

# CounterPunch

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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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**David Brower  
At 100**

**My Dad the  
Archdruid  
By Kenneth Brower**

**M**y father discovered himself in the mountains. He became one of the elite rock climbers of his generation, with many first ascents in Yosemite Valley and elsewhere in the Sierra Nevada. Among the peaks he found the love of wildness that would be the dynamo driving everything he later did. His initial preoccupation at the Sierra Club with wilderness preservation gave way, very soon, to the conviction that environmentalism had to embrace much more—pollution, pesticides, population, proliferation of nuclear weapons, just to name some Ps—yet love of wilderness always burned at the core. “Wilderness,” he said, “is where the hand of man has not set foot.” The definition was playful, but useful and apt. Wilderness is where the opposable thumb has not substantially transformed the landscape. The hand-foot distinction addresses a problem that critics of the wilderness idea always bring up: the fact that all wildernesses, save the Antarctic, have been inhabited by humans since the Stone Age.

Wilderness, indeed, is where we come from. Homo sapiens did not evolve in the Information Age, my father pointed out, or in the Space Age, or the Atomic, or the Industrial, or after the invention of agriculture. We evolved as hunter-gatherers in the wilderness of Mother Africa. We were fully human, entirely our present selves, long before domestication of the first seed. Natural selection tailored our every trait to life in wild country. Wilderness is home.

As a boy in the Berkeley hills, describing for his mother, who was blind, all the

**BROWER CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

**Black Farmers vs. the USDA  
Jim Crow in the Fields  
By Heather Gray**

**I**n the 1990s black farmers filed suit against the US Department of Agriculture because of egregious discrimination they experienced at USDA offices across the country, particularly in the South where most black farmers live. The tactics used by USDA staff in offices throughout the South to deny services to blacks are the stuff of legend. Further, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has been attempting to make changes in the USDA's historically racist culture (known by some as “The Last Plantation”).

The original lawsuit, known as *Pigford v Glickman*, was settled in 1998 and claims had to be filed by October 13, 1999. The lawsuit has been ongoing since then, however, with the second phase

being for “late filers”. The final date for individuals to file their claim of discrimination in the second phase was May 11, 2012. Importantly, black employees at USDA also successfully filed suit against the department in the same time period.

If farmers prevail in the lawsuit on an act of discrimination regarding credit issues they will receive \$50,000 (and a cap of \$250,000 for those with considerable documentation of the discrimination they experienced).

Some have complained that the relief is not enough. The late black lawyer J.L. Chestnut, class counsel in the lawsuit, agreed with the sentiment, but he also said that no amount of money could compensate for the pain and suffering ex-

**GRAY CONTINUED P. 2, BOTTOM COL. 3**

**Cornwall Diary: Extraction Zones  
From Penzance to California  
By Iain A. Boal**

**O**n the Celtic fringe where I learnt the game from my father - over the links at Portrush and Ballybunion, where the Atlantic rollers meet the broken dunes and lark-song “showered our upturned list'ning faces” - golf remained the sport of commoners long after it had been taken up by Scottish Lowland gentry and later adopted in the metropolitan south by a Victorian petty bourgeoisie obsessed with dress codes and anxiously in search of approved outdoor pastimes to fill the recently invented “weekend”.

I came to despise inland golf on heavy clay soils almost as much as the blazered blimps and half-timbered fascists that propped up the clubhouse bars in the home counties. Nevertheless, a few

favoured spots on the coasts of southern Britain, encountered when I was full grown, had the power to recall the youthful joy and carefreedom of a game played along the dunes without uniform or supervision - I am thinking of the sublime strand at Harlech, the marshlands of Rye decked with marigold and meadow bright, the home stretch at Brancaster in Norfolk on the windswept Wash, the common at Westward Ho! on the Bristol Channel, and the lovely links of St. Enodoc flanking the Camel estuary in Cornwall.

West of the Camel estuary lies Penwith, Cornwall's own peninsula, a massive batholith of fractured granite with rich intrusions of tin and copper that have made Cornish hardrock

**BOAL CONTINUED ON PAGE 5**

natural sights she was missing, he began working on the clarity of his sentences. Grown up, speaking at the campfires of Sierra Club trips he was leading, he refined his language, overcame his essential shyness, and discovered his theme. It was at high altitude, I am convinced, that he stumbled across his true calling. At those campfires in the wilderness, talking to the circle of the tribe, he was tapping into the Paleolithic and the very beginnings of narrative. There is no more powerful form of exposition, because it goes back so far. Nothing triggers ancestral memory like staring into flame while listening to the rise and fall of the human voice.

Today this kind of storytelling has gone missing. Plato was apprehensive about the written word, fearing that it would diminish human capacity for memory; he should have lived to see this third millennium and the written word gone digital. One of the delusions of the Information Age is that it's all just information. Another is that texting and tweeting bring us together in some real way. In our present media richness, we are also poor. Except in the wildest outbacks and remotest villages, nothing remains of the Homeric. David Brower, who was a quick study, curious and tentative, with a very high IQ, could have

easily ended up teaching at a university blackboard, but instead found himself addressing the fire.

These campfire talks were the beginnings of what my father would later call "the Sermon." This ever-changing palimpsest of a speech, in one form or another, is what he would deliver in lecture halls and university auditoriums for the rest of his career. Elements of it appeared, too, in his testimony before Congress and governmental commissions, in his commencement addresses, in articles and books he wrote, in the dozens of forewords he did for the books he published. The Sermon was never static: he would work in local angles and news from the morning paper, and sometimes at the podium he would extemporaneously invent

**We evolved as hunter-gatherers in the wilderness of Mother Africa. We were fully human, entirely our present selves, long before domestication of the first seed.**

whole new passages and sections.

On the public stage he was fearless. He had a joy in combat with his corporate enemies and their lackeys in government. He was not shy about mixing it up with the opposition, but it was never personal. His argument was never *ad hominem*. He did not trust the experts. In a democracy, he thought, our job is to question conventional thinking and expert wisdom. He did not believe in compromise, having been burned by it several times.

My father always led an organization, but he was never really an organization man. His impulse was for action; he inevitably grew impatient with institutional inertia that developed in the various outfits he built. He had no deep interest in operating in the black, a fatal trait in an executive who reports to a board of directors. His lifecycle mimicked that of an insect that he, as it happens, was the first to tell me about, as we listened to its buzz in the High Sierra: the North American cicada, genus *Magicicada*, which hatches out every seventeen years. After seventeen years as executive director of the Sierra Club, he was forced by the board

to resign. After sixteen years at Friends of the Earth, the same thing happened. He would swell, split the exoskeleton of the constraining organization, emerge, spread wings, and fly off to start a new one. His lasting effect, I think, was not in his organizations or books or films, but in the flesh, one-on-one, or one-on-five, or one-on-auditorium, or one-on-saloon, or wherever it was he delivered the Sermon.

The Sermon worked best when he was winging it, taking a chance, stretching for some idea just out of reach. The audience sensed this and began pulling for him. Is he going to make it? Where are we going? John McPhee, in his fine book on my father, *Encounters with the Archdruid*, observes that at the podium he would bend his knees with the effort, like a skier. The Sermon could bomb horribly. If he got no feedback from the faces in front of him, his engine would cough and sputter and stall and he would go down in flames. He needed the crowd behind him. When the Sermon succeeded, the effect was electric. At the conclusion, young people would stream down the aisles and ask how to sign up in his movement. It was the campfire all over again. CP

**Kenneth Brower** is the author of *The Starship and the Canoe* and other books. This essay is adapted from *The Wildness Within: Remembering David Brower*. (Heyday Books.)

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GRAY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

perienced by black farmers. The lawsuit, he argued, was just the start of a process and that it would not solve all the problems.

The lawsuit called for individuals to cite the discrimination they experienced at USDA between 1981 and 1996. These years were selected because President Ronald Reagan had abolished the Office of Civil Rights at the USDA in the 1980s and President Bill Clinton had reestablished the office in the 1990s. Because of this, had a farmer complained about treatment at USDA during those years, there was no official in place to address those complaints.

The black farmer lawsuit, in fact, is considered one of the largest ever filed against the United States government with already more than \$1 billion distributed to blacks who were discriminated against by the department.

**CounterPunch**

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Many pockets of the rural South are still in a time warp of prevailing Jim Crow white supremacist mentality and distinct practices to deny opportunities to southern blacks. In fact, scholar George Fredrickson in his book *Racism: a Short History* (2003) states that in world history there have only been three of what he refers to as “overtly racist regimes” and they are the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa.

There are five features of overt racism described by Fredrickson, and while there have been some changes in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century toward a more just and equitable society, all of these features prevailed in the Jim Crow South and the vestiges of them all are a reality:

“First there is an official ideology that is explicitly racist... Second, this sense of radical difference and alienation is most clearly and dramatically expressed in laws forbidding interracial marriage... Third, social segregation is mandated by law and not merely the product of custom or private acts of discrimination that are tolerated by the state... Fourth, to the extent that the policy is formally democratic, outgroup members are excluded from holding public office or even exercising franchise. Fifth, the access that they have to resources and economic opportunities is so limited that most of those in the stigmatized category are either kept in poverty or deliberately impoverished.”

For our purposes here, the fifth criterion, of overt racism by denying access to resources and economic opportunity for blacks in the rural South, is still practiced and most relevant to the black farmer lawsuit. Below are some of tactics used by USDA staff, and others, to do precisely that.

Historically, everything has been stacked against black farmers. For one, when the USDA's Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) was created in 1942 it was known as the lending institution of last resort to help farmers stay on the land due to the devastating effects of the depression in the mid-century. Yet, black farmers have not been able to obtain access to USDA credit from that time up to the present.

In addition to lack of government credit, black farmers have been discriminated against at commercial lending in-

stitutions where they are often either denied outright or offered onerously high interest rates.

Further, within the USDA infrastructure there have been local county committees that have in the past wielded significant power in deciding who gets money and for what purpose. Local farmers elect the county committee members and it's been difficult to elect “voting” minority representation to these committees.

The problem has also been that even when Congress passes provisions in Farm Bills that might benefit minority farmers,

**In fact, scholar George Fredrickson in his *Racism: a Short History* states that in world history there have only been three of what he refers to as “overtly racist regimes” and they are the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and apartheid South Africa.**

the information about the programs or opportunities is often not promoted or offered to the farmers. It's often said, “the closer you get to the farmer the harder it is for programs to be implemented” and this being the case because of prevailing cultural norms, patterns of racial discrimination and often lack of knowledge on the part of county employees about the new programs.

### **How the USDA Discriminates**

It is crucial to note also that there are government regulations in place that require certain behavior of staff toward their clients, most of which is never adhered to by the USDA officials with their black farmers.

For example, during the time period of the lawsuit, the program regulations state that the USDA county office should have offered assistance to the applicant to determine what programs would best meet his or her needs.

Also, written applications should have been encouraged and then accepted. In fact, the program rules state that any per-

son who wished to submit a farm loan application should have been permitted to do so. Further, the USDA should have encouraged applications, even if funding was not available at the time, since once funding did become available, applications were considered in the order received.

In regard to getting credit from the USDA, if the farmer was fortunate to even receive an application, there should normally have been a two-part decision making process. The USDA would decide if the applicant was eligible and, if eligible, the USDA would evaluate if the loan should be approved. Also, the applicant needed to show that the loan could be repaid and that there was adequate collateral.

The USDA staff often managed to circumvent all of these directives when it came to serving black farmers. In violation of the regulations, USDA county office managers and other staff often denied blacks an opportunity to apply, and routinely discouraged blacks from applying by saying there were no applications or money available.

If, per chance, black farmers were able to receive a loan, the USDA should, as mentioned, offer loan services to them if they were finding it difficult to make their payments, but more often this never happened. The results were often devastating with foreclosures and loss of land generally.

The loans were supposed to have been provided in a timely fashion. Often for the black farmers, the loan money came too late to plant their crops leaving them in a dilemma as to whether or not they should accept the loan. Further, often the loan amount was less than the farmer had requested for his or her farm operation.

The USDA staff has also been renowned for their stalling tactics. They would delay a decision on a loan application thus making irrelevant the economic calculations or cash flow in the farm and home plan submitted by the farmer and requiring the farmer to develop a new plan...sometimes again and again.

Perhaps one of the demeaning practices by USDA has been its “supervised accounts”. Often, if black farmers went through all the process of submitting their loan application to USDA and being approved, the USDA would insist that the loan be “supervised”. This means that

the farmer would not receive the money to administer his or her loan but, instead, the USDA kept the money. For any credit needs (as in buying seeds or fertilizer, etc.), the farmer was required to go to the USDA county office to request a check for even these small payments, all the while taking time away from his or her farm practice, plus travel expenses. It could be described as the ultimate in the southern plantation culture of impoverishment and control.

These are just a few examples, but the accounts from farmers about their dealings with USDA represent a sad tale of lost opportunities, lost land and homesteads, lost marriages and families destroyed because of lack of opportunities to pursue careers in agriculture.

Since the 1990s, I have assisted farmers with their claim forms and in appealing the decisions on their claims by the lawsuit administrators. One farmer in South Carolina described how he had gone to enormous lengths to prepare his loan application, which included assistance from an agriculture economist at Clemson University. When he submitted the application to the USDA county office, the manager threw it in the garbage

can. As the farmer described this to me he choked up and had to leave the room. I was told by one of my colleagues that a farmer in Kentucky she was assisting had been approved for a \$50,000 loan. When he went to the office for the check, the USDA county official tore up the check up in front of him saying, "a nigger doesn't need this much money." This farmer is a claimant in the suit.

I've had farmers tell me that to complain about racist behavior by USDA staff was a dangerous practice. Your livelihood and sometimes your life could be at risk by doing so. On the whole, for blacks to complain to whites is simply not something you could do safely in these closed rural Southern societies.

President Barack Obama's USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack has attempted to change the racist culture at USDA. It's true there have been ebbs and flows with this, not to mention his renowned error of firing USDA staff member Shirley Sherrod for unwarranted racial bias accusations. (It's rather interesting that the only person ever fired at USDA for racial discrimination issues was Sherrod who has worked most her life to address and challenge racism in the rural South. And she was fired for supposed discrimination against whites.)

Still, Vilsack has been helpful in implementing the black farmer lawsuit and in recommending policy changes in the USDA infrastructure. One of his first actions at USDA in 2009 was to address civil rights problems in the department by issuing 14 points of changes.

Vilsack said in the release about this, "These are just the first actions in a continuing effort to ensure that the civil rights of USDA constituents and employees are respected and protected. This memorandum reflects my deep commitment to changing the direction of civil rights and program delivery in USDA by creating a comprehensive approach to guarantee fair treatment of all employees and applicants."

After more than two years of reviewing and addressing racism within the USDA culture, Vilsack made a remarkable admission. In a meeting in his USDA office in 2011 about the black farmer lawsuit, which included a majority of representatives from black farm groups and a handful of whites (including me), Vilsack sat in his chair at the end of the oval table. He began by stating boldly, "When

I became the secretary I thought I knew something about racism, but I don't. I'm learning every day."

This was an amazing admission to this group of blacks and I admired his honesty. Vilsack is not unique, of course. I realized when he said this that he's from Iowa. What does anyone from Iowa know about the depths of white supremacist behavior in the rural South? I can assure you, not much!

What is unique is admitting this when you begin to deliberately witness and consider racism in action. Many whites refuse to acknowledge the stark reality of it all. Also, many of my white friends and family, and even some black friends in Atlanta, Georgia, don't have a clue about how white supremacy is still expressed in the rural South. Vilsack, however, was getting the data and said he was learning.

Vilsack started his USDA secretarial position by conducting a major disparity study of problems and unfair treatment of minorities within the USDA's infrastructure. It was, in fact, an update and known as the USDA's "Independent Assessment of the Delivery of Technical and Financial Assistance Civil Rights Assessment" (March 31, 2011). This effort follows other major disparity studies such as the Miller Report during the Clinton years that found similar problems followed by the Civil Rights Action Team (CRAT) report in the 1990s.

Vilsack has, subsequently, attempted to address many of the problems highlighted in this recent research, such as, for one, more direct participation and voting power of blacks in the county committee structure.

By filing the lawsuit in the first place, however, black farmers have led the way for these attempted changes for justice at USDA and by virtue of filing their lawsuit they also encouraged women, Latinos and Native Americans to successfully file lawsuits against the USDA.

The struggle continues. **CP**

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miners as much a byword as its smugglers and privateers. In February I was approached by the organizers of the Penzance Convention who invited me to strike the keynote on the convention's theme of "extraction", to relate in some way the landscapes of Cornwall - and their representation - to the history of its extractive industries, in particular mining, fishing and farming. Did I know Cornwall, they asked me. Somewhat, I said, a long time ago - back in the seventies I used to visit the north coast around Porth Izzick. But I moved to the U.S. thirty years ago. So, you have some sense of the place. Well, some. Cycling and wild swimming. I made no mention of my last, vivid memory of Cornish landscape, knocking it round James Braid's course at St Enodoc in 68 strokes one golden summer evening, in one of those mysterious accessions of grace familiar to sportsmen and jazz musicians but which cannot be commanded. The 'spirit of Shivas Irons', modern *kolfers* call it.

After a two-day recon fossicking around the Penwith peninsula in the delightful company of one of the co-conveners, an artist-geologist who lives on the steep hill above the port in Penzance, I accepted the invitation. It seemed fruitful - and so it proved - to compare Cornwall with northern California as zones of extraction. I knew that hundreds of Cornish hardrock miners had gone west to the goldfields and to the Comstock motherlode in the Sierra Nevada, and that many other 'cousin Jacks' labored in the quicksilver mine at New Almaden. But some modest research - aided by the library of Gray Brechin, author of *Imperial San Francisco* and by the pioneering studies of John Gillis, historian of insularity and coasts (*Islands of the Mind* and *The Human Shore*) - revealed many congruences between Cornwall and northern California.

Extraction is close to the heart of capitalist modernity, and Cornwall and California are each epitomes of that history. The discovery by the Spanish invaders of the New World of a mountain of silver in the Virreinato del Perú was the prelude to a story, rehearsed across the planet, of conquest and enclosure, mass migration and language extinction, boom and bust, accumulated wealth and hard-scrabble survival. Cornwall has a coastal landscape of great beauty, bountiful fishing grounds, and a crustal geology

bearing the blessing and curse of precious minerals - all features it shares with northern California.

I set myself the task of tracing the legacies - environmental and social - of mining and fishing considered as industries tied into a globalized market, by drawing out the paradoxes of depletion and sustainability, of tourism and the heritage industry, of regional autonomy and centralized subsidy, of lived reality and the mythos of the far West. Successful keynotes, by definition, sound a fundamental frequency for the conversation that follows; they set relevant terms resonating, and amplify them.

By the same token other equivalences,

## **I came to despise inland golf on heavy clay soils almost as much as the blazered blimps and half-timbered fascists that propped up the clubhouse bars in the home counties.**

other identities are dampened, interfered with. In Penzance I aimed to disturb a few of the standard binaries in general circulation - local vs global, periphery vs centre, state vs market, green vs toxic - and then, acknowledging that extraction in some form is necessary to humanity's metabolism, to offer a framework for discussion of what would be involved in the building of a world - and a Cornwall and California within it - where all might flourish and find an ample life in common.

The main proceedings of the convention - bringing together miners, engineers, geologists, naturalists, inshore and pelagic fisherfolk, artists, artisans, and citizens of the Penwith peninsula - took place over a weekend in May in the old Penzance telephone exchange. It followed a day of fieldtrips, walking and talking at various sites of extraction: Newlyn harbour and the fish auction, Penlee quarry, old mine workings and adits, the granite-hedged field system.

On the previous evening the keynote, entitled "Drawn from Nature: Extraction, Commodity and Commons" was delivered in the Methodist church on Chapel Street, a handsome four-square stone

building with high galleries and fine acoustics. (John Wesley stormed through West Britain in the 1740s converting the mining and fishing communities to Methodism. While he preached in the open air, his brother Charles composed an astonishing two thousand hymns.)

As daylight faded and the unaccompanied strains from the organ died away, your diarist - clad in dark vestments, high collar and a wide-brimmed hat of the kind favored by radical sectaries in the 17th century - ascended the ten feet to the carved oak pulpit. In the spirit of Harun Farocki's documentary, *The Silver and the Cross*, on the human cost of production at the infamous Potosi mine in Bolivia, which was screened during the convention, he opened with the words of Philip Levine, California migrant and poet of labor, a passage from his collection *What Work Is*:

*I would descend  
step by slow step into the dim world  
of the pickling tank and there prepare  
the new solutions from the great car-  
boys  
of acids lowered to me on ropes...a gal-  
lon of hydrochloric  
steaming from the wide glass mouth, a  
dash  
of pale nitric to bubble up, sulphuric to  
calm,  
metals for sweeteners, cleansers for  
salts,  
until I knew the burning stew was done.  
Then to climb back, step by stately step,  
the adventurer  
returned to the ordinary blinking lights  
of the swingshift at Feinberg and  
Breslin's  
First-Rate Plumbing and Plating with  
a message  
from the kingdom of fire...  
Then to arise and dress again in the  
costume  
of my trade for the second time that  
night, stiffened  
by the knowledge that to descend and  
rise up  
from the other world merely once in  
eight hours is half  
what it takes to be known among  
women and men.*

Given the evening chill, the austerity of the pews, and the length of the address, the convention delegates were generous with their attention. One of the congregation wrote afterwards to the organizers: "I had a lovely and inter-

esting time. Going underground on the fieldtrip was the highlight, although do you know the thing I remember most clearly was the keynote speech, which I know wandered, but I kind of got into that vibe, the light fading in the chapel and the uncomfortable seating and the poems, smoked one fag, then another, he was good, I liked his hat, he was quite Van Morrison."

The following morning I led a fieldtrip from Newlyn harbour to the village of Mousehole by way of a coppersmith's studio, a rebuilt pilchard lugger, and the Penlee quarry whose dense metadolerite rock, cooked by the heat of the underlying granite, lines the vaults of the Bank of England. Upon returning to Newlyn in the late afternoon, I discovered that my Brompton folding bicycle was locked for the night inside the Mission to Fishermen where we had taken an early breakfast. I rose at dawn the following morning and cycled the two miles to Newlyn on a borrowed machine to recover my Brompton bike.

I was astonished to find crowds lining the road, many of them carrying Union Jacks, plus the occasional Cornish ensign, a white cross on a black ground. Hordes of young children waved their flags and cheered as I passed. "No, no, not yet. That's not him!" shouted the grownups. Who him, I wondered? The Duke of Cornwall (aka Prince Charles) perhaps? Down in the duchy for a spot of mingling with his subjects? It was not until I got to the Mission at Newlyn that I found out from an unimpressed lobsterman that I had crashed the inaugural stretch - from Land's End to Plymouth - of the Olympic flame's progress around the British Isles.

Tethering the borrowed bike outside Lewis' fish-and-chip shop, and taking heart from the lobsterman's aplomb amid the general frenzy I mounted the small-wheeled machine and headed back towards Penzance. Once again the crowds of children lining the route - already across the threshold of boredom waiting for the torchbearer - cheered the strange sight. Mummy, it's the circus. Bears on Bikes! I soon caught up with the front of the tawdry Olympic cavalcade, consisting of a Coca-Cola float, a Samsung truck and a Lloyds TSB van, and found myself on the Penzance promenade overtaking the police outriders.

I learnt only later that the sacred flame itself was a hour to the rear, in the

care of a supersized local torchbearer in a white polyester tracksuit. Nor was I aware that another local torchbearer, Andrew Ball, according to a report in *The Independent*, "had the Cornish flag torn from his grasp by Metropolitan Police officers as the flame made its way from Land's End to Plymouth on Saturday. Ball unfurled the flag of St. Piran as he neared the Olympic bridge

**Enthusiasts of the medieval club-and-ball street game kolf, having been banned by the burghers of Amsterdam, took to the frozen canals. Across the North Sea the merchants of Fife likewise expelled this anarchic Dutch export from the streets of St Andrews, and local kolfers found a home on the gorse-scented sandy commonland lying between the city walls and the sea.**

but was grabbed by two policemen, who wrested it away. Locog [London Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games] said the seizure was an attempt to provide a 'uniform experience' for all."

Londoners can expect more of that "uniform experience" during the weeks of the Games themselves, not least cyclists facing arrest and a £200 fine for any intrusion onto those roads through the capital that will be privately reserved for the limousines of Coca-Cola executives, along with 25,000 other "marketing partners" and members of what Locog calls "the Olympic family". And for those who dislike uniform experience, remember, if you hate Coke, you'll love Pepsi. CP

**Iain Boal** is an Irish social historian and co-editor of *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California* (PM/Retort Press: Oakland, CA, 2012).

*Have you ever thought to yourself "I'd like to have a photo of Alexander Cockburn in a dress", or "One of Jeffrey St. Clair's photos sure would look great on my wall"? Now is your chance!*

## **Summer 2012 CounterPunch Online Auction**

It's almost the 20th anniversary of CounterPunch and to celebrate we're hosting an online auction! Ralph Nader, Noam Chomsky, Elin Slavik O'Hara, Anthony Papa, Laura Flanders, Tao Ruspoli, Chloe Cockburn, Margot Kidder and many other artists, musicians and writers have generously donated curiosities, objets d'art, limited edition prints, rare books, celebrity schwag and more! CounterPunch fans are sure to find something they can't resist. VISIT [www.biddingforgood.com/counterpunch](http://www.biddingforgood.com/counterpunch) to get registered and start bidding! (Donors who purchase items at a charity auction may claim a charitable contribution deduction for the excess of the purchase price paid for an item over its fair market value.)

## **Welfare Reform in Britain**

# **David Cameron's Assault on the Poor**

By Joseph Richardson

**D**avid Cameron's onslaught against the poor seemingly knows no end. The latest of his deranged measures to save society from the spectre of rampant welfarism – welfarism for the needy that is, not the super rich – envisages depriving jobless parents with large families of tax credits and dispensing with the already meager housing allowance for under-25s, on the grounds that these foster a culture of 'entitlement'. This seems an odd criticism to level at a system that by definition is based on entitlement as a core principle.

That the welfare state was founded on the notion people without adequate means to support themselves are morally entitled to a basic level of state aid is a fact which seems to have escaped Cameron. Quite how he can profess a commitment to retaining the welfare state whilst objecting to the fundamental precepts on which it is modeled is perhaps something only he can comprehend.

In any case, such logical inconsistencies have not prevented him from advancing a hodge-podge of economic ideas that seem better adapted to the 19th century liberal economic hell from which Britain only emerged with great difficulty in the 20th.

Indeed, surely Thomas Malthus, were he alive today, would be justified in suing for plagiarism when Cameron contends in his speech that child tax credits have merely encouraged feckless parents to reproduce more and burden society with the upkeep of their numerous progeny. No doubt next he will be suggesting that the only way to resolve the problem is by impoverished couples exercising sexual abstinence.

In his unrelenting attacks on the most vulnerable in society, Cameron is either wholly ignorant of the economic difficulties which beset most working people, or, worse, he is animated by a perverse desire to aggravate these problems a hundred-

fold. At times, the absurd level of reasoning underpinning his major policy pronouncements amounts to such an affront to basic human intelligence that the latter conclusion seems the least disparaging of the Prime Minister's IQ, if not his morals. Under-25s should simply move back into the family home, he asserts, rather than expect the state to assist them with paying exorbitant rents. Should parents then be legally obligated to house their children into their mid-20s then, the question naturally follows. Moreover, how are these parents supposed to accommodate their returning offspring, given they have been previously encouraged by the state to downsize their properties following their children's departure or risk having benefits reduced.

**That the welfare state was founded on the notion people without adequate means to support themselves are morally entitled to a basic level of state aid is a fact which seems to have escaped Cameron.**

The crudity of the arguments employed to justify such mad-cap schemes is indicated by the constant need to reference a plethora of, almost invariably spurious, examples of benefit cheaters, shamelessly leeching off industrious, tax-paying members of society. Cameron, in his speech delivered in late June, did not stint in his appeal to such fictitious paradigmatic instances of benefit cheating, abandoning even the pretence of fact-based examples by asking his audience to 'imagine' for a second two girls living on the same street, one of whom attends university, works hard after graduation and is unable to rent her own property, whilst the other leaves school and is able to move into new housing without any expense on her part at all.

The example would be compelling enough were it not unfortunately totally at variance with established facts. Most of the young people claiming housing benefit are in work and yet require as-

sistance to pay extortionate rents. The government's own department for local communities and government has recorded a 16 percent rise in homelessness compared to last year, coinciding with more stringent government measures capping housing benefits and making it more difficult to claim. This figure, moreover, discounts those forced to stay at friends' homes or hostels, owing to lack of affordable accommodation.

The facts, despite the best efforts of the government, cannot easily be elided, and by now they are so glaringly evident that no amount of appeal to visceral passions and intra-class loathing can blind people to the spectacle of a profligate, decadent minority which is not merely insulated against the adverse consequences of the recession, but are also currently augmenting their considerable wealth as a result of it. In this vast rapine, this systematic purge of the public purse, it is incorrect to characterize the government as an accomplice. For its interests are so wholly convergent with the needs of the City and affluent classes from which many of its members hail, that a more apposite description of its role is as an instrument, a weapon, in the hands of the inordinately wealthy, who wield it as though the basic *raison d'être* of economic policy consisted in condoning and sanctifying their dispossession of the poorer in society.

In 2009, Revenue and Customs (HMRC), revealed a tax gap of 35 billion, and it appears most of that loss comprises taxes avoided by large corporations that have actively courted the very government officials supposedly responsible for assessing their tax liability. In further figures released by HMRC this year, it was found that 6 percent of Britain's super-rich – those earning more than 10 million pounds a year – were paying less than 10 percent tax – in other words, half the rate of tax that someone on \$20,000 is expected to pay. All of this is not even mentioning the vast infusion of cash in the form of the financial bailout of which overpaid bankers have been the recipients, or the excessive sums awarded to firms over the course of several years as payment for providing services – medical, infrastructure, policing – that were formerly carried out, at less cost, by the public sector.

Cameron was vociferous in his condemnation of the comedian Jimmy Carr

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and his participation in an aggressive tax avoidance scheme. He did not mention, however, the participation of the multimillionaire George Robinson, who has donated hundreds of thousands to the Tory Party, nor has he had the integrity to concede that the principal drain on state revenues is not the unemployed or needy, but high-earners who are the beneficiaries of direct state subsidies and a lax tax policy. Is this patent omission to be accounted for through mere neglect – a simple oversight?

The government's statements on the need to reduce the deficit, to save every penny, are too abundant to infer that it is simply owing to ignorance that the activities of the rich go uncurbed. Its diligence in exploiting every opportunity to curtail benefit payments to the unemployed, depicted as cunning exploiters of an overly generous welfare state, gives the lie to the idea that it is insufficiently artful or ingenious to devise methods for suppressing tax avoidance by unscrupulous high-earners.

Nevertheless, some people argue, even conceding the unusual degree of freedom afforded the rich, this is no excuse to per-

mit a bloated welfare state to continue in existence, and hence no grounds for criticizing government attempts to address its systematic defects. Even supposing that the defects of the welfare provision derived from over-generousness as opposed to excessive parsimony, the preoccupation with the poor to the total exclusion of rich, suggests reforming the system in an equitable fashion is neither the intention nor the effect of government policy. Rather, it suggests that welfare reform is a deceptive guise for pursuing the only consistent and plausible objective that can be ascribed to this government – making the poor pay for a debt amassed by the rich.

Politicians are adept at the use of seemingly innocuous, agreeable language to characterize policies driven by a hatred of workers' rights. Indeed, they are quick to upbraid anyone who eschews the accepted vocabulary and candidly resorts to terms like 'class' to describe British society. Such terms, it is claimed, evince a crude prejudice against the rich – an archaic mentality that has been superseded and is appropriate to an unenlightened age when people could still unabashedly

call themselves socialists and even demonstrate pride in such an appellation.

Thus, specious phrases like 'labour flexibility' are used with a casual disregard for their real meaning, concealing attempts to reduce workers to the status of feudal dependents, subject to the caprice of their economic overlords and grateful for any opportunity to undertake laborious toil in exchange for a paltry wage. Similarly, welfare reform evokes progressive connotations – haven't all reforms been for the better? – rather than a regressive measure designed to return Britain to a state of affairs that obtained a hundred years ago. So long as people subscribe to this language, choosing to take refuge in the anodyne terminology in which the economic elite conducts its clandestine warfare, they will forever remain susceptible to arguments that purport to prize fairness and equal rights above all things, whilst systematically privileging the wealthy and leeching off the poor. **CP**

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