increased apprehension can result from increased enforcement efforts, even without increases in actual migration. A better measure of the phenomenon I was concerned with — the availability of immigrant labor to employers — might be the total number of immigrants. And here, as Feldman states, and as I discussed above, those numbers remain at historically high levels. Even as a measure of the effectiveness of border enforcement policy, looking at total numbers of undocumented immigrants demonstrates the futility of enforcement efforts — between 1990 and 2007, the number of undocumented immigrations grew by nearly 350 percent, from 3.5 million to 12.2 million.[16] As I stated in my previous article, this growth was actually a *consequence* of border militarization, as migrants who previously circulated between the two countries opted to settle (and bring their families) in response to the increased risks associated with crossing the border.[17] While Feldman is correct that undocumented migration is only one portion of overall migration to the United States, it has a significance greater than its numbers. Apart from the fact that undocumented immigration has become a central point in public debate, the

16 Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Total Dips to Lowest Level in a Decade," *Pew Research Center,* 2018, pewresearch.org/hispanic/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/03/Pew-Research-Center_2018-11-27_U-S-Unauthorized-Immigrants-Total-Dips_Updated-2019-06-25.pdf.

17 Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Why Border Enforcement Backfired," *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (March 2016): 1557–1600.

ineffectiveness of the restrictionist policy with regard to this minority of the immigrant population indicates the futility of any broader attempts to restrict the flow of migration.

THE POLITICAL CRITIQUE

Feldman's argument for amnesty does not simply rest on a rejection of my empirical support for capital's relationship to immigrant labor. While his suggestion that a "restriction with rights" solution may still be possible hangs on his empirical claims, Feldman also offers a series of political arguments for promoting amnesty as the better *strategy* for securing immigrants' rights. His first critique is about the term "open borders" itself, which has become a political slogan on both the Left and the Right, with very different meanings. Feldman maintains that the vagueness of the term allows not only for confusion across the political spectrum, but also confuses the Left itself, leading organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to support policy proposals like the "path to citizenship" — the most recent version of which would have forced applicants to submit to the extremes of capitalist discipline. Second, Feldman argues that the more radical "open borders" demand, which became prominent after the retreat of the mass mobilizations for immigrants' rights that punctuated the mid-2000s, gained currency only because the movement had become too marginal to be effective — and, in fact, reflects the closing of possibility on the immigration question. He insists that we should not squander the opportunity afforded by the Left's resurgence in recent years by clinging to this unrealistic demand.

On the first point, it may be that the term "open borders" is too contaminated to use as a political slogan for the immigrants' rights movement, but it does not follow that the Left's version of this idea — the free movement of workers across national jurisdictions, without discrimination in political, social, or economic

rights — should be abandoned. Such a problem can be resolved by adopting less controversial terminology, or simply by being more explicit about what we mean. Moreover, Feldman's own maneuvering around the word "amnesty" demonstrates that imprecise and ambiguous terminology is not a problem exclusive to open borders. The "path to citizenship" proposal that Feldman criticizes has, in fact, been explicitly labeled "amnesty" by many of its critics on the Right (and it is often associated with the 1986 IRCA amnesty provision, which it emulates in its basic form, though with greater restrictions and longer timelines).[18] Feldman has to qualify his usage of the term with "immediate" and "unconditional" in order to distinguish the amnesty he supports from the various alternatives that circulate in the debates on immigration reform. Finding an effective and appropriate vocabulary to communicate our ideas is simply the basic work of politics, not a reason to abandon a strategy or principle.

At its core, Feldman's second argument — that the way in which open borders supplanted amnesty in the immigration discourse demonstrates the political impossibility of supporting both ideas at once — is based on a conflation of the right-wing proposal for open borders with that of the Left. It was not the case that, after the dissipation of the 2006 protests, the immigrants' rights movement and the Left exchanged the demand for amnesty with a call for open borders. The major labor unions and the Democratic Party continued to support and push for some version of amnesty for undocumented immigrants — it was precisely the point of my article that these center-left institutions never went as far as to challenge the legitimacy of restriction itself. Immigrants' rights organizations, for the most part, did not rebuild their

18 Julia Preston, "Illegal Immigrants Are Divided Over Importance of Citizenship," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2013.

campaigns around a more radical demand, but rather retreated to try to address the most egregious humanitarian problems: deportation, detentions, and rights for people who migrated as children.[19] Open borders entered the public discourse not from a retreating Left, but from the Right — Bernie Sanders famously called open borders a "Koch brothers conspiracy" because it *was* right-wing libertarian think tanks supported by capital, like the Cato Institute, that promoted the loosening of immigration restriction. This version of open borders was one in which the free flow of migration did not necessarily entail an expansion of rights, with the actual policy proposals being primarily an expansion of guest-worker or other employment-contingent programs.[20] The problem with open borders was not that it was an abstract principle deployed as a political slogan; it was that the term was appropriated by the Right. Again, the solution is not to abandon the principle, but to reclaim the term or offer a new one in its place.

Moreover, Feldman's insistence on separating the two ideas of amnesty and open borders weakens the demand for amnesty and renders it unwinnable. On what grounds, if not the fundamental illegitimacy of borders, would he argue for the *immediate* offer of *full citizenship* rights to all immigrants? He uses the language of internationalism and solidarity as though it is possible to organize around those ideas without challenging the legal distinctions that separate workers on the basis of citizenship and nationality.

It is not only that a demand for unconditional amnesty stripped of a vision of open borders is logically incoherent, but that amnesty, as a concrete reform, is not tenable in the long term without a plan that undoes the conditions under which amnesties are necessary.

---

19 In 2006, the socialist left was so insignificant that its position on immigration had no impact on the public discourse.

20 See, e.g., Jason Riley, *Let Them In: The Case for Open Borders*, New York: Penguin, 2008.

To the extent that Feldman offers any such vision, it seems to be based on the political power of the 11 million new citizens that an unconditional amnesty would create today, who might then push for a further unraveling of existing immigration regimes. The experience of the 1986 IRCA's amnesty suggests that this outcome is unlikely. Nearly 3 million people were granted legal status under the IRCA, and while not all of them went on to become citizens, they sponsored the immigration of their family members and raised children born in the United States, ostensibly broadening the coalition to support immigrants' rights. Yet, as I've written before, the trajectory of immigration politics has moved in the opposite direction. Beginning in the 1990s, the period when IRCA amnesty beneficiaries began to qualify for citizenship and play a larger role in American politics, we saw the passage of federal legislation to curtail the rights of immigrants — excluding immigrants from eligibility for public benefits[21] and making it easier for immigrants to be deported.[22] This transpired even in states like California, where a larger proportion of amnesty recipients resided who might have had a greater political impact.[23] This turn, and the Republicans' obstinacy on the question of legalization, is often interpreted as a backlash to the 1986 legislation and its perceived failure to "fix" the problem of unauthorized immigration.[24] But this failure was inevitable, given the imperviousness of migration flows to enforcement efforts, as long as the policy of restricting migration remained in place. The most likely outcome

21 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996.

22 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) of 1996.

23 California Proposition 187 of 1994.

24 Rachel L. Swarns, "Failed Amnesty Legislation of 1986 Haunts the Current Immigration Bills in Congress," *New York Times*, May 23, 2006.

of granting amnesty without undoing the system of immigration controls altogether is a continuation of what has come before: a snowballing of enforcement, border militarization, and public hand-wringing over the intractability of the "immigration problem."

It is true that a demand for open borders might alienate some native workers, who may support the humane treatment of existing migrants but fear the economic and social impact of an unrestricted migrant flow. I have argued before that the Left can manage this risk by addressing specific material concerns. More important, this is a risk we *have* to take because not much can be won on the question of immigration rights or flows on the basis of humanitarianism alone. As with capital, whose likelihood to support or obstruct immigration policy lies on a spectrum based on interests, the political impact of American workers' generally positive opinion toward existing immigrants will vary depending on the intensity of their commitment to immigration reform. Because capital's interests in immigration no longer require it to accept an expansion of rights, winning a better immigration regime will require protracted and serious struggle, not just by the immigrant minority but by the labor movement as a whole. Consider the outcomes of two different confrontations over the border wall, one in 2006 and the other in 2019. In 2006, Congress passed (by a large margin), and an immigrant-friendly president signed into law, the Secure Fence Act, authorizing and funding the erection of a fence on the country's southern border, *despite* a millions-strong immigrants' rights protest movement. In 2019, President Donald Trump's efforts to secure another tranche of funding for the fence (now called a wall) by provoking a government shutdown collapsed in the face of labor opposition — specifically a threatened strike, not by immigrant groups, but by flight attendants in solidarity with federal transportation workers who were being forced to work without pay.

The Left cannot effectively oppose capital and the anti-immigrant right without a labor movement strategically exercising its power. While immigrant workers, who work in many essential services, do have an important role to play here, there will be moments in which the leverage to win concessions will lay in other sectors where native workers have more power. This means that an immigrants' rights movement will have to be a collaborative effort, and for native workers to be willing to take on such a struggle, they need to be bound to immigrant workers by something stronger than humanitarian goodwill. People support humane policies because they are generally decent and empathetic, but going on strike for the welfare of others is an act of altruism that most workers cannot afford. The only way to win, then, is to create a movement in which solidarity extends across national identity and citizenship. There might be other ways to build this kind of solidarity, but it seems to me that the demand for open borders, because it insists on the illegitimacy of these identitarian distinctions, is the most straightforward path.

DONATE

Catalyst is in its infancy — it needs your support. Please send your tax-deductible contribution to:

Jacobin Foundation
388 Atlantic Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11217

catalyst-journal.com/donate

Catalyst is an interdisciplinary journal. We welcome scholarly articles from all fields and any specialization.

STYLE

Articles submitted to *Catalyst* should be written in simple and clear language, avoiding unnecessary jargon. Although technical language is sometimes necessary, it should be kept to a minimum, as should footnotes and tables.

LENGTH

We do not have a standard word limit, but we encourage contributors to not exceed 10,000 words.

CITATIONS

Sources should be cited in footnotes according to the Chicago Manual of Style. Authors do not need to provide a bibliography.

DRAFTS

Please email drafts to submissions@catalyst-journal.com. We will try to respond as quickly as possible, but may require a month for review.

$15 ISSN 2475-7365

VOLUME 4
ISSUE 1
SPRING 2020