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Cover Image: The Pride of Bonehead by Jon Langford (acrylic and mixed media on plywood). The painting, along with other recent works by Langford, is hanging in the Yard Dog Gallery in Austin, Texas.

In Memory of
Alexander Cockburn
1941–2012
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Lovely Prism
I want to thank St. Clair for a tutorial on politics and history over the last two and a half years since the day I read your book Born Under A Bad Sky. I have argued and fought with everyone from the time I could talk about how half-assed their points of view were (my own included), politically. The closest I came to feeling less insane was when I would read an essay by Noam Chomsky and feel comforted in knowing there was another one out there. Then I would go back to learning how to make art and just loathe any and all politicians on principle. It is shocking to have my intuitive recoil confirmed in this book and CounterPunch, and it is surprising to hear myself offer alternative arguments to anyone's party line because I have sifted through the arguments on these pages. I am a scribbler and a draughtsman, and I thank a god I don't believe in that I don't run things. I have learned how well I think by reading history, ethics and politics filtered through the lens of Cockburn and St Clair which is a lovely prism.

Virginia McLaughlin

Worthwhile Journey
Kim Nicolini, I loved your thoughts on the film CONTROL. Very nice and wonderful. I produced the film and when I hear thoughts expressed like yours, truly make the entire journey worthwhile

Orian Williams

The Singer of Khe Sanh
During the Vietnam War a major network broadcast a soldier at Khe Sanh singing “Where have all the flowers gone?” I met the guy in Portland, Oregon recently and he played me the tape. He was on full disability and drank all day long. His hobby was raising birds and he had about 20 lovebirds and parakeets. So it goes.

John Emerson

Crack Go the Elite
No doubt the American elite are not pleased by the recent announcement that several European Union members are joining China’s development bank: The divide-and-conquer strategy so aptly described by Mike Whitney is showing cracks.

Bill Blunden
San Francisco

Sanctimony & Hypocrisy
Thank you for running David Yearsley and his many worthy essays (all of which I read with much delight), and for exposing the bloody Brits for what they are, bloodthirsty monsters who’ve destroyed not one, but many nations. The French and Americans are equally guilty. Iraq, Libya, Syria, Mali, etc. etc., bleed profusely while the Western world beats its chest in sanctimonious hypocrisy. And Palestine is being slowly gobbled up in peristaltic gulps all because there is no will to face Israeli Nazism.

Last week I led a discussion of “Monuments Men” in a faculty book of the month setting. I xeroxed Yearsley’s wonderful essay on the bombing of Dresden and shared it with my colleagues. Keep on keeping on; counterpunch and Yearsley are a delightful weekend ritual.

Sincerely,

Raouf J. Halaby
Professor of English and Art

Going Along with Torture
In his last column St. Clair writes: “The logic of impunity for the torturers doesn’t just let government criminals off the hook; it sanctifies the crimes they committed and enshrines torture as a legitimate mechanism to enforce the American imperial enterprise. There can be no regrets when you aspire to dictate your terms to the rest of the world.”

I think this is right. They’ve terrified the middle class ... threatened them - tortured them - with the loss of their ‘prosperity’ … and they’ve given it up. ‘OK, OK … anything! Just make it go away!’ The upper class has always gone along, the lower class has never gone along … the middle class has always pretended not to. Now, no more pretending - this is serious!

I think it’s going down anyway. To save it would have required change from the upper class and they were and are unwilling. So, we’ll all ride their plane into the ground. And by that time all the talk of ‘exceptionalism’ will have evaporated, or morphed into the same sort of exception as was in Germany sixty or seventy years ago, and whatever comes after will have to be made from whole cloth.

John Francis Lee

Cop Class
There is one flaw in David McCarey’s otherwise excellent “Unionism vs. Cop-ism” article. New York City patrolman’s salaries are not middle class.

According to last year’s federal affordability guidelines middle class in New York City starts at $100,681 a year. While Mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg talked a lot of pro-police rhetoric, they were very stingy at the bargaining table. Under Giuliani alone, this city’s cops went from being among the best to among the worst paid.

In fact, under those Scrooge-like mayors, city workers who were not already below middle class fell into that category. The exception being some school teachers with 22 years on the job. The current mayor, alleged progressive Bill de Blasio, has only negotiated contracts that are real money pay cuts.

New York City patrolman, working under an expired contract, reach top salary of $90,829 after five and a half years on the force. Before then, they’re making salaries not even close to middle class. The only way any (except for the before mentioned teachers) city workers are making middle class salaries is by working an awful lot of overtime.

Richard Warren
Against the slate-colored Oregon sky, the bird's white-and-black markings almost shimmer. Its long, sharply pointed wings are cocked in a dihedral as it hovers over the choppy waters of Young's Bay. It hangs nearly motionless for a moment before plunging into a steep descent. The bird strikes the water, shudders and emerges with a small cutthroat trout in its talons. It wheels skyward and lands on the branch of a dead Sitka spruce and begins to consume its prey.

I don’t need to consult my Sibley guide. There’s no doubt about the species: it’s that masterful fishing raptor, an osprey. But wait a minute. An element of doubt creeps in. Ospreys aren’t supposed to be here, near the mouth of the Columbia River, up here on Parallel 46, in far northwestern Oregon. Not this time of year. Not during the first week of February. Yet here she is, casually flaying a trout, less than 100 yards away from me.

Ospreys are neotropical migrants. Like many southern Californians, they summer in the Northwest and head south for sunnier terrain in the early fall. On the west coast, Osprey tend to winter in Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, Colombia and return north in the spring. Birders, an obsessive tribe of which I’ve long been a member, keep close watch on the first arrival dates for migratory birds like osprey. There’s a fancy word for the science of monitoring these migratory timetables called “phenology.”

In Oregon, ornithologists have been assiduously recording the first arrival dates of osprey for at least the past 80 years. Up here in Astoria, the oldest American settlement west of the Rockies, migration records, though spotty, go back even farther—to the men of John Jacob Astor’s American Fur Company, founded in 1812, and the Corps of Discovery, also known as the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1805/6.

Lewis and Clark were meticulous note-keepers and relatively gifted naturalists, especially the moody Meriwether Lewis. It’s worth noting that neither Lewis or Clark, nor the expedition’s other diarist Patrick Gass, recorded seeing an osprey during their stay at Fort Clatsop, the remains of which are just a quarter of a mile from where I spotted my winter Osprey. They left the soggy outpost for their return to St. Louis on March 23, 1806.

And it makes sense that they didn’t see an osprey that cruel winter of unrelenting rain, because over the course of the last 80 years the average first arrival date of Osprey at Young’s Bay is around the first day of April. So this bird was at least 55 days premature. Turns out, she wasn’t alone. Fifty miles south, at Tillamook Bay, an Osprey has been sighted all year long for the past three years. Similar year-round sightings have been made across Oregon: on the Columbia River near Bonneville Dam, at Detroit Lake in the Cascade Range and along the Illinois River in the Siskiyou Mountains. Over the past decade, across the Pacific Northwest, osprey have been arriving on average a couple of days early each year.

And the osprey aren’t alone. Turkey vultures, swallows, warblers and all manner of wading birds are also showing up, across the northern hemisphere, days, even weeks, ahead of schedule. For example, a recent long-term study by the Royal Society of London revealed that Black-Tailed Godwits are arriving to their nesting grounds in south Iceland more than 22 days earlier than they did in 1988. In all these cases, climate seems to be the driving force behind the early migrations northward.

Of course, it’s been a peculiar winter here in Oregon, the warmest and driest on record. On that same first week of February came news that Santiam Pass in the central Cascade Range was bare of snow. Santiam Pass sits at 3750 feet and since record-keeping began has averaged about 40 inches of snow on the ground in February and often much more. A hundred and fifty miles to the south, Crater Lake National Park saw its thinnest snow pack in more than a century. Even more disturbing, the snow pack at Crater Laker is 50 percent lower than the lowest ever recorded. Winter snowpack determines summer streamflow. It’s going to be a dry and crispy summer here in the Pacific Northwest.

Ecological bills are coming home to roost, though few seem to take notice. Down in Florida, a state in eminent peril from rising sea levels, the state’s billionaire governor Rick Scott issued an executive diktat gagging state employees from mentioning the word’s climate change or global warming. The man who blew the whistle on Scott’s gag order was a long-time ecologist at the state’s Department of Environmental Protection named Bart Bibler.

After Bibler breached Scott’s ludicrous injunction at a public meeting on coastal management issues, he was slapped with reprimand, suspended from his job and ordered to submit to a mental health evaluation. Apparently, Rick Scott has read his Stalin. But even the Kremlin Highlander himself couldn’t order the seas to stop rising.

When we returned home to Oregon City from the coast a few days after sighting the Osprey, the forsythias were in bloom, daffodils were poking up and a Black-chinned Hummingbird was flitting around the backyard looking for a nectar fix, two months ahead of schedule. The climate is changing in strange and inscrutable ways and the birds, at least, are racing to keep up. CP
EMPIRE BURLESQUE
An Exceptional Danger

By Chris Floyd

According to latest report from the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the United States currently deploys some 2,080 nuclear warheads, ready to launch at a moment's notice. It has 500 tactical nuclear weapons—for combat use, not strategic strikes—primed in bases across Europe. There are also 2,680 American warheads in storage. They can be brought out at short notice and added to the active arsenal. Including retired but still intact weapons, the United States possesses 7,100 nuclear warheads, any one of which could destroy a metropolis and kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people in a single eye blink.

The United States is the only nation to have used such weapons. They were used on targets consisting almost entirely of civilian populations. In the years that followed, the country vastly expanded its nuclear arsenal, declaring that it could and would launch a “first strike” against any other nation, should the leaders in Washington decide that it was in the strategic interests of the country to do so.

This threat was unprecedented in all of world history. No nation had ever possessed the power—or expressed the intention—to totally annihilate another nation in a single act of military aggression. This threat—and the reality behind it—has been the ultimate foundation of American dominance of world affairs for 70 years.

The full force of this threat diminished somewhat during the height of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union amassed an arsenal that presented a counterweight to American weaponry. But the dissolution of the USSR led to break-up of that nation’s nuclear arsenal. Russia now has some 1,800 missiles deployed. Its entire stockpile of weapons—deployed and in storage—is about 4,500. The nuclear balance has once again shifted significantly in the United States’ favor.

This, at least in part, accounts for Washington’s more aggressive stance toward Russia, especially in the Ukraine crisis. The old doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” is no longer so firm. The possibility exists once more that an American first strike could wipe out the Russian capacity for counterresponse. This isn’t certain, but it’s a greater possibility than it has been for several decades.

Russia’s involvement in a dispute in a region on its border has been translated by the Western Establishment into an imminent, Hitler-like threat to take over Europe. Whatever one thinks of the odious Putin regime, any rational observer would have to say that Western propaganda surrounding the crisis has been absurd, exaggerated, and highly dangerous.

But even if the Kremlin were guilty of everything it accused of doing in Ukraine, this would be nothing more than what the United States does day after day, all over the world: aggressively interfering in the affairs of other nations, supporting and fomenting armed conflict in order to advance its own agenda, and behaving with brutal disregard for the ordinary people who die and suffer as a consequence.

The U.S. has brought death, terror, ruin and persecution to millions of people in the Middle East, in just the past 12 years alone. It is a record of astonishing, deliberate, cold-blooded evil carried out solely for profit and political dominance.

And yet the bipartisan narrative is: Russia is evil, while we are pure and holy, trying only to put the world to rights. This is, essentially, the only frame for discussing policy toward Russia and the Ukrainian crisis. It is so mind-bogglingly stupid, so disconnected from reality, that it virtually defies understanding. We kill a million people, for no good reason at all, in a small, weak country thousands of miles away; and we are good. Even our super-savvy liberals, who scornfully reject the primitive doctrine of American Exceptionalism, still believe that America can hold some kind of moral high ground in global affairs.

Look again at those figures: 2,080 warheads on a hair-trigger right now, aimed at spots all over the earth, ready to—in the immortal words of Hillary Clinton in her 2008 campaign threat against Iran—“annihilate” millions of innocent human beings. This power, this threat, hangs over the entire world. However remote the likelihood of its use in any given situation, it is still present, it is still a possibility. (As our leaders like to say with nauseating regularity, “all options are on the table,” always.) It is still in the hands of, again, the only nation that has used such weapons, a nation that publicly reserves the right to use them again, aggressively, in a first strike.

A nation that launched a war of aggression in Iraq that killed a million people, dispossessed millions more, destroyed the society, deliberately inflamed sectarian divides and sowed violent chaos where extremism thrives. A nation whose presidents now openly proclaim that they have the right to assassinate any individual on earth at their arbitrary order, and have the power to carry this out.

What then, is the greatest threat to the greatest number of people in the world today? There are many horrible regimes and groups, but none of them possess all of these capabilities and exhibit all of these dangerous attributes; none of them have come close to killing as many people and wreaking as much destruction as the United States has in this century. CP
GRASPING AT STRAWS
Fattening Wall Street

By Mike Whitney

Is the Fed really planning to raise rates by the end of the year or is it just a bluff?

The problem with the Fed’s so called “rate normalization” strategy is that it depends on data that indicates the economy is stronger than it really is. For example, the Fed uses the unemployment rate—which has dropped to a respectable 5.5 percent—to suggest that its easy money policies are actually working. But are they?

Unfortunately, the unemployment rate fails to account for the millions of people who have either dropped out of the labor-force altogether or who have taken jobs that pay only a fraction of what they were earning before. As many readers know, the “percentage of Americans in the labor force has shrunk to levels not seen since the 1970s.” In fact, Fed Chairman Janet Yellen reluctantly admitted that the unemployment data was misleading when she opined in a speech on Aug. 22, 2014, “that the decline in the unemployment rate over this period somewhat overstates the improvement in overall labor market conditions.” In other words, the Fed is fudging the numbers to hide the truth.

Also, the jobs that have been created since the end of the recession are considerably worse than those that were lost in the downturn. The slump basically wiped out high-wage and middle-wage jobs. According to a new report from the National Employment Law Project (NELP) “low-wage industries have accounted for 44 percent of job growth...These jobs pay between $9.48 and $13.33 an hour.”

So, the better paying construction and manufacturing jobs are still below pre-crisis levels, while the crappy service sector jobs, like fast food and retail, have made up the difference. How does Fed expect the economy to reach “escape velocity” if personal consumption and overall demand are weaker due to lower wages?

The latest retail sales report helps to illustrate the flaws in the Fed’s approach. February sales came in at an abysmal -0.6% month-over-month, capping off a three month losing streak. Keep in mind, the experts predicted that the lower gas prices would put more money in consumer pockets allowing them to spend more at the restaurants and shopping malls, but it hasn’t worked out that way. Homeowners are still trying to reduce their expenses while boosting their savings whenever possible. Naturally, that’s put a damper on consumer spending.

But with fewer people in the labor force, and many of them earning less than they did before; how is the economy supposed to grow? And if the economy isn’t growing and there’s no pressure on wages, then inflation’s going to remain weak which eliminates any reason to raise rates, right?

Right. And there is no inflation. The price index for personal consumption expenditure (PCE), the Fed’s preferred inflation measure, is still well-below the Fed’s target of 2 percent. So even though the Fed has expanded its balance sheet by $3.6 trillion dollars and kept rates locked at zero for six years, the disinflationary trend persists for everything except financial assets which have ballooned into the biggest bubble in history thanks entirely to the Fed’s policies.

But if inflation is still below the Fed’s target, then why raise rates? Could it be that the economy is overheating and growing too fast? Is that it?

Nope. In fact, the majority of econo-
Looming Battle of the Churches Over the Environment

Climate Change, GMOs and Religion

By Joyce Nelson

Sometime this spring Pope Francis, leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, will be issuing a rare papal Encyclical on climate change and the environment. The Encyclical will apparently be urging all Catholics to take action against climate change. It will be sent to 5,000 Catholic bishops and 400,000 priests around the world, who will be asked to distribute it to their parishioners. The expected 60-page Encyclical comes months in advance of the next UN climate meeting set for December in Paris.

In November 2014, Pope Francis sent a letter to the UN Climate Change Conference in Lima, Peru, stating that “the time to find global solutions is running out” and that “an effective fight against global warming will only be possible through a collective response.” Ultimately, the delegates at the Lima conference agreed to only voluntary pledges to reduce carbon emissions.

During his Asian trip (Jan. 12—19) to Sri Lanka and the Philippines, Pope Francis told reporters aboard the papal plane that the Lima conference “was nothing much, it disappointed me. I think there was a lack of courage. They stopped at a certain point. Let’s hope the delegates in Paris will be more courageous and move forward with this.”

While in Asia, the pope focused his remarks on issues of poverty, but the climate change issue was a powerful subtext. Sri Lanka faces catastrophic sea level rises, while the Philippines was hit in November 2013 by a devastating super-typhoon that left 7,350 people dead or missing. Typhoon Haiyan, the most powerful storm ever recorded on land, had winds of 196 miles an hour and is considered to have been an extreme weather event consistent with man-made climate change. On January 17, Pope Francis visited Tacloban, one of the cities devastated by the super-typhoon.

Resistance to Pope Francis’ environmentalism is already mounting, especially in the U.S. where some powerful right-wing evangelical Christian churches consider science and environmentalism as hostile to the Bible. E. Calvin Beisner, spokesman and founder of an evangelical lobby group called Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation, told the UK’s The Guardian in December that “the pope should back off” regarding climate change, adding that the “Catholic church is correct on the ethical principles but has been misled on the science. It follows that the politics the Vatican is promoting are incorrect. Our position reflects the views of millions of evangelical Christians in the U.S.”

The “Dominion Mandate”

Beisner has been described by religiondispatches.org (Aug. 15, 2014) as “the most influential evangelical anti-environmentalist in the United States.” He is vehemently against any government regulation of the environment as an impediment to the will of God. That’s because Beisner and the Cornwall Alliance are squarely in the evangelical tradition called “dominionism” based on the so-called “dominion mandate” proclaimed in Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them [Adam and Eve], and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth.”

Many (although not all) dominionists take that passage as a divine trump-card against those who call for environmental protection or regulation. The Cornwall Alliance Declaration of Environmental Stewardship states: “We aspire to a world in which liberty as a condition of moral action is preferred over government-initiated management of the environment as a means to common goals.”

Most dominionists also believe that the Bible is “inerrant” and the Second Coming is “imminent.” In taking the Bible literally and as incapable of being wrong (rather than as metaphorical or symbolic truth), most dominionists believe that Earth is a mere 6,000 to 10,000 years old, and that the “end times” are not only “imminent,” but to be welcomed, because the Faithful will be “Raptured” to Heaven before the Battle of Armageddon erupts in the Middle East.

Of course, if you believe that the “end times” are imminent, then long-term planning for the health of the environment is as futile as it is unnecessary.

In dismissing climate-change science, Beisner and the Cornwall Alliance believe that “Earth and its ecosystems—created by God’s intelligent design and infinite power and sustained by His faithful providence—are robust, resilient, self-regulating, admirably suited for human flourishing, and displaying His glory. Earth’s climate system is no exception.”

More recently, Beisner has stated that climate change may be happening and may be caused by human activity, but any attempts to mitigate it by transitioning away from fossil fuels would “hurt the poor.” According to Bloomberg News (Dec. 12, 2014), this is the same stance now being taken by Peabody Energy Corp., ExxonMobil and Chevron Corporation - the latter two known to be funders of right-wing evangelical groups.

The website thinkprogress.org investigated the Cornwall Alliance in 2010 and found “deep ties to the oil industry,” especially ExxonMobil and Chevron, as well as direct connections to “longtime right-wing operatives orchestrating
the climate science denial machine.” When asked about such ties by the UK’s The Guardian (May 5, 2011), Beisner said, “There have been no corporate donations and certainly no oil money,” although he did not deny connections to the “climate science denial machine” long funded by fossil fuel interests.

The “Green Dragon”

In 2010, at a special function hosted by the (oil industry-backed) Heritage Foundation, the Cornwall Alliance launched a book and accompanying video called Resisting the Green Dragon, which labelled the environmental movement as “one of the greatest threats to society and the church today.”

Reportedly, the book states that “This slimy jade road...is paved with all kinds of perverted and destructive behaviours, leads to death itself, and finally to the pains of hell forever.” It also claims, “So-called ‘natural’ or wilderness areas are not hospitable to man and God does not consider this a good or natural state...”

In its list of aspirations, the Cornwall Alliance hopes for “a world in which the relationships between stewardship and private property are fully appreciated, allowing people’s natural incentive to care for their own property to reduce the need for collective ownership and control of resources and enterprises...”

Fully in the free-market, neoliberal economic camp, the Cornwall Alliance is apparently opposed to collective (i.e., public) ownership of parks and wilderness areas, collective ownership of natural resources and utilities, and of collectively owned Aboriginal lands.

Beisner’s rhetoric has been heating up lately. In 2013, he called the environmental movement “the greatest threat to Western civilization” because it combines “the utopian vision of Marxism, the scientific facade of secular humanism, and the religious fanaticism of jihad.” He has also angrily denounced the very concept of “social justice,” and has strongly criticized other evangelical Christian churches which don’t take the same hard-line stance against environmentalism that he does.

A Well-Oiled Machine

The Cornwall Alliance is a key member of the Council for National Policy (CNP)—a secretive organization that is considered one of the pillars of the New Right in the U.S., which gained control of Congress in the 2014 mid-term elections through Tea Party/Republican victories. Many of the winning politicians (including state governors) are climate skeptics whose campaigns were heavily funded by fossil fuel interests.

These newly elected politicians (and their Big Oil backers) are looking to prevent climate-change regulations that would threaten industry profits. They are also looking to stop the creation of new wilderness areas, roll back environmental regulation, force through the Keystone XL pipeline, and open...
the Pacific Coast to energy exploration.

Environmental writer Peter Dykstra has said of the midterm election victories, “The last time a Congressional anti-science caucus was this strong may have been during the Scopes Monkey Trial ninety years ago.” Climate change deniers such as Sen. Ted Cruz (R–Texas), Sen. James Inhofe (R–Oklahoma), and Sen. Marco Rubio (R–Florida) are each chairing major Senate committees that will determine environmental and climate change policy. Behind the anti-science caucus is the Council for National Policy.

The CNP was founded in 1981 by several right-wing conservatives, including Tim LaHaye, a former Republican strategist and head of the Moral Majority who wrote the popular “Left Behind” fiction series, in which the Anti-Christ returns as the Secretary-General of the United Nations (in league with Russia). According to author/activist Chris Hedges, the CNP brought together dominionist evangelicals and “the right-wing industrialists willing to fund them.”

The membership of the CNP has been described as “essentially a secret society of wealthy, hard-right Republicans” with an agenda of “cleaving to Christian heritage, unqualified support of Israel, a strong military, gun rights, traditional values, and small government.” Over the years, a variety of right-wing speakers have addressed the CNP, including Ronald Reagan, free market economist Milton Friedman, Dick Cheney, Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, and, in June 1997, Stephen Harper, now Prime Minister of Canada.

The CNP meets in utmost secrecy three times a year and gives billions of dollars to right-wing evangelical organizations. The CNP membership and donor lists are kept secret, and its events are closed to the public and the press. The CNP is known, however, to have given an award to the billionaire Koch brothers, who are heavily involved in Canadian tar sands development and other fossil fuel interests, and who have long been funding a large roster of U.S. and Canadian right-wing think tanks, lobby groups and evangelical organizations collectively known as “the Kochtopus.”

That funding to the CNP and evangelical groups has paid off for the climate denial machine. Many American voters prefer to think of extreme weather events in Biblical rather than scientific terms. The Atlantic (November 2014) recently reported: “As of 2014, it’s estimated that nearly half of Americans—49%—say natural disasters are a sign of ‘the end times,’ as described in the Bible. That’s up from an estimated 44% in 2011.”

Genetically Modified Crops

The Cornwall Alliance’s website has recently endorsed genetically-modified (GM) seeds and crops as in keeping with the Gospel message because they help “feed the poor.” Reportedly, the U.S. government and Monsanto have long been seeking papal support for GM seeds, crops and foods, but the Vatican has been silent on the issue. That may be about to change.

In 2013, Pope Francis met with representatives from the Landless Rural Workers Movement in Brazil (MST). MST is a founding member of Via Campesina—the world organization that represents 200 million peasant farmers. In the discussion, the threat of GM seeds and crops was raised, as peasant leaders from Brazil described the high costs, food insecurity, and land threats created by the imposition of GM crops. Subsequently, the Vatican asked the peasant movement for a short list of scientists knowledgeable about the negative impacts of GM crops.

On April 30, 2014, a letter signed by eight experts from Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, India and Canada was sent to Pope Francis, along with an accompanying document calling for the Pope to speak out against the negative impacts of GM seeds on the world’s peasants and on global food security. With the permission of Pope Francis and the peasant organizations, the letter and document were made public on August 14.

The letter states in part:

...GM-free forms of agriculture based on peasants and small-scale farmers, diversity, and socially and environmentally responsible science are essential to address hunger and climate change, but they are at risk due to GM contamination and the advancement of corporate monopolies. Because of this, and with the greatest respect, we believe that it would be of momentous importance and great value to all if Your Holiness were to express yourself critically on GM crops and in support of peasant farming. This support would go a long way toward saving peoples and the planet from the threat posed by the control of life wielded by companies that monopolize seeds, which are the key to the entire food web...

One of the letter’s signatories, Prof. Andres Carrasco of Argentina, developed a sudden illness and died during the preparation of the documents. The other seven signatories are Ana Maria Primavesi (Austria/Brazil), Elena Alvarez-Buylla (Mexico), Pat Mooney (Canada), Paulo Kageyama (Brazil), Rubens Nodari (Brazil), Vandana Shiva (India), and Wanderley Pignati (Brazil).

Signatory Pat Mooney, who is with the Ottawa-based ETC. Group, told me that Pope Francis’ forthcoming Encyclical will probably focus “more on climate change than anything else,” but there might be a reference to GMOs in it. “There is a hope for it” being included, he said. Mooney confirmed that there is “a history of conversations” and “close links” between biotech giant Syngenta and members of the Vatican. The biotech industry claims that GMO crops will help feed the world during climate change—a claim debunked by many independent scientists worldwide, as documented in materials sent to Pope Francis.
Conflict and Consensus

A People’s History of Mexican Constitutions

BY ANDREW SMOLSKI

The history of any constitution is a history of conflict and consensus. It is a history of different social groups with different levels of power fighting and being forced to compromise on the normative structure framing their future. As Pablo González Casanova states, “Codes of law and constitutions do not determine a society; rather, they are its direct or indirect expression.” It is always the people’s struggle that reveals the history of a constitution, rather than the abstract principles written on parchment.

Who are these people of whom I write now? In Mexico they are the indigenous, the campesinos [peasants], the workers, “los de abajo” [the underdogs], the people without history. More specifically, but not exhaustively, they are Nahua with rifles, campesinos guerrenses [peasants from Guerrero] Adelitas, the revolutionary women, and Zapatistas in the Lacandon Jungle. According to Jacques Rancière, they are people who take hold of the right to rebel as both physical and mental act, creators of their own ideological and material conditions; a pugnacious, populist people.

But, why write of the Mexican people now? For fun? Historical exercise? No, my purpose is based in a historical moment. Presently, another Grito de Dolores [Cry of Dolores] has gone out. Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla rings the bell once more in Mexico to call for independence. A constituyente popular [popular constitutional assembly] is beginning its peaceful work. In such a situation, discussing prior struggles illuminates the clouded skies, forcing open the fog covering our revolutionary imaginations. Concomitantly, the time has come for a people’s constitutional history, and the primary motivator of any such essay is to drive any future constitution towards a more radical normative structure.

Thus, I write a preliminary People’s History of Mexican Constitutions, a pluralist history of México lindo spanning 200 years of struggle to get free. This history focuses on the different groups making up Mexico’s conflicts generally, broadening the base of our understanding of how the indigenous, campesinos, and workers fought for Constitutions that ultimately enshrined much of their continued state of active exclusion from power. This history’s most salient questions revolve around who are citizens, what is a citizen, who owns the land, and who owns the means of production.

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Mexico has had many Constitutions, only slightly fewer than its many, many rebellions. Any list would at least include the Constitution of Cádiz in 1812, the Federal Constitution of 1824, the Federal Constitution of 1857, and the 1917 Constitution. Added to this should also be the Constitutional Decree for the Liberty of Mexican America of 1814 at Apatzingán, the Plan de Ayala of 1914 at Aguascalientes, and the ongoing call for a popular constitutional assembly since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, which has culminated in the Plan Tijuana-Realidad and the Caracoles. Each time, a new struggle, a new hope, a new eruption of the people.

Mexico’s constitutional tradition begins in Spain. Spanish colonial rule of Latin America was entering its terminal phase, a death resulting from internal indigenous and campesino rebellions, criollo elite conspiracies, and the frailty of the Spanish crown in a tumultuous era of European conflict. In 1808, Spain was conquered by Napoleon Bonaparte, who appointed his brother Joseph as ruler of Spain. Such chaos gave the audiencia [appellate courts] in Mexico leeway in sharing power with the viceroy, pushed forward the illegal, republican idea of juntas, as well as emboldened conspiracies against the Spanish Crown in the struggle for independence.

By the time the Spanish Crown under Ferdinand VII regained control of Spain, Hidalgo and his co-consprira-
tors had already launched their independence struggle on September 16th, 1810 with some variation of these words: "My children: a new dispensation comes to us today. Will you receive it? Will you free yourselves? Will you recover the lands stolen three hundred years ago from your forefathers by the hated Spaniards? We must act at once...Long live our Lady of Guadalupe! Death to bad government! Death to the gachupines! (my emphasis; quoted in Meyer, Sherman and Deeds' The Course of Mexican History)

By January 1811, Hidalgo’s peasant army numbered 80,000 insurgents [insurgents]. Even after a reduction in numbers, the loss of Hidalgo, and turning into a guerrilla movement, the insurgent army continued its revolutionary activity until 1821. Eric Van Young explains that Hidalgo’s movement was based on the convergence of peasant and indigenous political economy that saw in the insurgent ideology the ability to maintain “control over the means of production”, which “still resided in the communal village, the locus of the Indian peasant’s economic life...of his personal and cultural identity.” And while not all of the insurgents were indigenous, a common cause could be found in the struggle for campesino economic justice.

Thus, the constitutional tradition is intertwined with the independence tradition in Mexico, the result of a fear instilled in authority. The Constitution of Cádiz in 1812 was an attempt to quell the ambitions of the insurgents in their independence fight by legally normalizing popular sovereignty and the vote. This also began what Guy Thompson describes as the time when, “Mexico’s towns and villages...exchanged their status as closed corporate entities within an absolutist system...to becoming the administrative basis of a secularized and representative national system, composed of individual—ideally proportioned—citizens.”

The legal construction citizen became a lesson in a-historical liberal liberation for the indigenous population of Mexico. The promise of citizen is best understood in relation to an era when “the provinces teachers complained that pupils no longer heeded them; curas reported that Indians did not respect them and refused to attend mass; and other officials charged that people no longer obeyed the authorities because they believed the constitution had relieved them from most obligations” as described by Jaime E. Rodríguez O.

The Constitution of Cádiz meant freedom, and was interpreted as such by the people, who took it to its logical conclusion, anarchy. They learned the constitution and utilized it to assert their rights. This was quickly reacted upon and repressed, especially by the ecclesiastics and military who saw in the Constitution of Cádiz the loss of their absolute power due to secular, civil control over all public institutions.

At the same time, the Constitution of Cádiz meant stripping the indigenous of their autonomous rights and forcefully, if necessary, incorporating them into a highly unequal federalist constitutional system. As Thompson points out in a review of María del Carmen Salinas Sandoval’s work, “convivencia [living in harmony] with higher levels of government is what numerous villages in the northern part of the state of Mexico struggled for over decades, and very occasionally achieved during shortlived revolutions, but ultimately failed to enshrine in the constitutional or social changes which might have mitigated their powerlessness and poverty.” Therefore, when the indigenous municipalities were brought into the federalist system, they received little to none of the benefits, except for a rhetorical and juridical idea of being a constituent part of Mexico.

This antagonism between indigeneity, autonomy, and citizenship, along with land distribution and campesino rights have been integral to Mexican history ever since.

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The Constitution of Cádiz was an imposition by Spain, and while beginning the Mexican constitutional tradition, is not the first Mexican constitution. This is found in the Constitutional Decree for the Freedom of Mexican America of 1814 at Apatzingán, or the Apatzingán Constitution. The Apatzingán Constitution is based on decrees made by José María Morelos in Chilpancingo in 1813. In Morelos’ “Sentimientos de la Nación” [Thoughts about the Nation], Morelos expressed his constitutional principles including the principle of national sovereignty, state-supported religion, private property, individual human rights, equality before the law, and citizen control over the government. Thus, under Morelos’ leadership, the insurgent congress decided that independence would be an affirming of indigenous values, mixed with liberalism and Roman Catholicism.

The Apatzingán Constitution solidified the perception Indians had of being fully equal with the Spaniards that had come about after the Constitution of Cádiz. Liberalism, with its sovereign individual, became an ideological tool utilized to establish, at least rhetorically, the indigenous peoples of Mexico’s liberties. However, as described by Karen D. Caplan, this meant for the criollo [Spaniards born in New Spain] elite that “indigenous people had proven themselves incapable of comprehending the new liberal order” precisely because they understood equality meant equality. They thought of the constitution as restorative justice, and that it would work at ameliorating the historical crimes of colonialism.

For this reason, the Apatzingán Constitution would never become Mexico’s officially legitimate normative framework.

As José Bonifacio Barba has pointed out, “between 1810 and 1824 diverse juridical projects were developed”, and the national contradictions in Mexico’s independence move-
ment were more and more apparent. The insurgent constitution was disregarded by the criollo class whom wanted to end Spanish rule, while not being swept up by a social revolution. The eventual Federal Constitution of 1824, “forgot about individual rights and reduced the traditional government authority.”

Elites had been staging their own conspiracies against the Spanish Crown, unafraid of repercussions because of their own power. Control over Mexico would be quite lucrative with its fertile land, abundant natural resources, and large campesino population. As explained by Jaime E. Rodríguez O., the “autonomists”, an upper class grouping of “nobles, great magnates, merchants, professionals, and intellectuals”, envisioned New Spain as a “real entity” with Mexico City as its capitol. Their goal was a reorganization of power in their favor with no inclusion of indigenous and campesino demands.

The independence movement, as it was understood by indigenous and campesino groups, went far beyond either Morelos’ vision or the criollo project to take national power. In neither the Apatzingán Constitution nor the Federal Constitution of 1824 are there mentions of land redistribution to break down the hacendado system or financial regulation to end creditor exploitation of debtors, two main pressures leading to social upheaval in the provinces according to Brian R. Hamnett. Rather, a lot more concern was put into the maintenance of bureaucracy and security as Mexico transitioned into being a sovereign country.

The ongoing fractures and antagonisms of Mexico were left unresolved, even while the liberal project continued under Santa Anna’s Vice-President Gómez Farías. Liberalism has this flair for always staging an abstract people, while remaining deaf to the actual people. And even though the Federal Constitution of 1824 was a federalist project, Santa Anna was
able to exploit Mexico's antagonisms and centralize power. Santa Anna's lackadaisical leadership, narcissistic sacrificing of Mexico to the Texas rebels, and military loss of eight states to America, eventually led to his ouster in the Revolution of Ayutla in 1854.

* * *

When it came time to attempt another burial for centralism in Mexico, the federalists once more aligned themselves with the indigenous and campesinos. During and after the Ayutla revolt, the now solidified Puros [federalist liberals] needed fighters, along with the indigenous calls for further autonomy as a more radical bulwark, against the Moderado [conservative] faction. Otherwise, the Puros wouldn't have been able to advance their normative project. And, it wouldn't be till 1867 that the republicans finally triumphed. So, there was a constant state of conflict from 1854 to 1867 that necessitated the alliance with campesino and indigenous groups.

When the Puros were driven from power in 1857 by the Moderados, they regained power by being able to intervene in the trade routes. The rural and provincial areas, due to political economy changes, produced a burgeoning middle class that added to the Puros, who were utilizing their geographic location as a way to intervene in the Moderados trade routes. More important for the Puros retaining power was the military prowess of Nahua rifle men, which played a crucial role in the success of these commandeering and disruptive attacks on trade routes. The Moderados were being whittled down, unable to halt the guerrilla tactics of the insurgents.

Before the Liberals were ran out in 1857, they enshrined the idea of private property in the era of "La Reforma", forcing sale of some peasant communal landholdings, as well as not offering them legal protection in disputes over land. While unrecognized by more authoritarian leaders, such as Porfirio Diaz who wanted rule by the liberals through hierarchical control, other leaders, like Juan Alvarez, understood any justice from reforms must protect the communal holdings of the campesinos and indigenous groups in the provincial and rural areas. Thus, the handling of the land question under the liberals became a direct attack on a type of property rights seen as "backwards" by the Puros.

Regardless, as put succinctly by Guy Thomson, “Mexico's Liberal state was conceived, literally, on the hoof (or on foot), in time of war, and mostly in provincial, rural and often indigenous milieus.” This gave campesino and indigenous groups some leverage at keeping the more extreme destruction of collective rights held off, as even the moderate liberals, like José María Lafragua, stated:

...the most decisive cause of our ills has been the extraordinary disproportion with which territorial property has been distributed, which, making fortunes unequal, makes the poor class victim of the opulent, not only financial matters, but also in social matters, because it subjects the political conduct of a multitude of citizens to the caprices of a landowner, perhaps imbecile, and they are forced to obey not the inspirations of their hearts, but instead the precepts of the persons upon whom they depend. (cited by Peter F. Guardino)

These sentiments would sadly remain sentiments.

It is more than proper to state that Indigenous and campesino groups provided the motivating forces in the 19th century struggles in Mexico and were attempting to enact their own radical project, one always subsumed under the elites' projects. The same antagonisms arise again and again, making 19th century Mexico a long-drawn out battle for the establishment of a liberal capitalist order on the backs of campesino and indigenous fighters. In many ways, 19th century Mexico echoes Marx's much quoted assessment of history's progress, "first as tragedy, then as farce."

In the aftermath of the Federal Constitution of 1857 is once more the gruesome lie of indigenous citizenship and campesino rights to the land, as well as the re-entrenchment of oligarchy during the Porfiriato [dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz]. These antagonisms would be exacerbated once again as history marches toward 1910. As well, the 20th century sees the beginning of the obrero, the proletariat, and its role in Mexican history.

* * *

In 1910, Mexico burst into flames like a molotov cocktail hitting the street. The flame would burn brighter, dimmer, and brighter cyclically continuous for ten years. The Constitutionalists under the leadership of Francisco I. Madero wanted reinstitution of the liberal order and disposing of the Porfiriato. However, they represented a smaller liberal capitalist faction, and would have to align with and fight against Zapata and the campesinos and the Partido Liberal Mexicano's propaganda in Regeneración and revolutionary syndicalism, along with Pancho Villa's Northern Division and the old power elite of the Porfiriato.

After Madero took power in 1911 and refused to contemplate agrarian reform, Emiliano Zapata and the campesinos making up his armed forces from Morelos, Puebla and beyond, issued their Plan de Ayala. The Plan de Ayala begins with a populist rebuke of Madero, aligning the purpose of shedding blood with justice, as opposed to the practical, formal instituting of the rule of law. The Plan de Ayala's 6th decree states clearly, “we make it known: that the lands, forests, and waters that have been usurped by the hacendados [large landowners], científicos [intelligentsia], or caciques [political boss] in the shadow of venal justice, will henceforth enter into the possession of the villages or of citizens who have titles corresponding to those properties, and who have been despoiled through the bad faith of our oppressors.”
It goes on to state that any powerful actor who opposes the plan “shall have their properties nationalized and two thirds of those properties shall be given indemnizations of war, pensions to widows and orphans of the victims who are killed in the struggles surrounding the present Plan.”

Thus, the campesinos called for the radical resolution of the land question. This question would be settled with the reconstitution of the ejido system under Article 27 of the Constitution. It would not be settled permanently, nor sufficiently to alleviate the drastic, endemic deprivation of the system. What it would do is normalize once more the idea of collective ownership, and reinstitute partial autonomy for the indigenous peoples of Mexico bringing to surface the idea of pluri-democracy. It was also, since the 1810 call for independence, the first real attempt at grappling with what Lafragua labeled the “most decisive cause of our ills,” the land question.

The 1910 Mexican Revolution also brought out of the shadows the exploitation of labor. The industrial workers in the urban centers were split, and by the end of the revolution many sectors of the industrial proletariat would support General Alvaro Obregon and the Constitutionalists. But, the revolutionary syndicalist faction, especially the anarchist Casa del Obrero Mundial [House of the World Worker], had been wary of the Constitutionalists, who by 1914 were led by Obregon, since Madero had shut down the project for an Escuela Racionalista. These schools according to John M. Hart, were meant to propagate “a preschool program for younger children, a workers’ library, and the development of a complete education system” that was “free of government influence” with an Enlightenment orientation.

The revolutionary syndicalists, along with the more moderate factions of the worker’s movement, would normalize in the 1917 Constitution, and finalize under the Lázaro Cárdenas administration, national ownership over the means of production in key industries. But, this would be at the expense of the worker’s, campesino’s, and indigenous movement, which would be subsumed under a nation-state ideology of “revolutionary nationalism” promulgated aesthetically by the likes of Diego Rivera. The radical emancipation proposed by Regeneración became a dream forestalled. The institutionalization of the revolution would be the death of its most principled aspirations.

* * *

Mexico has maintained the 1917 Constitution, even after the 1968 massacres at Tlatelolco and the 1970s guerrilla insurgency with links to the Normal Rural de Ayotzinapa where Lucio Cabañas studied. The Constitution has been reformed on numerous occasions, most recently with the partial privatization of PEMEX, amongst other “structural” reforms, under President Enrique Peña Nieto. The reforms have been nothing but reactionary. Leading to current reforms is a recent history of calamitous political economy spearheaded by fools conducting a fire sale of the nation’s wealth. One of the most tragic reforms was the North American Free Trade Agreement, which led to the 1994 Zapatista Rebellion, along with the decimation of the ejido system. It meant the beginning of the end for those constitutional articles, especially Article 27, that normalized the radical demands that had emanated from indigenous, campesino, and proletarian social groups.

All was not grim. It also meant the beginning of a new wave of struggle searching for a new constitutional arrangement of Mexican society. The Zapatista struggle led to the possibility of the San Andres Accords, which were subsequently betrayed by the Mexican state, but birthed once more the right to rebellion, autonomy, and self-determination as constitutional necessities. These accords are what Bishop Raúl Vera López considers the origin of the new call for a popular constitutional assembly. This new assembly is based on the construction of social subjects, as opposed to the abstract individuals of liberal constitutional philosophy; social subjects like the teachers who took over the Zocalo, mothers fighting against the violence and human rights abuses of the drug war, Zapatistas searching for indigenous autonomy, campesinos revisiting the land question, workers and the need to expropriate the surplus value stolen from them by the transnational capitalist class.

On February 5th, 2015 the popular constitutional assembled and continues the search for a normative order that makes real demands for equality, liberty, and justice. 200 years and still these principles remained unfulfilled for the overwhelming majority of Mexico. But, like Alexander Cockburn once said, “You do what you can. You have to take the long view sometimes. Supposing we’re in the Roman empire in 300 AD...We’ve seen there’s a future for secular leftism in the Roman empire...Actually if you took the longview people would say “these people were completely insane in the third century.” Cause there’s centuries of not exactly radical advance ahead of them. But were they wrong to say I think we can nationalize land, release all the slaves, build a communal society in northern Tuscany?”

In Mexico, if we take the long view, we know we may not get it this time either. Two hundred years of struggle for a normative order representative of the people’s aspirations.

But the fight shall go on, we will approximate our principles to reality till the day we lose these chains. Till the day we truly have tierra y libertad this history is being written, la lucha sigue...

Viva la lucha!
Viva!

Andrew Smolski is a writer based in Texas.
Reflections on the Announcement that Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus will Retire Its Elephants in 2018

O Elephant!

By JoAnn Wypijewski

The first elephant who might rightly be called a circus act in America came on the scene in September of 1821. The Learned Elephant, as she was called, Little Bet. Until her emergence, two previous captive elephants had but to stand where people could gather. Their immensity alone was the object of wonder, worth 50 cents a view, a quarter if interest flagged.

Little Bet did tricks. She could sit, lie down or rise on command, open a corked bottle and drink its contents, carry a human on her trunk, stand on two legs. By the time she went on display, Americans had a quarter-century’s familiarity with what they’d considered a gentle giant—impressive, “sagacious” some said, almost human. They were primed to want more.

The first elephant anyone recorded on these shores had crossed the Atlantic on April 13, 1796, the property of Capt. Jacob Crowninshield, who quickly sold her for a handsome profit. The elephant, unnamed, made appearances from Boston to the Carolinas, but disappears from records in 1818. It’s said that a farmer from Somers, New York, Hachaliah Bailey, had once seen the elephant, a dream image he carried until one day he saw another, standing among cattle in the New York stockyards around 1805. Perhaps Bailey had intended Betty, or Old Bet, as he called America’s second elephant, to try the land, but soon he discovered the advantages of taking her at night from farm to farm, then village to village, then by wagon with a group of common beasts—a dog, a horse, some pigs—who might do stunts. Some accounts of Old Bet’s career conjure the lamplit north country of her early days, the big eyes of children and grown folks alike, poor rural people tied to the land, opening their barn doors for the first time to the world. A story of innocence, it is bound to collide unhappily with experience.

A roadside plaque in Alfred, Maine, cryptically memorializes “Site of Slaying of Elephant.” Old Bet died there on July 24, 1816. The shooter said it was sinful to make people pay to see an animal. Whether his murderous passions were aroused by such commerce generally or by its coincidence with the Sabbath—this is not clear—they were not impulsive. He had lain in wait for the elephant.

Another plaque, in Chepachet, Rhode Island, marks the death of her replacement, Little Bet, shot down after performing on May 25, 1826. Whether the killers were men or boys, and whether they were just bloody-minded, or aimed to test if her hide really was so tough that bullets would bounce off, as Bailey reputedly claimed, they too had lain in wait, felling her as she crossed the only bridge out of town.

Some say the killing inaugurated the modern circus, as showmen sought to protect their investments through organization and elaboration. Many of them crossed paths and exchanged ideas at Bailey’s Elephant Hotel in Somers, which today calls itself Cradle of the American Circus. In all events, by the 1830s the anarchic display of animals at tavern yards or museums, the thirty-some caravans that plodded the roads with a handful of creatures, were eclipsed by lavish shows with scores of trained animals, riders, comic acts, freaks and acrobats. Violence would no longer be random.

The first elephant I have found to be executed for breaking the systematized order of work died in England. Chunee had been on exhibit for 17 of his 22 years, a celebrity first as a stage act and then confined to a menagerie. Beginning in 1820, Chunee experienced annual, increasingly volatile bouts of what was diagnosed as sexual excitement, rattling his cage, threatening his keepers. The latter feared he might break out, and liberate other animals too. They gave him laxatives, which he learned to shun. They tried arsenic, which he rejected. On March 2, 1826, they brought firepower.

A broadside for a theatrical re-enactment of the execution depicts Chunee on one knee behind bars, spouting blood, while soldiers discharge 152 musket balls, and other men brandish spears. A keeper finally ended the elephant’s agony after more than an hour, driving a sword into him.

In The Animal Estate, Harriet Ritvo relates Victorian England’s enthusiasm for animals—particularly those whose natural powers made their domination all the more awesome—with the maintenance of social hierarchies and the psychology of empire. Chunee was no doubt experiencing a male elephant’s period of must, prologue to mating, but this intrusion of unruly nature upset the illusion of the civilized kingdom projected by circuses and the emerging zoological gardens. Having been sentimentalized in captivity, as Ritvo says, a “public pet,” Chunee was doomed as an animal.

America’s early circuses reflected what America had grown up with. They made Indians into exhibitions. They offered opportunity to a white ne’er-do-well. Phineas T. Barnum, a failure at every earlier pursuit, entered show business in 1835 with the purchase of a paralyzed black woman. Barnum hawked Joice Heth as George Washington’s nurse, and when she died, after seven months’ display, he staged a public autopsy, for which 1,500 people paid 50 cents a head. Later he went into business with James Bailey, who wasn’t related to Hachaliah but adopted the surname as a calling card, and who is said to have cinched the deal that in 1882 brought the world’s most famous elephant to America.

Jumbo, whose name would enter the vocabulary as a generic, like Kleenex or Vaseline, was the first African ele-
phant to survive the passage to Europe, where he was a sensation in Paris and London zoos, and the first to survive crossing the Atlantic. He may have been the first elephant to stage a sit-down strike as well, refusing to move for 24 hours outside the London Zoological Gardens after having been sold to Barnum and Bailey’s circus. But move he did, a trapper; Jumbo was killed in an industrial accident in 1885, struck by a train. (See: Jason Hribal’s Fear of an Animal Planet.)

The popular rage for animals in this country no doubt involved simple curiosity as well as the thrill of mastery over the wild, but it seems not to have been until after the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, in 1893, the dawn of U.S. overseas imperialism, and not until the frenzy period of domestic lynching, that the country began exacting a spectacular price for elephant rebellion.

In 1894, Tip, a star elephant in the Central Park Zoo, was poisoned with cyanide. “Enthralled monarch of the jungle, largest and most powerful of his herd, an elephantine colossus,” The New York Times intoned, he “paid with his life the penalty of refusing to tame his...nature.” Tip had been condemned for killing several keepers and arousing fear and hatred in another. It took him nine hours to die.

On June 7, 1900, Sport was hanged in front of 2,000 spectators at the Northern Central Railway yards in Baltimore. It was a mercy killing, all involved said, the elephant having broken his spine after releasing the door of his boxcar and being hurled from the circus train. Mercy waited nine minutes to arrive while Sport, suspended from the hook of a freight derrick, “trumpeted wildly.”

Before Sport died his circus companion, Jolly, grieved for him. The owner of both, a famed animal impresario called Frank Bostock, figured a half-gallon of rye whiskey would perk up Jolly’s spirits. The whiskey so administered, Jolly dropped dead the next day of heart failure.

In the fall of 1901, Jumbo II was chained to two wooden blocks and wired to a transformer in the center of an arena at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, while 7,000 paying spectators scrambled to their seats. For many months Jumbo had been the delight of fair-goers. Then President McKinley was assassinated, receipts and spirits dried up, the people themselves went on a rampage of destruction on Buffalo Day, and so did Jumbo, knocking his owner, Bostock again, unconscious. Bostock vowed, “Jumbo will be hanged, or choked to death with chains, in which case other elephants will be used” as executioners. The fair’s promoters disagreed. Electricity was the novelty and glory of the Pan Am Expo; electricity would kill the elephant. The day arrived, the throng waited, Jumbo was pronounced insane, and the current generated by
Niagara Falls flowed through him. Jumbo lived! Bostock was stunned, and the people, laughing, got their money back.

Topsy “lived” only in the sense that her electrocution, on January 4, 1903, was filmed by Thomas Edison. Until she was declared a menace for killing three people in three years, Topsy, 28, had been a favorite attraction at Coney Island. Her owners proposed to hold a hanging. When the ASPCA objected, Edison, who’d made a side-career out of publicly executing animals, suggested electrocution; 6,600 volts, and Topsy went down in seconds. Fifteen hundred people watched. The film became a landmark in motion picture history, replayed by millions in nickel machines at arcades.

Mary was hanged in the Clinchfield Railroad yard in Erwin, Tennessee, on September 13, 1916. She had paused to inspect a watermelon rind during the elephant parade in a nearby town. When her guide jabbed her in the jaw with a bullhook, she lofted him in the air with her trunk and dashed him to the ground, crushing his head underfoot. (Post mortem, it was discovered Mary had a severe abscess in her gum.) “Kill the elephant! Kill the elephant!” the crowd chanted. The next day 2,500 men, women and children witnessed as the crane hoisted Mary up, as a chain snapped, sending her crashing to the ground in pain, as, the chain replaced, her broken body was again jerked up and the hanging complete.

Black Diamond was chained to a block and executed by firing squad in a pasture outside Kenedy, Texas, on October 16, 1929. Four days earlier, during a circus parade in downtown Corsicana, the elephant had attacked his former trainer and the man’s socialite girlfriend, killing the woman. The show went on anyway, with record crowds. Black Diamond was jailed in a boxcar, under guard, which disappointed some in the audience but also attracted vigilantes “threatening that Diamond would never leave Corsicana alive.” This according to one of the circus crew, George (Slim) Lewis. The next day’s paper spun a tale of insensate jealousy, of the elephant’s “jungle lust” for the white woman. After Black Diamond fell in a hail of up to 170 rounds, spectators rushed to cut off a piece of him. For anyone who missed the killing, a local butcher later sold strips of the elephant’s hide for a dime.

It’s said that the elephant remembers. Perhaps. More important, the figure of the elephant is a memory box of who we are and what brought us to this shore of history.

I don’t remember seeing elephants as a child, though I must have in a circus or a zoo in Buffalo. Nobody, certainly, spoke of Jumbo II’s ordeal at the Pan American Exposition, though, in the scheme of things, the story is a happy-ender. My fascination with the animal fixed on its image in the encyclopedia, in Dumbo or National Geographic, finally on a stuffed toy, which looked different from an actual elephant and became my favorite. I gave Infi a name and a voice and a series of adventures that were comic and harrowing, and through which he always prevailed. I gave him a personality, which was disarming, since he was both hapless and wise, prone to accident and very brave. I loved him with a child’s mania, and never in all that projection did I imagine him joining the circus, or balancing on a tub, or pacing in a zoo, or symbolizing all of the terrible things I had time enough ahead to learn. He was Infi, simply; a child does not require the real to invent reality.

**Spinning on Black Writers**

**Black Literature & the FB Eye Blues**

**By Ron Jacobs**

“Got them blues, blues, blues

Them mean ol’ FB Eye blues…”

-Richard Wright

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the oldest official national police force in the United States. Its focus has always been at least twofold: to investigate perceived threats to the existence of the U.S. government and to go after criminals who commit certain crimes across state lines. The former focus has most often been turned towards the left side of the political spectrum, although recently that eye has trained a greater part of its view towards radical Islam. Like the leftist “threats” of the past, it seems from a daily reading of the news that many of these supposed threats are either paranoid fantasies of the Bureau and its agents or actually contrived by the Bureau itself. Another similarity is the lives these phantasms have destroyed.

One other consistent target of the FBI has been the non-white community in the United States. For the most part, at least until recently, this meant the African-American people. Indeed, the FBI has been considered one of the most racist institutions in the U.S. government since its inception. This was true in the case of its hiring practices and its approach to carrying out its mission. Any Black organization or individual standing up to racism was suspect; from the NAACP to Marcus Garvey and from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Black Panther Fred Hampton, fighting for equal rights and racial justice was automatically viewed as seditious.

The stories of FBI surveillance and harassment of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and numerous other civil rights and Black liberation activists are fairly well known. So is the racism of the long term director of the Bureau, J. Edgar Hoover. Less well known is the Bureau’s harassment and...
surveillance of Black writers and other artists. That is the subject of the recently published book by William J. Maxwell titled *F. B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African-American Literature*. The text was sourced primarily from FBI files Maxwell procured via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. He lists these requests and their results (whether he received any documents, how many pages and amount of redactions) in the book’s appendix. The book also includes an excellent annotated index that in itself is quite a read for anyone interested in U.S. government surveillance of its citizens.

Underlying Maxwell’s text is the convincing notion that the control of African-Americans was central to the growth of the FBI and its presence in the popular imagination. It is the story of a megalomaniacal man (J. Edgar Hoover), his extreme nationalism/patriotism, racism, and ego. Naturally, it is also a history of Washington’s ever-intensifying centralization of surveillance. Informed by Hoover’s own racism and apparent doubts about his own heritage, Maxwell contends that this phobic obsession with Black America was as important as the Bureau’s early focus on leftists and anarchists and its 1930s campaign against outlaws like John Dillinger and other so-called public enemies.

Like other histories detailing U.S. racism and its continued existence after the Civil War and Reconstruction, *FB Eyes* relates the tale of the great boxer Jack Johnson and his persecution by racist law enforcement agencies around the United States. It was Johnson’s flamboyant disregard for laws and customs forbidding interracial sexual relations and his ability to beat any white-skinned competitor (plus his tendency to brag loudly about it afterwards) that brought down the wrath of white society and its enforcers. In fact, it was his bringing a white girlfriend with him across state lines that gave the FBI the opportunity to prosecute him under the Mann Act (this law was used to prosecute musician Chuck Berry many decades later.) Johnson was forced to flee the US, only returning after seven years in exile to serve a year in federal prison.

News stories announcing the existence of government surveillance have not surprised civil libertarians and left radicals for decades. When Edward Snowden exposed the scope of eavesdropping and other surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013, there was substantial outcry from the mainstream media, Congress, and many ordinary US residents, but for the aforementioned skeptics, Snowden’s revelations only confirmed what the Left and civil libertarians already suspected. This was also the case in the 1970s when the Church hearings in the US Senate made official the information regarding COINTELPRO that was revealed in the FBI documents stolen from FBI offices in Media, PA. by a group of heroic antivar activists. Maxwell’s book continues this tradition of exposing government surveillance, with a specific focus on FBI spying on African-American writers and poets. If nothing else, it is a comprehensive look at this aspect of FBI surveillance of US citizens. Complementarily, it is also a primer on some of the more influential African-American writers of the twentieth century.

The approach Maxwell takes in his book is somewhat unique, at least for studies of government surveillance. As the subtitle implies, *FB Eyes* (which is taken from a poem by one of Hoover’s favorite target, Richard Wright), Maxwell suggests that the surveillance conducted by the FBI helped “frame” African-American literature from 1919 on. This “framing” occurred in a number of ways. Some of those methods included simplistic approaches such as threatening to cancel or not renew visas for writers living abroad unless they informed on their fellows who were Communist while other means were more sophisticated and included the creation of literary jour-
nals that published and reviewed some writers while ignoring others. Another tactic involved pressuring publishers to not publish writers the Bureau considered radical or revolutionary. This latter tactic was also used against the counterculture/New Left underground media during the 1960s and 1970s to great effect. Indeed, many of the FBI tactics of surveillance and harassment (black ops in today’s parlance) that were used on the New Left and antiwar organizations of the 1960s and 1970s were first used against Black organizations and individuals earlier in the century. Tragically, the tactics used during COINTELPRO against African-American groups were generally considerably worse than those used against predominantly white organizations. As any student of the period knows, FBI operations against African-Americans included murders, false charges and imprisonment, the destruction of personal and political relationships via lies and intimidations, to name just a few of the more notorious tactics.

According to Maxwell, his reading of the FBI files he was able to procure reveals an FBI that seemed to understand the importance of culture as a means of social change. It was this understanding that inspired Hoover to set up the program discussed in this book. Although the motivation behind the FBI’s relatively exhaustive study of Black literature was to stifle and subvert its liberatory possibilities, Maxwell writes that in doing so, the Bureau became one of “the most dedicated critics of African-American literature,” at least during the time when Hoover lead the bureau. Given the importance placed on literature and culture by Hoover and his agency-especially in relation to the U.S. Black community—it was only natural that the Bureau would try to shape its content and direction. Although this attempt was occasionally successful, it seems fair to state that by the late 1960s, the predominant influence of the FBI on African-American literature (and culture in general) was in direct opposition to the FBI and its director.

Maxwell opens FB Eyes by describing a letter written by one of Hoover’s top agents, William C. Sullivan. The letter, which was part of the COINTELPRO operation against Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was a fictionalized plea from a non-existent African-American upset with rumors about King’s purported infidelities and ties to communism. “King, look into your heart...” it reads. “You know you are a complete fraud and a great liability to us Negroes...” According to his memoirs, Sullivan perceived himself as an antiracist and FBI surveillance as a means of keeping the struggle for civil rights within the parameters of mainstream US politics. In order to achieve this task, Sullivan was willing to violate a good number of articles in the Bill of Rights. In fact, Maxwell describes Hoover actually reining Sullivan in during Nixon’s presidency when a plan designed by Tom Huston considered, among a multitude of other police state tactics, spying on every single U.S. college student. (The plan as a whole was eventually rejected, in large part because Hoover saw it as an attempt to usurp his power. However, many individual elements of the plan were put in place.) Sullivan was killed in a suspicious hunting accident in 1977, perhaps because he knew too much.

A common misconception of liberal U.S. citizens is that it is the political right wing that favors government surveillance and harassment of civil rights and other predominantly left-leaning groups and individuals. While it is true that some of the greatest violations of civil liberties occurred under the Republican Presidents Richard Nixon, George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, anyone who has paid the least amount of attention knows that Barack Obama’s administration is no slouch when it comes to such conduct. Much of the surveillance discussed in Maxwell’s book began under the liberal Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

William Sullivan was but one purveyor of the belief that COINTELPRO was primarily designed to destroy the Klan and other groups in the white racist movement. While this may have been the intent of various liberals in the FBI involved in the project, the historical facts are that the New Left and Black liberation movements bore the brunt of COINTELPRO and the Klan never disappeared. In fact, the Klan’s continued presence in the U.S. white racist movement is testament to the untruths present in such a supposition. Given the historical truth that African-American radicals of every stripe were one of the primary targets of the FBI from its inception, the theory that the Bureau prioritized ending racism seems a bit far-fetched.

Ron Jacobs is the author of Daydream Sunset: the Sixties Counterculture in the Seventies.

A Political Economy of Caging the Marginal
Van Jones’ Blind Spot

By Seth Sandronsky

In the Sacramento Bee, Van Jones, an activist turned Democratic Party official in the Obama White House, and now a CNN political contributor, critiqued America’s “massive incarceration industry”. He cites many of the carceral and racial details Michelle Alexander delivers in The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. According to him, the industry “locks up too many people, wastes too much money, ruins too many lives and violates our sense of racial fairness—all while failing to make our communities much safer.” The devil lies in the real economic conditions of imprisonment, which Jones sidesteps. For instance, detainment and imprisonment creates employment in the
private- and public-sectors. At the same time, detainment and imprisonment reduces the official employment data as those awaiting trial and sentenced to prison are uncounted in government employment data.

The American government’s (federal, state and local) race to incarcerate black and Latino communities exists within the struggle between capital and labor. The former has triumphed over the latter in the past 40 years through deindustrialization, deregulation and privatization. Class interests propelling U.S.-style capitalism have shaped imprisonment and punishment, a trend in which capital has restructured labor along what African American author and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois called “the color line”.

A post-WWII era of shared prosperity saw a 33.2 percent rate of union membership in 1956, with the top 10 percent receiving 31.8 percent of national income for the same year, according to the Economic Policy Institute. The opposite trend followed. The top 10 percent received 47 percent of national income while the rate of union membership fell to 11.2 percent in 2013.

The postwar period dominated by corporate monopolies such as the Big Three carmakers brought a rising standard of living to a heavily working class. The fruits of industrial productivity trickled down to working families, though poverty festered in union-free regions, notably the South. There, where centuries of chattel slavery left its mark in ways big and small, no more so than the caging of blacks, the origin of the current prison-industrial system.

Industry’s postwar demand for black workers in the Midwest and Northeast was robust. Off the radar screen, weak marketplace competition from global competitors, e.g., the defeated rivals in Germany and Japan, was ending. One impact was the end of an accord between American capital and union labor. The “last hired and first fired” fractions of the working class, national minorities, would incur the worst of the accord’s unraveling as the sun set on popular movements of the 1960s. What in part propelled this defeat, according to author Immanuel Ness, was “left movements in the United States that prioritized cordial relations with business and state over the organization of the U.S. working class—especially African Americans,” writing in New Forms of Worker Organization: The Syndicalist and Autonomist Restoration of Class-Struggle Unionism.

While the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union raged, President Richard M. Nixon dismantled the postwar Bretton Woods system of financial regulation away from the gold standard on August 15, 1971. A week later, a memo titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System” to Mr. Eugene B. Sydnor, Jr., Chairman, Education Committee, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce from Lewis F. Powell, Jr., later a Supreme Court Justice, sounded an alarm for corporate capital to politically respond to organized working class agitations, in and off the job. The Powell memo, in effect, is the forbearer of the American Legislative Exchange Council. Today, ALEC provides corporate-friendly bills to lawmakers such as Wisconsin’s GOP Gov. Scott Walker.

The political influence of the black freedom movement, lighting fires of rebellion under other oppressed minority groups, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and women, to oppose the status quo, posed major threats to what author Noam Chomsky has termed a “corporate-run and propaganda managed” democracy. Meanwhile, the postwar economic model was grinding to a halt. Something had to happen. It did. The ruling-class hammer landed sharply on the non-white populace, primarily blacks, via conscious policy formation, e.g., the Drug War.

African Americans saw industry’s demand for their labor services wither. For the overall U.S. labor force, “the percentage of all nonfarm workers in manufacturing declined from 24 percent in March 1973 to 10 percent in March 2007,” according to Marlene A. Lee and Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau.

In the U.S., the shift to a deregulated global monetary regime spurred the economic conditions for what author-activist Angela Davis termed the prison-industrial complex. Unionized factory workers, including blacks who had tenaciously clawed their way up the occupational ladder, watched their employment vanish, due to automation and capital flight. Automation is baked into the system. Capital fled the U.S. to the Global South for its lower wages and weaker environmental laws. Under this one-two punch, the U.S. industrial heartland states withered, so much so that a new term for such decay became part of the nation’s language: the Rust Belt. An unnecessary labor force of former industrial workers became the raw material, or commodity, in the over-policing and hyper-incarcerating system. The unemployment and social decay that followed resulted in the rate of imprisonment rising in all 50 states, so that for the nation as a whole the rate of imprisonment rose from 75 persons per 100,000 in 1970 to just shy of 450 per 100,000 in 2010, or a six-fold increase, according to the Prison Policy Initiative The racial disparity gives meaning to the phrase “a wide margin.” The U.S. incarceration rate by race per 100,000 in 2010 was: white 380; Latino 966 and black 2,207. Robynn J.A. Cox is an assistant professor at Spelman College and RCMAR Scholar at the USC Leonard D. Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics. In her report “Where Do We Go from Here? Mass Incarceration and the Struggle for Civil Rights, she writes: “From 1979 to 2009, there was a decrease in the share of individuals sentenced to state facilities for violent crimes and property crimes, but large increases in the proportion of individuals serving time for less serious crimes such as drug crimes and other crimes. This shift in focus occurred after the federal government increased federal funding and resources to state and local law enforcement to support the war on drugs. In order to obtain economic gains from the re-
sulting prison boom, impoverished rural communities—and the private sector—began using prison construction as part of their economic development strategies, with hopes that prisons would be a recession-proof industry that would help to stimulate their economy through job creation and regional multiplier effects.”

As factory jobs with livable pay faded, a fraction of the working class found employment in the emerging prison-industrial complex. A part of the labor force made a living guarding another section of workers. According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1988, the earliest year data is available, there were 142,200 correctional officers and jailers employed nationally. This occupation grew to a total of 382,150 in 1997 and 432,680 in 2013.

To describe the nation’s incarceration boom, as Jones does, as an enterprise wasteful of taxpayer dollars is to focus on one side of the public purse: fiscal spending. This serves to disguise a basic fact of the capitalist political economy. Whether money’s source is the public treasury or private pockets, there is always and everywhere an exchange of dollars between sellers and buyers for goods and services. Jones ignores this, as well as the fact that those receiving the money have political influence. For instance, the money-power of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association shapes bipartisan state politics in ways big and small. Jones’ blind spot here speaks volumes in his critique of the prison-industrial complex.

I recall asking a California Dept. of Corrections and Rehabilitation spokeswoman on background for her employer’s top vendors by payment. Her reply for fiscal year 2009-10 does not reflect the total funding available in the vendors’ contracts, only first-quarter payments made.

County of Los Angeles Sheriff—$6,560,317.06; Healthtrans LLC—$5,011,271.47; GEO Group, Inc.—$3,575,632.89; Amerisource Bergen Drug Corp.—$3,470,477.87; Rosen, Bien and Galvan, LLP—$1,425,159.95; and Cornell Companies, Inc.—$1,369,494.01.

Under the Obama White House, the GEO Group is a company expanding into the detention of immigrant detainees. This is a for-profit operation. Here, we see displaced peasants and workers from Central America and Mexico seeking paid work in the U.S., absent such opportunities in their homelands. Like stateside national minorities, these apprehended individuals become commodities in the prison-industrial complex. That is, their imprisonment produces a revenue stream for the GEO Group. To earn its investors a return on their capital, the company must spend less money than it takes in.

As Jones correctly writes, there are two groups of hyper-incarcerated U.S. prisoners, blacks and Latinos. This fact speaks volumes about America’s so-called post-racial moment, and a divide that fragments the working class. The current moment of crime and punishment, therefore, reflects an inter- and intra-class conflict. Employment of and investment in this status quo won’t go gently into the night without a sustained campaign of militant dissent and alternate social order.

The social position of non-white prisoners, e.g., relative to buyers of their labor services, or employers, prior to incarceration, cries out for attention. These imprisoned individuals, according to Loïc Wacquant of the University of California at Berkeley Sociology Dept., come from the ranks of the economically marginal. This is the slice of the U.S. working class superfluous to the employer class.

“Fewer than half of inmates [in U.S. prisons] held a full-time job at the time of their arraignment and two-thirds issue from households with annual income amounting to less than half of the so-called poverty line,” he writes. Official employment data ignores the imprisoned. Counting them would up the rate of unemployment. Their swelling the ranks of the un- and underemployed would, all things equal, increase the supply of potential workers relative to job openings. This is a surefire way to depress wage levels under the current status quo of the labor market.

Further, the rate of blacks’ unemployment is double that of white workers in and out of economic expansion and recession. Latino unemployment is regularly higher than whites’, though not at the extreme level of blacks’. If there is, as Wacquant asserts, a correlation between labor force participation, incarceration and immiseration, such intersecting forces of class, gender and race suggest sites for mobilization and organization to push for progressive change.

It is not as if members of both political parties have ignored expanding the national and state policies to detain and imprison marginalized people. These are bipartisan policies on the local, state and federal levels. Why? Follow the money. Prison-industrial complex-friendly policies profit corporate America. Jones’ claim that this system “wastes too much money” simply sidesteps the political-economy of the prison-industrial complex. For him to ignore the power of the business lobby at all levels of government is stunning.

Why are so many individuals kicked to the curb of U.S. society, rendering them outside the capitalist labor market? What makes marginalized individuals redundant to employers? From a left viewpoint, the aim is to air publicly and act collectively on what is at stake with the downward mobility of hiring and living patterns built into imprisoning trends for U.S. society.

Professor Hadar Aviram is Harry and Lillian Hastings Research Chair at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, the author of Cheap on Crime: Recession-Era Politics and the Transformation of American Punishment. She draws out the “lights and shadows” of post-2008 criminal justice policy. Her special focus is fiscal spending and taxing after this 18-month period, e.g., the Great Recession, ended.

“The 2008 financial crisis has not uniformly led to more punitivism,” Aviram writes in her book’s Introduction. “In
fact, as the rhetorical devices, political alliances, and criminal justice policies presented in chapters 4–7 of this book argue, the effect of the financial crisis on penal and correctional policies in the United States has been more complex and nuanced. In some criminal justice sites the recession scaled down the punitive project, whereas in others it has led to tough policies. These mixed trends require an explanation in light of the literature suggesting that in times of austerity governments tend to recur to greater, not lesser, reliance on punishment and oppressive social control.”

We might also consider what an attack on the conditions of poverty might do to reduce the power of the prison-industrial complex. There is no right to food, shelter and water for Americans. All exist in adequate supply.

In terms of the real estate bubble—commercial and residential—that ignited the 2007-08 financial crisis, it was the third such speculative expansion and contraction of last decade. Why? Look to the slowing growth of the U.S. economy. "Comparing economic growth between the 1950s and ’60s with the subsequent decades, the real GDP growth rate slows down from over 4 percent in the 1950s and ’60s, to around 3 percent for the 1970s to ’90s, to less than 2 percent for the 2000s," writes Fred Magdoff in Monthly Review. As growth slowed, investment capital faced a dilemma. Where would it go to grow? It has shifted, slowly, from the industrial arena to the financial field. Financial booms and busts became the new normal. That trend masks an underlying structural flaw in the economy. In brief, that is the scarcity of profitable returns on industrial capital investment statewide. As a result, financial markets absorbed the surplus investment capital. Wall St. grew. We see the rise of the finance industry, from 1950’s 2.8 percent of GDP to 4.9 percent in 1980 and 7.9 percent in 2007, as William K. Tabb writes, citing the International Monetary Fund, shows a near tripling of growth.

Alexander, in The New Jim Crow, describes the harmful impacts to black communities nationwide after postwar prosperity ended in the 1970s. Black unemployment spiked. By contrast in the postwar decade, business demand had been robust for African Americans. Citing Troy Duster, “Pattern, Purpose, and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice,” in Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice, ed., Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine, Alexander writes: “In 1954, black and white youth unemployment rates in America were equal, with blacks actually having a slightly higher rate of employment in the age group sixteen to nineteen. By 1984, however, the black unemployment rate had nearly quadrupled, while the white rate had increased only marginally.”

According to her, the collapse of the economy that devastated black communities cried out for Keynesian-style stimulus policies and politics. “A new War on Poverty could have been launched,” she writes, pushing past Jones’ proposals, for economic justice as a means to end the prison-industrial complex. Well, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s did in fact develop and propose a kind of Marshall Plan, the postwar policy to rebuild Europe (and benefit U.S. capital), to eradicate domestic impoverishment. Figures from that era of the black freedom struggle, from Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr. to A. Philip Randolph, played leadership roles in support for the Freedom Budget.

A recent book fleshes out the details. We turn to A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today by Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates. The Freedom Budget of 1966 was “a practical step-by-step plan for wiping out poverty in America during the next 10 years.” This document arose from the 1963 March for Jobs and Justice in Washington DC. The Freedom Budget took a Keynesian social spending from economic growth policy approach to eradicate poverty and inequality. It died in the disinterest of the Democratic Party and the economic class it represented (the top one percent in the parlance of the Occupy movement), in no small part due to the central dilemma of social conflict to end the Vietnam War, which Democratic Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson was busy escalating.

It is fair to say there are intertwining causes and consequences to the triad of employment, imprisonment and impoverishment. On that note, Jones’ goal to reduce the nation’s prison population by 50 percent in 10 years is laudable. It is also limited if unemployment and impoverishment are off stage.

A popular movement can marshal its power to shape the investments that determine job creation. First up is interfering the purpose and role of racially-biased incarceration and immiseration of the black and Latino populace. In 2010, the national incarceration rate by race was 831 for Hispanics and 2,306 for blacks per 100,000. There’s much to learn from young black people’s efforts to oppose their mistreatment after Darren Wilson, a white officer, shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen, in Ferguson, Missouri on August 2014. This movement for equality with justice shows, as Le Blanc and Yates argue in A Freedom Budget for All Americans, what matters most to forging working-class alliances and winning people’s victories. They write: “Governments react to power. Those who wield it tend to get what they want; those who lack power do not.”

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It may seem obvious that the U.S. government is at war with Islam at home and abroad. The reality is more complex. For example, in the excellent new book Rebel Music: Race, Empire, and the New Muslim Youth Culture (Vintage, $19.95), Hisham Aidi describes the work of Jihad Saleh, Congressional legislative assistant and head of the 45-member Congressional Muslim Staffers Association.

Working with the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, Saleh helps to host Islamic religious scholars, giving them tours of the Capitol. “They cannot believe that every Friday afternoon a hundred Muslims come out to pray in Congress,” Saleh told Aidi. “I know, in many ways, we’re tap dancing for the State Department,” adds Saleh, “that they’re using us to show Muslims around the world how affluent American Muslims are, and how tolerant America is.”

The tune the State Department calls for tap dancing is often an explicitly musical one. Muslim hip hop artists from America do shows at U.S. embassies in Europe, where millions of Muslim immigrants now live. In France, the U.S. ambassador sponsors hip hop conferences while French rappers are given free trips to the U.S. The U.S. embassy in Yemen puts on hip hop shows for local youth while State Department brochures feature photos of Wu-Tang Clan.

Aidi writes: “In 2010, State Department-sponsored break dancers were doing shows in Morocco and Algeria; rappers 50 Tyson and Kumasi were performing in Indonesia. Along with these tours, films about Islam and hip hop in America were screened at US embassies in Asia and Africa…. In 2010 the State Department sent a Brooklyn-based rap group named Chen Lo and the Liberation Family to perform in Damascus.”

Hip hop outreach is a significant part of U.S. government strategy. "Rap is at the heart of the embassies’ outreach…. Farah Pandith, the State Department’s special representative to Muslim communities, believes hip hop can convey a ‘different narrative’ to counter the foreign ‘violent ideology’ that youth are exposed to.”

The violent reality of U.S. foreign policy excludes some types of music from soft power consideration. Hard rock and heavy metal have been used as the soundtrack of choice for American troops and bomber pilots and have also been used by the CIA during interrogation and torture sessions. Another reason hip hop is the first choice of the State Department is the music’s long-standing relationship to Islam. Since its early days in New York, much hip hop has been informed by Islamic thought and many prominent rappers have been Muslims.

Following Chen Lo’s show in Damascus, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boasted that “Hip hop is America,” claiming that it could “rebuild the image” of the United States. It would have been no surprise if Clinton said she loved hip-hop, considering that rap producer Timbaland raised $800,000 for her at a Florida soiree in 2007. But her hip hop bona fides are highly suspect. Hillary Clinton was a compliant member of Walmart’s board when the company was the most active censor of hip hop; she attacked hip hop in a speech to the Democratic National Convention; and as Secretary of State Clinton worked to guarantee the continuing flow of billions of dollars to prop up the Saudi regime. Hip hop music is illegal in Saudi Arabia.

The problem the State Department has with using hip hop to “rebuild the image” of the U.S. is that hip hop tends to give an all too accurate image of America: poverty, police brutality, the world’s biggest prison system. From the government’s point of view, that problem is solved by pre-screening all lyrics. You wanna get paid? Rap how we tell you. American artists need the money precisely because they live in the poverty that they end up having to help cover up. Meanwhile, Yemeni youth may enjoy hip hop shows at the U.S. embassy, but when they return home they are still in danger of being killed by a U.S. drone strike.

The use of black American Muslims in pursuit of foreign policy goals isn’t new. Aidi writes: “The American Colonization Society, founded by Henry Clay in 1817 to ‘repatriate’ African slaves to Liberia, saw Muslim slaves with their Arabic literacy as a valuable tool for opening up West Africa to American economic and religious interests. America’s African Muslims were seen as natural intermediaries…the Muslim slaves…were indebted to the U.S. for their newfound freedom, and could help spread the gospel of American civilization in Africa…Some would feign conversion to Christianity and be sent to Liberia and Sierra Leone bearing Arabic-language Bibles.”

Today the State Department sponsors showings around the world of Arabic-language slave narratives to demonstrate that Muslims have been in America for four hundred years.

The current foreign hip hop cavalieres are used to distract from the reality of oil-driven military invasions. Similarly, in the 1950s and 1960s the State Department organized tours in Asia and Africa by integrated U.S. jazz
bands to “rebuild the image” of an America busy overthrowing governments from Iran to Guatemala to the Congo, an America where black people could not vote or go to college or safely walk down the street. “Many of the jazz tours appear to have moved in tandem with CIA operations,” writes Penny Von Eschen in Satchmo Blows Up The World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War.

Since there was no way to cover up the revolts collectively known as Arab Spring, the U.S. decided to just stand reality on its head. Despite the fact that the U.S. government strongly supported the oppressive regimes targeted by the Arab peoples, American officials blithely claimed they supported the uprisings. Well aware of the worldwide respect not just for American black music but for the freedom movement here as well, they moved to try to gain control of the discussion.

To that end, the State Department produced rap tributes to Arab Spring and, Aidi writes: “In 2011 the U.S. embassy in Tunis organized a public speaking competition for youth who want to be like Malcolm X, [asking] ‘Are you the next Martin Luther King? The next Gamal Abdel Nasser? The next Malcolm X? Can you inspire and move people with your words?’... American and European officials...note the centrality of Malcolm X to Muslim youth politics and argue that a ‘moderate’ understanding of the ‘Malcolm X narrative’ is critical to protecting ‘at risk’ Muslim youth.”

Aidi describes how Muslim youth are using culture and organizing as they strive “to imagine a utopian future for themselves.” I wondered how they defined that future and whether or not the U.S. was having any success in getting them to limit their understanding to “moderation.” When I asked Aidi to more explicitly define what type of utopian future was being imagined, he replied: “Muslim youth are drawing on black history to imagine a world where they are not ghetto-bound, where urban-beleaguered communities worldwide form a transnational community, where Islam is not set against the West, where North Africa is not separated from sub-Saharan Africa.”

Or, as Malcolm X put it, in words that allow everyone into the conversation: “I believe there will ultimately be a clash between the oppressed and those who do the oppressing. I believe there will be a clash between those who want freedom, justice and equality for everyone and those who want to continue the system of exploitation. I believe that there will be that kind of clash, but I don’t think it will be based upon the color of the skin.”

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Systems of Delusion
The Films of JC Chandor
By Kim Nicolini

“I run a fair and clean business. I just want to do what is most right.”
—Abel Morales, A Most Violent Year

“In acute situations like this often what is right can take on multiple interpretations.”
—Will Emerson, Margin Call

“Fuck!”
—Our Man, All Is Lost

Writer and director J.C. Chandor has three films under his belt: Margin Call (2011), All Is Lost (2013), and A Most Violent Year (2014). Put together, these films tell a hell of a story about the illusion of money, the invisible powers of capitalism, and a system that is based on self-delusion. Whether showing the 2008 Wall Street crash, a man fighting for survival on a sailboat, or a man trying to get his corner of the heating market, all three films challenge concepts of heroic masculinity as they show men attempting to adhere to moral codes in an economic system where Capital comes first and ethics and the codes in an economic system where Capital comes first and ethics and the people who believe in them are dispensable. These men fight for survival while trying to believe they are doing the right thing in a system that is corrupt and impossible to attain.

Chandor’s middle film, All Is Lost is a claustrophobic tale of survival. An unnamed man (Robert Redford named simply “Our Man”) is sailing the Indian Ocean when his million dollar sailboat is rammed by a floating container of sneakers, lost at sea on its trek from China to the U.S. Our Man literally leaves him alone with all the stuff he has bought to try to save himself and his boat—his Made in China Survival Kit, his plastic bottles for Potable water, his fancy waterproof watch, and his life raft. All stuff that was probably shipped to the U.S. in a container just like the one that does Our Man in. He tries one thing after another, but eventually Our Man is forced to choose between what is dispensable and what is not. He watches his boat sink, and realizes that he and his ideals are dispensable as all the stuff he has bought. Everything he owns and everything he believes in sinks.

The movie reads like a metaphor for the ups and downs of survival: the hoops we jump through to try to dodge catastrophe, the inevitable crashes and storms we endure, the human will not give up even when all is lost, and the fact that we have to live and die with our mistakes. Behind it all is the invisible force of Global Capitalism driving things beyond our control (the container that slams the boat and the ship that passes us by). We fight for survival as individuals, but we also have to survive within an economic system that is brutal yet tries to be invisible.

This is the perfect movie to be sandwiched between Chandor’s first film Margin Call and his most recent A Most Violent Year. Both films call economics, ethics and masculine ideals into question. Both show men struggling to maintain ethical codes of survival in the unethical and corrupt world of money. All Is Lost shows the bare bones metaphorical environment of Darwinian Capitalism, while Margin Call and A Most Violent Year show men in the literal world of money, men who try to save their asses (not unlike Our Man) while also attempting to do the right thing in a system that is wrong. These guys are living under multiple layers of self-delusion—the illusion of the American Dream where hard work will give you the great pay off (enough money to sail freely in the Indian Ocean, the power to control and manipulate the stock market, or your own booming business and corner on the oil market), and the illusion that they can come out clean when there is never anything clean about the world of money.

Margin Call tracks a group of traders on Wall Street the night before the economic crash of 2008. While All Is Lost follows the classic trajectory of American Naturalism showing a man literally lost at sea as a metaphor for being sunk by the forces that move capitalism (containerization), in Margin Call the men scramble for survival in the sea of Wall Street—a sea of suits, offices, numbers and phantom money. People’s jobs are cut, and they are left bailing ship with nothing but a file safe box of personal belongings (not unlike Our Man on his raft). Computers fill the movie screen margin-to-margin, ticking numbers as a sea of men swarm trying to figure out the best tactic for their own survival. They try to tread water in the shadow play world of capital, but they realize they are sunk when they discover that their losses are greater than their worth.

Chandor’s most recent film A Most Violent Year is set in Brooklyn in 1981, a year after Reagan became president and literally the most violent year on record in New York. Reagan’s presidency marks a paradigm shift where Free Trade and Darwinian Capitalism took on a whole new level of economic cannibalism, so setting the film during this literal and economic “violent” year makes sense. Oscar Isaac plays Abel Morales, the central character who has married into corrupt money (the daughter of a mob boss played by Jessica Chastain), but who is trying to go straight and buy his way into the heating oil market while not getting his hands dirty. Abel wears a crisp suit like a coat of armor. He remains unruffled as his trucks are hijacked, and he goes up against corrupt money while convincing himself he can.
stay clean. Abel so ferociously chases the American Dream and believes that he can achieve prosperity simply by playing his cards right that he has become a kind of business sociopath, where his dream of ethical yet economic success overrides everything.

But Abel, like all the other men in Chandor’s films, is self-deluded. Whether he wants to believe it or not, he is selling his soul for profit. That’s the world of capitalism. You can’t play its game without getting dirty, or bloody which Abel does eventually get. Abel’s biggest flaw is that he resists adapting in the world of Darwinian Economics. The teamster leader insists that his truck drivers be given guns to defend themselves against the forces that are stealing from Abel and putting the drivers’ lives in danger. He advises: “These are very dangerous times, and we have to adapt.” But Abel doesn’t adapt because he believes in a false set of ideals: that he can have the big house, big bucks, and big business and that he can stay clean. However, in all his plans, he forgot his balls and his gun. Thankfully his wife has both, and she saves Abel’s ass though his ideals sink just like Our Man’s boat.

The characters in these films have to reach the same conclusion which Jeremy Irons’ character John Tuld in Margin Call aptly states: “It’s just money. Pieces of paper with pictures on it so we don’t have to kill each other just to get something to eat.” In a way, these movies are all like something you’d see on National Geographic but where money is the background against which men fight for survival. They fight against containers and economic storms, rip each other’s throats out on Wall Street, or run through dirty snow chasing a piece of the market all for a sheet of paper that doesn’t mean shit.

The characters want the illusion of freedom as represented by power and money. Pieces of paper with pictures on it so we don’t have to kill each other just to get something to eat.” In a way, these movies are all like something you’d see on National Geographic but where money is the background against which men fight for survival. They fight against containers and economic storms, rip each other’s throats out on Wall Street, or run through dirty snow chasing a piece of the market all for a sheet of paper that doesn’t mean shit.

The characters want the illusion of freedom as represented by power and money, and they want clean hands, clean cars, clean boats, and clean lives. It doesn’t work that way. Even “Our Man” is a metaphor for a man living in self-delusion with “all his shit”—his boat, his gizmos, and his REI gear. What these characters fail to realize is that there is no such thing as being in control or staying clean when you are caught up in the storm of Darwinian Capitalism where survival and adaptation reign but don’t necessarily

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Paul Bettany and Kevin Spacey in "Margin Call."

Kim Nicolini is an artist, poet and cultural critic living in Tucson, Arizona. She recently published her first book, Mapping the Inside Out, in conjunction with a gallery show by the same name.
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