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The thread running through this issue of *Catalyst* is, to quote Frantz Fanon, the "pitfalls of national consciousness." Fanon had in mind the elite nationalism that so many intellectuals gravitated toward in the era of decolonization, which he correctly viewed as an obstacle to genuine social emancipation. In substituting the fictive notion of a national community in place of a popular class project, this ideology served the aspirations of an emerging domestic elite, which, while happy to oust the colonial masters, did so mainly in the hope of taking power for itself. It was a conservative brand of nationalism that substituted the language of community for that of class.

In the American left today, this orientation lives on as "identity politics" — a politics ostensibly committed to liberation but in fact limited to the interests of elites within the dominated groups. The main difference between the earlier form of national consciousness and the current identitarian tendency is that, today, the elite ideology has a stronger hold on the political left. In earlier decades, identity politics had to contend with a socialist current that was not only organized but had a mass base in subaltern classes. That is not the case today, and it has enabled the elite brand of identity politics to have a more pervasive influence on progressive politics.

There is no more conspicuous example of the change in left intellectual culture than the interpretation of Fanon himself. This acerbic critic of cultural nationalism and race reductionism has been turned into an icon of those very phenomena. When Fanon

wrote his key works at the time of the Algerian liberation struggle, it was uncontroversial that he criticized European colonialism not simply as a colonial subject but as a socialist. As Bashir Abu-Manneh shows in his essay on Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, by the end of the century, Fanon had been reduced to being an advocate of violence and an abstract "colonial" identity. His biting critique of the indigenous elites, of cultural nationalism, and of a narrow race consciousness had largely been erased by a "quite willful misreading" propagated by theorists from postcolonial studies.

Abu-Manneh's essay goes a long way toward excavating Fanon's class politics and restoring it to its rightful place in Fanon's work. In so doing, Abu-Manneh shows that the West Indian socialist remains highly relevant, as a critic of the very trends that are so powerful within today's Left. As Fanon argued, what was damaging about the nationalism of his time was not its displacement of class by a focus on the nation, but rather how it interpreted the nation. The latter was conceptualized so that it became a proxy for domestic ruling classes, leaving out the needs and aspirations of the laboring classes. Hence, what was at stake was two competing visions of the "nation" — one that identified it with the elites seeking to simply take the place of the colonial overlords, and the other that identified it with the laboring masses. This is, of course, the very debate that is unfolding on the Left today and that makes Fanon our contemporary.

In the colonial world, one of the central social bases of nationalist politics was the state functionaries and urban educated elites. So, too, in the United States today, it is the salaried middle classes and educated professionals. Benjamin Y. Fong and Melissa Naschek undertake a subtle analysis of the massive growth of these strata through NGOism over the past half century, of their links to the corporate community, and, most important, of the peculiar

political culture that is generated within their ranks — a culture that obsessively invokes the language of empowerment, community, marginality, and justice, but that carefully avoids a confrontation with real power. Fong and Naschek trace the evolution of this "third sector" and make a powerful argument for why its primary function is ideological: to deploy the language of empowerment and transformation while obscuring both the real fount of power in capitalism and the strategies to challenge it.

The bizarre marriage of radical-sounding rhetoric and the interests of the middle class was on display in a recent event at an elite American college. As Catherine Liu explains, a black student was questioned by staff about her presence in a closed building, an action that evoked such outrage on her part that she accused those involved (and some not involved) of racism. The staff were not only punished but publicly humiliated, with the college president leading the charge. A subsequent investigation found no evidence of wrongdoing, but it was too late. The damage was done.

The event is significant in that it offers a window into how these elite spaces, which train and socialize their students to enter the ranks of the American upper class, much as they did in earlier decades, now utilize the language of identity and marginality to pursue the same narrow class agenda they always have. But while they were more forthright in their social mission before, today, they drape it in the language of an ostensibly emancipatory commitment. After the episode was covered by the *New York Times*, the journalist Ryan Grim, one of the few voices of sanity, made the telling observation that, whereas in earlier times the Left would have come to the defense of these workers, now it stood silent at best, and more frequently joined in with the public shaming. But then, this should not be entirely surprising, for this political culture is precisely what an elite-dominated "national consciousness"

amounts to: the creation of a social identity around the very specific worldview — the class culture — of dominant groups.

These are the strata that still overwhelmingly populate the ranks of the contemporary left, and until socialists find a different anchor and embed themselves within the class they claim to be fighting for and alongside, they will continue to be a sideshow on the political scene.

(70) 1076 A Field of Pineapples, Jamaica.

ABSTRACT

The Wretched of the Earth is Frantz Fanon's most radical and influential book: it expresses the contradictions and revolutionary possibilities of the whole conjuncture of decolonization. Yet it has been marred by a postcolonial reception that is blind to Fanon's socialism and class analysis, and that turns Fanon into a prophet of violence.

Who Owns Frantz Fanon's Legacy?

Bashir Abu-Manneh

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961) is one of the twentieth century's most significant anti-colonial intellectuals. Born in Martinique under French colonial rule, Fanon joined the anti-Vichy Free French Forces in World War II and served in North Africa and France. After qualifying as a psychiatrist in Lyon in 1951, he ended up in French Algeria and practiced at the Blida-Joinville psychiatric hospital until he was deported in 1957 for his political sympathies toward the Algerian national struggle. Fanon formally joined the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) in exile in Tunis and represented the movement on the international stage. He also participated in editing its French-language publication *El Moudjahid*, where his own work appeared. Fanon died as he was waiting for treatment for

leukemia in the United States, having just completed his political testament *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which was famously prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Fanon's writings on colonialism, racism, and anti-imperialism have had a massive impact around the world, especially in the Global South. In addition to *Wretched*, he wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), and *Toward the African Revolution* (1964). *Wretched* is, without a doubt, Fanon's most important book. Nothing like it exists in the annals of anti-colonial letters. No other political text expresses as astutely and productively the whole conjuncture of decolonization, with its distinctive contradictions and possibilities. By targeting colonialism and positing a new egalitarian society in the future, Fanon captures the voice and critical orientation of a whole generation of radical intellectuals.

To read *Wretched* is to enter a world of colonial division, national conflict, and emancipatory yearning. As a text, it combines dynamic critique with political passion, historical probing with denunciation of injustice, reasoned argument with moral indignation against suffering. This is how it inspired a whole generation of radicals around the world to transform societies that were slowly emerging from colonial domination. By identifying the racism and structural subordination of the colonial predicament, as well as charting a humanist route out of it, Fanon defined a politics of liberation whose terms and aims remain relevant today.

But many of Fanon's recent academic critics, and even some of his sympathizers, continued to distort and misconstrue *Wretched*. They inflated the significance of one element in the book over all others: violence. And they underplayed Fanon's socialist commitment and class analysis of capitalism, which are two essential components of his anti-imperialist arsenal. Nowhere is this truer than in recent postcolonial theory. Indeed, postcolonial theory has

come to posit violence as the theoretical core of *Wretched*. Homi K. Bhabha, for example, has turned Fanon's work into a site of "deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation" that "speaks most effectively from the uncertain interstices of historical change."[1] In his recent preface to *Wretched*, Bhabha reads colonial violence as a manifestation of the colonized's subjective crisis of psychic identification "where rejected guilt begins to *feel* like shame." Colonial oppression generates "psycho-affective" guilt at being colonized, and Bhabha's Fanon becomes an unashamed creature of violence and poet of terror. He concludes that "Fanon, the phantom of terror, might be only the most intimate, if intimidating, poet of the vicissitudes of violence."[2] This flawed interpretation eviscerates Fanon as a political intellectual of the first order. It also skirts far too close to associating Fanon's contributions with terrorism — a bizarre interpretation for Bhabha to advance in the age of America's "war on terror." Rather than emancipation, it is terror, Bhabha posits, that marks out Fanon's life project.

It is hardly surprising that, in order to turn Fanon into a poet of violence, postcolonial theorists have had to deny his socialist politics. This begins with Bhabha himself, whose intellectual project is premised on undermining class solidarity and socialism as subaltern political traditions.[3] Ignoring Fanon's socialist commitments is also evident in Edward Said's reading of him in *Culture and Imperialism*, which is historically sparked by the First Intifada and Said's critical disenchantment with Palestinian elite

1 Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 112–123: 116, 113.

2 Homi K. Bhabha, "Foreword: Framing Fanon," in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), vii-xli: xxxix, xl.

3 For Bhabha's marginalization of class agency, see Nivedita Majumdar, "Silencing the Subaltern: Resistance and Gender in Postcolonial Theory," *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 87–115.

nationalism. If Said is profoundly engaged with Fanon's politics of decolonization and universalist humanism, he nonetheless fails to even mention the word "socialism" in association with Fanon, let alone read him as part of the long tradition of the socialist critique of imperialism. This dominant postcolonial disavowal of socialist Fanon is also articulated by Robert J. C. Young when he bluntly states that Fanon is not interested in "the ideas of human equality and justice embodied in socialism."[4]

Sartre never made that mistake, though his reading of Fanon is not without its flaws. In his famous preface to the book, Sartre does actually inflate the significance of violence in *Wretched*. His stark injunction is to "Read Fanon: you will learn how, in the period of their helplessness, their mad impulse to murder is the expression of the natives' collective unconscious." Decolonization, as a result, becomes indelibly associated with a "mad fury," an "ever-present desire to kill," and "blind hatred" in which the colonized "make men of themselves by murdering Europeans."[5] It is hard to stress how damaging this invocation of murder has been for understanding Fanon's life work and his conception of decolonization.

Sartre, however, does also emphasize Fanon's core socialist message, which he summarizes as follows: "In order to triumph, the national revolution must be socialist; if its career is cut short, if the native bourgeoisie takes over power, the new State, in spite of its formal sovereignty, remains in the hands of the imperialists." And he concludes, "This is what Fanon explains to his brothers

4 Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 278. Young subscribes to Bhabha's reading of Fanon's colonized as responding through violence to the psychic drama of an identity split by power. Young calls this "*the* theoretical problem" for Fanon in "What Is the Postcolonial?" *Ariel* 40, no. 1 (January 2009), 13–24: 17.

5 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1961]), 15–16. All subsequent page numbers correspond to this edition.

in Africa, Asia and Latin America: we must achieve revolutionary socialism all together everywhere, or else one by one we will be defeated by our former masters."[6] The aim of national struggle is to forge a socialist internationalism premised on popular solidarity and cooperation — one that reconfigures sovereignty as social and economic democracy. That, in a nutshell, is the political cause that Fanon advances in *Wretched*.

It has taken decades of quite willful misreading of the book to present Fanon as anything other than an emblem of African socialism at mid-century. For Fanon, socialism is the answer to the problems of racism, colonial domination, and economic underdevelopment that plague the Third World in the decolonization era. He was not a Marxist, nor did he give due consideration to the role of the urban working class in decolonization struggles. But he was a materialist who anchored his analysis of colonialism in an objective social structure; he was also a class analyst of colonial society and anti-colonial movements; and, finally, he was committed to a new universal humanism that the subordinate peoples and classes from across the colonial divide could participate in and help shape. For Fanon, ending racism and exclusion had to be done not through reifying oppressed identities and celebrating national or ethnic particularism, but through common struggle for freedom and equality.

It is important to flag here that Fanon's vision of liberation is not limited to national collective decolonization. To be free certainly meant living in a socially and politically liberated nation that independently controlled its economy. But Fanon took another crucial step. He advanced the notion that a real and authentic decolonization would have to result in the emancipation of the individual. Fanon articulated this idea most succinctly in *Toward the African*

6 Fanon, *Wretched*, 10.

Revolution, when he said: "The liberation of the individual does not follow national liberation. An authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation."[7] Individual freedom is thus part and parcel of Fanon's conception of anti-colonial democracy. Alongside the notion of "power for the people and by the people," in which popular sovereignty is a key response to tyranny and oppression, Fanon also advanced Enlightenment notions of human blossoming. As he specified in his *El Moudjahid* writings, these are:

> the essential values of modern humanism concerning the individual taken as a person: freedom of the individual, equality of rights and duties of citizens, freedom of conscience, of assembly, etc. all that permits the individual to blossom, advance and exercise his personal judgement and initiative freely.[8]

Fanon thus linked democracy to a notion of self-emancipating individuals and understood decolonization as both collective and individual self-determination. This is, indeed, what *Wretched* ultimately yearns for: all-around democracy and human flourishing.

This essay is organized into three core themes: Fanon's conception of violence, which has attracted so much attention; his examination of the limits and flaws of the national bourgeoisie and its project of independence in the colonies; and his unique conception of liberation. I also tackle his distinct views on political agency and revolutionary process in the colonies. *Wretched* constitutes Fanon's contribution to radical thought. Engaging it

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7 Frantz Fanon, "Decolonization and Independence" [1958], in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 99–105: 103.

8 Frantz Fanon, "A Democratic Revolution" [1957], in *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 567–573: 571.

brings out Fanon's new humanist remedies for global emancipation — a universal vision that remains relevant for tackling today's global inequality.

VIOLENCE

Wretched's opening sentence seems to say it all: "National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon."[9] But two things are often missed about Fanon's justification for anti-colonial violence. The first is that violence is a response to the greater violence of colonialism, and the second is that violence is part of a broader political strategy and subsumed under it: necessary but insufficient without the popular mobilization needed to unseat colonial domination.

For Fanon, colonialism was an exceptionally violent phenomenon: it dehumanized the colonized, divided and exploited them, deformed their culture, and transformed them into a lesser people. It was premised on force, not political consensus, and it resulted in the denial of people's fundamental rights. As total negation, the colonized equaled "absolute evil" — immorality, laziness, poverty, depravity, ignorance, and want.[10] Fanon argues that the colonized refuse to accept this colonial situation and negation. Colonialism fails to convince the colonized of the legitimacy of its authority and rule. Force breeds resistance and becomes a major source of instability for colonial regimes. Fanon depicts this process in the following terms: "He [the colonized] is overpowered but not tamed; he is treated as an inferior but he is not convinced of his

9 Fanon, *Wretched*, 27.

10 Fanon, *Wretched*, 32.

inferiority."[11] The colonized recognize that the system of colonial domination and oppression is designed to keep them down, and that their interest lies in pushing against its constraints and overcoming its disabling yoke.

The force of Fanon's analysis is to argue that violence is necessary in this process. This is not because the colonized are inherently violent, but because the colonizers only understand the language of violence: colonialism "will only yield when confronted with greater violence," and "The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence."[12] This is the moment of clash, confrontation, and powerful contradiction.

> The settler's work is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the native. The native's work is to imagine all possible methods of destroying the settler. On the logical plane, the Manichaeism of the settler produces a Manichaeism of the native. To the theory of the "absolute evil of the native" the theory of the "absolute evil of settler" replies ... For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler.[13]

Statements like these have been used by postcolonial commentators to argue that Fanon gives dreams and mental dramas (what Bhabha describes as "the psycho-affective realm") a causal primacy in explaining colonized conduct. But that is not how Fanon mobilizes the psychological dimension in his argument. Fanon utilizes phenomenological language in order to highlight the generative connection between the individual and wider historical processes. The subjective realm conveys the powerful effect that

11 Fanon, *Wretched*, 41.

12 Fanon, *Wretched*, 48, 68.

13 Fanon, *Wretched*, 73.

objective reality has on individual psychology and imagination. Indeed, the whole point of Fanon's analysis is to show that it is colonialism that causes psychological and social injuries, distortions, and violence. Through Fanon's materialist framework of explanation, ideas and feelings become symptoms of social structure, and they have a social basis that is essential for understanding their emergence and development.

In his chapter on "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" in *Wretched*, Fanon tackles the question of individual psychology head-on, detailing tens of actual cases from his time as a psychiatrist in Bilda-Joinville during the Algerian war. For example: "We have here brought together certain cases or groups of cases in which the event giving rise to the illness is in the first place the atmosphere of total war which reigns in Algeria," or "this colonial war is singular even in the pathology that it gives rise to."[14] To argue that the root of violence lies in identarian or psychological crises is to miss what causes those in the first place. It thus misidentifies the reasons and mechanisms of collective action. The whole point of *Wretched* is to connect social suffering to colonial relations and to identify ways to remedy it.

Violence has a function for Fanon. It is an instrument for forging national unity. Only that way can the colonized hope to achieve their objectives. There is no violence for its own sake in Fanon, but only as a means to a political end: independence. The nation thus comes into its own as an oppositional political project and an instrument of liberty.

The Algerian context illuminates Fanon's emphasis on prioritizing politics over armed struggle in *Wretched.* His identification with the Algerian Revolution's Soummam platform is a good example of what this actually meant in practice. The three-week

14 Fanon, *Wretched*, 217, 202.

strategy conference in 1956, held two years after the initiation of armed struggle by the FLN, was mainly associated with its architect Abane Ramdane and regarded as the most serious attempt to formulate a cohesive progressive vision for the decolonization struggle. As Martin Evans has argued:

> In terms of the armed struggle, Soummam established the civil structures that would govern the military, appointing political commissaries to organize the population, advising on military strategy, and putting in place people's assemblies: a counter-state replacing French law and authority.[15]

The platform also articulated new rules of war for the guerrillas, and, "most importantly, Soummam produced a clear set of war aims: recognition of Algerian independence and the FLN as sole representative of the nation."[16] As Fanon's latest biographer, David Macey, states, Soummam called for wider activation of Algerian society in the struggle for national freedom: "The need for alliances with the Jewish minority, women's organizations, peasants, trade unions and youth groups was spelled out in some detail."[17] Abane paid with his life for this effort. He was assassinated by the exterior leadership of the FLN, who regarded his internalist push for political organization as a challenge to their conservative allegiances to Islam, military hegemony, and authoritarian Arab nationalism. But his political vision lived on in *Wretched*.

BOURGEOIS INDEPENDENCE

The critical spirit of Soummam, with its emphasis on self-organization and popular struggle, infuses Fanon's writings on

15 Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 179.

16 Evans, *Algeria*, 178–9.

17 David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2000), 277.

decolonization. Especially important was the notion that there were competing senses of the national project and that decolonization is a struggle for freedom and democracy that takes place not only *between* nations but *within* nations as well. This emphasis on class analysis anchors Fanon's political analysis in *Wretched*. Fanon's key anxiety is that coterminous with national popular struggle is a national elite project of substituting external for internal forms of authoritarian domination and rule. His fear that the outcome of decolonization will not be democracy but national tyranny is palpable throughout *Wretched*. His socially dynamic conception of anti-colonial struggle is best expressed here:

> The people who at the beginning of the struggle had adopted the primitive Manicheism of the settler — Blacks and Whites, Arabs and Christians — realize as they go along that it sometimes happens that you get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites and that the fact of having a national flag and the hope of an independent nation does not always tempt certain strata of the population to give up their interests and privileges … The militant who faces the colonialist war machine with the bare minimum of arms realizes that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up automatically yet another system of exploitation.[18]

To "get Blacks who are whiter than the Whites" means that race solidarity cannot anchor the political dynamic of decolonization: "The barriers of blood and race-prejudice are broken down on both sides."[19]

Fanon's rejection of négritude as a political philosophy for mobilization is on par with his emphasis on class in national

18 Fanon, *Wretched*, 114–15.

19 Fanon, *Wretched*, 116.

struggle. Though he admired Martinician poet Aimé Césaire's spirit of revolt and challenge against racism and colonialism, he found the terms of négritude's self-affirmation insufficient, retrograde, and elitist. As Nigel Gibson succinctly states in his account of Fanon's consistent criticisms of the cultural movement: "Negritude spoke of alienation and not exploitation; it spoke to the elite and not to the masses; to the literate and not to the illiterate."[20] This was especially true of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president. Négritude's main African proponent wanted to revalorize the black elements that had been denigrated and excluded as racially subordinate by what he described as "white civilization." Contra reason, science, and objectivity that exist on the white pole of the racial binary, Senghor celebrated their opposites: emotion, participation, and subjectivism. Fanon rejected such essentialism, as it was premised on accepting a race-based ontological division between white and black that he believed was false. Though Fanon was sympathetic to négritude's spirit of anti-racist negation, he repudiated the racial ontological divide that both colonialism and négritude depended on.

As early as *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon's position on race was clear. "My life," he said, "should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values," adding: "There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence."[21] In an essay entitled "West Indians and Africa" published

20 Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 62. For more on négritude, see: Azzedine Haddour, "Sartre and Fanon: On Negritude and Political Participation," *Sartre Studies International* 11, no. 1/2 (2005), 286–301; and Patrick Williams, "'*Faire peau neuve*' — Césaire, Fanon, Memmi, Sartre and Senghor," in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Routledge, 2003), 181–91. For recent revisionist histories, see Reiland Rabaka, *The Negritude Movement* (London: Lexington Books, 2015) and Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

21 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New

in 1955, Fanon is certain that négritude is the wrong response to colonialism: "It thus seems that the West Indian [Césaire], after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage."[22] With the intensification of decolonization, négritude would come in handy. Rather than undermining French colonial aims in Africa, it was used to fortify it. Even as Senghor spoke in the name of black freedom on the African continent, he mobilized négritude as an ideology of state rule and rejected Algerian independence. Négritude's radical race talk had actually come with political subservience, and this undermined the active unity and solidarity Fanon advocated for the African continent. Fanon's damning judgment was clearly expressed in *Wretched*. If négritude was a symptom of the illusory cultural politics of race, *Wretched* is where Fanon would develop his alternative political worldview, in which class politics is primary.

Fanon thus charts how, during the struggle for decolonization, the colonized elite actively pursues its own class interests and constructs a system of domination and exploitation for its own benefit. Fanon calls this process "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" and dedicates a whole chapter in *Wretched* to elaborating the bourgeois approach to national independence. Writing as decolonization was taking place, Fanon articulates a deep anxiety about the nature and quality of freedom being advocated by national elites. His whole emphasis is on a collective unity cracking up and fracturing because of the colonial bourgeoisie: "The national front which has forced colonialism to withdraw cracks up, and wastes the victory it gained."[23] Elite

York: Grove Press, 1967), 229.

22 Fanon, "West Indians and Africa" [1955], in *Toward the African Revolution*, 17–27: 27.

23 Fanon, *Wretched*, 128.

interests trump the politics of equality and social solidarity. In a deep sense, the Global South is still suffering from the effects of the bourgeoisie's foundational social treason: "The treason is not national, it is social."[24]

In order to sustain its own class domination and accumulation strategies, the colonial bourgeoisie institutes a one-party system, turns its back on its own people, and looks for compromise and support from its old colonial masters. This is not surprising, and it is consistent with research that has been conducted about this period. For example, Vivek Chibber, who has debunked the myth of a developmental national bourgeoisie in the colonies, described the postcolonial political economic order as a form of developmentalism that "in essence … amounted to a massive transfer of national resources to local capitalists."[25] Aijaz Ahmad has also argued that decolonization ended up giving power "not to revolutionary vanguards but to the national bourgeoisie poised for reintegration into subordinate positions within the imperialist structure."[26]

Fanon was cognizant of this potential eventuality and critiqued it as it was happening. He saw that elite nationalization was being undertaken not "to satisfy the needs of the nation" but for private profit: "To them nationalization quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period."[27] Decolonization is here read as class substitution — a local bourgeoisie simply takes over the levers of economic and political power from its old colonial

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24 Fanon, *Wretched*, 116.

25 Vivek Chibber, "Reviving the Developmental State? The Myth of the 'National Bourgeosie,'" *Socialist Register* 41 (2005), 144–65: 157.

26 Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994), 28.

27 Fanon, *Wretched*, 122.

masters and sits in its place. In neocolonial logic, it "discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary … of being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant." Indeed, "The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent."[28]

It needs to be admitted that this acute analysis of the colonial ruling classes stands in contrast with Fanon's acceptance of the mythology around the bourgeoisie in Europe. At the same time as he debunks the myth of the national bourgeoisie as agent of freedom in the colonies, Fanon fortifies another: that the bourgeoisie had fought for liberal freedoms in its homeland but is betraying that noble mission in the colonies. By utilizing the historic analogy of the bourgeois revolution in Europe, Fanon argues that the national bourgeoisie in the colonies is failing in its historic task of pushing thorough an authentic democratic revolution, and hence, it is shirking from the progressive role its forebears played in Europe. As he states: "the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West." It emulates that class's "senile" end rather than its "first stages of exploration and invention," and it "lives to itself and cuts itself off from the people."[29] The result is that the colonial bourgeoisie constitutes an impediment to progress and liberation.

But what Fanon does not realize is that the bourgeoisie is actually behaving *in character* and that the bourgeois revolution is a myth. As Chibber argues, misreading the history of the bourgeoisie and attributing to it a role of political heroism is a common mistake made by postcolonial theorists. Democracy and liberalism do happen in the capitalist era, but they do so not as a result of

28 Fanon, *Wretched*, 122.

29 Fanon, *Wretched*, 123.

the "bourgeoisie as historic actor."[30] As Chibber observes, capital never intended to transpose a liberal order in the colonies, since it never implanted one in Europe. What it "universalizes" is not freedom and liberty but a regime of market dependence; what it seeks is not liberal equality but its own political dominance. Any democratic achievements of the so-called bourgeois revolution result from popular mobilization and pressure from below, both in the metropolitan heartland and in the colonies. Hence, even in the heady days of the French Revolution, "The revolution had finally become antifeudal and democratic, but not because of a 'bourgeois project.' The 'bourgeois' legislators of the Third Estate had to be dragged kicking and screaming to assume their role as revolutionaries."[31]

There is, thus, no ideal of a liberal bourgeoisie against which the colonial capitalists might be measured and found wanting. The bourgeoisie behaves in a similar way across the colonial divide: narrowly self-interested, afraid of democracy and popular sovereignty, and authoritarian. "The fact is," Chibber concludes, "the European bourgeoisie was no more enamored of democracy, or contemptuous of the ancient régime, or respectful of subaltern agency, than were the Indians."[32] What Fanon reads as its social treason in the colonies was, then, its core universal feature. His analysis and description of its conduct there reflects its class behavior everywhere.

If Fanon's historical class analogy was flawed, his real intervention lies elsewhere: in the political lessons he draws — in what needs to happen in the colonies in order for the revolutionary

30 Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013), 52.

31 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 75.

32 Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory*, 101.

struggle to overcome the local bourgeoisie's elitist vision of independence. His clear answer was democratic organization and socialism.

LIBERATION

Faced with these problems of decolonization — a self-interested bourgeoisie and severe underdevelopment — Fanon offers an oppositional socialist vision of emancipation. By emulating neither Soviet bureaucratic politics nor Western capitalist democracy, he advances a New Left alternative instead:

> Capitalist exploitation and cartels and monopolies are the enemies of under-developed countries. On the other hand the choice of a socialist regime, a regime which is completely oriented towards the people as a whole and based on the principle that man is the most precious of all possessions, will allow us to go forward more quickly and more harmoniously, and thus make impossible that caricature of society where all economic and political power is held in the hands of a few who regard the nation as a whole with scorn and contempt.[33]

Fanon returns to this clear position so often in *Wretched* that it is surprising so many postcolonial commentators ignore it. They prefer to quote the following by Fanon, and to pretend that the humanism he invokes is somehow distinct from socialism: "But if nationalism is not made explicit, if it is not enriched and deepened by a very rapid transformation into a consciousness of social and political needs, in other words into humanism, it leads up a blind alley."[34] Said does this in *Culture and Imperialism*. If he goes to Fanon to justify his emerging critique of Palestinian bourgeois

33 Fanon, *Wretched*, 78.

34 Fanon, *Wretched*, 165.

nationalism during the First Intifada, he remains silent about Fanon's New Left socialism. But "socialism" is the one word that captures Fanon's worldview and explains the basis of his critique of bourgeois nationalism that Said was after.

For Fanon, national consciousness has to become an instrument for satisfying the needs of the majority. He thus emphasizes the colonized's mass capacity for self-government — "to govern by the people and for the people, for the outcasts and by the outcasts" — and argues that everything "depends on them."[35] The whole emphasis is not only on democracy as outcome but on democracy as form and process of organization: a true popular sovereignty. He articulates a clear rejection of the urge "to cultivate the exceptional or to seek for a hero, who is another form of leader."[36] Decentralized organization is a mode "to uplift the people" and humanize them after the negations of colonialism. It is they who are "the demiurge" of their destiny: collective responsibility is key.[37] This egalitarian vision also extends to gender equality. Fanon's anti-patriarchal sentiments are clear: "Women will have exactly the same place as men, not in the clauses of the constitution but in the life of every day: in the factory, at school and in the parliament."[38] This widespread social participation is part and parcel of the revolution's deepening "social and political consciousness."[39]

It is on the basis of such democratic self-organization that Fanon can argue for equality and cooperation between nations. Contra exclusionary nationalisms and competition, his internationalist

35 Fanon, *Wretched*, 165, 159.

36 Fanon, *Wretched*, 158.

37 Fanon, *Wretched*, 159.

38 Fanon, *Wretched*, 163.

39 Fanon, *Wretched*, 163.

commitments are evident when he states that "It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture."[40] As Sartre understood all too well, either the Third World rises together in unity and solidarity, or it falls apart in division and fragmentation. Only as a unified cooperating self-governing bloc can it face off against the might of Western imperialism.

Wretched is thus committedly internationalist and refuses to essentialize the West as irredeemably racist or incapable of anti-systemic mobilization. It is clear as early as the conclusion of its first chapter, "Concerning Violence," —so, quite unmissable — that Fanon is a universalist. Indeed, he actively invites the contribution and participation of subordinate European classes in the struggle to "rehabilitate mankind, and make man victorious everywhere" — seeing in them allies and potential agents for change:

> This huge task which consists of reintroducing mankind into the world, the whole of mankind, will be carried out with the indispensable help of the European peoples, who themselves must realize that in the past they have often joined the ranks of our common masters where colonial questions were concerned. To achieve this, the European peoples must first decide to wake up and shake themselves, use their brains, and stop playing the stupid game of Sleeping Beauty.[41]

What is striking about this openness is not only its inclusive vision but its distinct substantive claims. While many European critical theorists (like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) had at the time discounted the possibility of popular mobilizations

40 Fanon, *Wretched*, 199.

41 Fanon, *Wretched*, 84.

for socialism in the West, Fanon does not.[42] Rather than seeing permanent subaltern integration into capitalist structures and political neutralization, Fanon saw exclusionary ideologies that needed to be fought and a political potential for action. At a time when European Marxist theory had become "an esoteric discipline whose highly technical idiom measured its distance from politics," Fanon offered theory as intellectual activity centered on politics, subaltern agency, and radical transformation.[43] Only with the explosion of working-class mobilizations in 1968 were the exponents of defeat forced to grapple with their views on the degradation of political agency.

Contra Western Marxism, Fanon's openness to working-class agency in Europe was there all along and clear in *Wretched*. In his concluding chapter, he employs an impassioned rhetoric that expresses his deep disappointment in Europe's imperial history and ongoing commitment to global domination. But he is far from being anti-European, nor does he tar Europe as permanently disabled by its old colonial practices. Fanon's injunction is to "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe."[44] The Europe he wants to bury forever — never again to be imitated or mimicked — is the Europe of violence, arrogance, hypocrisy, and the crushing of humanism. It is the exploitative capitalist Europe that broke the individual and tore her away from autonomous unity.

If European workers suffering under its oppressive yoke had once shared in "the prodigious adventure of the European spirit,"

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42 For the impact of defeat on Western Marxism, see Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), 42.

43 Anderson, *Considerations*, 53.

44 Fanon, *Wretched*, 251.

it is now time to break with its assumptions and join in forging a new universal humanism in common with other subordinate classes.[45] By challenging global imperialism and capitalism, a radical Third World is calling for genuine connections, diversity, and a worldwide process of rehumanization. Fanon's proposition is not a simple reversal of Eurocentrism, celebrating the cultural nationalism or particularism found in race ideologies like négritude that he so devastatingly critiques as regressive in *Wretched*. Nor does he deny Enlightenment's contribution to human emancipation. Quite the opposite, actually: "All the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought."[46] The real novelty of Fanon's position lies in its emphasis on political practice. What *Wretched* anticipates is a new politics of humanity that, sparked by the new frontiers of resistance in the Global South in places like Algeria and Vietnam, empowers all-around participation.

REVOLUTIONARY AGENCY

Fanon's elaborations on agency are nonetheless not free from theoretical and political complications, especially in regard to the social basis of revolt and who will lead revolutionary practice in the colonies. It is worth examining these issues here, as they raise certain problems with his conception of socialism.

Fanon saw himself as conveying the "human realities" of the settler colonial divide visible through markers of race, violence, and force, as well as adapting Marxist theory to the historical specificity of colonial relations. In order to capture the nature of the colonial divide, he does state — but then transcends — the following:

45 Fanon, *Wretched*, 253.

46 Fanon, *Wretched*, 253.

> In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.[47]

Does Fanon mean that all colonial whites are rich and all colonized are poor? His whole analysis in *Wretched* shows the limits of this logic and how it needs to be overcome in order for socialist decolonization to take place. Race alone obscures political assessment in the colonies. As Fanon states: "The settler is not simply the man who must be killed. Many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much nearer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation."[48] This truth becomes apparent through the process of revolutionary struggle that challenges the unequal distributions of human well-being, living standards, and space in settler colonial cities. In the process, race becomes something to be transcended, not reified.

Stretching Marxist analysis to the colony is done by accounting for the mechanisms of colonial structure: through a class analysis conducted during a historical process of national revolution. Fanon dedicates the second chapter of *Wretched*, "Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weakness," to identifying and weighing the different social forces involved. It is here that he finds most reason to distance himself from what a Marxist analysis of capitalism in a more economically advanced European metropolis entails. Like many socialist revolutionaries in the Third World, his challenge was to convey the distinct workings of capitalism in the colonies and to propose a historically specific strategy to transform it.

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47 Fanon, *Wretched*, 40.

48 Fanon, *Wretched*, 116.

Fanon's theory of revolutionary process is based on some key historical facts. First, the communist parties in both France and Algeria had rejected Algerian political independence for the longest time, under different pretexts ranging from fighting traditionalism in Arab society to advocating gradualist political reforms in the colony. This tarred communism with political ambivalence at best, or colonial contempt at worst. Second, the majority class in Algeria at the time (and in the Third World at large) was the peasantry. For a political movement built around proletarian revolution and the proletariat as leading "grave-diggers" of capitalism (as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*), this presented understandable challenges. As the Russian Revolution had shown earlier in the twentieth century, the question of devising socialist outcomes in economically underdeveloped societies, where the core agent of socialism is a minority class, is a real political challenge. This applied to the colonies. Who could carry colonial society beyond capitalism? This was, arguably, one of Marxism's core preoccupations in the twentieth century, especially since all successful socialist revolutions took place outside of advanced capitalist countries: in Russia, not Germany; and in Cuba, not the United States. Fanon's "stretching" of Marxist analysis speaks to this conundrum.

Faced with colonial Algeria's social structure, Fanon advances the following conclusions. Since both the urban bourgeoisie and the working class are integrated into colonialism, he surmises, the radical leadership of the revolution should look to the countryside for alternatives. There, the peasantry constitutes a spontaneously anti-colonial mass adversely affected by colonial dispossession. Unable to surpass its elementary and diffuse forms of revolt, peasant resistance is in bad need of the discipline and national organization that only a radical leadership could bring. Through

a process of mutual education between leaders and masses, the basis for a revolutionary war is laid. The role of the *lumpenproletariat* is ambiguous and contradictory but nevertheless significant for bringing the revolution back from the countryside to the city. As he charts the trajectory of revolutionary process, what Fanon emphasizes is how the revolution unifies villages, towns, and cities by forging national solidarity: "These politics are national, revolutionary and social and these new facts which the native will now come to know exist only in action."[49] He concludes his chapter on "spontaneity" with this damning description of the bourgeois independence movement that revolutionary praxis has to overcome:

> Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag waving: and down there at the bottom an undivided mass, still living in the Middle Ages, endlessly marking time.[50]

While Fanon's critique of bourgeois nationalism and his social emancipatory vision are exemplary, his trajectory of actual practice can be faulted for being dismissive of working-class agency. Indeed, *Wretched* develops a thesis about the colonial urban proletariat that mirrors Vladimir Lenin's aristocracy of labor thesis. If, for Lenin, imperial profits were used to divide the working class at home and create a labor aristocracy stratum loyal to the ruling elite, colonialism for Fanon does something similar in relation to colonized labor. Fanon's language even echoes Lenin's analysis, without mentioning him by name, as when Fanon states:

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49 Fanon, *Wretched*, 117.

50 Fanon, *Wretched*, 118.

> The embryonic proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position ... In the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents that fraction of the colonized nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly: it includes tram conductors, taxi drivers, miners, dockers, interpreters, nurses and so on.[51]

Fanon dubs this urban proletariat "the 'bourgeois' fraction of the colonized people."[52]

Leaving aside whether Lenin's thesis on metropolitan workers is correct or not, Fanon's dismissal of the colonial working class is far more categorical. A whole urban proletariat is not only politically discounted but viewed as a pampered colonial product lacking political agency and purely motivated by narrow economistic self-interest. Was this empirically correct? There are many examples that suggest otherwise.[53]

This was especially true for Algeria, where the urban proletariat originated in mass impoverished landless rural labor and was a direct product of French colonial land expropriation and proletarianization. If its role during the decolonization struggle of the 1950s seemed small to Fanon, this is a reflection of French colonial repression in the cities, as well as urban workers' lack of real leverage in a French colonial society mainly reliant on its own settler labor. As the colonial economy severely restricted Algerian

51 Fanon, *Wretched*, 86.

52 Fanon, *Wretched*, 86.

53 For an easily accessible literary example, see Ousmane Sembène's novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1960). It is a superb dramatization of the famous 1947–8 anti-colonial workers' strike on the Dakar-Niger Railway that crippled French colonialism, and it conveys the political agency and potential of the industrial proletariat. For an empirical examination of the validity of Fanon's claim, see Richard Sandbrook, *Proletarians and African Capitalism: The Kenya Case, 1960–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

labor and its material well-being, Algerian workers left for mainland France in the hundreds of thousands. As Mahfoud Bennoune argues in his history of Algeria, labor migration to France resulted from economic exclusion: "The colonial economy was incapable of satisfying the basic needs of the Algerian population."[54] This migration had direct economic and political results that included political radicalization in the metropolis, where more political freedoms where possible. Ending colonialism and achieving Algerian independence became key objectives of the "first Algerian working-class nationalist movement," the North African Star (ENA) party, which was founded in Paris in 1926 and then "transplanted" to Algeria. "The experiences of these uprooted workers gave rise to the most radical national movement of colonial Algeria."[55] Contra Fanon, therefore, the urban working-class links with, and contributions to, national struggle were evident.

Fanon misses another crucial point about working-class agency. There is a direct link between a small and weak urban working class and the problems of achieving socialism in decolonizing societies. Stretching Marxism cannot sidestep key political realities. If Fanon understands the problems of petty bourgeois nationalism well, he fails to see how the structural weakness of the proletariat impacts democratizing forces *within* decolonization, and how this increases the obstacles to socialism. Without workers' democratic control and leverage over decolonizing leaderships, bureaucratic and petty bourgeois forms of rule get empowered. As Michael Löwy put it, petty bourgeois *substitution* and containment of revolutionary aspirations lead to bourgeois restoration: they are

54 Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76.

55 Bennoune, *Contemporary Algeria*, 78–82. The Algerian Popular Party and the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties also contributed to the development of the national movement.

"a transitional stage towards neo-bourgeois stabilization and the renewal of dependence upon imperialism."[56]

Marnia Lazreg advances this political eventuality in relation to Algeria. She argues that, both during and after the struggle for independence, the FLN's petty bourgeois bureaucracy undermined alternative forms of popular power for workers and peasants. It also co-opted socialism and turned it into a state ideology of authoritarian rule — thus paving the way for the restoration of bourgeois power: "Hence the policy of encouraging and protecting Algerian private capital."[57] Left forces within the FLN and outside of it (like the laborist Party of the Socialist Revolution) did marshal a strong critique of the FLN's compromised political and economic policies, and they did call for worker and peasant mobilizations in order to institutionalize Algerian socialism and roll back the power of bourgeois fractions. But they were suppressed and disorganized.[58] This, in turn, empowered counterrevolutionary forces even further — making the bourgeois restoration of capitalism in post-independence Algeria a near certainty. *Wretched* warns against this eventuality.

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Sixty years after its publication, what is the value of *Wretched* today? *Wretched* is no bible, and the Left is not a church steeped in

56 Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development* (London: Verso, 1981), 207.

57 Marnia Lazreg, *The Emergence of Classes in Algeria: A Study of Colonialism and Socio-Political Change* (New York: Routledge, 2018; orig. Westview Press, 1976), 136. See chapter 5 for the Algerian state's containment of post-independence workers' self-managed enterprises, its weakening of organized producers, and its boosting of capitalism.

58 For postcolonial class struggle, see Mahfoud Bennoune, "Algerian Peasants and National Politics," *MERIP Reports* 48 (June 1976), 3–24, especially 6–11. See also Ian Clegg's important study *Workers' Self-Management in Algeria* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

dogma. The book's political significance, nonetheless, is unequivocal. *Wretched* has a particular value for radicals and socialists motivated to challenge racial oppression and social injustice today. This lies not only in its class analysis of decolonization and its socialist vision of emancipation, but also in the enduring connections it makes between popular sovereignty, anti-capitalism, and anti-imperialism. Reading *Wretched* today means recognizing that socialism was a historically possible route out of colonial capitalism that was missed. That the way to tackle racism and global inequality is by digging deep into the material infrastructure that generates them. That structures of power are transformed by agents who have both the capacity and the interests to challenge them. And, finally, that the core activity of universalists is to identify what is common between separate identities rather than to inflate what is different. Here, cross-national solidarities are crucial for undermining forms of rule based on elite nationalism and elite cooperation in global capitalism.

In addition, *Wretched* strikes the right balance between culture and politics. Rather than inflating the significance of cultural identities "around songs, poems or folklore," Fanon insisted that political struggle is an essential substance of culture:

> No one can truly wish for the spread of African culture if he does not give practical support to the creation of the conditions necessary to the existence of that culture; in other words, to the liberation of the whole continent.[59]

Fanon's materialism shines through here as well: material conditions and social relations have primacy over the cultural practices of past generations. Culture requires freedom, and freedom requires politics. There is no way for culture to shortcut the political struggle

59 Fanon, *Wretched*, 189.

for liberation. That explains Fanon's orientation toward establishing a new humanist society in the future. What counts is a radical politics of culture — not cultural politics.

Replicating Fanon in our own contemporary moment means devising a materialist analysis of the Global South rooted in categories like class and capital, and it means being acutely aware of the challenges of radical political agency in the era of neoliberal capitalism. In a world of rising global inequality, ideologies of cultural difference are constantly utilized by the Right to justify competition and rivalry. In the name of global security and self-defense, universal rights and international norms of justice are gutted by powerful states. In such an unequal world, Fanon no doubt cuts an oppositional figure that inspires a new generation searching for socialist precursors and radical political models. His faith in reason, resistance, and revolutionary consciousness reverberates across the decades. Fanon's radical opposition to the existing political and social order of his own time is certainly worth studying and advancing today.

ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs the intellectual trajectory of John E. Roemer and his contributions to socialist theory. There are many Marxists who, like Roemer, criticized and rejected the labor theory of value. But instead of moving away from socialist politics, Roemer articulated a new theory of class and exploitation as well as a moral argument — both as critique of capitalism and as justification for an alternative to it.

John Roemer's Ethical Socialism

Roberto Veneziani

> Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance.
> — Eduardo Galeano

1. BACK ON THE AGENDA

Socialism is back on the agenda, and nobody would have predicted it, even, say, ten years ago. We are not on the brink of a wave of revolutionary upheavals rippling throughout the world. But in the last decade or so, candidates openly advocating socialist reforms

have gained significant popular support in advanced countries and have actually won power in many countries in the Global South.

Thirty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the s-word is no longer a taboo, and perhaps the prospects of a socialist transformation are not so dim. But if the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the replacement of bourgeois democratic procedures with party control of political life are not sufficient to lead us to socialism — as the Soviet experience has bitterly taught us — then what kind of socialist society should we aspire to? Which political and economic institutions would characterize a well-functioning socialist society? What kind of rules should dictate the allocation of economic goods and services?

Karl Marx famously refused to write recipes for the cookbooks of the future, leaving only hints in his writings as to what a socialist society would look like. He probably thought that the abolition of private property in the means of production would set in motion a massive change in attitudes and behaviors, such that all pieces of socialist society would eventually fall into place. History, sadly, proved this belief wrong. And in any case, the lessons of central planning have taught us that socialists cannot afford undertheorizing what the future should look like, as well as our transition to it.

It is not a matter of climbing up the ivory tower to engage in a sci-fi writing exercise at the comfort of one's desk. Nor is it a matter of compiling a notebook of magical spells and blueprints for possible societies that people in the future will be able to choose from. It is an urgent matter of political expediency, if socialists' main aim is — as it should be — to gain mass support for our politics. Capitalism is bad, granted. But why should anyone turn to socialism? After 1989, it is still important to offer a grand vision, but it is perhaps more important to have clear, credible proposals — real utopias, as it were. Having a clear horizon is key to getting

people moving. But it is also a necessary condition for steering away from capitalism without being derailed, again, into a ditch.

Few intellectuals have contributed to the design of real utopias, and to the revival of a socialist project, more than John E. Roemer. This paper reconstructs his intellectual trajectory and his contributions to socialist theory. There are many Marxists who, like Roemer, criticized and rejected the labor theory of value. But Roemer belongs to the rare category of Marxists who did not use such a rejection as the first step in a steady move away from socialist politics. Rather, he took on the challenge of reconstituting socialism on new grounds. And he did it not just by articulating a new theory of class and exploitation that does not rest on the labor theory of value, but also by deeply engaging political philosophy to interrogate the normative foundations of socialism — both as critique of capitalism and as justification for a new system.

2. JOHN ROEMER AND ANALYTICAL MARXISM

The intellectual biography of John Roemer starts at the end of the 1970s, during the decline of structuralist Marxism, the renaissance of liberal egalitarianism, and the rebirth of interest in Marxism within analytical philosophy.[1] In 1978, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* appeared, in which Canadian philosopher G. A. Cohen provided a reconstruction of historical materialism guided only by "two constraints: on the one hand, what Marx wrote, and, on the other, those standards of clarity and rigour which distinguish twentieth-century analytical philosophy."[2] In 1979, a group

1 Roemer's *political* biography starts much earlier, with the exile of his parents, who had to flee the United States during the McCarthy era — followed by his expulsion from Berkeley, where he was attending graduate school, due to participation and arrest in a demonstration and an occupation.

2 G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), ix.

of like-minded scholars began to meet, forming the core of the "No-Bullshit Marxism September Group," or, in short (and in somewhat more academically neutral terms), "September Group." These two events marked the birth of Analytical Marxism (AM) as a self-conscious school of thought.[3]

In the following decades, AM has provided some of the most controversial, analytically sophisticated, and thorough interpretations of Marx's theory, including some classic analyses in economic theory;[4] political philosophy;[5] class theory;[6] and political science.[7] AM has provided important insights on crucial topics in social theory, such as the theory of history, the class structure of advanced capitalist economies, and exploitation theory. AM analyses, however, have led to the rejection, or radical revision, of many concepts and propositions — including, for example, the labor theory of value and the law of the tendential fall in the profit rate — such that the viability of a distinctively Marxist perspective in social theory seems called into question.

Thus, it should not come as a surprise that AM's contribution to Marxism (and social theory in general) and its legacy have been at the center of a heated debate, with critics sometimes hastily

3 The September Group has comprised, among others, Gerald A. Cohen, Jon Elster, Adam Przeworski, Robert Brenner, Philippe Van Parijs, Hillel Steiner, Erik Olin Wright, and Sam Bowles.

4 John E. Roemer, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); John E. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)

5 Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

6 Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985); Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

7 Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

dismissing AM as a "particularly virulent" part of the anti-Marxist tradition and a "fundamentally dishonest" theoretical enterprise.[8]

While extremely influential in academia as well as in political debates, Roemer's own work has sometimes elicited an analogous reaction in socialist — and especially Marxist — circles, and his association with AM may have partly hampered the reception of his ideas. Therefore, in order to outline the theoretical and methodological pillars of Roemer's work, and to dispel some common misconceptions, it is worth briefly outlining the main tenets of AM as a style of theorizing, if not a school of thought.[9]

A core tenet of AM, and its main departure from classical Marxism, is the denial of a specific Marxist methodology, dialectical or otherwise. Analytical Marxists believe that "although the word 'dialectical' has not always been used without clear meaning, it has never been used with clear meaning to denote a method rival to the analytical one."[10]

More precisely, Erik Olin Wright proposes the following definition.[11]

> **DEFINITION 1**. Analytical Marxism (AM) is defined by an analysis of Marxist concerns that is focused through
>
> > **C1:** "A commitment to conventional scientific norms in the elaboration of theory and the conduct of research."

8 E. K. Hunt, "Analytical Marxism," in *Radical Economics*, ed. Bruce Roberts and Susan Feiner (Boston: Kluwer, 1992), 105.

9 For a comprehensive analysis and critical appraisal of AM, see Roberto Veneziani, "Analytical Marxism," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 26, no. 4 (September 2012).

10 G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence, Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiii.

11 Erik Olin Wright, "What is Analytical Marxism?" *Socialist Review* 19, no. 4 (1989), 38–39.

C2: "An emphasis on the importance of systematic conceptualisation ... This involves careful attention to both definitions of concepts and the logical coherence of interconnected concepts."

C3: "A concern with a relatively fine-grained specification of the steps in the theoretical arguments linking concepts."

C4: "The importance accorded to the intentional action of individuals."

Commitments C1 through C4 are by no means trivial, and Wright's definition excludes a number of approaches, such as critical theory, postmodern and post-structuralist Marxism, and the "capital logic" school. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the boundaries of AM are much wider and fuzzier than is commonly assumed. Contrary to a widespread preconception, it is sufficiently general to allow for a broad range of methodological and substantive positions, including those, for example, of the school of British Marxist historians, and various analytically oriented Marxist philosophers and social scientists could easily subscribe to C1 through C4, even if they do not explicitly associate themselves with AM.[12]

Based on C1 through C4, AM has reconstructed a set of core propositions that aim to provide the foundations of a distinctive Marxist approach to social theory. According to AM, Marxism is unique not in some putative method but "in organizing its agenda around a set of fundamental questions or problems which other theoretical traditions either ignore or marginalize, and identifying a distinctive set of interconnected causal processes relevant to

12 Indeed, as Wright acknowledges, the methodological commitments expressed in C1 through C4 are not the monopoly of AM as a self-conscious school. "What is Analytical Marxism," 39.

those questions."[13] Thus, the rational kernel of Marxism reconstructed by AM comprises at least four components: the Marxist theory of history, or historical materialism; a Marxist theory of classes; a set of socialist normative commitments; and a Marxist theory of the state.[14]

The rigorous reconstruction of these four pillars of Marxism is arguably a significant, positive contribution of AM, which may play an important role in a revival of socialist theory. Roemer's own work is directly relevant to at least three of the four components, as we shall see.

3. MARXIAN ECONOMICS AND THE THEORY OF EXPLOITATION AND CLASS

One of Roemer's key intellectual achievements has been to show that much of Marxian economics can be derived using modern concepts of equilibrium and rational, goal-oriented behavior: the Marxist phenomena of crisis, exploitation, class, and technical change, among others, can be conceptualized as equilibrium phenomena of economies with optimizing individuals. Roemer's models have made analytical Marxism a force to be reckoned with in the social sciences. Whatever one thinks of the interpretation offered there, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory* remains a classic, with a deep, rigorous treatment of many, if not most, of the topics in Marxian economics.

To be sure, the analysis of Marxian topics by means of standard tools came at a cost — at least from the viewpoint of classical Marxism. While certain relations could be established between labor magnitudes and variables expressed in monetary terms, for

13 Erik Olin Wright, "Understanding Class," *New Left Review* 60, (November/December 2009), 102.

14 Andrew Levine, *A Future for Marxism?* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

example, the labor theory of value was proved to be both incorrect and irrelevant to understanding capitalist economies. The law of the tendential fall in the profit rate was also shown to be false: under rather general assumptions, cost-reducing technical changes inevitably *increased* the profit rate.

It is fair to say, however, that Roemer's most original and lasting contribution to Marxian economics is his reformulation of the Marxist theory of exploitation and class, which represents one of the most rigorous and general approaches to both those topics, as well as a pivotal reference point for debates in political philosophy and the social sciences.[15]

3.1 Exploitation as the Unequal Exchange of Labor

In the standard approach, exploitation is defined as the extraction of surplus value from workers at the point of production by capitalists, thanks to the latter's monopoly over the ownership of the means of production. Several important properties follow from this definition.

First, the labor theory of value is essential to defining surplus value and thus exploitation. Extraction of surplus labor is called "exploitation," and it characterizes all types of class society. But while exploitation is obvious in, for example, slave societies (slaves are compelled to produce more than they consume) and feudal societies (serfs are compelled to work on the lord's land for part of the week), it is not obvious, in capitalist societies, where market transactions are voluntary. The purpose of the labor theory of value is to show how voluntary participation in markets nonetheless generates exploitation. The labor theory of value provides an explanation of equilibrium prices, and it uncovers the form surplus labor takes in capitalist societies — namely, surplus value.

15 Roemer, *A General Theory*; John E. Roemer, *Free to Lose* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Second, exploitation is identified at the systemic level, as it reflects class relations. At its most basic, capitalist society is a class society of workers and capitalists; these classes exist in antagonistic relation to each other, and that antagonism is based on the extraction of surplus labor from one class (the working class) by the other (the capitalist class). Individual workers may or may not be exploited: the theoretical focus is on the exploitation suffered by the working class as a whole.

Third, capitalist exploitation requires, definitionally, a certain organization of production and, even more important, a labor market. Because exploitation is the appropriation of surplus value, exploitation does not arise in trade, when goods of similar values are, as a norm, exchanged. In contrast, workers who are "free" to sell their labor power are compelled to do so under unfavorable conditions, and labor power is the only good that is exchanged for less than its value, thus generating surplus value that can be appropriated by capitalists, thanks to their control over the production process.

Fourth, exploitation is virtually definitional of capitalism: it arises from capitalist relations of production, and it automatically disappears when they are abolished.

Finally, although there are significant ambiguities in the classical interpretation, exploitation theory is usually taken to explain the inherent tendency of capitalism to accumulate: the capitalists' exploitation of workers provides them with the resources to invest, innovate, and accumulate. From this perspective, exploitation theory has a primarily explanatory role, and its normative content is largely undertheorized — the fact that exploitation is a wrong associated with capitalism is considered either irrelevant or self-evident. To the extent that exploitation is considered a wrong, its morally objectionable features derive from the coercion exercised by capitalists at the point of production: exploitation is akin to a

theft, which is made possible only by the force that capitalists can exercise in the firm.

A General Theory of Exploitation and Class calls into question each and every one of the pillars of the standard approach.

Roemer approaches exploitation theory using the standard tools of microeconomic analysis and general equilibrium theory. He defines "Marxian exploitation" as an unequal exchange of labor (UE): an agent is exploited (respectively, an exploiter) if and only if she works more (respectively, less) time than is embodied in her consumption bundle.[16] This, argues Roemer, is the technical definition of exploitation in Marxian theory. Based on this definition, he examines class and exploitation formation in abstract model economies and derives a number of propositions that have profound methodological and substantive implications.

First, Roemer proves that, in equilibrium, each agent's class and exploitation status is determined by asset ownership: wealthy agents are net hirers of labor (capitalists) and exploiters; poor agents are net sellers of labor (proletarians) and exploited.[17] Asset inequalities are *all* that matter to give rise to class cleavages and exploitative relations.

Second, although UE focuses on labor flows, and labor is the exploitation numeraire, the labor theory of value is irrelevant for the definition of exploitation: labor values play no role in the determination of equilibrium prices (which are the standard prices of production of classical economics), and the notion of surplus

16 To be precise, this is the definition of UE appropriate in an economy in which only one type of labor is used in production, and in which all agents consume the same subsistence bundle and have the same endowment of labor. The UE approach can, however, be extended to economies with heterogeneous labor, preferences, and skills. For a discussion, see Roberto Veneziani and Naoki Yoshihara, "The Theory of Exploitation as the Unequal Exchange of Labour," *Economics & Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (November 2018).

17 This is Roemer's "Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle."

value is unnecessary to identify exploitation. Exploitative relations emerge even in subsistence economies that produce — definitionally — no surplus value. Indeed, the fact that exploitation occurs in stationary, subsistence economies in simple reproduction also shows that there is no logical relation between exploitation and accumulation.

Third, Roemer proves that exploitation and classes emerge in societies in which all agents produce on their own and exchange capital on a credit market. Thus, the labor market is not "intrinsically necessary for bringing about the Marxian phenomena of exploitation and class … competitive markets and [differential ownership of productive assets] are the institutional culprits in producing exploitation and class."[18] Therefore, exploitation should not be defined as the expropriation of labor at the point of production. The definition that focuses simply on UE — independent of the existence of a production relation between agents that allows someone to extract surplus labor from others — is preferable.[19]

The UE definition itself is problematic, though, according to Roemer. If rich agents turn out to be workaholics, while poor agents have a strong preference for leisure, then the former may end up working more and the latter less time than is embodied in their consumption bundles, and thus it is possible for some very wealthy producers to be exploited and for some very poor producers to be exploiters.[20] Therefore, UE exploitation, "in the general case, is misconceived. It does not provide a proper model or account

18 Roemer, *A General Theory*, 93. Indeed, in later work, Roemer has clarified that a third condition is also necessary (and, together with competitive markets and asset inequalities, jointly sufficient) to bring about exploitative relations, namely a scarcity of capital relative to the labor seeking employment (see, for example, Roemer, *Free to Lose*).

19 John E. Roemer, "Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1985), 54.

20 Roemer, *A General Theory*, 175.

of Marxian moral sentiments."[21] Roemer develops an alternative approach that focuses on property relations, which aims to be sufficiently general to allow exploitation to be defined even under conditions of considerable institutional variation and to capture its essential normative content, which is interpreted as requiring equality in the distribution of productive assets.

3.2 Exploitation and Property Relations

In a given economy, at a given allocation, consider any partition of the set of agents into two groups, A and B: masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, and so on. At the most abstract level, the property relations (PR) definition encompasses all types of exploitation arising in different modes of production. It states that group B is exploited if and only if there is a hypothetically feasible alternative (to be appropriately specified) in which (PR-i) group B would be better off than in its present situation; and (PR-ii) group A would be worse off.

Three features of the PR definition should be highlighted. First, labor flows are no longer at the center of the analysis. While the definition does not specify the relevant metric that captures the welfare of the two groups, labor is not necessarily — definitionally — the relevant exploitation numeraire. Second, the UE definition looks at the status of each individual separately and incorporates no relational dimension. Based on the UE definition, we can compute labor accounts for all agents and tell whether an individual is exploited or an exploiter. But the fact that agent A works more labor time than is embodied in her consumption bundle, and is UE exploited, whereas agent B works less labor time than is embodied in his consumption bundle, and is a UE exploiter, does not imply that A is exploited by B — let alone that

21 Roemer, "Should Marxists," 54.

A's being exploited is *caused* by B's exploiting her. In contrast, the combination of conditions (PR-i) and (PR-ii) aims to capture the idea that exploiters benefit from exploitative relations *at the expense of* the exploited.

Third, and perhaps more important, the PR definition is the *general* definition focusing on property relations, and different specifications of the hypothetical alternative generate different concepts of exploitation. Thus, a group B is *feudally* exploited if it can improve its lot by withdrawing with its own endowments, leaving group A worse off: masters could extract surplus labor from serfs because the latter did not own their own labor (at least not fully) and could not leave the land.

In capitalist societies, exploitation arises because of differential ownership of (transferable) productive assets: according to PR, group B is *capitalistically* exploited if it would be better off by withdrawing with its per-capita share of society's alienable non-human property. Workers are capitalistically exploited because assets are unequally distributed: if they got hold of their share of capital and organized production independently, they would be better off, while capitalists would lose out.

Based on the PR definition, Roemer can also propose a novel, iconoclastic concept of exploitation that applies to societies that have transitioned out of capitalist relations of production: a group of agents is *socialistically* exploited if it would improve its lot by withdrawing with its per-capita share of all endowments, alienable and inalienable (most notably, skills and human capital).[22]

Given its focus on property relations, the PR definition also allows Roemer to derive a link between the theory of exploitation

22 Of course, redistributing inalienable assets raises complex incentive and feasibility issues. Yet this does not put the theoretical relevance of the PR definition into question.

and historical materialism.[23] For Roemer, the taxonomy of exploitation provides a model of the transitions predicted by historical materialism, according to which "history progresses by the successive elimination of dynamically socially unnecessary forms of exploitation."[24] Because property relations are eliminated when they fetter the development of productive forces, historical materialism thus provides the reason why forms of exploitation are successively eliminated.

Further, exploitation theory suggests a mechanism for the transition between different modes of production. Each mode of production is associated with a characteristic form of exploitation, and the transition between modes of production is, in some sense, explained relative to the progressive elimination of forms of injustice.[25] In fact, exploitation can be understood as motivating class struggle, which is in turn the motor of history. For instance, when feudal exploitation becomes a fetter to the development of the forces of production, class struggle leads to its elimination and to the passage to the capitalist mode of production.[26]

The most important and lasting legacy of the PR approach, however, is to highlight the central relevance of normative issues in Marxist and, more generally, socialist thought. According to Roemer, his account generalizes the Marxian theory of exploitation

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23 Roemer, *A General Theory*, part III.

24 John E. Roemer, "An Historical Materialist Alternative to Welfarism," in *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, ed. Jon Elster and Aanund Hylland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 146.

25 Marcus Roberts, *Analytical Marxism: A Critique* (London: Verso, 1997), 163.

26 Roemer provides no proper link, however, between exploitation theory and class struggle, only a suggestion for further research. No sociology of moral beliefs or injustice is developed to explain how exploited classes become aware of their status and organize to eliminate exploitation. Thus, without further elaboration, the general theory of exploitation is at best an interpretation of the Marxist theory of history, and it is simply superimposed on the latter.

while capturing its essential normative content in a more robust and transparent fashion. In fact, it can be proved that, in simple economies, capitalist exploitation is equivalent to UE exploitation, but unlike the latter, it accurately reflects asset inequalities in more general settings, too. Roemer also constructs a number of examples to show that, whenever they render different answers concerning the existence of exploitation and the identity of exploited agents, it is the PR definition that captures Marxist normative intuitions.[27] Further, according to Roemer, the injustice associated with UE as such is unclear, whereas the PR definition clearly shows the ethical imperative of Marxian exploitation theory, namely the elimination of asset inequalities.

Actually, the PR approach can provide the foundations of a Marxist theory of distributive justice in capitalist economies that focuses on unequal distributions of endowments. Roemer contends that, in capitalist economies, asset inequalities derive either from an original accumulation characterized by "robbery and plunder" or from morally arbitrary factors, such as luck or socially determined saving preferences and skills.[28]

In either case, exploitation can be condemned on grounds of equality of opportunity, and PR identifies a Marxist ethical imperative that requires the elimination of differential ownership of productive assets in order to equalize opportunities. Thus, Marxian exploitation theory "directs our moral inquiry into why [differential ownership of productive assets] should constitute injustice," and such concern for asset inequalities is indeed its fundamental legacy.[29] The theory of exploitation and class developed by Roemer

27 See, for example, Roemer, "Should Marxists."

28 See Roemer, *Free to Lose*, 57–69.

29 John E. Roemer, "Marxism and Contemporary Social Science," *Review of Social Economy* 47, no.4 (1989): 391.

and sketched above is characterized by two main substantive shifts away from standard Marxist approaches, which significantly shape his subsequent intellectual trajectory and, in particular, his contributions to the theory of socialism.

First, Roemer interprets the theory of exploitation as the foundation of the Marxian condemnation of capitalism. It is a normative theory whose purpose is to understand what's wrong with capitalism and not an explanatory theory of the functioning of capitalist economies. Centrally, exploitation does not explain accumulation, since the former can obtain in subsistence economies. Nor does it explain crises, as exploitative relations emerge also in stationary equilibria where the economy is, loosely speaking, at rest. Thus, the theory of exploitation represents Roemer's entry point into the theory of distributive justice and normative economics: Why — or, rather, when — does Marx's concept of exploitation diagnose an instance of injustice?

Second, in a normative perspective, Roemer argues that labor flows are, at best, of secondary relevance. It doesn't really matter whether workers work more or less than is embodied in their consumption bundle (or income). The normatively primary factor is the distribution of assets, which enables unequal labor flows or, setting aside labor as the main exploitation numeraire, unequal income or well-being. If asset inequalities are of primary normative relevance, then it is quite natural to analyze distributive justice focusing in particular on property relations — the Marxist version of John Rawls's focus on the basic structure. The normatively pressing question, from this perspective, is: "What is unjust about capitalist relations of production, and capitalism as a social formation?" By implication, this also implies considering which aspects of capitalist economies, if any, could be retained in socialism.

The answer to these questions can be found in Roemer's theory of equality of opportunity.

4. SOCIALISM AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

As noted in the previous section, according to Roemer, exploitation is wrong insofar as it is the product of an unfair distribution of assets. As simple as this conclusion may seem, it raises a number of important, and difficult, questions. First, what makes the differential ownership of productive assets unfair? The answer, at least in the case of current capitalist economies, may seem obvious when one considers transferable assets: the history of expropriation, violence, war, and rights violations associated with primitive accumulation has irremediably tainted current holdings.

As the PR definition and the taxonomy of exploitation based on it show, however, an egalitarian redistribution of transferable assets (and the removal of feudal privileges) does not guarantee the elimination of exploitation — more generally, it does not guarantee the elimination of *all* forms of injustice. The moral imperative arising from the PR approach may go *further* than the elimination of the exploitation arising from capitalist relations of production. Obliterating inequalities in the ownership of capital may be insufficient. *If* inequalities in the endowments of skills, talents, and human capital are the product of morally arbitrary factors, then they are unjust and should also be removed.

Moreover, why should one focus on productive assets only? Why not take a broader perspective, and consider everything that matters for individual well-being?

Traditionally, equality of opportunity was understood as the absence of a legal bar to access to education and jobs, and the fact that all hiring was meritocratic. This conventional view was challenged in liberal political philosophy to additionally require compensating persons for a variety of circumstances whose distribution is morally arbitrary. In the modern liberal egalitarian tradition sparked by Rawls's landmark *A Theory of Justice*, justice

requires compensating individuals for aspects of their situation for which they are not responsible.[30] This general principle is made precise in Ronald Dworkin's theory of equality of resources, according to which justice requires that agents should be held responsible for their autonomous choices and preferences (as long as they identify with the latter) but not for their extended resources (both transferable and nontransferable, such as talents and handicaps).[31]

Specifically, Dworkin distinguishes between *option luck* and *brute luck*.

> Option luck is a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out — whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and might have declined. Brute luck is a matter of how risks fall out that are not in that sense deliberate gambles.[32]

He then argues that equality of opportunity entails compensation for the outcomes of brute luck but not for the consequences of deliberately chosen gambles. More precisely, he proposes that taxation systems should mimic the functioning of an ideal insurance market where agents are placed under a thin veil of ignorance (they are assumed to know their preferences) and have the same budget to buy goods and to insure against an adverse realization of the lottery of talents and handicaps.

The line separating those aspects for which a person should be held accountable from those for which he should not is a

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

31 Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1981); Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1981).

32 Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 2," 293.

controversial aspect of Dworkin's theory. Richard Arneson proposes equality of opportunity for welfare and criticizes Dworkin's distinction, arguing that involuntarily acquired tastes may call for compensation.[33] He asserts that the set of circumstances should include all characteristics that are beyond an agent's control, while the set of factors for which individuals should be held responsible are the variables within their control. Then,

> Equal opportunity for welfare obtains among persons when all of them face equivalent decision trees — the expected value of each person's best (=most prudent) choice of options, second-best, … nth-best is the same. The opportunities persons encounter are ranked by the prospects for welfare they afford.[34]

Cohen also rejects Dworkin's distinction between factors individuals should be held responsible for and circumstances beyond their control ("Dworkin's cut"). He suggests advantage as the appropriate outcome — which includes welfare but is closer to Amartya Sen's concept of functionings — but proposes a partition similar to Arneson's.[35] However, the precise definition of advantage and the actual mechanism to implement equality of opportunity are not specified.

Building on this liberal tradition, Roemer formalizes a precise definition of equality of opportunity in an economic framework as an explicit method of selecting policies among a set of alternatives. The idea is as simple as it is elegant: the well-being of every individual (either in general or in a specific domain, such as health

33 Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophical Studies* 56 (May 1989), 85–6.

34 Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity," 85–6.

35 G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989); Amartya K. Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1985).

or education) depends on three things: circumstances, effort, and policies. One's circumstances are those aspects of one's condition that are beyond one's control — such as one's genetic endowment or family background. Effort may be taken to be all those actions and factors over which an individual has at least partial control — such as how hard to study or whether to lead a healthy life. An equal opportunity policy with respect to an objective like general well-being, education, and health should allocate resources so that the degree to which an individual achieves the objective is a function only of the degree of effort she expends and is therefore independent of her circumstances.

Roemer presents his proposal as a "pragmatic theory for the egalitarian planner" in that he does not aim to identify the right "cut" to distinguish circumstances from effort. His is a political — not a metaphysical — theory that provides an algorithm to identify the right equal opportunity policy once the relevant polity collectively decides where to place the cut and what ought to be considered a "circumstance."

This algorithm works whatever the polity decides to consider as circumstances versus effort, and the theory can accommodate, in principle, extremely different distributive views — which correspond, argues Roemer, to different views over where to place the cut. One can take a conservative or even libertarian approach and view all factors as effort, denying the existence of circumstances. In this case, agents' outcomes are entirely the product of their effort, and the equal opportunity policy coincides with laissez-faire. Alternatively, one can take the polar opposite view, that agents' choices are entirely constrained by their upbringing, genetic makeup, and environment. In this case, agents are not responsible for their achievements, and equality of opportunity requires equalizing agents' actual *outcomes*. "What distinguishes socialists or leftists from conservatives is,

in large part, the matter of deciding what exactly is required to equalize opportunities."[36]

Although the equal opportunity algorithm is neutral with respect to the definition of the set of circumstances and effort, Roemer's own stance is quite radical, despite the adoption of a cautious — moderate, even — rhetorical strategy. In a number of empirical contributions, he shows that *even if* one took a rather conservative view concerning the "cut," an equal opportunity policy would require significant redistribution in most advanced capitalist economies. Yet if one believes, as Roemer does, that the set of circumstances is actually quite large — as it comprises all genetic and environmental factors that influence one's skills, beliefs, and even preferences, in addition to any endowments that are inherited or otherwise obtained by brute luck — then an equal opportunity policy would require major structural transformations of the economy.

In other words, the theory of equality of opportunity allows Roemer to precisely identify what's wrong with capitalism: its massive inequalities in income, wealth, and well-being are unjustified at the bar of justice. These inequalities are not an accident. They are structural, as they are inherent in the logic of the accumulation of capital and tend to get larger — and normatively even less justified — as wealth and even immaterial assets, human and social capital, tend to be transferred across generations. But it also provides the foundations of his theory of socialism as a system that, among other things, promotes a radical equality of opportunities.

This is a major contribution, and one that socialists should examine very carefully. For Roemer does not simply show that, as a theory of prices and as the foundation of exploitation theory, the

36 John E. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12.

labor theory of value is flawed. His analysis of the foundations of exploitation theory, and of the subsequent elaboration of a Marxist-inspired equal opportunity approach, show that it is actually redundant. A damning criticism of capitalism, and a rationale for moving beyond it to a new system, can be provided without any reference to it. The socialist project does not hang on the labor theory of value, and therefore, it does not lose its cogency if the latter is ditched.

5. MARKET SOCIALISM

Roemer's reflection on equality of opportunity developed while the regimes in the Eastern bloc underwent major changes and eventually collapsed. In a sense, it was perfectly timed: by the time the Soviet Union disappeared, Roemer's thinking on socialism had already evolved away from central planning. Thus, the Berlin Wall did not fall upon him, and, contrary to what happened to so many ex-Marxists who turned into neoliberal enthusiasts, "Third Way" minstrels, or even fervent neoconservatives, Roemer remained firmly in the socialist side of the pitch.

If anything, historical events lent new urgency to his research, and Roemer took on the task of providing a theory of feasible socialism. The theory of exploitation showed him that exploitative relations could occur even in economies with independent producers, and therefore the analytical focus should be on economic systems, not agent-specific interactions at the point of production. Indeed, the PR definition of exploitation explicitly incorporates, at the highest level of abstraction, the idea that exploitative relations — and injustices more generally — should be defined relative to (at least hypothetically) feasible systemic alternatives.[37] It also

37 The counterfactual in the PR definition "captures the idea that exploitation involves the possibility of a better alternative" (Roemer, *A General Theory*, 196).

showed him that property relations and asset inequalities, and not markets per se, are the fundamental culprits in generating exploitative relations.

So, the theoretically and politically urgent question is how to design a socialist economic system: its property relations and fundamental institutions. The theory of equality of opportunity provides two key pieces to the puzzle. First, it shows that market interactions are unjust — or even exploitative — under certain conditions, but this is not inherent in the functioning of markets. Hence, markets in socialism can be morally justified, and central planning is *not* a fundamental pillar of a socialist society. Second, it clarifies the moral imperative for socialists, and the kind of society they want. "I believe socialists want equality of opportunity for: (1) self-realization and welfare, (2) political influence, and (3) social status."[38]

Thus, just like exploitation theory is seen as advocating a kind of resource egalitarianism, Roemer *defines* socialism as a kind of egalitarianism. In other words, argues Roemer, socialism should be defined by what it should deliver and not by the specifics of its economic organization or its broader institutional framework. The nationalization of firms, especially in certain sectors, may be instrumental to bringing about socialism, and a strong public sector is likely an essential ingredient of a socialist project. But to *define* socialism as a system in which there is simply public ownership of the means of production is, in Roemer's view, to fetishize the means and lose sight of the ends. "[S]ocialism has its roots in egalitarianism, not in public ownership, which was endorsed by socialists as instrumental for egalitarianism."[39]

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38 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 11.

39 John E. Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism After Communism?" in *Market Socialism: The Current Debate*, ed. Pranab K. Bardhan and John E. Roemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 90. To be sure, the institutional setup of a socialist

But if central planning and public ownership of the means of production are deemed theoretically unnecessary — and, based on historical experience, fundamentally flawed — then what are we left with? Roemer outlines an institutional blueprint for socialism as a system in which there are institutional guarantees that aggregate profits are distributed more or less equally in the population.[40] Thus, in Roemer's proposal, a market socialist economy is, at first sight, very similar to a capitalist economy in that prices are not centrally set, there are markets for final goods *and* for productive inputs (including labor), firms maximize profits and households maximize utility, and there even exists a stock market.[41] However — and this is the key ingredient — property rights in firms are not the same as in a capitalist economy.

To be specific, the first step in Roemer's proposal is the distribution of vouchers to all adults, giving each a per-capita claim on the profits of each firm in the country.[42] Citizens would then be free to trade their vouchers on a stock market, buying and selling

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society *will* differ from that of capitalism and Roemer's own market socialist blueprint provides an alternative institutional setup. While a change in the institutional framework is necessary to achieve socialist goals, Roemer argues that there may be several ways of establishing socialist equality of opportunity and no single institutional mix *defines* socialism.

40 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 89. To clarify, the institutional blueprint does not define socialism. Rather, it is instrumental to reaching the objectives that define socialism according to Roemer.

41 The heavy reliance on markets may seem rather odd in a blueprint for a socialist economy. It is therefore worth emphasizing that Roemer's view of markets is rather different from the standard neoliberal conception. "In contrast to the 'thin' neoclassical view, which sees markets as a minimal structure organizing competition among talented individuals, the modern 'thick' view sees markets as part of a complex network of man-made institutions, through which all individual contributions become pasteurized and refined" (Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 5–6). Many of these institutions can be transferred into a socialist economy and help harness the power of the market's competitive mechanism in order to solve efficiently the coordination problem that any economic system faces.

42 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 96.

shares of specific firms. Wouldn't this initially egalitarian allocation quickly reproduce the familiar ills of capitalism? Not necessarily, if there are limits to the operation of the stock market. Thus, in Roemer's proposal, citizens would be free to trade their stock, but they could not liquidate their portfolios, and shares could not be purchased with money.[43]

Combined with a dynamic mechanism ensuring that all new adults get an equal share of vouchers, and forbidding the intergenerational transmission of coupon holdings, this mechanism

> would prevent the concentration of ownership of firms in the hands of a small class: thus it would provide, if not a guarantee, then something close to it, that the profits of firms would be distributed roughly equally in the population.[44]

The intellectual foundations of this proposal can be traced back to Roemer's theory of exploitation: the root cause of injustice in capitalist economies lies in its property relations, which lead to massive inequalities in asset ownership and the flows of income deriving from it. The appropriate institutional reform should therefore be precisely at the level of property relations. Socialists have long believed that:

> only through public ownership could a just distribution of income be attained. The unequal distribution of profits in the population was equivalent, for Marx, to exploitation … thus the abolition of exploitation required the abolition of the property form giving rise to that unequal distribution, private ownership of firms. The error was in assuming that the abolition of private property required public ownership.[45]

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43 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 96.

44 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 97.

45 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 90.

Why not public ownership? Because historical experience has shown, argues Roemer, that it does not provide agents with the right incentives to produce efficiently and, especially, to innovate. A market socialist economy with a coupon stock market may instead harness the strengths of the competitive mechanism, while significantly mitigating inequalities in income and welfare. Productive efficiency and the ability to innovate are arguably desirable per se, as they allow for increases in well-being and the reduction of the pressure on natural resources, but they are also fundamental to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the market socialist system from a political perspective, as the Soviet experience shows. Economic prosperity is a key ingredient for consensus. Markets are an indispensable institutional device to coordinate economic activity in any advanced society, according to Roemer.[46]

By significantly reducing disparities in purchasing power, a market socialist economy would also mitigate inequalities in political influence. This is arguably desirable per se — and, according to Roemer's description above, a key desideratum for socialists — but it is also instrumentally important in tackling public bads (e.g., pollution) and in choosing the appropriate amount of public goods.

Consider public bads (but a symmetric reasoning holds for public goods). They are often the by-product of productive processes whose costs are borne by all citizens, while profits accrue to shareholders. Capitalist economies are typically characterized by an excessive production of public bads for two reasons: First, given the high concentration of ownership, a significant amount of profit accrues to a small group of people who bear at most a

46 "I think that any complex society must use markets in order to produce and distribute the goods that people need for their self-realization and welfare" (Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 27).

small fraction of the costs, which are spread over a large number of individuals, if not the polity as a whole.[47] Second, the significant concentration of wealth and income implies that capitalists have the resources to influence the political process and block any legislation to reduce public bads. In other words, the preferences of large shareholders and wealthy individuals are normally biased toward the excessive production of public bads (and the suboptimal production of public goods), *and* they have the means to make their preferences prevail in the political process.

The political economy effect of a change in property relations on the production and allocation of public goods and public bads is not a minor point. It is well-known, at least since Oskar Lange's contributions, that under certain conditions a market socialist economy performs as well as a capitalist economy in terms of (static) allocative efficiency. One such condition is the absence of externalities and public goods. Roemer proves a startling result: once the interaction of competitive markets and democratic institutions is taken into account, in an economy with public goods or bads, social welfare is *higher* at a market socialist equilibrium than at a capitalism equilibrium.[48] Given the same underlying technology, productive endowments, and preferences, market socialist property relations improve upon capitalist property relations by giving more voice to poorer agents, whose preferences favor a lower level of production of the public bads. All agents benefit from lower levels of, say, pollution, even though, on balance, rich agents would prefer higher levels in order to receive higher profits. Because the poor are the majority of the population, a mechanism

47 Roemer actually shows "that the larger a person's ownership share of the means of production, the larger is that person's optimal level of profit-increasing public bads" (Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 57).

48 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism"; Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*.

that gives them more voice, such as Roemer's market socialism, tends to increase social welfare.[49]

6. SOCIALISM AND INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR

Is the market socialism designed by Roemer the final answer to all doubts and concerns that socialists have expressed in the last two centuries? By Roemer's own standards, most likely not.

Inequalities in social status — the third concern of socialists in Roemer's definition of socialism — would at best be mitigated, and class cleavages are likely to persist in market socialism. Perhaps more important, while a more or less egalitarian distribution of profit will be attained, potentially significant income disparities would remain, because competitive mechanisms in the labor market would lead to earning inequalities due to differences in skills. Assuming, as seems plausible, a significant part of skills to be the product of factors independent of one's control (luck in the genetic lottery, or in the family and broader social environment in which one is raised), these inequalities are unjust at the bar of equality of opportunity, and the market would not implement a socialist allocation.[50]

More generally, "The market socialism that I have outlined is a pale shadow of what Marx thought possible, or of the Bolsheviks'

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49 The voucher mechanism and the market for coupons is indeed the key feature of Roemer's original market socialist design, which distinguishes it both from a capitalist economy and from centrally planned economies or alternative socialist projects — such as labor-managed firms or social democracy. However, it is worth stressing that Roemer does not exclude other forms of intervention of the state in the economy, including public ownership of the main banks, restrictions on international capital flows, welfare state programs, (aggregate and sectoral) investment planning, and the full range of regulatory functions that are performed even in capitalist economies (see Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, chapters 9 and 12).

50 In the longer run, perhaps a socialist education policy aimed at distributing skills more equally might help, and in a market socialist economy, the broad constituency in favor of public education is likely to have the political clout to implement it. Nonetheless, it is unclear that *all* skills can be thus redistributed.

utopian dream. It is a society in which many of the conflicts of capitalist society would remain."[51] Is this a failure of Roemer's proposal? The massive theoretical effort in designing an alternative set of institutions and property relations has led to a system that, according to its own architect, falls far short of the socialist visions of the past. Has the mountain labored only to bring forth a mouse?

There are three reasons why it would be hasty to jump to this conclusion, according to Roemer. First of all, Roemer does not conceive of his blueprint for market socialism as the end state to reach. A socialist society will entail a much more significant — radical even — equalization of opportunities. His institutional design is meant to be a major, significant step away from a capitalist society and *toward* the horizon, not to be the horizon *itself*. This is for both political reasons, since Roemer believes it is useless to paint a beautiful final picture without providing a credible road to it, and strategic ones:

> My intent is to propose an economic mechanism that differs quite modestly from the successful capitalist market economies: a lesson from the Bolshevik experience is that one is ill-advised to redesign too many moving parts in a complex machine at the same time.[52]

Of course, one may argue that, even as an intermediate step, Roemer's market socialism is not particularly ambitious. According to Roemer — and this is the second point — this is not the case if one takes political constraints into account, as he does. In our time, changing the relations of production, if only in a rather limited

51 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 105. It is worth keeping in mind that market socialism, as defined by Roemer in all of its variants, does not eliminate Marxian exploitation. For, as discussed in section 3 above, Roemer believes that the classical concept of exploitation is fundamentally misguided and does not provide a proper account of Marxian moral sentiments.

52 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 106.

fashion, still appears as a major feat — a world-historic achievement, one may argue. Trying to implement a more significant redistribution today is politically infeasible, argues Roemer, "and I would like to define socialism as a system more egalitarian than capitalism, *with some chance of existing today*."[53]

Third, and most important for the subsequent development of Roemer's work, his original theorization of socialism focuses only on property relations and institutions, while leaving individuals somehow in the background. Concerning individual behavior, Roemer's assumptions are indistinguishable from those of mainstream social science: agents are supposed to be largely self-interested and strategically rational. There are two reasons behind this approach. Rhetorically, Roemer does not want his proposal to hang on the assumption that people will change in a way that will facilitate the advent of socialism. "I therefore remain agnostic on the question of a wholesale change in human nature. I prefer to put my faith in the design of institutions that will bring about good results with ordinary people."[54] His aim is to show that, compared with other proposals, a market socialist system would solve many of the ills of capitalism more quickly, without requiring the widespread adoption of principles of community or solidarity.[55]

But there is also a theoretical rationale behind this choice. Roemer's original analyses of market socialism

> take people as they actually are today, not as they might be after an egalitarian economic policy or cultural revolution has

53 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism," 90, italics added. "The salient issue is: Does there exist a next step from capitalism approaching the long-term socialist goal that is better than some variety of market socialism? It will come as no surprise that I believe there is not, although I have no proof" (Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 118).

54 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 114.

55 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 111.

> "remade" them. We must assume, as social scientists, that people are, in the short term, at least, what they are: what can be changed — and slowly, at that — are the institutions through which they interact.[56]

Granted that it is important, at least in the short term, to avoid unrealistic assumptions based on massive shifts in individual attitudes, values, and behavior, and to design socialist institutions "taking people as they are," the real question is, what are they? In his early work on market socialism, Roemer makes the standard assumptions of neoclassical economics: individuals maximize their utility, given their constraints and taking prices and other people's actions as given.[57] Is this the appropriate model of individual behavior?

In the last two decades, Roemer has started to investigate alternative ways of conceptualizing agents' decision-making procedures. The starting point of his analysis is the observation of many instances of cooperative behavior, both in the lab and in the economy, contrary to the predictions of the standard maximizing models. One explanation of this behavior assumes that people are standard utility maximizers but are endowed with "altruistic preferences." Yet, methodologically, this kind of explanation has an almost circular flavor. Substantively, in large economies, one immediately faces a free-rider problem, as the welfare of others is a public good if an agent is an altruist. According to Roemer, this suggests that cooperation, if it comes about, must involve some other optimization protocol, which requires some kind of cooperative thinking. Specifically, Roemer has recently proposed that cooperation may involve people engaging in "Kantian optimization"

56 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 46.

57 Roemer, "Can There Be Socialism"; Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*.

and choosing the action that maximizes their payoff, assuming that all other agents take the same action.[58]

This represents a fundamental departure from Nash behavior — and the related notion of Nash equilibrium — and may provide an alternative framework for thinking about individual behavior in a number of important economic settings. For the purposes of our discussion, however, the reflection on individual behavior has added a new, key ingredient to Roemer's theory of socialism. For now, Roemer argues that "any socio-economic system has … three pillars: an ethos of economic behavior, an ethic of distributive justice, and a set of property relations that will implement the ethic if the behavioral ethos is followed."[59] The ethic of distributive justice and the property relations of socialism are the same as in his earlier work on market socialism, but a third pillar is added: "The behavioral ethos of socialism is cooperation. Citizens of a socialist society should recognize that they are engaged in a cooperative enterprise to transform nature in order to improve the lives of all."[60]

The idea that different economic systems are defined also by different forms of behavior reflecting differences in the underlying ethos is a key conceptual innovation in Roemer's recent work. Capitalism is characterized by Nash behavior: agents optimize in isolation, taking other people's actions as given. This reflects what may be called a "monadic ethos." In contrast, socialism is characterized, in Roemer's definition, by Kantian behavior: individuals adopt optimization protocols in which they assume all agents to

58 John E. Roemer, "Kantian Equilibrium," *Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 112, no. 1 (March 2010); John E. Roemer, *How We Cooperate: A Theory of Kantian Optimization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

59 John E. Roemer, "What Is Socialism Today? Conceptions of a Cooperative Economy," Cowles Foundation Discussion Paper No. 2220 (2020), 2.

60 Roemer, "What Is Socialism," 2.

take or consider similar actions. This reflects what may be called a "universalising ethos."

What happens when individuals optimize à la Kant, instead of adopting the usual Nash protocol? Roemer examines the distributive and efficiency properties of various models of socialism, characterized by different variants of Kantian optimization and different assumptions about taxation and the ownership of firms (while productive capital is always privately owned).[61] The startling conclusion is that, under pretty general assumptions, in socialist economies, the equity/efficiency tradeoff disappears and, thanks to the cooperative ethos, the problems arising from externalities and public goods can be solved. In other words, if agents adopt the Kantian protocol, market socialist economies can reach *any* distribution of income without any efficiency loss, while also solving any issues related to standard market failures.[62]

7. MOVING THE HORIZON … FURTHER

So, have we finally got the definitive blueprint for socialism? Has Roemer indeed managed to compile the recipe(s) for the cookbooks of the future? There are several reasons to doubt that our search is over. Here, I will focus on what I deem to be the two main issues. The first one, relating to the role of cooperative behavior in the definition of socialism, concerns only Roemer's more recent theorization discussed in section 6 above, but not his earlier work, and especially not his original blueprint of a market socialist economy outlined in section 5. The second, relating to the distributive focus of Roemer's thought, highlights a more general issue that runs throughout his work.

61 Roemer, "Kantian Equilibrium"; Roemer, *How We Cooperate*.

62 John Roemer, "Market Socialism Renewed," *Catalyst* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2020).

7.1 On Individual Behavior

To begin with, consider Roemer's analysis of the first pillar of the concept of socialism outlined in section 6 above, namely the ethos of economic behavior. The concept of Kantian optimization is exceptionally elegant, and it does provide a more convincing explanation of the massive experimental evidence inconsistent with self-interested behavior than alternative approaches (such as altruism or behavioral biases). Yet in the Kantian approach to socialism, there is a fundamental ambiguity about the theory of cooperative behavior. Is it a normative theory, stating how agents ought to behave in order to have socialism, or is it a positive theory, explaining how people actually behave currently in various situations?

Roemer argues that the simplest form of Kantian equilibrium — which entails taking exactly the same action in symmetric strategic environments in which agents have an identical structure of actions and payoffs — is:

> both a positive and a normative concept: positive because I believe it is a good model of many real instances of cooperation, and normative because I believe that the observation "we must all hang together, or … we shall all hang separately" makes good sense as a recommendation for action in such situations.[63]

However, this is not true for the more general variants of Kantian equilibrium (the so-called additive and multiplicative Kantian equilibria) that apply outside of simple symmetric settings and require rather complex and not equally intuitive thought processes. In this case, Roemer admits that he has

> no evidence that this [the adoption of Kantian behavior in more general settings] ever happened. I cannot argue that additive

63 Roemer, *How We Cooperate*, 215.

> and multiplicative Kantian equilibrium are intended as descriptions of reality. They are, as far as I know, mainly normative concepts. They are prescriptions for behavior.[64]

Given that most real-world interactions happen in asymmetric contexts, this conclusion raises two major issues for Roemer's most recent analysis of socialism as outlined in section 6 above, which, unlike his earlier work on market socialism, is not based on standard assumptions about behavior. First, if a cooperative behavioral ethos is *definitional* of a socialist society — one of the three pillars of socialism — and Kantian behavior is a necessary condition to establish a new social formation, then the essentially normative nature of Roemer's reasoning leads to a rather pessimistic view about the prospects for socialism. For there is little guarantee that such behavioral ethos will ever develop. As Roemer acknowledges, we have scant evidence to that effect: although the neoclassical view of homo economicus is extraordinarily reductive, historical evidence so far tells us that individuals compete as often as they cooperate. People do recycle, vote, and refrain from polluting at a cost to themselves. But would they choose, say, how much labor to supply in a consistently Kantian fashion?

As Roemer himself forcefully put it in his earlier work:

> This brings up the question whether the transformation from individualistic values to socialist values — the making of the "socialist man," as many used to say — will be facilitated by institutions of market socialism or whether, indeed, such a transformation will ever occur.[65]

And Roemer's own answer is tentative at best: "value changes occur slowly, and by no means do they always occur in the 'right'

64 Roemer, *How We Cooperate*, 216.

65 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 113.

direction. Albert Hirschman (1982) has argued that values cycle between a focus on the public and a focus on the private."[66]

The second issue concerns, specifically, the more recent market socialist design proposed by Roemer, outlined in section 6. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the previous problem can be set aside: once a full socialist society is indeed constructed, a cooperative ethos will prevail. The blueprint of a market socialist society, however, is meant to be an intermediate step toward the final objective of socialism, and it is designed, on purpose, to be as close as possible to a capitalist economy. But is the development of a widespread Kantian ethos compatible with such an institutional design? This is far from obvious, as the very logic of market competition seems fundamentally incompatible with the universalizing argument inherent in Kantian behavior.

Somewhat puzzlingly, however, *whatever* the answer to the latter question, Roemer's theory of socialism faces some difficulties. Suppose one argues that Kantian behavior can emerge in capitalism but remains isolated and constrained, and that a capitalist economy is fundamentally incompatible with the development and widespread adoption of a cooperative ethos. Given that the market socialist society is designed to be very close to a capitalist economy — for example, by promoting profit-maximizing behavior in firm management — and to inherit many of the institutional mechanisms of capitalism, then one may question the very validity of the market socialist blueprint as an intermediate step in the socialist direction.

Suppose, instead, that Kantian behavior can emerge and thrive within a social formation that is organized, according to Roemer

66 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, 116. Tellingly, Roemer goes on to note that "For these reasons, I do not base a blueprint for a socialist future on the evolution of the selfless individual." This may be considered a *strength* of his earlier model of market socialism outlined in section 5 above.

himself, in a manner very much like a standard capitalist economy. Then, the question is, why would anyone actually want, or even need, to move to a socialist society? Why not promote cooperative behavior directly in capitalist societies? Because Roemer defines capitalism as a system in which, among other things, an individualistic ethos prevails, the question cannot even be posed: a cooperative ethos cannot prevail in a capitalist society *by definition*. Yet this is not an idle question: there is a key efficiency gain in adopting cooperative behavior, even within capitalism, as it allows society to solve the free-rider problems in the production of public goods (or bads), and to do so without fundamentally altering property relations or the distribution of income and wealth.

In other words, it seems reasonable to argue — as Roemer does — that capitalism tends to promote individualistic behavior, while socialism would foster Kantian reasoning. Yet both social formations are likely to be ultimately characterized by a mixture of selfish Nash optimizers and Kantian cooperators. At any rate, these seem *empirical* claims, and it is rather unclear that individual behavior should be a *definitional* feature of different social formations.

7.2 The Normative Horizon

The second pillar of socialism is an ethic of *distributive* justice. This is perhaps one of the main threads that runs through the body of Roemer's work, and an emphasis on the crucial importance of distributive justice in socialist theory is one of his fundamental contributions. But is distributive justice enough to define socialist normative commitments? Is a concern for distribution (of income, wealth, or well-being) the alpha and omega of socialist morality as well as socialist politics?

It is worth clarifying what the latter questions are *exactly* about at the outset. They are not about casting doubt on the relevance

of distributive justice, either in general or for socialists. There is no denying the importance of distribution, both at the general normative level and in terms of political expediency — especially after four decades of neoliberal policies redistributing income and wealth upward. Distribution matters, and a socialist society should implement radically egalitarian policies.

They are also not about adding a few more items to create a laundry list of socialist ideals. At times, Roemer does mention community, self-realization, and the removal of status inequalities as important elements in building a good society. It is certainly possible to engage in further value-hunting and add more trophies to the socialist wall of fame.

The point is that, unlike other normative commitments, Roemer considers an egalitarian ethic of *distributive* justice to be one of the pillars of the definition of socialism. In Roemer's view, it is not one of the (presumably many) aspects of a well-ordered society, it is definitionally at the core of socialist theory. And yet one may argue that a distributive ethic constitutes half of the normative concerns of socialists. The other half is, arguably, the elimination of major disparities of power that arise from property relations and relations of production.[67]

To be sure, in Roemer's view, market socialism will likely mitigate power imbalances, especially given the key, definitional

67 A similar criticism has been moved by relational egalitarians against the distributive focus of equality of opportunity theory. According to relational egalitarians, equality requires much more than a focus on the distribution of goods, and it is "a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another" (Samuel Scheffler, "What Is Egalitarianism?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31, no. 1 [Winter 2003], 21). See also Elizabeth S. Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (January 1999). A criticism of the distributive focus of Roemer's theory of exploitation, and his reformulation of socialism in a broadly similar vein, has also been advanced by Nicholas Vrousalis. See Nicholas Vrousalis, "Exploitation, Vulnerability, and Social Domination," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2013); and Nicholas Vrousalis, "Socialism Unrevised: A Reply to Roemer on Marx, Exploitation, Solidarity, Worker Control," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2021).

role of a solidaristic ethos. For socialism would yield a significant reduction in asset inequalities — a primary source of asymmetric power — even beyond what is entailed by standard equality of opportunity theory, since major inequalities are likely inconsistent with solidarity even if they are fair.[68] Further, one may argue more directly that major power imbalances are at odds with a widespread solidaristic ethos.

Nonetheless, even setting aside the doubts concerning the central role of a solidaristic ethos discussed in section 7.1, it is quite unclear that power relations and domination would no longer be a concern in Roemer's market socialism. Even a radical opportunity-egalitarian allocation such as the one advocated by Roemer is, in principle, consistent with inequalities in asset holdings that may allow for the persistence of significant power imbalances. Further, not all power imbalances arise from asset inequalities, as the experience of socialist countries has forcefully shown.

More generally, the elimination of major disparities in power is not, in Roemer's definition of socialism, an independently relevant objective — therefore it is difficult to gauge, a priori, the implications that a market socialist society as laid out by Roemer would have on power relations. In contrast, one may argue that, from a socialist perspective, an egalitarian distribution of assets is important not only because it reduces inequalities in income and well-being but *independently* because it reduces power imbalances, thus allowing people to relate as equals.

Just like many of Roemer's most important and original insights derive from his theory of exploitation, so does his neglect of power

68 "If cooperation and solidarity are necessarily a part of socialism, and solidarity would be severely compromised by large income differences, as I believe it would be, then such differences must be prevented, even if their genesis is just according to the choice/luck distinction" (John E. Roemer, "Socialism Revised," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 45, no. 3 [Summer 2017], 310).

in the analysis of capitalism and in his definition of socialism. The intellectual roots of many of the subsequent developments can be traced back to the theory of exploitation. So, in closing this paper, it is worth going full circle and returning to it, in order to identify some missing pieces in Roemer's analysis.

The fundamental conclusion of Roemer's analysis is that the theory of exploitation reduces to a kind of resource egalitarianism. The theory of exploitation falls squarely into the realm of distributive justice. This conclusion is based on two main arguments. First, Roemer sets up a number of models and proves formally that differential ownership of productive assets and competitive markets are sufficient institutions to generate an exploitation phenomenon.[69] This allows him to conclude that exploitation theory *can* be reduced to a distributive concern for asset inequalities.

Second, throughout his work, Roemer provides a number of arguments and examples to argue that a notion of force is unnecessary to define exploitation: provided differential ownership of productive assets is unjust, the wealthy exploit the poor, even if they can reach subsistence working on their own and thus are not forced. Therefore, he argues, exploitation *should* be defined in purely distributive terms.

To be sure, the proof that exploitation does not coincide with surplus value extraction at the point of production — and thus that the labor theory of value is unnecessary to define exploitation — is extremely robust. Roemer is also effective in criticizing approaches that focus on domination and direct coercion, and in stressing the relevance of distributive issues. It is, however, unclear that exploitation theory *can* be reduced to a concern for inequality and that weaker forms of asymmetric relations between agents *should* also be ruled out.

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69 Roemer, *A General Theory*, 43.

Concerning the first argument, the starting point of the analysis is that exploitation should be conceptualized as a persistent feature of capitalist economies, but Roemer's models are static and therefore unsuitable to analyze exploitation as a persistent phenomenon. If one generalizes Roemer's models, then it is possible to prove that the claim that asset inequalities and competitive markets are the fundamental determinants of exploitation depends on very restrictive assumptions, such as the impossibility of savings. If savings are allowed, differential ownership of productive assets is necessary but not sufficient to generate persistent exploitation, and an emphasis on asset inequalities while exploitation disappears seems misplaced.[70] This raises serious doubts about the claim that exploitation theory can be reduced to a form of resource egalitarianism. While causally primary, differential ownership of productive assets appears to be a normatively secondary wrong, and Roemer's arguments in favor of a merely distributive definition need further scrutiny.[71]

Closer inspection suggests that, indeed, purely distributive definitions have too impoverished an informational basis to capture exploitative relations and to distinguish exploitation from other forms of injustice or wrongs.[72] As discussed in section 3.2 above, in Roemer's theory, exploitation is not defined relationally. This is most evident in the UE approach, whereby "The statement 'A exploits B' is not defined, but rather 'A is an exploiter' and 'B is

70 Interestingly, exploitation disappears even if agents do *not* accumulate, and therefore capital does not become abundant in any relevant sense: the *possibility* of saving is sufficient to drive the disappearance of exploitation.

71 For a detailed discussion, see Roberto Veneziani, "Exploitation, Inequality and Power," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 25, no. 4 (October 2013). See also Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*.

72 The discussion that follows draws heavily on section 3 of Veneziani, "Exploitation, Inequality and Power."

exploited.'"[73] It only measures a person's position in the economy with respect to labor flows or, in general, to the relevant index of well-being. Nor does Roemer's theory capture the *causal* dimension of exploitation, which has to do with the idea of taking advantage of someone — that is, "when I derive a benefit from another person being placed in such a situation that his best option is to act in a way that is to my benefit."[74]

In Roemer's theory, the causal and relational dimension of UE, for example, reduces to the fact that, even without a labor market, in equilibrium, exploiters work less than the average because the exploited work more. Thus, it is in principle impossible to discriminate between exploitative relations and voluntary labor transfers: if someone decided to spend time and effort in a number of volunteer activities for little or no pay, then she could be counted as exploited.

The causal dimension of exploitation is also difficult to capture within PR, because, as Jon Elster forcefully argues, counterfactual statements, such as (PR-i)-(PR-ii), cannot capture causality: "The truth of 'If A had not been present, B would not have been present' is neither necessary nor sufficient for the truth of 'A caused B.'"[75] Thus, according to PR — Roemer's general definition — a diagnosis of exploitation can emerge even if there is no interaction between groups, as in the case of two autarchic islands with differential ownership of productive assets; or when the relation of dependence between coalitions is of the wrong kind for it to be a relation of exploitation. In fact, according to (PR-i)-(PR-ii), a hermit living austerely on the meager interest yielded by a smaller

73 Roemer, "Should Marxists," 31.

74 Jon Elster, "Roemer versus Roemer," *Politics & Society* 11, no. 3 (September 1982), 364.

75 Elster, "Roemer versus Roemer," 367.

than average capital endowment is capitalistically exploited; rich puritans exploit spendthrift neighbors if their greater wealth is inspired by the cautionary example of the latter; and compulsory support for the children or the needy is exploitative.[76] These examples do not carry any resemblance to capitalist/worker relations, but they appear as different instances of the same phenomenon.

In short, the informational basis of purely distributive approaches, such as UE or PR, seems too impoverished to capture exploitative relations and to distinguish exploitation from other forms of injustice or wrongs.

Roemer acknowledges that (PR-i)-(PR-ii) are insufficient to define exploitation, and he argues that the missing clause concerns the dominance of the exploiter over the exploited.[77] The counterexamples are ruled out, according to him, if the following condition is added in the PR definition of exploitation:

Condition (D): A is in a relation of dominance to B.

Given Roemer's emphasis on the distributive aspects of exploitation, the addition of (D) is rather puzzling. To be sure, Roemer does not provide a precise definition of (D) and oscillates between including it[78] or not,[79] thus suggesting that it does not have the same logical status as (PR-i)-(PR-ii) and that its function is only to rule out "examples that are 'noneconomic' in some sense"[80] or

76 See Philippe Van Parijs, "A Revolution in Class Theory," *Politics & Society* 15, no. 4 (December 1987), fn. 11; Elster, "Roemer versus Roemer"; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183.

77 John E. Roemer, "Property Relations vs. Surplus Value in Marxian Exploitation," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11, no. 4 (Autumn 1982), 304, fn. 12.

78 Roemer, *A General Theory*; Roemer, "Property Relations vs. Surplus Value."

79 John E. Roemer, "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class," *Politics & Society* 11, no. 3 (September 1982); Roemer, "Should Marxists"; Roemer, *Free to Lose*.

80 Roemer, "Property Relations vs. Surplus Value," 313, fn. 24.

even "pathological."[81] Welfare benefits or child support, though, do not seem "pathological" or "noneconomic" in any relevant sense. Moreover, a generic appeal to an undefined notion of dominance is unsatisfactory, and there are conceivable definitions of (D) such that the above counterexamples remain valid; for example, in the case of compulsory welfare payments. A precise notion of dominance thus seems a necessary part of the PR definition. Yet dominance is not consistent with Roemer's theory and many of his conclusions.

To begin with, several of Roemer's examples should be reconsidered in light of (D). Take, for instance, Karl, who consumes little, does not work, and lends his little capital to rich Adam, who works and consumes more, and who pays interest to Karl.[82] According to UE, Karl exploits Adam even if Adam is wealthier, but, suggests Roemer, this conflicts with our moral intuitions. Instead, PR gives the right verdict: "Adam is unjustly gaining from the flows between him and Karl, if the initial distribution of stocks is unjust against Karl."[83]

Upon closer inspection, it is unclear that this example sheds any light on exploitation. If dominance is essential to define exploitation, it should be explicitly included. In the absence of dominance, the example may be capturing some form of injustice but not an exploitative relation between Adam and Karl. As Jeffrey Reiman argues, this kind of example may show, at most, that PR is a better distributive definition than UE, but then the problem may be the distributive approach itself.[84] In the above example, one may

81 Roemer, *A General Theory*, 195.

82 Roemer, "Should Marxists," 58ff.

83 Roemer, "Should Marxists," 60.

84 Jeffrey Reiman, "Exploitation, Force, and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism: Thoughts on Roemer and Cohen," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1987), 25ff.

argue that UE renders the wrong judgment by identifying Adam as exploited because it does not include dominance or power, and not because it is uncorrelated with differential ownership of productive assets. If a relation of power were a key part of the definition of exploitation, then Adam would not be considered exploited, and, in general, the Adam/Karl example would simply not be an instance of exploitative relations.

More important, Roemer's attempts to include dominance are ad hoc, since they are disconnected from the ethical imperative he identifies as the basis of exploitation theory and inherently at odds with a mere distributive focus on asset inequalities.[85] As acknowledged by Roemer himself, because dominance is undefined, "the addition of [(D)] is ad hoc … (With respect to our earlier discussion domination exists at the point of maintaining property relations.)"[86] As a definitional requirement, (D) sits uneasily with the claim that exploitation should be reduced to a distributive injustice, and Roemer's attempts to capture the interaction between coalitions in (D) seem inevitably inconsistent with the main thrust of his approach.

In later contributions, Roemer acknowledges the limits of PR and proposes that "an agent is exploited in the Marxist sense, or capitalistically exploited, if and only if PR holds and the exploiter gains by virtue of the labor of the exploited," because the expenditure of effort is characteristically associated with exploitation.[87] This is almost a U-turn. First, Roemer admits to being "now less convinced of PR's superiority to UE," and, under the revised definition, an allocation is deemed exploitative if

85 Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 204, fn. 13.

86 Roemer, "New Directions," 277, fn. 15.

87 John E. Roemer, "What is Exploitation? Reply to Jeffrey Reiman," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1989), 96.

both PR and UE diagnose it.[88] Second, the information set necessary to evaluate exploitation is significantly enlarged, and the emphasis on effort may be read as an implicit acknowledgment of the importance of the causal dimension of exploitation. Yet the revised definition remains purely distributive, consistent with the ethical imperative of Roemer's theory, and thus, in light of the above discussion, it should not be surprising that it is vulnerable to counterexamples.[89] Therefore it seems necessary to go beyond Roemer to incorporate a notion of power, or dominance, in exploitation theory.

8. BACK TO THE AGENDA

The above discussion of Roemer's contributions to socialist theory hopefully shows that there is much to be learned from his work. Not only has he not been seduced by the dark side of the force, like those former Marxists turned into neoliberal enthusiasts or even neocons; at the intellectual level, his work shows a remarkable coherence supported by ruthless analytical scrutiny. Starting from his theory of exploitation, Roemer has developed an internally consistent analysis of economic systems, supported by normative arguments as to just and unjust social institutions, all explicated through a rigorous formal apparatus.

Socialist theory, and socialist politics, require systematic, rigorous thinking about feasible alternative socioeconomic systems. In turn, this entails a reflection on all three pillars of socialism as a new social formation: an ethos of economic behavior, an ethic of distributive justice, and a set of property relations that will implement the ethic if the behavioral ethos is followed. The

88 John E. Roemer, "Second Thoughts on Property Relations and Exploitation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Suppl. Vol. 15 (1989), 258.

89 See, for example, Reiman, "Exploitation, Force," 106–7.

socialist horizon cannot remain undertheorized if we want to build a movement to change things for the better.

From this perspective, a firmly structural approach to social theory, with property relations at center stage, is one of Roemer's fundamental, lasting contributions. Socialism, Roemer has taught us, does not require central planning, bureaucratic price setting, or state ownership of the means of production, and there exists a fundamental difference between markets and capitalism. Markets may be a powerful coordinating mechanism and are likely indispensable to allocate resources in any advanced economy, and competitive forces may be harnessed within a socialist project. It is capitalist production relations that must be dispensed with.

But Roemer has also shown that it is possible to retain the pillars of socialist politics, and even of a structural critique of capitalism, while rejecting some of the standard propositions of Marxian theory, including the labor theory of value. Roemer's contribution is important *because of* this critical stance and not *in spite of* it. The construction of a theory of exploitation that does not focus on the forcible extraction of surplus value at the point of production is arguably a major intellectual advance. The indictment of capitalism does not hang on the rather shaky foundations of the labor theory of value as a theory of prices.

And yet Roemer's theory of socialism certainly isn't the final stop of the socialist journey — in fact, it is likely not the final stop of *his own* incessant intellectual exploration. While Roemer has undoubtedly asked the truly searching questions and opened a fundamental path, not all his answers are equally convincing, and a number of issues remain unsolved, as argued in the previous section — but this does not detract from his contribution. He has taught us the most important lesson: keeping our gaze straight to the horizon, for this is what ultimately gets us going.


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ABSTRACT

In addition to amplifying the influence of the private sector over social welfare institutions, NGOs generate a particular mode of solving social problems that does not challenge the basic structures of capitalism. The Left today must break free from the subtle control of this understudied form of “money in politics.”

NGOism: The Politics of the Third Sector

Benjamin Y. Fong and
Melissa Naschek

> Something happened recently that reminded me of a rich woman's exclamation once in New York. "Socialism! But wouldn't it do away with charity? And what would we do without charities? I love my work for the poor more than anything else I can do."
>
> — Lincoln Steffens

In 2015, Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed Jr made a sad pronouncement: if "by left we mean a reasonably coherent set of class-based and anti-capitalist ideas, programmes and policies that are embraced by a cohort of leaders and activists who are in a position

to speak on behalf of and mobilize a broad constituency," then "there is no longer a functioning left in the United States; nor has there been for a generation."[1] Not long after, the Left was jolted back to consciousness by the first Bernie Sanders campaign, but now, following a brief and jubilant period of populist revival, it has been chastened into disheartening sobriety. In the words of Matt Karp, "the Left, after Bernie, has finally grown just strong enough to know how weak it really is."[2]

To understand the nature of this weakness, it is necessary to grapple not only with the broad political economic transformations of the neoliberal period that have made the Left's work more difficult today but also with *internal* changes in the Left's own composition and political orientation. As the organizations of the working class have declined in size and power, the Left has become increasingly dominated by elite groups, particularly the educated middle classes. Certain segments of the humanities and social sciences within academia have been one important pole in this shift; another related part has been the burgeoning NGO sector, which has expanded greatly in the last few decades, in the very spaces that unions, mass membership organizations, and political parties once occupied.

As many critics have noted before us, NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) tend to cultivate a particular approach to solving social problems — often called "NGOism" or "activist-ism"[3] — that coalesced and became influential in the 1960s as NGO funders and social movement activists became more friendly. Seeing a world

1 Mark Dudzic and Adolph Reed Jr, "The Crisis of Labour and the Left in the United States," *Socialist Register* 51 (2015), 351–2.

2 Matt Karp, "Bernie Sanders's Five-Year War," *Jacobin* 38 (Summer 2020).

3 Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, "'Action Will Be Taken': Left Anti-Intellectualism and Its Discontents," *Left Business Observer* (accessed March 30, 2021), leftbusinessobserver.com/Action.html.

in flux and wanting to guide it in the "right" direction, foundations became more directly interested in both remedying social ills and stoking "political action" (moves that led to the rise of the conservative foundations that liberals today bemoan).[4] Leftist groups took the bait and began, in turn, to view nonprofit funding not only as a viable political strategy but also as a legitimating one.[5] With money came influence, and with influence came a new political culture resulting in slow but assured domestication.[6]

Agreeing, as we do, with Michael Barker that there has been far too "little political attention on the left that has zeroed in on the detrimental impact of foundations [and in particular, *liberal* foundations] on the political realm," we believe it is of vital importance for the Left today to identify the presence of NGOism, to minimize its influence, and thereby to break free from the subtle control of this understudied form of "money in politics."[7] In this vein, this article aims to define the particular features of NGOism, a concept often employed but, to our knowledge, nowhere systematically described.

Our basic argument is twofold: first, that NGOs function to amplify the influence of the private sector over social welfare institutions; and second, that their institutional logic generates a particular political culture that, while replete with radical rhetoric, does not and cannot challenge the basic structures of capitalism. We are largely in agreement with Joan Roelofs that the third sector

4 See, for instance, Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking Press, 2017).

5 Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1981]).

6 Joan Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy: The Mask of Pluralism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 121.

7 Michael Barker, *Under the Mask of Philanthropy* (Evington: Hextall Press, 2017), 11; Lester M. Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2002), 4.

provides a "protective layer" for capitalist society[8] — by picking up the slack caused by industrial decline, providing goods and services that the market cannot, and muting criticism of the corporate world — and our contribution here is to explain how the internal constraints of the sector as a whole generate a mode of "solving" social problems (NGOism) that ultimately serves the status quo. The first section offers a basic history of the "third sector" in the United States. The second describes the structural incentives behind NGOism, and the third identifies its key attributes. We conclude with the implications for the Left.[9]

One final note: in this article we will use the terms "NGOs," "third sector," and "nonprofit sector" interchangeably to refer to institutions separate from government, on the one hand, and from for-profit industry, on the other.[10] Large, multipurpose foundations are central to organizing the third sector, as seeking foundation grants is common sense in the nonprofit world. As Nina Eliasoph says of nonprofit workers, "organizational affiliation and funding [are] as important … as their names."[11] By offering the largest contributions around, as well as by acting as the key source of institutional networking and technical assistance, foundations have an undue influence over nonprofit projects.[12] It is for this

8 Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 21.

9 We make no pretense here of explaining the activities of foundations and NGOs in general. Since our focus is on the specific form of activist-ism that NGOs promote, we have mostly put to the side important topics of concern for the Left, including the third sector's influence on foreign policy through the Council on Foreign Relations and the CIA; on academia through the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies; and in the propagation of neo-Malthusian population control theories.

10 Cf. Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 16–17.

11 Nina Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers: Civic Life After Welfare's End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 116.

12 Mark Dowie, *American Foundations: An Investigative History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 3.

reason that we speak of the third sector as encompassing both nonprofit organizations and their foundation funders, though there are separate but related literatures on the two.

I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE "THIRD SECTOR"

In this section, we offer a brief history of the third sector, focusing specifically on the manner in which the development of the American welfare state has encouraged its growth. Even when the welfare state was robust, its work was carried out in "devolved" fashion through private and public-private hybrid organizations. In the neoliberal period, this domain of "outsourced sovereignty" continued to balloon, with an increasing focus on social service provision and with increasing reliance on private funders and more "entrepreneurial" methods of revenue generation. This dependence on private interests made the third sector more professional, more oligarchical, and ultimately unwilling to do anything that would challenge the dominance of capital.

While charitable and voluntary efforts have existed throughout time, the specific form of philanthropic, nongovernmental *organization* that exists in the United States today only emerged in the late nineteenth century and crystallized in the early twentieth. Before the Civil War,

> the amelioration of social ills was often in the hands of individual citizens — the Lady Bountifuls — of the communities who took care of the poorly educated, the blind, the halt, and the lame as a matter of religious stewardship, ethical humanism, noblesse oblige, and the like.[13]

13 Sheila Slaughter and Edward T. Silva, "Looking Backwards: How Foundations Formulated Ideology in the Progressive Period," in *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad*, ed. Robert F. Arnove (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1982), 57.

Postwar industrialization and urbanization provoked a middle-class movement of corrective relief and political reform. Local "charity organization societies," usually guided by an essentially Protestant moral-religious perspective, sprang up to address the ills associated with rapid unregulated industrialization, poorly planned urbanization, and waves of foreign immigration.[14]

By the end of the century, American business leaders realized they needed to support this moral orientation as "a private-sector alternative to socialism."[15] Large general-purpose foundations soon emerged that institutionalized and propagated their individualistic ethos. New millionaires like Andrew Carnegie, Russell Sage, and the Rockefellers, motivated by some combination of tax evasion, property inheritance protection, public relations, power grabbing, scientism, and paternalistic beneficence, started large foundations with vague mandates to "serve" society.

In January of 1915, Frank P. Walsh's Commission on Industrial Relations launched a "sweeping investigation of all of the country's great benevolent organizations."[16] The Walsh Commission didn't pull any punches. Socialist Party leader Morris Hillquit, Edward P. Costigan from the United Mine Workers of America, and Samuel Gompers from the American Federation of Labor testified that the foundations' "all-pervading machinery for the molding of the minds of the people" (Gompers) obscures the "sordid practices of big business" (Costigan) and guides research and action in such a way so that they do not "oppose … business interests in a pronounced way" (Hillquit).[17]

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14 Slaughter and Silva, "Looking Backwards," 58.

15 Peter Dobkin Hall, *"Inventing the Nonprofit Sector" and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 44.

16 Barbare Howe, "The Emergence of Scientific Philanthropy, 1900–1920: Origins, Issues and Outcomes," in *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism*, 34.

17 Quoted in Howe, "The Emergence of Scientific Philanthropy," 42–43.

The Walsh Commission's recommendations — strict congressional oversight combined with restrictions on foundations — were never implemented. Foundation relief provided during World War I and other mollifying developments after the war won them too many allies. The third sector was also defended by powerful spokespeople: in his 1922 book *American Individualism*, Herbert Hoover extolled the virtues of a business-minded progressivism that took on complex social problems "not by the extension of government into our economic and social life" but through "the vast multiplication of voluntary organizations for altruistic purposes."[18] Though obviously radically different from Hoover in embracing the statist programs of the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt included a place for these voluntary organizations in his administration, allowing, for the first time, in the 1936 tax act for corporations to deduct charitable contributions from their federal income taxes.

The consolidation of the postwar welfare state further encouraged the growth of the third sector. Its distinctive form can best be grasped by looking at employment numbers: whereas the number of federal civilian employees remained unchanged between 1951 and 1999, the number of state and nonprofit employees ballooned. These numbers drive home Lester Salamon's argument about the need to "differentiate between government's role as a provider of funds and direction, and government's role as a deliverer of services."[19] In the wake of World War II, business elites (untainted by fascist collaboration, unlike their European counterparts) embraced big government for its stabilizing function, but they

18 Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 52–3.

19 Lester M. Salamon, "Of Market Failure, Voluntary Failure, and Third-Party Government: Toward a Theory of Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 16, no. 1–2 (January 1987), 36.

Table 1. **Federal Civilian, State Government, and Nonprofit Employment (in Millions), 1951–1999**

Year	Federal civilian employees	State employees	Nonprofit employees
1951	2.5	4.3	–
1956	2.4	5.2	–
1961	2.5	10.2	–
1966	2.9	8.5	–
1971	2.8	10.2	–
1977	–	–	5.6
1981	3	13.4	–
1982	–	–	6.5
1983	2.9	13.2	–
1987	–	–	7.4
1992	3.1	13.4	9.1
1994	–	–	9.7
1999	2.8	14.7	–

Source: Hall, "A Historical Overview of Philanthropy," 54.

did so in devolutionary fashion, with heavy reliance on nonprofits and their hybridizations to carry out the delivery of services.

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In the 1950s, the Ford Foundation began to assemble the case for the theory that economic misery was perpetuated by irrationally run public institutions as well as the culture of urban areas.[20] If

20 Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Alice O'Connor, "Community Action, Urban Reform, and the Fight Against Poverty: The Ford Foundation's Gray Areas Program," *Journal of Urban History* 22, no. 5 (1996), 586–625.

better assimilated into American society, impoverished areas would be able to build local vehicles of power and secure a place in both the labor market and public life. Private nonprofits, funded by private foundations and the federal government, could thus provide underrepresented communities the infrastructure (replete with their own systems of patronage) to build themselves into powerful interest groups.

This foundation vision helped shape the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (EOA), which set the stage for rapid growth in the third sector.[21] Title II of the EOA created Community Action Agencies (CAAs), which implemented a variety of programs such as employment counseling, early childhood education, and heating assistance in their municipalities.[22] Most CAAs were nonprofits, and they relied on both EOA and private foundation funding.[23]

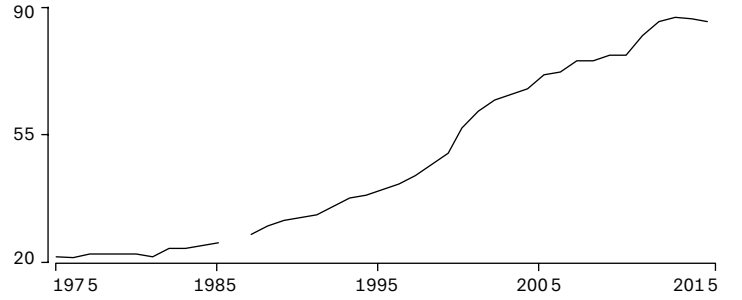
As the War on Poverty's incipient NGOization unfolded, the big foundations came again under congressional scrutiny, with trenchant critics on both sides of the aisle. But the consequences of the period did not amount to much: the Tax Reform Act of 1969 imposed a 4 percent excise tax on foundations' net investment income, required them to spend at least 6 percent of their net investment income, and applied certain political restrictions on

21 O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 139–65. Richard Magat (a Ford Foundation official for over two decades), in a retrospective report commissioned in 1975 by president of the Ford Foundation McGeorge Bundy and the Board of Trustees, noted that "The much-cited Gray Areas program tested and drew attention to the free-standing local tax-exempt corporation as a means for applying government funds to locally perceived needs. As a result, this mechanism was built into the poverty programs of the 1960s." Richard Magat, *The Ford Foundation at Work: Philanthropic Choices, Methods, and Styles* (New York: Plenum Press, 1979), 79.

22 Henry J. Aaron, *Politics and the Professors: The Great Society in Perspective* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1978); Sar A. Levitan, *The Great Society's Poor Law: A New Approach to Poverty* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 128–9.

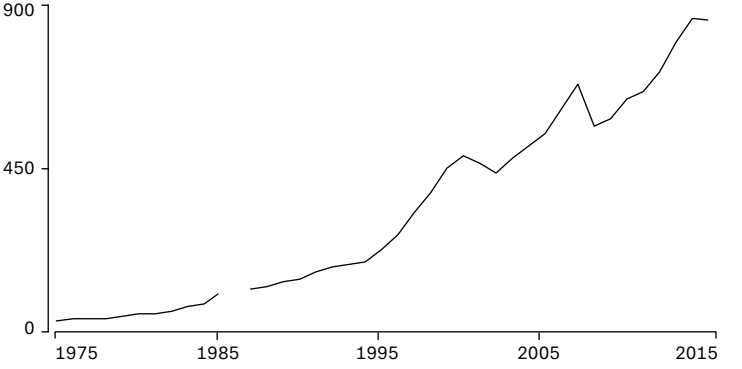
23 John Hull Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87.

Figure 1. **Number of Grantmaking Foundations in the United States (in Thousands)**



Sources: Brice S. McKeever, Nathan E. Dietz, and Saunji D. Fyffe, *The Nonprofit Almanac: The Essential Facts and Figures for Managers, Researchers, and Volunteers*, 9th ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), Table 3.11; "Foundation Stats," Foundation Center, data.foundationcenter.org/#/foundations/all/nationwide/total/list/2014.

Figure 2. **US Foundation Assets (in Billions of Dollars)**



Sources: McKeever, Dietz, and Fyffe, *The Nonprofit Almanac*, Table 3.11; "Foundation Stats," Foundation Center.

foundation spending — hardly the crackdown that the foundations feared.[24] The foundations eagerly cleaned up their act, and the bipartisan critique of an existential threat to democracy was lost as the neoliberal fog settled over the United States.[25]

In the broader nonprofit world, the trials of the third sector in the '60s had the effect of organizing and professionalizing nonprofits. In 1967, pushed by concerns about waste and "poverty pimping" in the growing third sector, Congress directed the General Accounting Office (now known as the Government Accountability Office) to review federal anti-poverty funding with special attention to the Community Action Agencies. By 1974, the stated concern with efficiency and accountability led to the Housing and Community Development Act. Born in response to the demand for new, low-income housing to replace the housing stock lost in the federally funded "slum clearance," the housing-oriented system of grant funding that it created turned many community organizations born of fighting displacement into nonprofit housing developers. With the new funding structure came an intensification of funding-connected bureaucracy: the new law included detailed stipulations about community participation, coordination between state and local government and the nonprofit sector, long-range planning, and organizational self-scrutiny.

The foundations soon piled on as well. In 1976, John D. Rockefeller III established the umbrella organization Independent Sector, which promoted studies that raised technical questions about implementation and organizational diversity in nonprofits. It was thanks to its efforts that the discourse around tax-exempt entities

24 Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 14–15.

25 Judith Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Reshaping of American Social Policy From the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 6.

shifted away from *what* these entities did to *how* they did them.[26] The substantive questions of the late '60s were thereby transformed into formal questions in the early '70s under the promise of scientific self-inspection.

The regulations of the Tax Reform Act of 1969 and the broader demand for more nonprofit accountability also led to the creation of specific nonprofit training programs. Nonprofit work thereby increasingly became a specialized trade, the province of professional managers who could navigate complex reporting requirements. It was these nonprofit professionals who oversaw the "advocacy explosion" beginning in the '60s and '70s, which changed the landscape of the civic universe in America.[27] Traditional membership organizations up until that point were popularly rooted and "rivaled professional and business associations for influence in policy debates."[28] They aimed to "knit together national, state, and local groups that met regularly and engaged in a degree of representative governance," and, though less diverse in terms of race and gender, they were "much more likely to involve less privileged participants" than contemporary associations.[29]

The nonprofit world created by the advocacy explosion is markedly more oligarchical. It is run by educated, upper-middle-class experts who engage in "politics" as a form of insider lobbying

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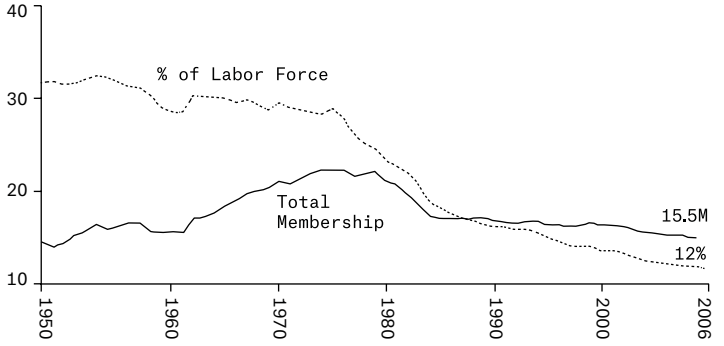
26 Peter Dobkin Hall, "A Historical Overview of Philanthropy, Voluntary Associations, and Nonprofit Organizations in the United States, 1600–2000," in *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Richard Steinberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 55.

27 See Jeffrey M. Berry and Clyde Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society,* 5th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2009), chapter 2.

28 Theda Skocpol, "Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life," in *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, ed. Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 465.

29 Skocpol, "Advocates without Members," 491, 500; Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 47.

Figure 3. **Union Membership (in Millions) and as a Percentage of the Labor Force**



Source: Berry and Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society*, 21.

rather than mass mobilization. When they do interact with "membership," it is through mass mailings and fundraisers around issues narrowed to stand out among grant applicants and garner media attention. Indeed, their strategies are largely media-centric, focused more on propagating a dramatic and polarized "message" for which they find a constituency rather than advocating on behalf of an existing membership.[30]

Jeffrey Berry "characterizes this as a shift from 'materialism' to 'postmaterialism,' from the pocketbook concerns of middle- and working-class voters to the social concerns of more affluent ones."[31] Unsurprisingly, the traditional membership organizations that suffered most under the advocacy explosion were trade unions.

30 Given the revolving door between NGOs and political parties, these changes have likely played an important role in making both parties less responsive to their respective bases, dramatically weakening the voice of American voters and fracturing constituencies around niche cultural issues, but a full exploration of this connection would require a separate article.

31 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 63.

Where once the unions were primary vehicles for social justice, nonprofits stepped in as more "efficient" advocates for the concerns of particular and increasingly fragmented constituencies.

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Received wisdom dictates that there is a trade-off between government and third sector spending, but, in reality, none of the three "sectors" — for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental — operate independently of one another. At both the institutional and individual level, there is a thorough interweaving of the three: there are nonprofit corporations that are publicly controlled (like the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey), nonprofit hospitals run by for-profit corporations, and broad swaths of municipal work contracted out to both for-profit and nonprofit entities, for example.

The Reagan administration ran up against this uncomfortable fact in trying to make good on its promise to make "voluntarism … an essential part of our plan to give the government back to the people."[32] In an initial budget, the new administration proposed to "cut federal spending in program areas in which nonprofits are active by the equivalent of $115 billion."[33] Realizing that their spending cuts would cripple the very sector they hoped would "take up the slack," the actual cuts were not nearly as severe as proposed (and nowhere near proportional to the revenue loss from the 1981 tax cuts).[34] Despite these cuts, nonprofit expenditures increased slightly during this period, but not, as Ronald Reagan predicted, because of increased private charitable giving.

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32 Lester M. Salamon, *Partners in Public Service: Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 149.

33 Salamon, *Partners in Public Service*, 154.

34 Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 80; Salamon, *Partners in Public Service*, 159.

Nonprofits instead made up for the loss by increasingly turning to fees and service charges, becoming "far more entrepreneurial, reducing uncertainty by broadening their financial bases beyond charitable contributions to include a mix of grants, contracts, donations, and sales of services."[35]

Table 2. **Share of Government-Funded Human Services Delivered by Nonprofit, For-Profit, and Government Agencies in 16 Communities, 1982 (Weighted Average)**

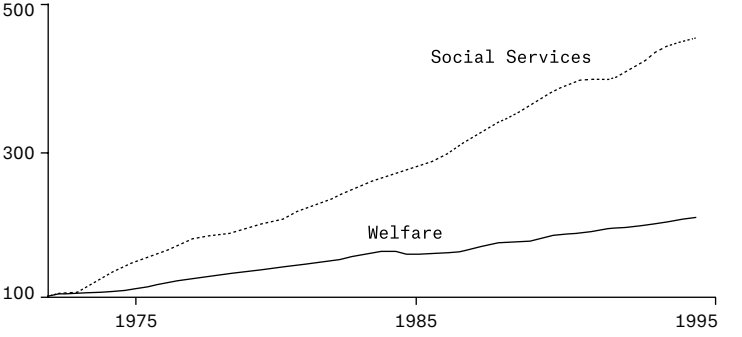
	Percentage of Services Delivered by:		
Field	Nonprofits	For-Profits	Government
Social services	56	4	40
Employment/training	48	8	43
Housing/comm. devel.	5	7	88
Health	44	23	33
Arts/culture	51	<0.5	49
Total	42	19	39

Source: Salamon, "Of Market Failure, Voluntary Failure, and Third-Party Government," 30.

At the same time, the demand for nonprofit services grew under the devolutionary program inherited from Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. However, whereas Nixon's "new federalism" had involved massive outlays on social services,

35 Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 80. Michael O'Neill estimates that three-quarters of nonprofit funding comes from the government and service payments. See O'Neill, *Nonprofit Nation: A New Look at the Third America* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 23.

Figure 4. **Index of State and Local Government Employment in Public Welfare vs. Private Organizations, 1972–95**



Source: Richard P. Nathan, with the assistance of Elizabeth I. Davis, Mark J. McGrath, and William C. O'Heaney, "The 'Nonprofitization Movement' as a Form of Devolution," in Dwight F. Burlingame, William A. Diaz, Warren F. Ilchman, and associates, *Capacity for Change? The Nonprofit World in the Age of Devolution* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 1996), 33.

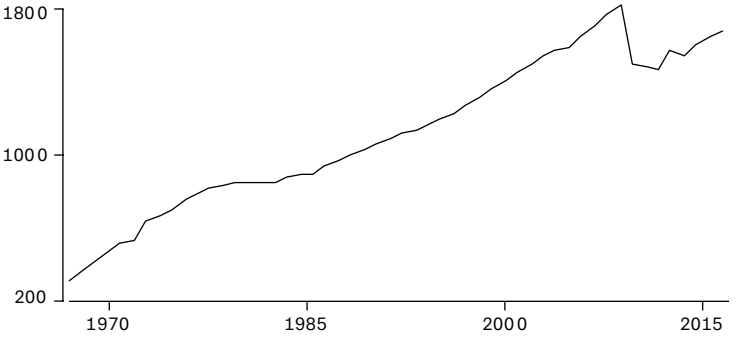
Reagan's version of devolution did not include the same federal largesse. The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 thus merged seventy-seven programs to create nine new block grants with a fraction of the combined funding, harming "the same kinds of services and programs that Nixon wanted to support."[36] In addition to spending cuts and devolution of responsibility for social services to states and municipalities, Reagan increased the disparity in funding for social services in comparison to direct payments, continuing a trend that had begun with John F. Kennedy.[37]

In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which finally

36 Jeffrey M. Berry, with David F. Arons, *A Voice for Nonprofits* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 18.

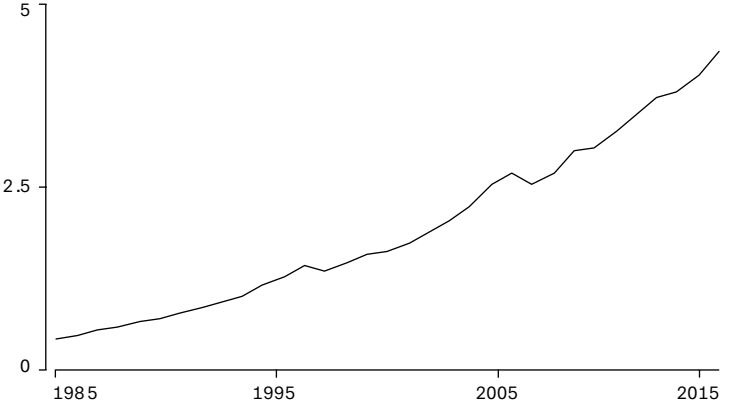
37 Berry, *A Voice for Nonprofits*, 13.

Figure 5. **Number of Tax-Exempt Organizations in the United States (in Thousands)**



Source: IRS Data Book, 1967–2018, irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-all-years-irs-data-books.

Figure 6. **Total Assets of US Nonprofit Charitable Organizations (in Trillions of Dollars)**



Source: IRS, "SOI Tax Stats — Charities & Other Tax-Exempt Organizations Statistics," irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-charities-and-other-tax-exempt-organizations-statistics.

eliminated Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created the much inferior Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In the mid-1990s, seventy out of every hundred poor families received cash assistance thanks to AFDC; in 2018, under TANF, that number dropped to twenty-three. Less than one-quarter of TANF funds go to basic cash assistance, while the lion's share supports the provision of social services, and the massive nonprofit world that supplies them.[38] A disaster for the poor, PRWORA was a "windfall of resources in program areas of interest to nonprofits."[39]

After a brief hiccup following the 2007–8 financial crash, both the number of tax-exempt organizations and total nonprofit assets have continued to rise, along with the assets of their foundation benefactors. As the sector grows increasingly professionalized and penetrated by market culture, many complain of a growing "identity crisis" in the third sector: How can the market character of the services it provides be reconciled with its larger social mission? Others recognize the tension but are ready to push on toward a "'fourth sector,' one that explicitly merges social purpose with business methods and taps into the much larger resources available through socially focused private investment capital."[40] The future of the third sector is indicated in phrases like "venture philanthropy" and "reputational capital" — even the semblance of independence is falling away.

II. The Structural Incentives Behind NGOism

As the third sector expanded its role in administering the welfare state, the consistent features for which it is

38 Ali Safawi and Liz Schott, "To Lessen Hardship, States Should Invest More TANF Dollars in Basic Assistance for Families," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, January 12, 2021.

39 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 23.

40 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 69.

known — professionalization, bureaucratization, top-down advocacy, local and niche problem solving — emerged. In this section, we lay out how the structural position of the third sector constrains its ability to challenge the power of the capitalist class, and thus its ability to meaningfully change capitalist society. In other words, NGOs, regardless of ideological orientation, share certain common features that bolster the status quo not by accident of history but due to their structural position.

Our argument is not that all third sector agencies are thinly veiled vehicles for the political machinations of particular elites, though they can be that as well. Rather, NGOs are structurally reliant on funding in a way that leaves them ultimately under the undue influence of capitalist interests, which limits ahead of time what they typically pursue and advocate for. NGOs are generally assumed to be synonymous with 501(c)(3)s, but it is funding structures, not tax status, that determine the restraints generative of NGOism.[41]

NGOs have four main sources of funds: the government, corporations, other nonprofits, and private individual donations and payments. Most money flows into the nonprofit sector from government sources, especially the federal government.[42] Government funding of nonprofits, which has been sharply rising since the 1960s, shifts the administration of the welfare state from public to privately run institutions. Nonprofits are also frequently involved in other, indirect processes of privatization. As the state increasingly relies on directed partnerships with corporations

41 One way out of this situation would be funding through membership dues, but this is no silver bullet. The AARP, for example, is a membership organization, but its main mission is service provision; no one expects, upon joining the AARP, to have any influence over the organization. Egalitarian funding schemes merely remove the constraints. Nonprofit organizations then have to adapt their organizational models to provide pathways for members to participate in decision-making.

42 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 206.

to shape development, nonprofits serve as useful partner institutions, either to connect the state to specific corporations or to allow corporations to offload the risk of experimenting with government programs.[43]

As Damien Cahill has noted, the neoliberal transformation of the postwar welfare state was not simply a project of retrenchment.[44] It was also a process of *restructuring* of government intervention, such that benefits were decreasingly given as cash transfers and increasingly means-tested and offered in the form of social services. The government both finances and subsidizes individual access to these services, but continues to play a significant role in funding the services themselves regardless.

Since direct government grants amount to only 31.8 percent of 501(c)(3) revenue, nonprofits are forced to rely on fees for service, which make up approximately 49 percent of their revenue.[45] Fee-for-service models subject nonprofits to market-like pressures, since their survival, even though reliant on the government, is not financially guaranteed and is rather dependent on a certain level of individual consumption. But even government grants, which do directly disburse revenue to nonprofits, only go so far in shielding NGOs from insecurity, as funds for overhead and institutional

43 Kathryn Wylde, "The Contribution of Public-Private Partnerships to New York's Assisted Housing Industry," in *Housing and Community Development in New York City: Facing the Future*, ed. Michael H. Schill (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 74.

44 Damien Cahill, *The End of Laissez-Faire? On the Durability of Embedded Neoliberalism* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2014), 14–30.

45 National Council of Nonprofits, "Nonprofit Impact Matters: How America's Charitable Nonprofits Strengthen Communities and Improve Lives," September 2019 (accessed April 12, 2021), nonprofitimpactmatters.org/site/assets/files/1/nonprofit-impact-matters-sept-2019-1.pdf. Some fees for services are paid for out of pocket (for example, individual fees to enter museums), while others are paid with government money disbursed to individuals (for example, Medicaid). This figure reflects both privately and publicly funded contributions.

costs are limited.[46] Thus, the neoliberal goals of privatization, marketization, and cost cutting are creatively combined in the administration of social welfare by NGOs.

The political consequences of this restructuring are dire: devolution makes it more difficult for state actors to fix issues in social service delivery, especially since nonprofits operate with far less transparency than government institutions. Performing socially necessary services with public dollars but under a private mandate, any failures they experience are distant from state control as well as a poor reflection on the state itself, which further erodes trust in the government's ability to solve social problems.[47]

Nonprofits with government grants also face many political constraints, like restriction of the types of political agitation recipient institutions can engage in. Legal restrictions prohibit tax-exempt nonprofits from endorsing or using organizational resources to campaign for elected political officials. 501(c)(3) s are allowed to engage in lobbying, but only to the extent that such activity does not constitute a "substantial part" of their work.[48] Further, government grants typically cannot be used for

46 National Council of Nonprofits, "National Council of Nonprofits Resolution in Support of Full Implementation of the OMB Uniform Guidance" (accessed April 12, 2021), councilofnonprofits.org/national-council-of-nonprofits-resolution-support-of-full-implementation-of-the-omb. "A small percentage of CDCs [community development corporations] have regular and reliable sources of support such as a sponsor organization — often a religious one — or an endowment fund. The majority of CDCs, however, are in a continual search for administrative funds to support the office activities of the organization." Edward G. Goetz, "Local Government Support for Nonprofit Housing: A Survey of US Cities," *Urban Affairs Review* 27, no. 3 (1992): 420–35.

47 Joel Fleishman, a sympathetic proponent of foundation reform, discusses the issues of accountability foundations and nonprofits create as they administer social goods. See Joel L. Fleishman, *The Foundation: A Great American Secret; How Private Wealth is Changing the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).

48 IRS, "Measuring Lobbying: Substantial Part Test," November 10, 2020 (accessed April 12, 2021), irs.gov/charities-non-profits/measuring-lobbying-substantial-part-test.

political activity, meaning organizations must receive private funding for political work — itself a constraint on how and for what purpose nonprofits engage in political activity.[49] While many nonprofits welcome these restrictions for insulating them from partisan politics, they are often unable, due to these restrictions, to advocate for the kinds of political changes that would make them more effective.[50]

Corporations, the second source of nonprofit funding, make sizable donations to NGOs for a number of transactional reasons. In some instances, corporations make direct donations to organizations to appear socially conscious, but often, nonprofit and corporate involvement is more complex, especially when nonprofit activity is undertaken in part to benefit not just a corporation's reputation but also their bottom line.[51]

The relationship between Aetna and the Fifth Avenue Committee (FAC), a nonprofit housing developer in the 1980s, provides an instructive example. Aetna, as part of its 1979 National Demonstration Program "to fund neighborhood reinvestment projects," collaborated with FAC and the city of New York to redevelop part of Warren Street in Park Slope. Aetna donated money to FAC, who, in turn, received a HUD Neighborhood Self-Development Grant, which allowed them to cheaply develop and sell houses

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49 *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) contains many firsthand accounts from activists that detail the corrosive effects such restrictions place on nonprofit organizers who might have larger political visions than the direct scope of grants their organizations require to keep afloat.

50 National Council of Nonprofits, "Protecting the Johnson Amendment and Nonprofit Nonpartisanship" (accessed April 12, 2021), councilofnonprofits.org/trends-policy-issues/protecting-nonprofit-nonpartisanship.

51 Joseph Galaskiewicz and Michelle Sinclair Colman ("Collaboration between Corporations and Nonprofit Organizations," in Powell and Steinberg's *The Nonprofit Sector*) provide a nice overview of different possible arrangements between the two.

at no profit. Aetna and the city of New York jointly hold the mortgages on these houses.[52] FAC essentially serves as a risk-taking developer, allowing Aetna to safely try out insurance financialization schemes, which, if successful, stand to make Aetna far more money than its FAC donation.

General-purpose foundations, the third source of nonprofit funding, raise money through a combination of individual donations, corporate donations, and managing endowment funds.[53] Foundation grants are desirable because they normally come with fewer bureaucratic strings attached than government grants. They do, however, come with a set of political limitations — namely that nonprofits, upon receiving foundation grants, must agree to conduct themselves in accordance with the political ideology and goals of the foundations.[54] A different kind of transactional relationship dominates here than in the case of corporations. Whereas corporations are looking for good press or a profitable investment, foundations are looking to build institutions that will carry out their missions and serve as reliable coalition partners. While corporations partner with nonprofits whose mission aligns with something already seen as useful to the corporation, foundations partner with nonprofits in order to shape what their mission is in the first place.

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52 Andrea Olstein, "Park Slope: The Warren Street Balancing Act," *New York Affairs* 7, no. 2 (1982), 59–64.

53 For the role that foundations play in elite policymaking networks, see, in addition, G. William Domhoff, *The Power Elite and the State: How Policy Is Made in America* (London: Routledge, 1990).

54 There are many examples of foundation officials communicating with nonprofit groups about the scope of their political activity and even taking away grants when the political actions of a nonprofit veered into territory they were not comfortable with. See, for example, INCITE!, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*.

Finally, there are individual contributions to nonprofits.[55] While wealthy members of the elite can change the budget of an institution overnight, individuals without huge amounts of wealth — those from the middle and working classes — would have to pool their money in order for their contributions to exert a similar effect. In today's highly demobilized, disorganized political environment, individuals typically direct their donations to large, service-oriented nonprofits, such as Planned Parenthood or the American Civil Liberties Union, without the expectation of ever receiving a direct benefit from the organization. Foundations and corporations are thus much more strategically positioned to use their financial power to direct action in accordance with a planned agenda.

To summarize, nonprofits are tasked with the provision of social welfare with significant government funding, but not enough that they are saved from having to pursue other reliable sources of revenue. One key source today is fees for services, which are themselves often highly subsidized by the government. This dynamic makes nonprofits and the constituencies they serve into quasi-market actors and quasi-consumers, respectively. Filling in the gaps of this monstrous creation are corporate, foundation, and individual donations. Since they both offer large grants and are embedded in institutional networks important to further fundraising, corporations and foundations play an outsize role in guiding intentionally undercapitalized nonprofits, making the third sector ultimately unwilling to pursue the kinds of social reform that would challenge capitalist class power.

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55 Evelyn Brody ("The Legal Framework for Nonprofit Organizations," in Powell and Steinberg, *The Nonprofit Sector*, 243) estimates individual contributions at around 20 percent, but these numbers are inconsistent across the literature, as many lump together foundation and individual donations. "Nonprofit Impact Matters," which breaks down the differences between foundation and individual contributions, estimates individuals at 8.7 percent of contributions, but this number only applies to "charitable" nonprofits, or 501(c)(3)s.

III. THE ELEMENTS OF NGOISM

The literature on NGOs is replete with sinister descriptions of corrupt handmaidens of capital. The third sector is often referred to as a "nonprofit industrial complex," which has the basic function of managing and controlling dissent toward the maintenance of the power of the ruling elite.[56] NGOs are seen by some as "co-optive mechanisms [that] the ruling class have used to respond to [working-class] struggles"; "by alleviating distress, they have secured their own positions against those who might displace them and thus have avoided revolt."[57]

As we argued in the preceding section, the essential truth in these alarming descriptions lies in the structural incentives to which NGOs are subject. NGOs do not always *directly* serve the interests of particular capitalists, but the sector does serve the class as a whole insofar as their activity in pursuit of social betterment systematically avoids taking on the profit motive. In this section, we argue that a specific political *culture* emerges from this situation, one that lines up nicely with the interests of capital. If, despite the seemingly endless diversity of its pet issues, the third sector's reports and recommendations, PowerPoint trainings, and

56 Craig Jenkins and Abigail Halcli have opposed this strong "social control" thesis to what they claim is a "more sophisticated" *channeling* thesis, which sees the third sector as merely channeling discontent toward "professional-movement organizations," defusing movement energy but also playing an important role in materializing movement goals (Craig Jenkins and Abigail Halcli, "Grassrooting the System? The Development and Impact of Social Movement Philanthropy, 1953–1990," in *Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities*, ed. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 244). It is undeniable that this "social channeling" does indeed result in the partial remediation of social ills, but defenders of the stronger "social control" thesis, like Roelofs and Arnove, would readily admit as much. The key question for them, as it is for us, is what purpose this "channeling" work serves: the substantive reform, or even transcendence, of a particular capitalist regime of accumulation, or its legitimation?

57 Barker, *Under the Mask of Philanthropy*, 2; Robert F. Arnove, "Introduction," in *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism*, 1–2.

advocacy campaigns all seem lifted from the same cauldron, it is because the sector is structurally incentivized to operate under the common assumption that social ills are *not* the result of political conflict between unequal classes, and thus do *not* require a change in the power dynamic of American society in order to be solved.

In what follows, we enumerate what we consider to be the three identifying traits of NGOism, which are a) technocratic, b) service-oriented, and c) fixated on the "community." These three features of NGO work derive from the structural constraints that give rise to them; they anchor the NGOist approach to solving social problems without altering the balance of social power. So as to defuse rather than stoke political conflict, nonprofit activity is technocratic; the ideal is to avoid the messy world of politics by empowering well-trained professionals to manage away social problems. Second, it is oriented toward the provision and improvement of services, both because these services defuse political opposition but also because they fracture and depoliticize constituencies, in such a manner that any failure of service delivery is always met with the reply: "Better services!" Finally, the third sector is fixated at the level of "communities" in order to limit the scope and ambition of social reforms but, more important, because the amorphous concept of "community" can be molded so as to privilege private interests and develop a leadership class of "community representatives" that legitimate those interests.

These features often make sense within their natural context: it is rational, for instance, for a nonprofit hospital to be technocratic and service-oriented, as angering key funders threatens its entire operation. They are nonetheless problematic in their own contexts — for instance, that avoidance of conflict puts the constituencies that nonprofit hospitals serve at a political disadvantage — and we will review the issues that arise from each feature in turn. But what is further curious and pernicious about

the features listed here is that they have been ported out of their nonprofit context into a *general* theory of social change: NGOism. This false universalization would make all activism into nonprofit activism — which is to say, activism that serves the status quo.

A. Technocratic

Through the advocacy explosion reviewed in the first section, nonprofit work increasingly became the domain of experts: those who knew how to navigate complex reporting requirements, put together comprehensive grant applications, and speak and write in what Mark Dowie has called "foundationese."[58] This has allowed foundation officers to become "thought leaders" who set agendas through the enforcement of norms around vocabulary, but it has also made the whole third sector more professionalized and technocratic. The third sector has thus contributed "to the overprofessionalization of social concerns, redefin[ed] basic human needs as 'problems' that only professionals can resolve, and thereby alienat[ed] people from the helping relationships they could establish with their neighbors and kin."[59]

The constancy of the ideal of "the neutral, highly trained 'expert'" since the 1930s is surely one of the greatest victories of the foundation world, as Judith Sealander has argued.[60] Opposed as they are to the influence of partisan passions and the uneducated masses, the implicit preference of those who embody this ideal is to be answerable to no real constituency, save for their funders. With a paternalistic beneficence, they act on *behalf* of the masses, without necessarily stooping to take direction from them.

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58 Dowie, *American Foundations*, xxiv.

59 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 36; Cf. Dowie, *American Foundations*, 7.

60 Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life*, 244.

However, the nonprofit world cannot totally do without "outside" input and has thus invested a good deal in the creation of organizational forms that suit their ends. Above all, the third sector militates against political contentiousness and seeks to shape its work before the fact in such a way as to avoid potential conflict. The Ford Foundation was the first organization to explicitly theorize "social conflict as an irrational, pre- or antimodern reaction to the inevitable progress to modern times," and thus something to be defused ahead of time.[61] The Kettering and Pew foundations have been particularly active in putting this theory into practice through the "civic renewal movement" to increase public participation in America's political life.

The civic engagement that these foundations promote is of a very particular kind: since "national politics is deemed too contentious," and the classical types of political organization, like parties and unions, are seen as "failures," they promote noncontentious forms of community engagement.[62] Kettering encourages the use of "Public Issues Forums," a model taken up by a range of nonprofit organizations, in which self-selected community members, under the guidance from expert facilitators, "deliberate" on certain issues and reach "consensus" on them. These well-publicized community "deliberations," the results of which are neatly presented to city councils, school boards, and state legislatures, are carried out in a managed environment where disagreement is muted.

This model of friendly and noncombative dialogue, constructed as an alternative to the forms of organization found in 1960s movement politics,[63] today dominates nonprofit spaces. In her study

61 Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 48.

62 Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 48.

63 Roelofs, *Foundations and Public Policy*, 51.

of contemporary "empowerment projects" in *Making Volunteers*, Nina Eliasoph describes the effortless avoidance of political controversy by volunteer activists in the name of "staying upbeat."[64] Politics is seen by her interviewees as an old and ugly domain, to be recognized by argument and disagreement; their not-for-profit volunteer work, by contrast, is understood as *obviously* good, a vehicle of enthusiasm rather than thought.

This debate-avoidant professionalism is further used to stymie debate outside of nonprofits. NGO actors position themselves as benevolent experts who know how to get things done; any effort to diverge from their plans is presented in neutral terms as bound to fail. In *Driven From New Orleans*, John Arena demonstrates this dynamic when he describes the relationship that NGOs in New Orleans have established with tenants' unions. These unions wanted to protect public housing in opposition to the mayor's plans for redevelopment, and NGOs stepped in to delegitimate their "confrontational strategy as simultaneously extremist and self-defeating."[65]

As Alice O'Connor and many others have argued, however, it is the NGOist technocratic approach that is itself ultimately a hindrance to political change. As O'Connor wrote of the work of the Office of Economic Opportunity, by inscribing "poverty research with a greater degree of precision, quantification, and methodological innovation than it had ever before achieved," the OEO had done a good deal to undermine its own role as a

> force for political change: for one thing by making poverty research a more specialized, and enclosed, profession; for another, by neutralizing poverty as a political problem by

64 Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*, 98.

65 John Arena, *Driven From New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 129.

> reducing it to quantifiable, individualized variables; most importantly by keeping the focus on the characteristics of poor people rather than on the economy, politics, and society more broadly construed.[66]

This was undoubtedly a function of the ideological constraints of the War on Poverty, and it's worth mentioning that the third sector has a strong tendency, for the reasons we cover in the second section of this essay, to theorize social problems in terms of "individual dysfunction" (thus its preference for "trainings" that educate those dysfunctions away).[67] But it also followed from the sector's professionalizing tendency, which mutes political conflict by framing it in terms of technical problems.

B. Service-Oriented

Service delivery is the most common activity in which nonprofit organizations engage. NGOism encourages the view that refining social services, rather than redistributing money and power, is the solution to social ills. If these services are not adequately alleviating poverty or inequality, then it is simply because they are poorly administered or require tapping into new pools of money. Central to the typical NGO theory of change, then, is the notion that innovation in service provision — making it more accessible, more efficient, or cheaper — is the key to social change.

Nonprofit social services come in at least two types: providers and innovators. *Providers* are the types of nonprofits one most commonly thinks of: nonprofit hospitals, universities, and organizations such as Planned Parenthood. They focus on a specific type of social need, such as education or health care, and supply a necessary social service in that area. This narrow approach creates

66 O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 194.

67 Dowie, *American Foundations*, 56.

specific political obstacles for the "constituencies" that nonprofits serve. Nonprofits typically proliferate by filling niche social needs, cultivating small constituencies who are then at a disadvantage when they attempt to advocate for funding on their behalf. Even large nonprofits that serve a wider base of people are politically disadvantaged because they can only build constituencies on a single issue based on their area of service provision. Whether the problem is looked at numerically or thematically, nonprofit services create "bases" that alone are ill-positioned to amass enough political power to ensure adequate and continued funding of their services. This is not a bug but a feature of nonprofit service delivery.

Innovators, on the other hand, direct their activity toward bettering the work of providers. Some do this through political advocacy, but most focus instead on the provision of special professional and technical expertise. An example of the latter type of nonprofit innovator is the 501(c)(3) TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project), which provides a variety of services, including evaluating hiring practices and implementing systems of talent management.

In 2013, Camden, New Jersey's school district was placed into state receivership due to persistently high dropout rates, building disrepair, and a $113 million budget shortage. As part of a huge district restructuring program, TNTP stepped in and, by the end of their involvement with the district, boasted about reducing district costs and implementing school leadership programs. But their efforts did not resolve the district's budget shortage, nor did they stop school closures.[68] Camden, one of the poorest cities in the United States, with 37 percent of the population living below poverty and a workforce participation rate of 57 percent, simply

68 "Camden, NJ: Jumpstarting Systemic Reform," TNTP (accessed March 12, 2021), tntp.org/what-we-do/case-studies/camden-jumpstarting-systemic-reform.

cannot adequately fund its school district, and the state and federal government are not forthcoming with additional funds to make up the budget shortfall. In building new structures for staff recruitment and retention, TNTP clearly focused on "problems" that are peripheral to Camden's real issues.

It is undeniable that social services partially remediate social ills, but they do so in such a manner as to alleviate symptoms rather than address causes.[69] The nonprofit service orientation ultimately leads away from political action that would resolve chronic underfunding of public goods.[70] The increasingly smaller and more technical scale they are capable of succeeding on worsens their long-term ability to solve the problems they are created to redress.[71] Rather than aiming to reverse this dynamic, a process that would demand political conflict, the NGOist mindset seeks to do more with less: we *can* serve "our communities" because we *must*. At root here is an unrepentant "do-goodery," oriented not toward building bonds of solidarity but rather toward serving others in need — toward *doing for* rather than *doing with* — complemented by a reflexive turn to "smarter" solutions as a means to improve service provision.[72]

C. Fixated on the "Community"

Odds are that within thirty seconds of reading through any nonprofit website, one will come across an exaltation of "community" — in Eric Hobsbawm's words, one of those "vapid phrases"

69 Joan Roelofs, "Liberal Foundations: Impediments or Supports for Social Change?", in *Foundations for Social Change: Critical Perspectives on Philanthropy and Popular Movements*, ed. Daniel R. Faber and Deborah McCarthy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 64.

70 Mollenkopf, *The Contested City*, 197.

71 Salamon, *The State of Nonprofit America*, 35.

72 Skocpol, "Advocates without Members," 502.

of "lost and drifting generations."[73] Calls to the community typically go hand in hand with commitments to deeply engage the citizenry, and thus to ensure that the nonprofit's demands and services are truly representative of the needs of the people. Despite the self-evident manner in which community is evoked, it is in reality an amorphous concept, subject to the will of whoever calls upon it.

During the War on Poverty, nonprofits were encouraged to engage in "community action," but from the outset, there was disagreement about what this entailed. Some saw community action as a version of radical liberal interest group politics, wherein a new means of organizing and giving voice to the powerless poor would be made possible. For others, "community" referred to a diverse set of groups whose leaders needed to engage in cohesive planning in order to ensure their particular geographic area would maximally flourish. In this view, "action" entailed bringing together government officials, politicians, businessmen, and people of all class backgrounds to work together and agree on needed services and opportunities.[74]

This disagreement points out a misconception common to the invocation of "community": communities do not exist a priori, waiting to be represented by well-intentioned actors. Rather, they are actively constructed for particular political purposes. Those political goals and the people selected as proper representatives of the "community" serve a much larger role in defining the

73 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

74 Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 [1996]); James L. Sundquist, *On Fighting Poverty: Perspectives from Experience* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Peter Marris and Martin Rein, *Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community Action in the United States*, Vol. 15, (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1967), 164–207.

"community" than the people ostensibly located within it.[75] This "careful selection, development, and monitoring of handpicked, 'grassroots' leaders," in accordance with the objectives of foundation funders, has been absolutely central to the third sector's vision of "community empowerment."[76]

Both understandings of community action nonetheless emphasized direct citizen involvement and viewed nonprofits as institutions that would catalyze the "community" to fight its own battles. This conceit quickly came under fire as nonprofits established themselves in cities and, in some cases, led visible, embarrassing fights against municipal governments.[77] As foundations and community nonprofits adjusted their conception of citizen engagement to dull this early agitational tendency, citizens in the "community" were encouraged to "get involved," but only by expressing their opinions to leaders, members of nonprofits boards, and nonprofit staffers, who would then make the real decisions. "Community building" settled into what it largely is today: the promotion of alliances *across* classes rather than within them, and the structuring of those alliances ahead of time in such a manner as to allow elite interests, by virtue of their control over resources and power, to dominate and define political agendas.

Emblematic of the way nonprofit institutions perpetuate these dynamics is the community development corporation (CDC). CDCs were first created by the Special Impact Program, part of a package of legislative amendments to temper the agitational effects of the War on Poverty. They offer a range of services aimed at ghetto uplift (such as jobs training programs, real estate development,

75 Ferguson, *Top Down*, 212.

76 Ferguson, *Top Down*, 213; Cf. Arena, *Driven From New Orleans*, 105.

77 John C. Donovan, *The Politics of Poverty* (New York: Pegasus Books, 1967); Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty*.

and small business lending) and encourage "localism and privatization [while eschewing] the grandiose, statist solutions of the dying New Deal order."[78]

For all their commitment to being "community controlled" vehicles that aim to make capitalism work in poor or developmentally struggling communities, CDCs have remained subordinate to the private decision-making of capitalist firms, and they provide no meaningful leverage for working-class community members to alter the course of development.[79] Vastly undercapitalized in comparison to for-profit development corporations and banks, they essentially serve to smooth over the fact that "community building" is typically responsive to profits rather than human needs. Indeed, the primary service CDCs offer is to negotiate with for-profit developers and provide technical advice on how to undertake residential and commercial development.[80]

As some of the most powerful community-based nonprofit institutions, CDCs demonstrate how nonprofit proclamations of community participation are typically only there to lend an aura of grassroots power. They have not reliably been able to construct institutions that are capable of forcing corporations to be responsive to community needs, but they *have* often provided legitimating cover for private development. No doubt, the third sector's understanding of "community" differs considerably from

78 Ferguson, *Top Down*, 211. Since the war on poverty, CDCs have continued to proliferate and are no longer viewed specifically as institutions designed to help the poor but are rather more broadly conceived as regular partners in local development.

79 Y. Thomas Liou and Robert C. Stroh, "Community Development Intermediary Systems in the United States: Origins, Evolution, and Functions," *Housing Policy Debate* 9, no. 3 (1998), 575–94.

80 Benjamin Marquez, "Mexican-American Community Development Corporations and the Limits of Directed Capitalism," *Economic Development Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1993), 287–95; Randy Stoecker, "The CDC Model of Urban Redevelopment: A Critique and an Alternative," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 19, no. 1 (1997), 1–22.

that of "community control" advocates in the late '60s. Nonetheless, given its domestication in the neoliberal period, when "community" is invoked today, it almost inevitably serves as a replacement for and obfuscation of "class."

IV. CONCLUSION

One does not need to dig very deeply into the literature on the third sector to find fairly scathing criticisms of it. Introductory texts do not shy away from jolting descriptions of nonprofits as sites where "the higher social classes … consolidate their position of influence, control, and social separation" or as "self-serving hobbies of the rich."[81] New foundation officers are told the oft-repeated joke, "You'll never again get a bad meal or hear a truth."[82] That the third sector is not what it seems to be is a secret hidden in plain sight.

Still, many scholars of foundations and nonprofits would readily recognize our view as simply echoing the left flank of their intellectual worlds and would argue, with academic dispassion, that a "balanced" perspective on the third sector would avoid the Manichaean views of the Left and the Right.[83] At the most general level, our response to this scholarly "progress" (besides "Follow the money!") is that it is embedded in precisely the pluralist framework that the third sector has done so much to propagate, and that social theorists rightly reject.

That foundations and nonprofits do some good in the world, that they advance legal recognition of marginalized subgroups or "concretize" social movement goals, is without question. The pluralists see here a balance to their subversion of democracy,

81 O'Neill, *Nonprofit Nation*, 43, 181.

82 O'Neill, *Nonprofit Nation*, 207.

83 See Sealander, *Private Wealth and Public Life*, 9; Barker, *Under the Mask of Philanthropy*, 63–6.

evidence that we are dealing with a "mixed bag" that can be reformed in better and worse ways. In contrast, we see the "good" that the third sector does as ameliorating social instability without challenging existing power dynamics.

The Left is generally split in its attitude toward the third sector: on the one hand, there are those who see NGOs as bastions of grassroots civic engagement. They are reflexively sought out as coalition partners, and their internal culture and language is uncritically absorbed as good and authentic (and, in turn, emulated). Some of this is undoubtedly a result of the simple fact that many leftists themselves work in the nonprofit sector. But this is also a natural outcome of the destruction of civic associational groups that make good coalition partners difficult to come by.

As we have argued here, the underlying dynamics of the third sector — specifically, its role in supplementing and supporting the provision of social welfare with undue influence from private interests — leads to certain consistent features of its activity, and these features dictate that that activity, regardless of ideological orientation, will not challenge the basic structures of capitalism. The explosion of third sector growth in the neoliberal period, and the corresponding decline of the power of unions and mass membership organizations, has resulted in a transformed civic universe within which elites are effectively insulated from popular pressure from below.[84] Not for nothing did "turn-of-the-century social reformers … vehemently [oppose] the prevailing practice of government subsidies to private charities on grounds that it impeded progress in establishing a modern system of universal public protections."[85] The third sector is everything the Walsh Commission worried it might become.

84 Skocpol, "Advocates without Members," 502–3.

85 Salamon, *Partners in Public Service*, 101.

The second attitude on the Left is a deep skepticism of NGOs. This sentiment broadly matches our own, but there is a tendency in this second group to speak about NGOs in a conspiratorial way, as if the essential problem with them is that they provide legal cover for bad men to do bad things.[86] There is more than a grain of truth in this view, but such analysis can unintentionally encourage the idea that there are just a few bad apples out there that can be plucked out with greater nonprofit accountability and oversight.[87]

The problem of the third sector for the Left is much more serious than that. The structural constraints imposed on NGOs severely limit the ability of even well-intentioned actors to make any appreciable societal difference, and, more often than not, they channel their activity into deference before the profit motive.

The implications of this analysis for the Left are thus fairly straightforward: our political orientation must minimize the effect of, or even explicitly reject, the dominant tendencies of NGOism. Thus, instead of technocratic noncontentiousness, we ought to encourage democratic debate, however "divisive" it may become. Instead of a service-oriented "doing for," we need to build solidarity through "doing with." And instead of a blinkered focus on "community" concerns, we must rehabilitate the class politics at the heart of the socialist project.

One might reply that the features of NGOism we have identified here are not propagated *only* by foundation-funded hacks, that they are staples of a broader left liberal discourse. This is true, but it also neglects the truly worldmaking power of the third sector: a whole generation of activists grew up in a society carefully curated by foundations and nonprofits, which furnished

86 Steve Eder and Matthew Goldstein, "Jeffrey Epstein's Charity: An Image Boost Built on Deception," *New York Times*, November 26, 2019.

87 Cf. Barker, *Under the Mask of Philanthropy*, 17–18.

textbooks in school, funded the work of college professors, trained campus-based student activist organizations, shaped neighborhood community organizations, educated social service providers, and provided "meaningful" work for the sons and daughters of the upper and middle classes. It should be unsurprising, then, that well-intentioned activists show up to political spaces today armed with NGOist wisdom, wanting to "be kind," to help others (naturally, less excited about projects of mutual self-interest and solidarity), and to favor decentralization and localism. For this reason, a technocratic, service-oriented, and community-focused NGOism pervades political spaces that ought to be democratic, solidaristic, and class-focused.

As the Bernie Sanders moment has demonstrated, a program of universal demands bears mass popular support. The task now is to build the kinds of working-class organizations capable of realizing those demands. NGOs and NGOism are not the only, let alone the primary, hindrances to accomplishing this task, but the mode of solving social problems that they propagate militates against challenging capitalist class power. Thus, the degree to which they are present in Left political spaces, either in material or ideological terms, is indicative of the organizational inhospitableness for channeling and expressing working-class power. As the collaboration between socialists and unionists around the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act demonstrates, the post-Bernie moment still contains promising signs of reversing the disastrous course of neoliberalism. If we are to take advantage of these opportunities, it is necessary to cast off the insidious influence of elite soft power so as to be capable of taking on the capitalist class without illusions.

ABSTRACT

An incident of alleged racial profiling at Smith College in 2018 provides a window into the extraordinary culture cultivated in elite colleges in the United States. The article is a careful reconstruction of the context in which the president of Smith College suspended an employee accused and later exonerated of racism in the context of the professional-managerial class's abandonment of basic liberal norms. In these colleges, the language of social justice has become just another instrument in the assertion of class privilege.

ESSAY

The Apotheosis of the Professional Class

Catherine Liu

By 2019, more than one-third of Americans over the age of twenty-five had a college degree, the highest proportion in US history.[1] The professional-managerial class (PMC) has made the bachelor's degree a necessary credential for anyone who wants to enter its ranks.

In colleges, especially small liberal arts colleges, students are learning the language of identity protocols and its ancillary politics, and they are able to exercise their sense of entitlement to forms of social interaction that enable them to function in and dominate

1 Kevin McElrath and Michael Martin, "Bachelor's Degree Attainment in the United States: 2005 to 2019," American Community Survey Briefs, February 2021, census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2021/acs/acsbr-009.pdf.

the liberal professions. In the meantime, liberal leaders find it all the more easy to dismiss the 64 percent of Americans who fail to earn that degree as backward and guilty of the societal ills that the PMC has individualized, psychologized, and managed.

If the majority of Americans do not attend college, the majority of college students in the United States do not attend private liberal arts colleges: public universities do most of the work of educating students, but we rarely hear about their individual attendees. They are the masses, unnamed and faceless, often evoked in images of spring breakers gone wild, or football fans dressed in Buckeyes regalia. In the popular media and in the popular imagination, attendees of small liberal arts colleges appear as individuals who are culturally significant, if sometimes more spoiled than your average twenty-year-old. What happens in private colleges takes on outsize importance, because these institutions are the training grounds for elite members of the PMC.

Liberal contempt for the "masses" and media fetishism of what goes on at elite private universities and colleges have shaped reporting on recent events at Smith College, a women's school that is nearly 150 years old, roiled by struggles over its management of conflicts shaped by social media, class, and race. In July 2018, a student at Smith leveled accusations of racism against members of staff after being questioned by a campus security officer about her presence in a building that was meant to be closed. On social media, she publicly identified the janitor who allegedly alerted security to her presence and two staff members who had nothing to do with this incident, branding them as racists. Her story about being racially profiled while eating lunch and minding her own business attracted attention from the national media, and Smith College officials promised speedy action to combat racism on campus.

Unexpectedly, an independent investigation commissioned by the college found no evidence of wrongdoing or racial bias on the part of the accused staff. However, the college administration still pressed them to take part in "restorative" processes that implied they were guilty of an offense. Behind the focus on race in the public discourse around the incident lurked another story about class privilege and social and economic disadvantage.

THE LIBERAL ARTS COMPLEX

Th 2018 incident at Smith College is broadly representative of what is happening at other private institutions located in rural areas of the Northeast, such as Haverford, Amherst, Williams, and Wellesley. These colleges have become laboratories of PMC culture, drawing well-educated students from both private high schools and academically excellent public high schools. Like its competitors, Smith has worked hard to diversify its student body and, to a lesser extent, its faculty. Smith has attempted to forge its ideals of equity, diversity, and inclusion in colonial-era buildings and idyllic quadrangles behind ivy-covered walls. But its very location vitiates such efforts.

Smith, like many other elite liberal arts colleges, has become an island of cosmopolitanism, diversity, and prosperity in an area that, along with most of rural America, has suffered decades of economic stagnation. In 2019, Northampton's unemployment rate was twice that of Boston's, and its economy is reliant on tourism and education. Colleges like Smith, like any other institution, employ blue-collar and union workers to clean and repair their quaint facilities or to serve their student body food in cafeterias. Smith draws on the local employment pool to staff its lower-level administrative positions that guarantee the smooth running of its bureaucracy. Good management of a college's resources means paying these sorts of workers as little as you can get away with

while rewarding famous professors and upper-level administrators to the greatest possible extent. Unfortunately for the administration of the colleges, they cannot curate their working-class employees, who, unlike the PMC bosses and the PMC-aspiring student body, often remain bound to their places of birth, notoriously rooted in communities and families that allow them to survive on almost poverty wages.

Despite increasing rates of college enrollment in the United States, economic mobility for the majority of Americans has stagnated over the past fifty years.[2] The costs of higher education have become increasingly privatized, as generations of American college students now labor under the burden of unpayable student loan debt. An educated populace is a public good and a necessary condition for democracy. However, the expansion of college education has not led to a dramatic improvement in the quality of debate in the American public sphere. We are caught between two poles, as right-wing media outlets like Fox News, on the one hand, flirt with conspiracist thinking and trade in rage, suspicion, and xenophobia, while the likes of MSNBC and CNN compete in moral panics and PMC virtue hoarding, on the other.

We might even argue that the combination of increasing economic inequality and the growth of college participation has produced a divided and obdurately suspicious polity. An economic system of inequality has exacerbated disparities, enabled by the meritocracy and its secular moral code of liberalism that PMC elites have redefined to suit their own material and psychological needs. The ideal of education as a driver of social mobility is a fantasy that keeps a corrupt meritocracy creaking along, an

2 Marcus Lu, "Is the American Dream over? Here's what the data says," World Economic Forum, September 2, 2020.

institution broadly recognized as fatally flawed and unfit for the task of distributing education as a public good.

As levels of educational attainment have increased along with inequality, the lure of admission to the most prestigious colleges and universities has grown stronger. A degree from an elite private college is supposed to be a marker of indelible distinction that will stay with the graduate for life. Of the Americans with college degrees, 4 percent have attended private liberal arts colleges. In total, students and graduates from small liberal arts colleges comprise about 1 to 1.5 percent of all Americans. Even in this rarefied sector of higher education, stratification and the hoarding of prestige and capital is opening up a pitiless divide between wealthier and poorer institutions. While schools like Smith have seen their already massive endowments balloon during the pandemic and under an ebullient stock market, Ithaca College is looking to lay off 20 percent of its faculty.[3]

IDEALS AND REALITIES

Those who attend institutions like Smith, Amherst, and Williams may not all hail from the nation's wealthiest 1 percent, but they constitute a very special part of the college-going population. In beautiful, rural settings, they enjoy intense personal attention from professors who are also graduates of elite institutions. In their small classes, students should be able to receive, in isolation from the pressures of family, profession, and market, a well-rounded education in skepticism, curiosity, critical thinking, and general knowledge. This Socratic training comes with the added bonus of strong networking and social bonds with classmates and alumni alike. For these rewards, ambitious students and their families do

3 Colleen Flaherty, "The Growing Ithaca Resistance," *Inside Higher Ed*, February 8, 2021.

not balk at the sky-high tuition and fees, which at Smith are close to $80,000 per year. Smith boasts that 58 percent of its students enjoy financial aid.[4] Why not simply lower the tuition? Elite private education has become a luxury good and an important site of philanthropic activity. Just as you wouldn't want to lower the price of a luxury item like a Hermès bag or a Gucci coat, private colleges play the high price/discount game with which consumers of late capitalism's fake deals are all too familiar. "Supporting" worthy students is a philanthropic activity that the college's development officers can sell to wealthy donors for tax deductible donations.

Of course, the realities supported by Smith alumnae, hovering behind the ideal of liberal arts education, are deeply racist and imperialist. Smith alumna Nancy Reagan launched her "Just Say No" propaganda campaign for the War on Drugs while her husband, Ronald Reagan, dismantled the welfare state, deregulated the American media, undermined union power, demonized working-class African Americans, and ignored the AIDS epidemic. Further back in time, in the 1930s and '40s, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek made trip after trip to the United States, armed with her Wellesley degree, begging for resources for her husband to fight the Chinese communists.

Until the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges like Smith saw rising numbers of applications, reaching an all-time high in 2018, with 5,780 applicants.[5] In 2020, Smith's endowment reached $1.9 billion, or $638,000 per student. October 2020 brought the biggest gift in the college's history into its coffers: $50 million.[6] These

4 https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/smith-glance (accessed April 17, 2021).

5 "Data About Smith," https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/institutional-research-smith-data (accessed April 17, 2021).

6 "Endowed Funds," smith.edu/about-smith/giving/ways-to-give/endowed-funds (accessed April 17, 2021); Ryan Trowbridge, "Smith College receives largest endowment gift in its history," *Western Mass News*, October 7, 2020.

numbers are benchmarks of success for its Yale-educated president, Kathleen McCartney, who left her position as dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education to assume leadership of the college in 2013. According to the latest *Chronicle of Higher Education* numbers, McCartney's executive compensation package totals $720,690 a year.[7]

Although McCartney has a PhD in psychology and a distinguished academic career, she is, like most contemporary college leaders, preoccupied with fundraising. In addition, following national trends, she has focused on redefining the liberal arts mission of Smith to suit the needs of students who are more pragmatic about their majors, as well as the culture of start-ups and businesses that want to see innovation and entrepreneurship touted in academic mission statements throughout American higher education. On her Smith webpage, McCartney predictably declares a deep affection for innovation and entrepreneurship as core elements of the Smith education. She is also committed to helping Smith women succeed in the C-suite.[8] Today, 46.7 percent of Smith undergraduates are majoring in math and science — a number that has steadily increased under McCartney's watch.

If McCartney was really engaged in defending a liberal ideal of education, not to mention academic freedom and professional research protocols, that would put her in conflict with the interests of capital represented by Smith's donors and the corporations looking to hire ambitious young women who graduate from the school. Instead, she and Smith tout leadership as a quality the college promotes and nurtures: Is the BA in essence the new MBA? PMC university administrators have covertly merged their

7 Dan Bauman, Julia Piper, and Brian O'Leary, "Executive Compensation at Public and Private Colleges," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 25, 2021.

8 "About President McCartney," smith.edu/president-kathleen-mccartney/about-president-mccartney (accessed April 17, 2021).

language, outlook, and institutional mission statements with the interests of wealthy donors and business leaders.

"Leadership," as a quality promoted by colleges and universities, is simply a code word for compliance with business needs — if we think of classical leadership qualities in literature and history, we find a set of traits highly incompatible with neoliberal institutions. Ruthlessness, love of power, charisma, a willingness to sacrifice others and the self, stoicism, skepticism, decisiveness, cunning, and single-mindedness are all qualities shared by fictional and historical leaders, from Napoleon and Catherine the Great to Odysseus, Genghis Khan, and Julius Caesar, to Joan of Arc, Andrew Carnegie, and Abraham Lincoln. When a college or university administrator speaks of leadership as a value they want to inculcate in their students, they are more likely referring to the examples of Jack Welch, the CEO who downsized General Electric, or Elizabeth Holmes, founder of the failed start-up Theranos, a young woman who convinced investors that she had invented a revolutionary method of rapidly testing blood using shockingly small blood samples. Like Adam Neumann, deposed CEO of WeWork, her leadership qualities and ability to deceive people grossed her hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars.

A NEW REGIME

What does an institution like Smith do when its mission, once grounded in flawed but non-market-driven liberal arts ideals, do when it has completely surrendered to the demands of the C-suite? It adopts a language of social justice, inclusion, diversity, and equity that no human resources manager from Morgan Stanley, Citibank, or ExxonMobil would find offensive. If the pre-woke workplace was filled with sexism, racism, and overtly punitive evaluation protocols that encouraged the promotion of networked

white male employees, the contemporary workplace has evolved into an experimental site of surveillance and retraining, all in the name of employer reputation washing.

Kathleen McCartney's handling of the 2018 incident of alleged racial profiling dramatizes this process in stark detail. The aftermath of the incident has resulted in mandatory anti-racism training for Smith staff, whose average salary is $43,000, and the establishment of affinity dormitories where "students of color and Black students" can choose to live.[9] Even though employee training has repeatedly been proven ineffective at preventing bias or harassment in the workplace, employers across the United States are investing in such training against sexual harassment and racism in order to deal with issues of legal compliance and liability while also flashing the badge of the enlightened and the bias-free.[10] In reserving dormitories for students of color, forty years after federally mandated desegregation of public schools and housing, the Smith administration is effectively admitting to having fostered such a racially hostile environment that students of color have to shield themselves from it by residing separately.

Meanwhile, in the classrooms and across campus, students imbibe a culture of extraordinary privilege, not just economically but psychologically. Their every need is catered to and their every thought validated by their professors, who are at their beck and call — so much so that tenure is effectively determined by student assessments of professors' "performance." It is a culture in which the language of social justice is ubiquitous but the ability to distinguish between slights and annoyances, on the one hand, and genuine social oppression, on the other, is quietly extinguished.

9 "Special-Interest Housing," smith.edu/student-life/residence-life/houses/special-interest (accessed April 17, 2021.)

10 Rhana Natour, "Does sexual harassment training work?" PBS NewsHour, January 8, 2018.

Whereas earlier generations of students at these elite colleges were openly socialized into taking their place among the ruling elite, the current crop is trained to perform that function while draping it in the language of affirmation, empowerment, and justice. And the emerging multicultural cohort of managers and influencers use their social justice portfolio to great effect as they climb their way up the PMC career ladder.

All these aspects of college culture were on display in the alleged racial profiling incident of July 31, 2018. It attracted national coverage after Smith sophomore Oumou Kanoute posted about it on her Facebook page, picked up by national news outlets including CNN, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, which emphasized Kanoute's trauma in their reporting.[11] In her Facebook post, Kanoute stated that she was having lunch and relaxing in the living area of Smith's Tyler House when someone called campus police on her. She described being observed by a man and a woman before the police arrived, testifying that they were pacing a room away from her, agitated by her very presence. When a campus security officer finally arrived and approached her, accompanied by a janitor, they questioned her right to be where she was.

Kanoute reported being deeply traumatized after the incident, afraid to go to sleep in her room and unable to resume normal life on campus:

> All I did was be black. It's outrageous that some people question my being at Smith … No student of color should have

11 Nicole Chavez and Sophia Lipp, "Smith College student who was racially profiled while eating says the incident left her so shaken she can't sleep," CNN, August 3, 2018; Daniel Victor, "'All I Did Was Be Black': Police Are Called on College Student Eating Lunch," *New York Times*, August 2, 2018; Cleve R. Wootsen Jr, "'All I did was be black': Someone called the police on a student lying on a dorm couch," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2018.

to explain why they belong at prestigious white institutions. I worked my hardest to get into Smith, and I deserve to feel safe on my campus.

In response to the Facebook post, McCartney addressed a public apology to Kanoute and promptly suspended the janitor involved in the incident.[12] None of the immediate reporting raised any questions about McCartney's apology or the worker's suspension. Kanoute herself referred to him in social media posts as a "racist punk." The *Washington Post* quoted Phillip Atiba Goff, president of the Center for Policing Equity: "The issue is that, for many folks, law enforcement has been seen as their own racism valet."[13] The description implies that the Smith janitor was behaving like an entitled aristocrat or boss, calling upon police to govern the campus according to his racist views. The story appeared to confirm liberal suspicions about a toxic and deeply entrenched strain of racism and a culture of fear and resentment among working-class whites, including those working low-paying jobs at small liberal arts colleges — people whose racism is so irrational and inescapable that they are willing to jeopardize their livelihoods when they act on their alleged white supremacy.

INVESTIGATING THE STORY

As mentioned earlier, there was an afterword to the incident: Smith commissioned an independent third-party investigation of the events on July 31, 2018. The report found no evidence that any Smith employee had behaved improperly.[14] Major news

12 Kathleen McCartney, "Strengthening Our Community in Response to the Events of July 31," Smith College, August 2, 2018.

13 Wootsen Jr, "'All I did,'" *Washington Post*.

14 Sanghavi Law Office, "Investigative Report of July 31, 2018 Incident," October 28, 2018, smith.edu/sites/default/files/media/Documents/President/investigative-report.pdf

outlets ignored that report upon its public release in October 2018, although Emma Whitford at Inside Higher Ed published a piece on it.[15] Whitford reported that the Sanghavi Law Office hired by Smith had discovered no evidence that the suspended employee was motivated by racial bias, while noting that many Smith alumnae and students had denounced the report's findings on social media. The American Civil Liberties Union, which had begun representing Kanoute, also condemned the report.[16]

The investigators interviewed the "Caller," who remained unnamed, and Tyler Hall cafeteria worker Jackie Blair, with whom Kanoute had a brief exchange on the day of the incident, in the presence of their union representatives. The report made public the nature of the exchange between Kanoute and Blair, who had served Kanoute food before the incident, as well as the exchange between Kanoute, the janitor, and the police officer. The janitor, who was in his sixties, made a mistake when he called campus police that day: Kanoute was right to assert that he could have come over to talk to her before doing so. However, the police officer was not armed, as she had claimed. His recorded interaction with her was polite and apologetic.

In February 2021, the *New York Times* published a lengthy investigation of the incident by Michael Powell.[17] Conservative figures took up the plight of the working-class people involved in the drama, two of whom Kanoute named in subsequent Facebook posts. In the *NYT* opinion pages, Bret Stephens accused

15 Emma Whitford, "Smith Finds No Bias in Incident That Roiled Campus," In*side Higher Ed*, October 30, 2018.

16 "ACLU Statement on Smith College Findings on Racial Profiling of Black Student," ACLU, October 29, 2018.

17 Michael Powell, "Inside a Battle Over Race, Class and Power at Smith College, *New York Times*, February 24, 2021.

the liberal left of capitulating to the "Woke left."[18] In March 2021, conservative African American leaders from a group called 1776 Unites penned an open letter to Smith, condemning McCartney's handling of the incident:

> Many of us participated in the Civil Rights movement, fighting for equal treatment under the law, which included due process and the presumption of innocence. We didn't march so that Americans of any race could be presumed guilty and punished for false accusations while the elite institution that employed them cowered in fear of a social media mob. We certainly didn't march so that privileged Blacks could abuse working class whites based on "lived experience."[19]

McCartney had said in her apologies to the student that she accepted Kanoute's account of what happened based on the category of "lived experience."

As an addendum — or a sideshow, depending on your point of view — one former Smith employee, Jodi Shaw, created a small-scale media furor. Following the July 2018 incident, Shaw refused to talk about race during mandatory anti-racism training, then quit her position as a student support coordinator and publicly denounced Smith as a workplace hostile to its white employees. She found support in right-wing circles and published an open letter to Kathleen McCartney on the Substack of conservative provocateur Bari Weiss, while articulating grandiose hopes for "change" on her own YouTube channel.[20] Shaw, a single mother

18 Bret Stephens, "Smith College and the Failing Liberal Bargain, *New York Times*, March 1, 2021.

19 Greta Jochem, "Letter castigates Smith over handling of 2018 incident where no bias was found," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, March 24, 2021; "1776 Unites Open Letter to Smith College," March 22, 2021, 1776unites.com/essays/1776-unites-open-letter-to-smith-college/.

20 Bari Weiss, "Whistleblower at Smith College Resigns Over Racism," Com-

of two, also started a GoFundMe page that has attracted over $200,000 in donations. She styles herself as a voice for Smith employees who are afraid to speak up against McCartney's administration. Shaw is a Smith alumna, and when she quit her job, she was making $45,000 a year. While she may have rejected the invasiveness of Smith's anti-bias training, she's no working-class heroine. Her YouTube videos and written denunciations of Smith's anti-white culture are filled with familiar PMC-engineered clichés about visibility, social change, victimhood, and representation.

Like McCartney, Shaw wants the public and her community to believe that she is operating on behalf of the rights of white workers at Smith. She refers to giving voice to those silenced by Smith's workplace culture, but while she may seem delusional and reactionary, we should judge McCartney just as harshly for her equally far-fetched claims. In apologizing to Kanoute and asserting that the student belongs "in all Smith spaces," she claims that her administration is building "an inclusive, diverse and sustainable community … Members of the Smith campus community share a responsibility to ensure that each of us is safe and each of us is treated with respect."[21] By repeating the word "community" over and over again, McCartney hopes to cast away the unequal reality of the employer/employee relationship that defines her antagonism toward the janitor she put on administrative leave on the basis of a student's Facebook post.

McCartney may have displayed the leadership qualities necessary to guarantee her bona fides as a neoliberal boss, ready to treat her employees as guilty before proven innocent, but she wants her peers and her students to see her as an enlightened

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mon Sense with Bari Weiss, February 20, 2021.

21 McCartney, "Strengthening Our Community."

college president who is on the side of those fighting against a racist society. Her willingness to sacrifice workers on the altar of liberal anti-racism, based merely on the word of an unhappy student, is another sign of her obdurate class identity. I have shown elsewhere that PMC elites have a habit of scapegoating poor whites for the sins of a racist society.[22]

Liberalism once touted the presumption of innocence and a general skepticism as markers of its superiority to totalitarian regimes like its much-despised adversaries in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Today's PMC leaders are eager to embrace an entirely fictious and antisocial form of virtue with disregard for due process and reason, all in the name of narcissistic self-preservation in the face of evidence of their lack of judgment and integrity. I do not expect the president of a small liberal arts college to be a socialist or even a progressive, but I am genuinely surprised at McCartney's utter lack of commitment to the very values of due process and fact-finding that a college like Smith claims to defend and uphold.

Jodi Shaw is now relying on social media celebrity and a lawsuit against Smith to guarantee her livelihood: McCartney took a pay cut during the pandemic but otherwise occupies her office unmolested and unbothered by her abuse of power and her errors in judgment. The leadership cadre to which she belongs is ultimately very forgiving of those in positions of power. McCartney showed herself willing to defend the meritocratic line that the best educated and most well paid among us can, in sacrificing any relationship to material truths, maintain positions of authority and coercion over a myriad of underlings they like to call "members of their community."

22 Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

"DON'T LET A RICH STUDENT REPORT YOU"

Mark Patenaude was one of two Smith employees misidentified by Kanoute on Facebook as having called the police on her. He told the *New York Times*: "We used to joke, don't let a rich student report you, because if you do, you're gone."[23] That joke is one of the few accurate things that have been said about employee-student-administration relationships at Smith in all the discourse around the 2018 incident. While manufacturing jobs have disappeared from New England, postindustrial service work has expanded, with a feminized workforce doing the labor of maintaining the American prestige economy, supporting liberal professions and the culture industry.[24] In the postindustrial workplace, where service is key, worker discipline takes the form of constant surveillance by customers and technology.

While Karl Marx described the factory as the infernal site of worker exploitation and coercion, postindustrial workplaces are supposed to provide weightless, frictionless experiences, from one-click shopping to liberal arts educations that erase the presence of the human worker. The coercive power of labor, in its rawest forms, is increasingly disguised by the language of "woke" management and human resources. If McCartney and Kanoute are aligned, it is because they are willing to treat as guilty and discipline the least respected and lowest paid workers at Smith College.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild analyzed this regime of affectual self-management in her book *The Managed Heart*, a study of flight attendants and bill collectors. Hochschild emphasizes that the presentation of the correct attitude is a critical element in

23 Powell, "Inside a Battle," *New York Times*.

24 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

postindustrial service work.[25] Patenaude describes an environment in which a cafeteria or janitorial worker at Smith must not only do their job well but must also produce the appropriate attitude of service toward students — or risk being denounced and fired.

Kanoute also named Blair, the cafeteria worker, as a Smith employee who had participated in racial profiling. Blair was in Tyler Hall that day, serving food. She had a brief exchange with Kanoute about access to the dining hall during summer, when it was reserved for teenagers attending a camp. All calls to campus police are recorded, so it is beyond dispute that Blair did not call the police, while Patenaude was not working at the time of the call.

After Kanoute's post appeared, wrongly naming her as the caller, Blair received phone calls at her home telling her she "didn't deserve to live," and found notes taped to her car declaring her a "racist." Although she was not guilty of any wrongdoing, Smith administration urged Blair to go into mediation with Kanoute. She refused. In a message to the Smith community in August 2018, McCartney evoked the concepts of "restorative justice … willing apology, forgiveness and reconciliation," in reference to the incident.[26] By using a term associated with criminal justice, McCartney implied that a crime had been committed. By asking Blair to participate in mediation with Kanoute, she assumed that Blair was guilty of something. Within a couple of months, the independent report had exonerated Blair of any wrongdoing.

HIDDEN INJURIES

All Smith employees are now obliged to participate in anti-racism training, which requires white participants to talk about their

25 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012 [1983]).

26 Kathleen McCartney, "Reflections on the Events on July 31," Smith College, August 30, 2018.

childhood experiences of race while "confessing" to harboring racist ideas. If the capitalists studied by Marx in the nineteenth century wanted to extract as much labor as physically possible from their workers, the postindustrial boss seems to want to invade and reshape every element of their workers' psyche. How did the demand for racial justice mutate into a new form of worker discipline?

One reason may lie in the fact that PMC bosses have always been eager to find ways of sorting workers while promoting conversation about bias, rather than confronting the brutal reality of class relations and power dynamics in the workplace. Powell's *New York Times* report quoted one telling remark from a Smith professor: "It is safe to say race is discussed far more often than class at Smith. It's a feature of elite academic institutions that faculty and students don't recognize what it means to be elite."[27] PMC elites have learned that they can use the alleged racism of the white working class to justify the social stratification and economic inequality that characterize American capitalism. How else could Smith, a school allegedly focused on social justice, justify the remarkable pay differential between its president and its average employee?

In 1972, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb published *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, a book that summarized the findings of 150 interviews with white working-class people who lived in what the authors called "urban villages" in the Boston area, just a few hours' drive from Northampton and Smith College.[28] Sennett and Cobb focused on the case of Frank Rissarro (a pseudonym), who spoke to them during their interview in a confessional mode

27 Powell, "Inside a Battle," *New York Times*.

28 Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993 [1972]).

for three hours without stopping. Rissarro was born into poverty, raised by a violent and abusive father, and had managed to attain a lower-level white-collar job at a bank: "Rissarro talked to the interviewer in a peculiar way: he treated him as an emissary from a different way of life, as a representative of a higher, more educated class, before whom he spread a justification of his entire life."[29] Rissarro was especially ashamed of his inability to take control of his life, to gain autonomy and satisfaction at work. He assumed that his college-educated interviewers enjoyed a dignity at work of which he was deprived. Although he displayed a casual contempt for his college-educated colleagues at the bank who had a relaxed attitude about work and no relationship to craft or manual labor, he had also internalized a sense of inferiority toward those who were more educated than him.

Sennett and Cobb treated Rissarro without judgment; he was able to speak openly to them about his life because of the empathy they displayed. However, they would prove to be exceptions to the rule for their class. College-educated elites have increasingly recoiled from lives and perspectives like Rissarro's, abjuring class as a category of analysis in favor of any other form of difference. Universities have taken to categorizing their working-class students with the more user-friendly term "first-gen," confident that a college education will differentiate their students so clearly from their families that their progeny will henceforth go on to be college-educated as well.

Fifty years after Sennett and Cobb undertook their project of interviewing working-class people in Boston's white ethnic enclaves, McCartney has proven that Rissarro was absolutely correct in assuming a defensive attitude with regard to college-educated elites. Sennett and Cobb were surprised by Rissarro's

29 Sennett and Cobb, *Hidden Injuries*, 24.

social anguish: he was a man who had escaped a violent working-class family and obtained a lower-tier white-collar job, but he could not resign himself to the emptiness and futility of his work. Unable to make peace with the culture of social mobility, Rissarro remained ambivalent about his status in the world. Sennett and Cobb were interested in the tightly knit, insular world of the white ethnic working class in the Boston area, which revealed itself as a place where its inhabitants felt the need to prove themselves worthy of respect. The dignity afforded to the college educated was something the working class felt they constantly had to earn. This defensiveness and the injury of living in a class society that judged and shunned them forced them into tight-knit neighborhoods and communities, against which their sons and daughters eventually rebelled.

Two years after the publication of *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, the Boston busing riots exploded across working-class white neighborhoods forced by the state government to integrate their public schools. The ugly images of working-class whites unleashing violence against black students bused into white neighborhoods were seared into the PMC liberal imagination. White families with means moved out of Boston to the suburbs or sent their children to the many excellent private schools in the area. The white ethnic enclaves that Sennett and Cobb chose as sites for their sociological research became increasingly alienated from the world of PMC liberalism, and many working-class whites retreated into their own suburbs and the reactionary, anti–New Deal politics of Ronald Reagan.

Brown v. Board of Education was the Supreme Court case that precipitated the racial integration of the American public school system, but its insistence on equality of educational resources and student populations is a dim memory today. In our time, equality is almost never mentioned in the highly administered forms of

diversity and inclusion touted by university administrators. De facto segregation, like the affinity dormitories put in place at Smith, represents a new balkanization of identity. Since the early 1970s, inequality has intensified in every American ethnic and racial category and in every stratum of American income: from African Americans to Asian Americans to income distributions across society, wealth has accrued to fewer people at the top of each group, leaving people at the center and bottom struggling to survive with compressed wages and degrading living and working conditions.

It is against a backdrop of grotesque and growing levels of economic inequality in the country that, at Smith College, the real fear experienced by Oumou Kanoute prompted the school's president to judge her staff as being existentially guilty of the sin of American racism. The gleam of the new economy and globalization may have worn off, especially after the financial collapse of 2008, but stratification continues unabated. The denigration of the working class, and of labor as a whole, allows the PMC to preside over a situation in which it serves the whims of capital but clothes itself in vainglorious colors of self-righteousness. Unable to see beyond its own self-interest, it has made social justice an individual affair that can only be adjudicated in a secular confession. In a postindustrial economy, working-class people must swallow their pride in order to adapt to serving the PMC.

At Smith, workers must be an invisible field of support for its institutional fantasy of social justice so that its students enjoy a frictionless college experience: Kanoute was not a victim of racism. She was a victim of PMC instrumentalization of race and poor, sociopathic mentoring. She learned that, by simply posting a complaint on Facebook, she could induce the college president to make an apology and have the ACLU rush to her defense. This is not a good lesson for any teenager to learn, that voicing one's

suspicions can lead to the potential destruction of someone's livelihood. The investigation that exonerated the falsely accused employees will forever link Kanoute's name to a farcical drama orchestrated by a spineless college "leader," an experienced and educated woman who should have shown greater circumspection with regard to her student and her employees.

The 2018 incident at Smith allegorizes the way elites have sought to suppress discussion of working-class employment conditions in a world with a pitifully frayed social safety net. In the absence of national health care, loss of employment is nothing less than catastrophic for any worker. McCartney can disguise her abuse of power as a boss by referring to misguided and distorted ideas of campus politics and social justice, but we should ask ourselves what kind of education Smith is actually offering its students by having its president behave with impunity in this way. Furthermore, we should ask whether Smith and other institutions like it should exist at all, and what social function private colleges perform in constructing themselves as an illusory classless community, serving the principles not of education for education's sake but of cosmetic social justice, adapted to corporate America's relentless demand for allegiance and compliance to the grifter-friendly qualities of innovation and entrepreneurship.[30]

It is time to think about dissolving private colleges and their endowments and merging them with public institutions — in Smith's case, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, a nearby public university. UMass Amherst educates 24,233 undergraduates, 77 percent of whom come from within the state. After decades of public austerity, its tuition has risen steadily, but at $15,791 for

30 "Liberal Arts Colleges Making a Big Impact," Liberal Arts Colleges, liberalartscolleges.com/liberal-arts-colleges-making-a-big-impact/.

in-state students, it is less than one-third of the amount Smith charges, $55,830.[31] It is already part of the Five College Consortium, including Hampshire, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Amherst, which allows students to take courses across the five campuses.

If working toward structural equality is a liberal goal, the dissolution of private college endowments should be a step that we as a nation are willing to contemplate. Bernie Sanders proposed free public higher education for all: this is an admirable policy, but it's one that keeps the structural gap between public universities and community colleges and their elite private counterparts intact. Now is the time to be bold about imagining a different future, one founded on liberating and socializing for the public good the education and wealth that have been stockpiled and distorted by an utterly corrupt class of sycophants for capital.

Education for education's sake is the birthright of every human being. After fifty years of neoliberal education, we must strip away the veil of virtue behind which elites try to hide their deep disdain for the people over whom they rule.

31 "UMass Board of Trustees Approves Massachusetts Student Tuition Freeze for 2021–2022 Academic Year," University of Massachusetts Amherst, April 14, 2021; "Tuition & Fees," Smith College, smith.edu/about-smith/sfs/undergraduate-tuition (Accessed April 17, 2021).

ABSTRACT

A major new materialist study, *Green Unpleasant Land*, explores the special links between the dispossessions of race and class in the English countryside across four centuries of imperial history. Comprehensive and erudite, Corinne Fowler's book highlights radical historical and creative responses to the exclusionary politics of rural England.

REVIEW

Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020)

Empire and Architecture

Rena Jackson

Debates around race, empire, and slavery continue to make headlines on both sides of the Atlantic. The past year alone saw a new wave of organized protests launched by Black Lives Matter in response to entrenched cultures of violence and systemic racism in the United States. Radical campaigns in the United States were followed by All Black Lives UK marches, which featured the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol. A prominent seventeenth-century merchant and Tory member of parliament, Colston's statuary presence stood as a reminder that slavery and imperial politics were historically yoked to the rapacious greed of social elites. Oprah's March 2021 TV interview with Meghan Markle and Prince Harry, in which questions of skin

color and royal entitlement were raised, further foregrounded the pet obsessions of elites with race and bloodline as indices of inclusion and belonging.

Corinne Fowler's *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* arrives at a timely juncture, with many of its themes and concerns generating attention through a maelstrom of political and media vitriol from angsty conservatives. Fowler's UK-based collaborative work with schools, heritage practitioners, and other academics, including her public-facing project Colonial Countryside, has come under fire from Conservative MPs and the tabloid press for researching and educating the public about historical links between English country houses and colonialism.[1]

Fowler recently contributed her academic insights into such links to a paradigm-shifting report published by England's National Trust, a society founded in 1895 and entrusted in the 1930s with the acquisition of declining country estates as part of its remit to make places of historic interest accessible to the public.[2] The report finds that ninety-three of the organization's three hundred historic houses have colonial links to transatlantic slavery and the East India Company. The report also reveals how the colonial dealings of England's landed classes historically meant that people, commodities, and capital were continually crossing an imperial arc spanning England's rural spaces and the British Empire's exploited hinterlands.

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1 For an overview of the Colonial Countryside project, see the University of Leicester website, https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/creativewriting/centre/colonial-countryside-project [accessed March 24, 2021]. For a summary of recent attacks in response to Fowler's collaborative work, see Corinne Fowler's blog piece for *Hacked Off*, "Public debate is important. Waves of press and political attacks damage it," March 11, 2021.

2 For the National Trust report, "Addressing Our Histories of Colonialism and Historic Slavery," see nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust [accessed March 24, 2021].

The significance of this report cannot be overestimated. Soon after its publication, Parliament's fifty-six-strong Conservative "Common Sense Group" banded together in response, declaring a "culture war." House of Commons leader Jacob Rees-Mogg even gave a speech in Parliament expressing his concern about the report's affiliation of Winston Churchill's house, Chartwell, with Churchill's well-known objections to Indian independence in his capacity as colonial secretary. However, despite right-wing efforts to stifle debate — among them charging the Charity Commission to investigate whether the National Trust had breached charity laws with its report — the Conservatives and various press outlets such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Times*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Spectator* have been foiled in their efforts.[3] The Charity Commission has cleared the National Trust of being in breach of its charitable purpose, and there are clear signs that other publicly funded sites — for example, Kew Gardens and Historic England (until recently known as the English Heritage Trust) — will be following in the footsteps of the National Trust.[4] Fowler trenchantly defends radical reorientations of this kind in her book, saying: "[T]he custodians of history have a responsibility not to withhold facts. No one should knowingly tell half a history."[5]

Green Unpleasant Land assembles many of its heritage findings while further developing its inquiry into rural England's colonial

3 A summary of Conservative debates in British Parliament and press comments leading up to the Charity Commission inquiry can be found in Fowler, "Public debate is important," *Hacked Off*.

4 For a report on the Charity Commission's verdict, see Patrick Butler, "National Trust report on slavery links did not break charity law, regulator says," *Guardian*, March 11, 2021. On new directions for Kew Gardens, see Nazia Parveen, "Kew Gardens director hits back at claims it is 'growing woke,'" *Guardian*, March 18, 2021. On new directions for Historic England, see BBC News report, "MP calls for Lincolnshire slavery report to be 'shredded,'" March 18, 2021.

5 Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020), 32.

histories and examining radical creative responses to them. It offers an impressive and meticulously researched assessment of Black British and British Asian presences within the English countryside. It dismantles "comforting" myths of rural whiteness and challenges misplaced nostalgias for a pastoral world in which the traumas of capitalism and colonialism go unrecognized. As Fowler notes, "England's green and pleasant land" — here she cites the well-known line from William Blake's *Milton: A Poem*, later signaling Blake's position as a "prophet against empire" — "is not just about agriculture and estates, but about colonialism and a long-standing Black presence."[6] Fowler convincingly argues that the English peripheries are, in fact, dense with imperial and global connections.

Starting in the seventeenth century, merchants and industrialists bought country estates with the proceeds of imperial wealth, namely through transatlantic slavery and profits from the East India Company. Admission into the "landed gentry" was seen as a means of qualifying for MP roles and, ultimately, assuring the longevity of landowners' commercial and colonial interests. Other entanglements of England's rural elites with the British Empire, mainly in the nineteenth century, were reflected in upper-class investments in colonial infrastructural developments, in colonial administration (for example, within the British Raj), and in the pursuits of aspiring or celebrity adventurers, including to the African interior and Asia.

In *Green Unpleasant Land*, Fowler chronicles the presence of black pages, domestic servants, musicians, and gardeners at English country estates and in aristocratic circles from the Tudor period to the mid-nineteenth century. Studies of wills, legal papers, and inheritance trials in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show that hundreds of mixed-race children of slave owners or

6 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 35, 11.

nabobs (individuals returning from India who made their fortune through the East India Company) and Afro-Caribbean or Asian mothers traveled to Britain "to educate themselves, improve their lives and claim their inheritance"; however, as Fowler explains, they were "rarely acknowledged as legitimate relatives."[7] In sum, as Fowler notes, black presence within the English countryside existed long before the arrival of Caribbean peoples on the *SS Empire Windrush* at Tilbury Docks in 1948: "an event which is persistently and incorrectly held to have inaugurated Black Britishness."[8] Fowler's book covers financial records of profits from imperial trade on landed estates, additionally considering compensations to estate owners for the loss of their human "property" with the abolition of slavery in 1833. It furthermore charts the ubiquitous presence of colonial spoils within country houses. Domestic interiors, house collections, gardens, greenhouses, pavilions, and orangeries all display visible signs of imperial depredation or influence, from mahogany furniture to tiger rugs, ivory billiard balls and furniture, Chinese porcelain and wallpaper, African torchiers, paintings of African and Asian servants, Bengali cotton, Indian tea chests, temple-like structures, ornamental stone pineapples, and naturalized exotic plants such as rhododendrons.

Colonial capital, Fowler further elaborates, was injected into agendas beyond the country house. It was used to boost the "social, political and civic standing" of new landowners.[9] Seeking to secure their legacy, members of the imperial elite funded local churches, schools, hospitals, and almshouses. These philanthropic endeavors served to conceal or divert attention from the morally reprehensible transactions of elites beyond England's borders. Other landowners,

7 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 136.

8 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 29.

9 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 132.

mainly slave owners with specialisms in horticulture, used their imperial fortunes and botanical knowledge to stimulate commercial interest among the affluent and at a quasi-state level in exotic gardening and landscaping styles (Kew Gardens in London, noted above, and Trengwainton Garden in Cornwall are famous incarnations), as well as in the cultivation of plants for their medicinal properties (Chelsea Physic Garden is cited as an example). Rising interest in colonial botany at home, in turn, saw the expansion of production on overseas estates and a concomitant increase in the enslaved workforce (such as at the Worthy Park Estate in Jamaica, owned by Sir Rose Price).

Simultaneously, landowners were spending their imperial profit on the deracination and alienation of England's agricultural classes. Especially compelling and original lines of inquiry in *Green and Unpleasant Land* are pursued in chapter 2, in which colonial proceeds from sugar plantations and the East India Company are found to have been invested in land enclosure. As Fowler explains, "many of England's lengthier walls, hedges and keep-out signs are unrecognised legacies of colonial profiteering."[10] Relying heavily on Nick Hayes's acclaimed *The Book of Trespass*, Fowler invokes as an example the Drax family's use of profits from their Barbadian sugar plantations to fund one of England's longest walls, which runs through Dorset in West Country.[11] In the 1640s, the same Drax family had originally set up its plantations to produce tobacco, staffing them with eight thousand British vagrants and Irish prisoners of war. When their tobacco venture failed, the Draxes opted instead for the labor-intensive cultivation of sugar, to which enslaved Africans were deemed better suited.

10 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 45.

11 Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass: Crossing the Lines that Divide Us* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

New money that was brought in on the back of African and Indian labor "was the same money that partitioned English commoners from their livelihood and land."[12] As Fowler clarifies, the long process of land enclosure through the Enclosure/Inclosure Acts (1773, 1801, 1845–1859) empowered landowners to buy ground rights and to fence off land that had once been open to the agricultural classes for the purposes of grazing livestock, growing crops, gleaning, or collecting fuel. Enclosure contributed to a firm shift from self-subsistence cultivation to waged labor. The number of rural workers seeking waged work rose in consequence, ultimately exceeding demand, with the pernicious outcome of driving wages down to starvation levels while driving up local taxpayers' costs of Poor Law support. The rural elite's land grab forced landless people into temporary migrancy across rural England in search of work. Many migrated to towns, while others left the country as settlers within the British Empire.

The benefits to the landed classes from land enclosure — enclosure, in this case, must be understood to arise not strictly from the profits of colonial exploitation but also more widely from capital accrued through habits endemic to English elites of preying on workers, irrespective of location — were significant. Enclosure meant the acceleration of commercialized agriculture and the extraction of higher rents from tenant farmers. Areas that contained evidence of such commercial activity were often carefully screened from the stately vista with the help of planted strands of trees. Here, Fowler invokes Karl Marx's *Capital*, in which he describes the wealthy classes' vision of the countryside idyll as an attempt to conceal "the conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force," that lay behind landownership.[13] Higher rents and

12 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 46 [citing Hayes, *Trespass*, 134].

13 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 44 [citing Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (London:

the manicured "picturesque" settings in turn facilitated the life of leisure prized by English gentry.

In this context, Fowler recalls the many rural working-class uprisings and disturbances against enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Swing Riots of 1830–1831, in which rural labor revolted against deplorable working conditions with machine breaking and arson attacks, find their near-contemporary parallels in the Baptist War, a Jamaican slave revolt in 1831–1832, with agricultural laborers fighting to end their enslavement in another part of British rural territory. At the same time, Fowler offers powerful reminders of the important differences between working-class and slavery working conditions. In 1830, for example, enslaved people worked for an average of 4,000 hours a year, while British factory workers are estimated to have worked an average of 2,900 hours. These troubling disparities must, however, be soberly understood in terms of the much broader agenda of capitalism, of which colonialism remains a tributary, in which the lion's share of profits to England's landed elites, regardless of whether they were directly engaged in colonial activity, is made on the back of English laborers.[14] Nonetheless, what Fowler's study does so skillfully when it alerts readers to the material links between colonial wealth and domestic land enclosures is to shed new light on Raymond Williams's point in his *The Country and the City* that "[d]istant lands became the rural areas of industrial Britain, with heavy consequent effects on its own surviving rural areas."[15] Fowler's work, when read together with Williams, demonstrates in stark terms why it is no longer off

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Penguin Books, 1990), 873–4].

14 For further reading on these issues, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2017 [1999]).

15 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 280.

limits to debate the material and reciprocal links between colonial and domestic oppressions.

Armed with the study's persuasive emphasis on empire's conflict-ridden operations and its alienating agenda of capital accumulation for both domestic and colonial labor, one returns with a critical perspective to Edward Said's claim in the second chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* (titled "Consolidated Vision") that enclosure, alongside other global imperial developments, was part of a process of consolidating a national imperial agenda. Via Williams, Said accurately maintains that enclosure dissolved "old organic rural communities" and forged new ones "under the impulse of parliamentary activity, industrialisation, and demographic dislocation."[16] In tandem, Said claims, there occurred "a new process of relocating England [...] within a much larger circle of the world map."[17] At this point, ideas from J. A. Hobson's landmark *Imperialism: A Study* are reprised in Said's book to show that imperialism meant "the expansion of nationality," the latter of which was "fully formed" by the turn of the twentieth century.[18] Enclosure, then, in Said's estimation, was part of a wider "nation-making" effort in the "long" nineteenth century, through which the classes eventually aligned themselves around "English" interests and around the colonial project. *Green Unpleasant Land* complicates the Saidian view, one that is foundational to an incalculable number of postcolonial interventions, that domestic social conflict (and, by extension, cultures of radical response) turned unequivocally into cemented support for the colonial project. In Fowler's book, it is not the nation but rather England's upper crust that emerges, lock, stock, and

16 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 83; citing J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972 [1902]), 6.

17 Said, *Culture*, 83.

18 Said, *Culture*, 83.

barrel, as the unmistakable premier of rural England's colonial program and its cultures of marginalization and/or concealment.

Fowler's careful research of material culture therefore makes the reader highly alert to those implicit nods within her own book to the Saidian view of national imperial formation. Her opening gambit (the title of her first core chapter is "Nation at the Crossroads") seems, at first sight, to work against Said's perspective when it invokes "a nation at the crossroads: either prone to comforting nationalist myths, or a country ready to embrace its fuller histories and the global connections of its people."[19] However, given that this so-called crossroads appears to be invoked with respect to the present day rather than in relation to a colonial or even more recent postcolonial past, one infers the existence of a cohesive imperial culture *prior* to the contemporary present. This logic is reinforced by the additional reflection, a little further in, on the pressing need for a historical reckoning with rural racism, one that necessitates an acceptance of "unpalatable elements of the national story."[20] Wading deeper still, one meets the position in Fowler's book that country houses are "iconic signifier[s] of national identity."[21] Assertions such as these gesture toward postcolonial notions of national imperial cohesion and, on the whole, tend not to carry the same cachet as do those eminently defensible claims within the book for the nationally divisive impacts of imperialism.

If a history of national alliance around a politics of racial exclusion or upper-class interests exists, it is not prominently positioned in *Green Unpleasant Land* (answers to important questions such as when and how this so-called national culture formed and evolved

19 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 11.

20 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 23.

21 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 126. Fowler is citing Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, eds., *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013), 3.

might have been helpful here). It is also at odds with the book's marvelous and distinctive critical coverage of an array of radical responses, both historical and creative, to four centuries of colonial rural expansion. What shines through much of this critical appraisal is the punctuated existence of this fabled "crossroads" at every stage of imperial history and its associated creative energy. Division and conflict, then, are not unique to us today but are facets of any society and culture, irrespective of time and location, when faced with the ravages of capitalism.

The final part of this review examines the far-reaching account of radical creative responses to the legacies of capitalism in the countryside, including special attention to its colonial backdrops. Fowler's book is structured around the imperial histories and literatures of moors, country houses, villages, rivers, coastlines, gardens, flora, and fauna: all features of the rural, and analyzed with extraordinary flair and virtuosity. Cultural productions evaluated in the book range from poetry and fiction to drama, music, and film and include contributions from Black British and British Asian voices. Women and working-class writers are widely represented in the book. Common to many of the selected creative interpretations is the way in which they vex or upend visions of England's peripheries as spaces of whiteness and repositories of the pastoral idyll. Each chapter follows a structure reminiscent of Raymond Williams's method in *The Country and the City* by offering a satisfying blend of historical and creative material across several centuries. The book is rounded off with Fowler's own poetry and short fiction, connected to her research into the colonial activities of country houses.

Noteworthy examples of creative rejoinder, ones that specifically address rural links to the empire, are seen in the Georgic writings of James Thomson and other poets such as Oliver Goldsmith. The latter, as Fowler points out in chapter 3, openly laments the destruction of a precapitalist way of life, reads harm in the

new commercial spirit, and alludes to the reprehensible process of land enclosure by one landowner who was historically likely to have been a returning nabob. Other more explicitly anti-pastoral poets include the Liverpool poet Edward Rushton, whose experience as the second mate of a slave ship traveling between Guinea and Dominica made him a passionate abolitionist. In his *West-Indian Eclogues*, Rushton satirizes the pastoral form to stage a series of dialogues between two enslaved men, one "quiescent out of fear" and the other "prepared to sacrifice his life for liberty."[22] The Bristolian poet Thomas Chatterton's 1770 "African Eclogues," meanwhile, adopts a heightened heroic mode to express antislavery sentiments, in which marauding European slave traders on the slave coast of West Africa incite an African warrior named Gaira to declare: "my vengeance still exclaims for blood."[23] The eighteenth-century poetry of the abolitionist William Cowper, for its part, was significant in educating generations about the wrongs of animal hunting, a sport that "owes its pleasure to another's pain."[24] As Fowler observes, this kind of poetry shifted perceptions of the country house and influenced directions that would be taken by antislavery campaigners, many of whom were also concerned with animal rights.

Nineteenth-century poets such as John Clare write radically about "all kinds" of inequality and exclusion associated with the enclosure of the commons and the commodification of land. His writings stand out especially for the way in which they explore the negative impacts of enclosure on Romani people.[25] Meanwhile, William Cobbett, in his *Rural Rides*, refers to English enclosures and

22 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 74.

23 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 74.

24 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 142 [citing Cowper's *The Task*].

25 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 80.

plantations at Northington Grange estate in the same breath and alludes to wealth that has been "made at a heat."[26] This tropically inflected description, Fowler maintains, is not lost on the reader, especially with the added knowledge that the estate itself was purchased partly with sugar plantation wealth from Alexander Baring's father-in-law. In the same work, Cobbett "names and shames" planters who have disturbed the social order, including "a West India dealer" by the name of Mr Laing.[27] Fowler's introduction of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* at this point is worth pausing over. Fowler's reading, on the whole, situates Austen on the side of the antislavery movement, even though her work, in other respects, subscribes to conservative ideologies. Austen's text, says Fowler, contains many subliminal allusions to political, military, and jurisprudential contexts in connection with slavery debates. These feature generously in names of places, warship vessels, and characters, in addition to references to Sir Thomas Bertram's Antigua estates.[28] These elements of dissent, ones that reward the "active reader," pose a challenge to Said's own reading of the novel as symptomatic of the process of national imperial harmonization — one he intuits through a narrative of restored productivity to Bertram's presumed slave plantation in Antigua and recovered order and social harmony at Mansfield Park.[29]

Inching toward Victorian and modernist outputs during Britain's period of high imperialism, the book introduces the presence of colonial politics, subjects, and commodities on landed estates in works by Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, and E. M. Forster. These writers show country

26 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 81.

27 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 81.

28 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 147.

29 Said, *Culture*, 87.

houses in states of decline and full of shameful secrets about various colonial transgressions, including the incarceration of Rochester's Creole wife, Bertha Mason, in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Mrs Jellyby's "minor do-gooding" obsession with the unfortunates of "Borrioboola-Gha" on the Niger in Dickens's *Bleak House* to the neglect of local misery and dereliction; the theft of a sacred diamond by an East India Company colonel and consequent upheaval to the family in Collins's *The Moonstone*; Elias Openshaw's crimes against abolitionists and enslaved alike in Conan Doyle's "The Five Orange Pips"; and the Wilcoxes' profits from the Imperial and West African Rubber Company in Forster's *Howards End*.[30] One might add to this critical survey of literary links between country houses and empire the work of the rural writer Thomas Hardy, who, in Fowler's book, is invoked solely in relation to domestic class concerns. In his novel *Two on a Tower* and in a number of his short stories, imperial adventure, hunting, plantation profits, or financial speculation (in East India Company stocks, for example) enable the acquisition or otherwise catalyze the imperilment and decline of country houses. In *Two on a Tower*, imperial activity intersects with representations of upper-class misogynistic violence and animal cruelty. Hardy's texts, in other words, are unambivalent in their stance against the misdemeanors of colonial elites.

Prominent examples of Black British and British Asian writing engaging with the countryside begin in the 1980s. Common to such literary interventions is a claimed right to inhabit and belong within England's rural spaces. Saint Lucian poet and playwright Derek Walcott and the Trinidad and Tobago–born writer V. S. Naipaul additionally critique the rural class system, upper-class snobbery, and the commercialization of the countryside. The Guyanese-born novelist David Dabydeen offers brutal depictions in *A Harlot's*

30 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 150.

Progress of the real-life sadist slaver Thomas Thistlewood. Journeys through the countryside in the writings of Lemn Sissay and Grace Nichols are "transformative," giving rise to a new pastoral aesthetic.[31] Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* narrates the travels of the black Roman Zuleika and African Roman emperor Septimius Severus, the latter seeking to quell a rebellion by Scottish "ginger-heads."[32] Maya Chowdhry's poem "Black Badger Carlin Peas" links the working-class Lancashire "tradition of eating black peas (the historical poverty-diet of country work-houses) and the historical journey that black peas made, by ship, to medieval Britain."[33] Specially commissioned pieces from Black writers as part of Fowler's national writing and history project Colonial Countryside reimagine the colonial histories of specific country houses. Peter Kalu's short story "Richard Watt I, Merchantt, of Speke Hall (Intimations of Immorality)," for example, considers the legacies of slavery and industrial capitalism in connection with Richard Watt I's Speke Hall and personalizes the deaths of 1,200 slaves who are recorded to have drowned on Watt's Jamaican estate during the 1780 and 1781 hurricanes. Many of these important contributions from black writers are included in Fowler's own evocative poem, "Pastoral: A New Chronology," in the closing section of her book.

Corinne Fowler's *Green Unpleasant Land* will appeal to researchers at all degree levels, including colonial and postcolonial scholars, imperial historians, and Black Atlantic scholars, as well as to cultural heritage researchers and practitioners. The study will find traction in disciplines that are committed to engaging with class politics. Due to Fowler's accessible writing style, general readers also stand to gain much from this remarkable book.

31 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 99.

32 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 101.

33 Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 102.

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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.

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