

# Catalyst

VOLUME 1 Nº.1 SPRING 2017 A JOURNAL OF THEORY & STRATEGY

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**VIVEK CHIBBER** :

*Rescuing Class from  
the Cultural Turn*

**NIVEDITA MAJUMDAR** :

*Silencing  
the Subaltern*

**MIKE DAVIS** :

*The Great God Trump and  
the White Working Class*

**JOSHUA MURRAY &  
MICHAEL SCHWARTZ** :  
*Collateral Damage*

**CEDRIC JOHNSON** :

*The Panthers Can't  
Save Us Now*

**CHARLES POST** :  
*Slavery and the New  
History of Capitalism*

**EDITORS**

Robert Brenner  
Vivek Chibber

**ADVISORY EDITOR**

Mike Davis

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR**

Erin Schell

**COPY EDITOR**

Sarah Grey

**PUBLISHER**

Bhaskar Sunkara

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*who played an indispensable role in getting this project off the ground.*

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**VIVEK CHIBBER**

is a professor of sociology at New York University and the co-editor of *Catalyst*. His latest book is *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, published in 2013.

**MIKE DAVIS**

is the author of several books, including *Planet of Slums* and *City of Quartz*.

**CEDRIC JOHNSON**

is the author of *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* and editor of *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism and the Remaking of New Orleans*. He is also a representative for UIC United Faculty Local 6456.

**NIVEDITA MAJUMDAR**

is an associate professor of English at John Jay College. She is the secretary of the Professional Staff Congress, the CUNY faculty and staff union.

**JOSHUA MURRAY**

is an assistant professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University. His work examines how globalization has created a transnational capitalist class and its influence on US politics.

**CHARLES POST**

is a longtime socialist activist who teaches at the City University of New York.

**MICHAEL SCHWARTZ** is distinguished teaching professor, emeritus at Stony Brook University.

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## INTRODUCING

# *Catalyst*

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The first issue of *Catalyst* appears at a profoundly contradictory political conjuncture. It is the moment of the greatest promise for the working class and popular forces since the 1960s, but also one of significant danger. The capitalist system long ago lost the capacity to realize its ostensible historic comparative advantage and justification — to drive unceasing capital accumulation, which makes for self-sustaining economic growth and creates the potential for rising living standards. In response, the world’s political and economic elites, miniscule in size, have refocused their efforts, at the levels of both the corporation and government, away from investment and growth and toward upward redistribution of the economic product. This has left the top 1 percent of the US owning 40 percent of US wealth, the top 1 percent of the world’s population owning half the world’s wealth, and the bottom half of the world’s population owning the same amount as the world’s richest eight people. To maintain social cohesion, neoliberal elites no longer attempt to co-opt or buy off significant parts of the population, but instead prepare for the expected outbreaks of popular opposition by building up their coercive apparatus — from the massive surveillance of the population to the militarization of the police to the brutal suppression of small and not-all-that-threatening manifestations of resistance.

The consequence is that today's world working class, defined loosely and in its multiple aspects, is little attracted to the neoliberal worldview that constitutes the unanimous and unquestioned ideology of the world's elites and their captive media, an ideology that does nothing for it. It is, on the contrary, open to a gamut of oppositional political perspectives that could set it in motion against its neoliberal, globalizing tormentors. Starting from the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, we have witnessed an impressive series of militant, radical political explosions against the established order across much of the globe: the Arab Spring, the Wisconsin public-sector strikes, Occupy Wall Street, the occupations of the squares in Greece, Spain, and Turkey, and the French mass strikes and demonstrations of winter and spring 2016.

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But the fact remains that, up to now, in most of the world, right-wing nationalist-*cum*-populist forces have been able to capitalize on the profound distress and disaffection of working people far more effectively than has the radical left. They have done so by bringing behind them various native working-class constituencies that once constituted the main social base of the center-left parties but have long been ignored by them — notably factory workers and miners hard hit by economic stagnation, technological advance, and globalization. Especially in the wake of the Great Recession, which has brought a plunge in popular living standards of an extent unparalleled since the Great Depression, these nationalist forces have exploited the suffering of broad layers of the population so as to achieve epoch-making victories in the vanguard countries of global finance, austerity, and upward redistribution of income — Brexit in the United Kingdom and, of course, Donald Trump in the United States.

Until now, radical left-wing forces have expressed at best befuddlement and at worst indifference to the indispensable task of challenging the far right for the allegiance of economically depressed, profoundly alienated working-class whites. The adoption of multiculturalism and inclusiveness by neoliberal parties like the Democrats, combined with their refusal to recognize class and class exploitation, has disoriented not only many of those parties' followers but also forces far to the left, who have prioritized their critique of the very real and continuing advantages of white people without placing that critique in the context of the disastrous, decades-long decline of living standards and downward mobility for all workers, including white workers. The simple fact is that these working people have been ravaged by capitalism in its neoliberal form. They will follow a self-styled, anti-neoliberal populist far right that will do

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little or nothing for them, unless the Left can offer a more viable version of that anti-neoliberal struggle.

There is no reason to believe that, in the foreseeable future, the dominant political elites can secure much in the way of political stability, and every reason to expect opposition on the part of wide swaths of the population. The question is whether a still embryonic radical left can develop the capacity to exploit the implicit and explicit opportunities that are certain to present themselves in the coming period.

It is *Catalyst's* purpose to provoke and contribute to a collaborative effort to understand today's political world in order to assist the struggles to change it. To that end, its fundamental task is to promote wide-ranging discussion and to organize debate on the urgent questions facing the working class, the emergent mass movements, and radical and socialist political organizations. What follows is an initial, very partial attempt to lay out for our readers how we understand today's political landscape, a number of its salient features, the openings that are presenting themselves to the movements and the Left, and the problems the Left confronts.

### *Not Your Parents' Capitalism*

The necessary point of departure for grasping today's politics is the epoch-making decline of the economy over the last forty years or so. This process has transformed beyond recognition the capitalist class across the globe, in its multiple forms and sections, as well as the constraints under which it operates and the politico-economic perspectives it advances. It has imposed on working people, their mass movements, and political organizations around the world the need to thoroughly rethink their strategies for resistance, a project that has barely begun.

Since 1973, the economies of the advanced capitalist countries have performed ever more poorly. The growth of GDP, investment, productivity, employment, real wages, and real consumption have all experienced an historic deceleration, which has proceeded without interruption, decade by decade, business cycle by business cycle, to the present day. The source of this loss of dynamism has been the deep fall, and failure to recover, of the economy-wide rate of profit, a process that took place mainly from the late 1960s to the early-1980s and derived largely from the relentless buildup of overcapacity across the

global manufacturing sector. This increasing overcapacity resulted from a process of economic development that has made mincemeat of orthodox economics' understanding of world trade. Instead of deepening the world division of labor along Smithian lines by way of ever greater specialization and complementarity, the most dynamic entrants into the global economy have brought growing redundancy and intensified competition.

The manufacturers of successive newly emerging economic powers have used the latest technology, generally borrowed from the economic leader(s), in combination with relatively low wages, to make export goods that were already being produced for the world market, *but at a lower price*: Germany and Japan in the 1960s and 1970s; the East Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs) and Southeast Asian tigers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; and finally the Chinese behemoth in the 1990s and 2000s, with its devastating "China price." The result has been too much supply compared to demand in one industry after another, forcing down prices and thus profit rates in an unending cycle that has ultimately engulfed its leading progenitors themselves in overcapacity, above all China.

The decline in the rate of profit resulting from intensifying overcapacity has brought about a fall in the surpluses available to corporations, while worsening the prospects to invest them. The result has been an historic weakening of capital accumulation (the growth of investment). The reduction in the rate of return has also provoked an ongoing assault on workers' wages, benefits, and working conditions, which, by redistributing income upward from labor to capital, has subsidized profits and prevented an even greater decline of profitability. This combination of weak investment and falling wages has made for an ongoing, worsening crisis of aggregate demand, which is the immediate cause of the long slowdown and hangs like a dark cloud over the global economy. Put another way, the very processes by which the profit rate was stabilized prevented that stabilization from increasing the economy's vitality.

The long-term weakening of aggregate demand brought a tendency toward deeper and longer-lasting cyclical downturns and shallower cyclical expansions and would, sooner or later, have detonated serious recession or even depression had it not been for the historic growth of both public and private borrowing, nurtured directly or indirectly by governments. The turn to Keynesian deficits and easy credit on an ever larger scale was thus a novel and defining feature of the post-World War II era; they did make for a certain stability, which would have been impossible in their absence. However, they also perpetuated the economy's

weakness by preventing high cost-low profit producers from being sufficiently shaken out and superseded by more productive and dynamic ones. The result was that increases in Keynesian subsidies to demand delivered ever smaller increases in supply. Greater stability was thus purchased at the price of declining performance. During the first half of the 1990s, this process reached an initial point of culmination, with the world economy performing worse than in any other five-year period since 1950. Keynesianism had failed, and a subsequent brief experiment with revitalizing the economy by way of balanced budgets in both the United States and Europe only exacerbated its languor.

From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, the US Federal Reserve tried to unleash the economy by turning to ultra-low interest rates to drive up the prices of financial assets — equities and house values. It did so to enhance the on-paper wealth of corporations and households and increase their credit worthiness in the eyes of the banks, thereby enabling them to borrow more and spend more, thus inflating demand. This two-stage essay in asset-price Keynesianism, or “bubblenomics,” succeeded in blowing up equity prices (1995 to 2000) and then housing prices (2001 to 2007). The consecutive bubbles made possible successive booms — first in investment spending, then in consumption expenditures — conveying the impression that the economy had somehow regained its vitality.

That impression was, if anything, even more vivid in the developing world, which enjoyed an unprecedented if brief acceleration of economic expansion, driven largely by China’s rise to the status of workshop of the world. China based its ascent heavily on record exports to the United States, which were fueled by the phenomenal bubble-based explosion of debt-driven consumption there. China’s world-shaking export growth facilitated, in turn, China’s massive imports of raw materials and semi-finished goods from places like Brazil, South Africa, and other parts of Africa, as well as East and Southeast Asia. Economists even at the staid Bank of International Settlements cautiously concluded that the less developed countries might be, for the first time, closing the chasm between themselves and the advanced capitalist countries (ACCs) that had been expanding for half a millennium. At the same time, the astounding growth of the Chinese industrial working class seemed to compensate for the working class’s shrinkage in the Global North, and the vertiginous rise in the annual number of strikes seemed to signal a shift in the primary locus of class struggle on a global scale to the Middle Kingdom.

Nevertheless, it was mostly an illusion. The successive US bubble-based expansions failed to bring increases in earnings and incomes (i.e., profits or wages) that could support the accompanying record increases in stock prices and housing prices. So when the housing-price bubble burst in 2006 and 2007, household wealth evaporated, new borrowings were replaced by rising debt obligations and payments, and spending collapsed. Aggregate demand crumpled, plunging the US economy — and a world economy that was unalterably dependent upon the US market — into the Great Recession. The worst slump since the 1930s exacerbated the long downturn in the capitalist core that had begun in 1973 and delivered to the developing economies an enormous setback, leaving their futures very much in doubt.

The ensuing recovery has been unworthy of the name, far and away the weakest since the Great Depression. During the US business cycle that began in 2008, the average annual increases of GDP, capital investment, and labor productivity have been *less than half* the average increases during the long downturn from 1973 to 2007 and *barely one-quarter* the average increases during the postwar boom between 1948 and 1973. The growth of jobs during the same interval has left the workforce participation rate as a percentage of the active population aged 18 to 65 at 59 percent, far below its level of 63 percent in 2007 or the average of 61.7 percent between 1990 and 2007. Real median household income is still not back to its 2007 level, which was itself markedly lower than its peak in 1999 and 2000. Fully 95 percent of households are still bringing in incomes below those of 2007.

Capitalism at the height of the postwar boom, in the mid- to late 1960s, promised an ever more prosperous future for an ever greater part of the world's population. Much of the world's population was still largely excluded from the benefits of the system, prominently including African Americans and other minorities in the United States, along with much of the citizenry of the less developed world. But few even of capitalism's most radical Marxist critics could convince themselves to argue for capitalism's abolition on the grounds that it was unable to underwrite self-sustaining growth and rising living standards. To found their critiques, they had basically to fall back on the alienation at capitalism's core, along with such secondary traits as consumerism, suburbanization, and repressive de-sublimation.

Today, all that has proved chimerical. In the wake of four decades of continuous economic decline and falling living standards, capitalism's Golden

Age promises have been brutally traduced. The call for capitalism's elimination, which not so long ago could be dismissed as unrealistic and utopian, must today be the point of departure for any realistic Left, and reconceptualizing the socialist goal in a form that speaks to today's transformed social economy and enhanced technological potentials must be the highest priority.

### *What Is Neoliberalism?*

The capitalist system's incapacity to provide more than the semblance of a growing pie has impelled a near-unanimity of the world's economic and political rulers (the top 1 percent by income or above) and their parasitic hangers-on (a periphery of, at best, 10 percent) to make the radical political departure now known as neoliberalism. At the start of the 1970s, US corporations and the state launched an all-out counteroffensive aiming to revitalize the economy by stoking demand in Keynesian fashion and by cutting costs to revive manufacturing competitiveness. But this only worsened the overcapacity that had brought down profitability in the first place. In the ensuing years, the improved cost competitiveness of East Asian producers allowed them to appropriate ever greater shares of the world market in manufactured goods, leading to a stark reduction in opportunities for profitable investment in the United States except at the highest end, a tendency that was exacerbated by the rise of global value chains that broke industrial production down into its component parts and distributed it to the locations where it could be done most cheaply.

The consequence has been that capitalist classes and their governments, not just in the United States but in the ACCs more generally, have largely ceased attempting to stimulate a new wave of investment and growth, whether through Keynesian deficits, industrial policy, or rebuilding infrastructure in the form of schools, hospitals, highways, bridges, and the like. They no longer believe in the possibility of securing a large-scale revival of profitable production by any means. Instead they have turned to a far-reaching program of politically founded upward redistribution, underwritten by both financial and nonfinancial corporations and the government, which has had the stunning effect of enabling them, in recent decades, to appropriate an overwhelming proportion of the increases in income annually produced by the economy while expropriating ever more of the already existing wealth of the working class.

In retrospect, the shift to neoliberalism has had two fundamental aspects — austerity on the one hand and politically driven direct upward redistribution on the other. The essence of neoliberal austerity is to free up entry to the market to every economic agent and to subject them to the bracing cold bath of unmitigated competition, imposing survival of the fittest as first principle, the ostensible benefit being lower prices for every commodity, above all labor power. Marketization has weakened, if not eliminated, all protections from the adverse impacts of competition, such as trade unions, the welfare state, employment regulation, and consumer protection. It has also meant lower barriers to international trade and investment as well as the de facto elimination of antitrust laws, not to mention government macroeconomic policies that enable inflation.

Neoliberalism has demanded, too, increasing the numbers and quality of players in every market. This has meant extending access to those previously excluded by their geographic or national position (i.e., globalization). It has also meant including those previously excluded by discrimination along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, implicitly to bring the representation of every group in all income levels and occupations into line with their proportion of the population (i.e., multiculturalism). Marketization has meanwhile returned to the private sector activities that had long ago been taken over by the state, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

The publicists for neoliberalism like to speak of increasing freedom and promoting equality of opportunity. They seek to equalize the legal position of the players in the market, without mention of equalizing the initial assets they possess (that would defeat the whole purpose). The beneficiaries of increased liberty have thus been entirely predictable. Those entering the market with the most assets, in terms of capital (means of production), technological capacity, innovative potential, and knowledge, have appropriated ever more income. Put another way, ever greater income and wealth go to those economic activities that are most difficult to enter, where competition is least intense because of the levels of innovative capacity, technology, means of production, and human capital required. Oligopolists like Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft are emblematic in this regard. Correspondingly, ever less income and wealth go to those activities that are easiest to enter, where competition is most intense, above all the sale of unskilled labor power. While neoliberal multiculturalism may thus call in theory for equalizing representation of blacks, Latinos, and

women, the fact that members of these groups tend on average to enter the market with the lowest levels of capital, education, skill, and capacity to innovate ensures the very opposite.

Neoliberalism's second aspect has probably been even more consequential in terms of effecting the upward redistribution of income and wealth, but it has gone unheralded by pro-capitalist publicists for the straightforward reason that it goes directly against supposed neoliberal values and capitalist principles. This has taken place by way of governments and corporations handing over to a tiny number of favored individuals exclusive access to politically constituted economic opportunities yielding fabulous sums of money. The chief beneficiaries are the allied political party leaders and top corporate managers who have been mainly responsible for the installation of the neoliberal political economy across the capitalist world, relieving them of the need to engage in the messy and uncertain processes of producing for profit in competitive markets or of high-risk investing in the financial markets.

In recent decades, the mechanisms of politically constituted rip-off have included granting massive tax cuts to the rich and the corporations; facilitating investment in government debt on the part of the rich at ultra-high interest rates; privatizing public assets at far below market value; paying obscenely high wages to CEOs; and central banks using low interest rates to drive up the value of stocks and bonds, which are owned almost exclusively by the very rich. Perhaps the most egregious politically driven rip-off has occurred by way of the ascent of the financial sector, where the privatization of acrophobia-inducing profits for a thin layer of top managers has been made possible by governments' socialization of trillion-dollar losses.

The entirely political nature of the powers and privileges that have been handed over to top corporate managers and their politician allies at the core of neoliberalism could hardly be clearer in what might be seen as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole process — the politically driven suspension of law enforcement with respect to the financial magnates. The US government (and others) have increasingly accommodated the open criminality of the banks, as demonstrated by the declining number of arrests made over time compared to the rising amount of loot appropriated. The savings-and-loan scandals of the 1980s and early 1990s saw hundreds of arrests of relatively small-time crooks who stole what now would be considered peanuts. There were around two

dozen arrests from the much more impressive circle of criminal manager-entrepreneurs, who ripped off hundreds of millions of dollars from tech giants such as Enron, WorldCom, and Global Crossing in the New Economy scandals of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Arrests so far have totaled zero for the very top bankers at the world's largest international banks, who have masterminded and profited from the outright larceny that brought their institutions one hundred billion dollars or more through the LIBOR, foreign exchange, drug-lord money-laundering scandals of the last decade or so. It is no exaggeration to say that these magnates are literally above the law, and the Obama administration explicitly acknowledged them as such, in statements by former US attorney general Eric Holder and Lanny Breuer, then head of the criminal division at the Justice Department.

A parallel process of ever increasing corruption and acceptance thereof could be charted for many of the world's leading politicians by laying bare the close correlation among the level of income or payoff, the amount of power and prestige of the politician, and the degree of adoration by the media. The list would feature not only such notables as the Clintons, the Blairs, and Silvio Berlusconi, but their ostensibly more traditional European counterparts Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder in Germany and Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy in France, whose terms in office featured secret slush funds, the embezzlement of taxpayer money, and lucrative favors for highly placed friends. These egregious figures have constituted the vanguard of neoliberalization on a world scale, and they have elicited round after round of ever louder applause from a tiny number of giant media corporations — their partners in crime, whose oligopolies they nurtured. As flabbergasting as was Hillary Clinton's gall in taking a total of \$21.5 million from leading Wall Street banks for ninety-two speeches over a two-year period between 2013 and 2015, even more astounding was the ingratiating with which this revelation was greeted by the sycophantic media. Only Bernie Sanders's awkward appearance on the scene spoiled the celebration.

The Republicans and Ronald Reagan had led the initial political breakthrough to neoliberalism in 1980 and 1981, suddenly introducing, with the Democrats' full approval, measures that directly distributed income to corporate leaders and the rich by political means that came to distinguish the new regime. The result was to drive an historic shift in income distribution to the top 1 percent that would persist up to the present. But the problem for the

Republicans was that, since the beneficiaries of this largesse were so few, their signature policies promised little gain for the white workers they were attempting to bring behind them — workers who, not coincidentally, were being subjected to the most devastating reductions in their living standards since the Great Depression, thanks to rising Social Security taxes and decreasing social services, as well as falling real wages and rising unemployment. The answer that the GOP hit upon, seemingly too superficial for words, was to build on their covert, if patently obvious, racist commitment to favor whites, the silent majority, over blacks by turning to “social issues,” from crime to opposing gay rights and abortion and so on. Still the Republicans’ resulting dependence on their voting base to act politically against its material interests for the duration was an unstable solution.

Bill Clinton famously took up the baton of neoliberalism from his Republican forebears and consolidated the project they had initiated, a necessary departure for the Democrats if they were to continue to compete successfully in terms of fundraising. In particular, Clinton won over an impressive phalanx of top bankers by putting into place a series of major pieces of legislation favoring finance that were to shape the economy for the next decade and beyond. But this shift toward Wall Street left the Democrats’ working-class and black constituencies in the lurch. To compensate and distract, the Democrats turned to propagating multiculturalism, hoping in particular to attract and nurture an expanding base of supporters ever higher on the income scale. But as with the Republicans, the shift to neoliberalism left their traditional lower class supporters behind, a problematic strategy beyond the short run.

The fast-emerging outcome was that the Democratic and Republican neoliberal fraternal twins came to look ever more like identical ones in terms of the issue of class. In particular, the Democrats came to represent the wealthy virtually to the same degree as did the Republicans. What differentiated them was political-cultural identifications — multiculturalism for the Democrats and “social issues” for the Republicans. But political parties that catered in material terms only to the very well off could hardly stabilize their own political positions. In this, as in so many other respects, a dozen years of bubblenomics provided a temporary escape from reality, allowing the two parties to postpone confronting the problem of speaking to the material interests of the very large lower-class voting constituencies that were crucial for both. But they could not put it off for very long.

For the time being, the turn to neoliberalism could hardly have been a more resounding success for the tiny corporate and political elite at the top of the scale of income and wealth. It brought, especially by way of its distinctive forms of politically constituted plunder, an otherwise inconceivable — and historic — redistribution of income upward to the top 1 percent, from 10 percent in 1980 to 23.5 percent in 2007, a level previously reached only at the end of the roaring 1920s on the eve of the stock-market crash. The top 1 percent appropriated no less than 95 percent of the total increase in income between the Great Recession and 2013. As the other side of the coin, the real wages of production and non-supervisory workers, composing the bottom 80 percent, did not increase between 1972 and 2012 (falling, in fact, by just under 10 percent). This meant that the US working class could not get a raise above its starting salary for forty years.

### *From Consent to Coercion: A Crisis of Legitimacy*

With their failure to propel growth, their imposition of ever more extreme austerity on working people, and their blatant rip-off of the bottom 90 percent in the interest of the top 1 percent, neoliberal elites have largely forfeited the political legitimacy enjoyed by the capitalist ruling class of the preceding epoch, which won its leadership position in the first instance by accumulating capital and inciting growth, bringing about fast rising employment and real wages. With their politico-ideological hegemony in doubt, today's official ruling parties, from right to left, have begun preparations to use fraud and force in the event of resistance. One should avoid exaggerating the degree to which this trend toward repression has already been realized in the capitalist core, where basic freedoms are still largely intact (although these have always been restricted, at best, for African Americans). So far, in that part of the world, it has been mainly a question of locating and monitoring potential oppositionists, such as with the US government's extraordinary program to surveil literally the whole population, revealed by Edward Snowden; the attempt to intimidate, while preparing to repress, radical activists, as with the militarization of police departments the world over; and the use of political repression sooner rather than later to put down militant movements of opposition, such as the dispersal of Occupy.

The fact remains that we are already witnessing major episodes of much more serious repression, involving states of emergency, suspension of liberties, and the disestablishment of formal democracy. These have so far been confined largely to the periphery — for example in the states of emergency accompanying politico-military coups in Egypt and Turkey (although France, too, remains in its own state of emergency more than a year after the terror attacks in Paris). Yet where large-scale explosions of resistance from below have not only disrupted public order but also threatened to extract major gains from the corporations, the core has been hardly immune from political repression. During the first half of 2016, the François Hollande government was unable to push through a new law to deregulate the French labor market in the face of a huge, militant mass movement bringing together allied contingents of workers, school kids, and urban middle-class youth, a movement that enjoyed the overwhelming support of the general public. But Hollande nonetheless forced its passage entirely undemocratically, essentially by fiat, using a provision of the constitution specifically enacted for just this sort of occasion. In a somewhat different register, Germany and its north European partner states have inflicted a kind of a mass torture on the Greek population, imposing extreme measures of austerity that are explicitly intended to bring about pauperization and demonstrating the lengths to which these states will go to crush resistance and make an example of resisters. It would be foolish to believe that this could not happen elsewhere in the capitalist core.

### *Social Democracy's Collapse into Neoliberalism*

The world's social-democratic and liberal-left parties rose to great heights during the long postwar expansion. Nevertheless, their prospects even then were profoundly constrained by the political priorities of the party politicians and trade-union leaders who headed up large apparatuses of well-paid officials. The latter saw their fundamental interest as nurturing the parties and unions that constituted their material support — that provided their salaries, established their career paths, and constituted their whole way of life. These leaders' overriding commitment to protecting their organizations from threats both from above and from below led them to adopt a political strategy that sought to increase wages, benefits, and social welfare gains *gradually*, so they could accommodate

the economic and political needs of capital while minimally satisfying their members. This meant putting capitalist profits first as the precondition for capital accumulation and the growth of employment and wages, while avoiding at all costs direct confrontations with employers and the state. Such confrontations could easily endanger their party and trade-union organizations. This strategic perspective implied, as a tactical matter, state-regulated collective bargaining, corporatist forms of state regulation of capital-labor relations, and the electoral road, supplemented from time to time by strictly routine, limited strike action — rather than ever broader forms of mobilization of the trade union and party memberships. Their dependence upon these methods is what makes the social democrats and trade unionists *reformists* — not the fight for reforms, which is incumbent on all organizations that presume to represent working people.

This strategy worked reasonably well during the long upturn, when high profits and rapid capital accumulation allowed social-democratic organizations, along with the trade unions, to secure steady material improvements for their memberships and the citizenry. But when profitability began to fall from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, social-democratic leaders and trade-union officials were progressively disarmed or disarmed themselves. At first they obliged their followers to accept restraints on wages and benefits, as well as to moderate their fight to defend the welfare state, in hopes that this would allow their employers to restore their rates of profit, regain previous levels of investment and growth, and, on that basis, once again provide steady improvements in living standards. But as it became ever clearer that granting concessions would not actually incite employers to raise their rates of capital accumulation, that the economy would continue to stagnate, and that austerity was a permanent fact of life, party leaders, along with their trade-union counterparts, found themselves pretty much sidelined, waiting for the economy to recover its dynamism.

When ruling classes just about everywhere embraced neoliberalism, social-democratic and allied trade-union leaders had no choice. Having long ago abandoned militant class struggle, they had no viable path to winning economic gains for their followers, but the extreme political position adopted by the leading capitalist parties did offer them a way forward. They could set themselves up as a kind of lesser evil, in effect joining their adversaries in implementing neoliberal policies while holding out the hope of offering minimal concessions to working people that their adversaries would not grant.

Over the past thirty or more years, formerly social-democratic parties around the world have functioned as the left wing of neoliberalism, taking part, with their center-right rivals, in an electoral revolving door. Democratic and social-democratic parties often took the decisive steps if not to originate the neoliberal thrust, as in Australia or New Zealand, at least to make it irrevocable and further consolidate the shift in that direction. Witness Bill Clinton in the United States, Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, Gerhard Schröder in Germany. The trend has only deepened since the Great Recession, highlighted by Hollande's abrupt shift to the right after winning election on a program of breaking with neoliberalism. Most of the rest of Europe has followed the same path, as has the Democratic Party in the United States, where Barack Obama, though embracing neoliberalism even more fully than Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, won two elections thanks to the Republicans' plunging even further to the right.

17 Social-democratic organizations' universal defection to the ranks of neoliberalism has deprived working people of any mass political party that even remotely pretends to represent them, leaving them without a political voice. The outcome is an enormous political vacuum, completely unprecedented since at least the start of the twentieth century. The question is whether any new political formation on the left can organize a credible alternative that can stem the plunge of popular living standards, offer an anticapitalist point of departure, and begin to craft a convincing version of socialism for our time. Such a formation must do so against the opposition of the neoliberalized social democratic parties and mostly without the support, at least for the time being, of trade-union organizations implicitly or explicitly tied to those parties. Nevertheless, they will have plenty of openings to do so.

### *Evolution of Resistance: A Learning Process?*

The great housing and credit market crash of 2007 and 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession thrust working people across the world into a new ice age to which they have barely begun to acclimatize. Tens of millions lost their jobs and were obliged, if they were lucky enough, to accept much worse ones. Almost as many lost their homes and thus a great part of their accumulated wealth. Their power to borrow and to consume plummeted; "food insecurity," the risk of starvation, threatened shockingly large numbers of families.

But the coup de grace was delivered by governments. In an astoundingly skewed but entirely predictable response to the collapse, the two US neoliberal parties led a coordinated and expensive bailout of the global financial sector, preserving the banks that had inflated and burst the stock market and housing price bubbles, along with the wealth of the 1 percent. They saw no moral hazard in privatizing the gains and socializing the losses of the financial sector. Equally predictably, they declined to bail out the underwater mortgages of ordinary citizens, moralizing against their profligacy, even though such a bailout would have been far cheaper and much better for the economy. Flaunting their hypocrisy, neoliberal rulers in much of the advanced capitalist world, notably across most of Europe, took the opportunity to try once and for all to destroy the remaining institutions protecting workers, their living standards, and their leverage in the labor market, namely the trade unions and the welfare state. Bailouts for the capitalist class, brutal austerity for the working class was the rule virtually everywhere, backed by both neoliberal parties.

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At the start, governments, led by the United States, did implement a short and shallow burst of Keynesian deficit spending/subsidy to demand, which did at least prevent total depression. Soon, however, neoliberals on both sides of the Atlantic returned to their touchstones — austerity and politically driven rip-offs. Rather than stimulate consumption and investment to catalyze capital accumulation, they turned to ultra-cheap credit to increase returns on investment in stocks and bonds, the benefits of which the top 1 percent monopolized. The wave of popular revulsion that resulted engulfed ever broader sections of the citizenry and has driven a long wave of punctuated political resistance, on both the right and the left.

### *Revolt of the Right*

Symptomatically, it was the political right which initiated popular opposition in the United States. Massive protest from below, emanating largely from an outraged Republican base, greeted Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson's Troubled Asset Relief Program bank bailout bill and forced its defeat when it was first brought before Congress. It took the congressional Democrats, led by New York senator Chuck Schumer, a leading apostle of Wall Street (despite his liberal bona fides), to save Paulson's bacon and that of the banks.

As the Great Recession came to an end, if only formally, a key section of the Republican base lurched further rightward, led by a far-right pro-business network headed by the Koch brothers. These Tea Party Republicans wanted to reduce taxes, eliminate regulations on industry and the environment, and destroy trade unions. Their tactics included paralyzing the state by way of blocking budgets or threatening to refuse to raise the debt ceiling. Though they booted out establishment Republicans in primary challenges, in the end, they represented the party's neoliberal politics, if an ultra-radical version.

Two developments transformed the situation. First, the awful deterioration of living standards set off by the Great Recession, which continued processes of decline going back a decade or more, brought special torment to the population of white workers, particularly the less educated layer upon which the Republican Party had so long relied for its successes as a viable electoral competitor. These workers, especially the middle-aged among them, have suffered horrific levels of drug addiction, alcohol poisoning, suicide, and generalized despair, which have been increasing since around the turn of the millennium. As a result, after falling at a rate of 2 percent per year between 1978 and 1998, the mortality of US whites *rose* by a half a percent per year through 2013. This while their black and Latino counterparts, and indeed every other group of workers in Europe and the United States, continued to sustain falling death rates at pretty much the same pace as before. In the same interval, the number of deaths of middle-aged Americans with a high school degree or less increased by 134 per 1,000 people, a jump in the death rate of no less than 20 percent. This profound socioeconomic collapse opened the way for a new message that would speak directly to white workers' condition.

The second development was the emergence of a credible political force that could speak to these needs — Donald Trump. From the beginning, he put front and center a list of populist-nationalist economic demands supposedly designed to defend American workers. This included opposition to immigration and trade deals, attacks on finance, and, from time to time in a twisted manner, threats to reduce military spending and punish corporations that export jobs. Trump melded this economic nationalism/populism with a *mélange* of racist, anti-Latino, Islamophobic, and misogynist invective. The racism and misogyny heightened the economic nationalism and the economic nationalism intensified the racism, increasing his message's potency.

The latter combination represented — if only in rhetoric — a resounding break with neoliberalism, endowing white workers with what seemed like an alternative political vehicle. This break was rendered all the more powerful because Trump’s ability to win white workers was paralleled by the abject failure of Hillary Clinton — the embodiment of neoliberalism — to inspire working-class people of any color across the country. Similar dynamics had already brought victory for a similar alliance of forces, with native workers and low turnout playing a central role, in the passage of Brexit in the United Kingdom, and they were also in play in the campaigns of Marine Le Pen and the National Front in France and, if to a much lesser extent, in the victorious vote against the pro-Europe, pro-neoliberal constitutional reforms advanced by Matteo Renzi in Italy.

### *The Left’s Progress*

*Meanwhile, resistance on the left in the wake  
of the Great Recession has evolved through  
three distinct, if overlapping, phases.*

#### I. STREETS AND SQUARES: AUTONOMOUS ANTIPOLITICS.

The series of extended mass demonstrations and occupations in public spaces that marked the Arab Spring set the pattern for the initial phase of rebellion from below and from the left. It was followed by the trade union–social movement takeover of the Wisconsin statehouse in defense of the union rights of public-sector workers against a far-reaching assault on labor unleashed by a right-wing governor. The next two or three years witnessed analogous long-term occupations, with radical politics, highlighted by the *indignados* movements that took over the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, and Taksim Square in Istanbul.

The movements’ politics were similar almost everywhere, at least in the large occupations. Their programs targeted the neoliberal regimes across the board, featuring opposition to austerity and the rule of finance and support for the homeless and ill-fed. The strategy, or political method, was bottom-

up democracy and movement autonomy, meaning independence from all traditional political parties and the bureaucratized trade unions: a self-styled “antipolitics.”

The isolation of these movements, the flip side of their autonomy, proved their undoing. This was hardly all their own fault; they received minimal support from the established left parties and trade unions. But their failure to concern themselves with establishing ongoing organizations, however rudimentary, with political programs, however tentative, made it impossible for them to see to their own futures, to provide continuity to the political thrust of the occupations as the energy that sustained them inevitably waned.

## II. ELECTORALISM: OFFICE WITHOUT POWER.

In the wake of the dissolution of the mass movements behind the anti-political occupations, there emerged a very different sort of political wave, one that focused on the electoral struggle. Its exponents have sometimes claimed to provide the politics and organizations that had been lacking in the previous phase of militant self-organization and political autonomy yet needed to realize its political goals. But they are mainly motivated by the hope of filling the gaping political vacuum left by the social-democratic parties since the latter organizations had made clear their abject submission to their northern European rulers, especially with respect to honoring their external debts and enforcing austerity programs to pay for them.

Both Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain thus sought to exploit the near-universal disgust of their electorates with the political perspectives and the extreme corruption of their respective neoliberal political establishments. Syriza was a complex alliance of political organizations, but its leadership and their followers, always dominant within the party, functioned like a classical social-democratic outfit. They sought to control the party with little consultation from the membership as a whole and made every effort to isolate and destroy their political opponents inside the organization, minimizing, for example, the number of meetings of the party’s leading bodies. Their aim was to create an essentially one-faction organization, that of the leadership, so as to gain the freedom to maneuver politically to avoid at all costs confrontations with the powers that be, above all Germany and its allies.

Syriza identified itself with the powerful mass struggles that had been animated by the death, in December 2008, of Alexandros Grigoropoulos at the hands of police, by the occupation of Syntagma Square in 2010, and by the dynamic antiausterity movement that arose in response to worsening economic conditions and the power of the Troika. But as this wave of struggles subsided, Syriza focused almost entirely on electoral campaigns — because to mobilize mass movements was to risk potentially destructive confrontations with Greek and European political elites. In the end Syriza could not avoid the mass refusal of austerity, expressed in the “no” vote on its own referendum on the terms of the EU memorandum. But it ended up getting around it, eventually imposing an even more severe program of austerity and claiming that “there is no alternative.”

Podemos’s experience so far has been a pale carbon copy of Syriza’s. Podemos acquired sudden dynamism when a handful of university professors, known for hosting a successful talk show, sought in the wake of the *indignados* movement to build a party like Syriza, to the left of the discredited Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE). The program they put forward was ambiguous in the extreme, focusing on corruption as a lowest common denominator and downplaying class domination and even class division in Spain. Yet they managed an initially stunning electoral showing.

Nevertheless, the apparently emerging electoral dominance of Podemos was cut short by the rise of a similarly ill-defined anticorruption political party, this time to its right. Podemos could now move forward only by giving itself greater political definition. But to put actual weight behind any reform program it might put forward, it would have to nurture mass struggles in the shops and in the streets, the only real source of power for the left anywhere. This would run the risk of subjecting its organization to political reprisals, from the local state and its north European sponsors. Whether Podemos will be willing to attempt such a demarche remains very much in doubt.

### III. TOWARD SYNTHESIS? THE FRENCH MASS MOVEMENT AGAINST HOLLANDE’S LABOR REFORM LAW.

When in 2016 the Hollande government announced a wide-ranging reform of the French labor code designed to weaken its protection of workers, it provoked a stunning popular reaction that went from strength to strength with

the support of clear majorities of the French citizenry, as registered in public opinion polls. The movement exhibited, from the start, growing militancy and a breathtaking spread, with strikes, demonstrations, and occupations all across the country. What made for its impressive power was the succession of broadening alliances among social constituencies that had hitherto been separated forged with one another. As in few, if any, other instances since the Great Recession, a major trade-union federation entered into the fight against austerity. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT), traditionally cautious of confronting its erstwhile allies in the Socialist Party, called and supported recurrent general strikes as well as blockades of ports, refineries, and nuclear power stations. Meanwhile, parallel militant movements of young people arose: first takeovers of high schools, then recurrent occupations of Place de la République, which became known as *Nuit debout*. Compared to its predecessors, like the *indignados* in Spain, deriving from the same social layers, *Nuit debout* called for the broadest possible alliance, including trade-union federations, as the key to victory. While the promise of such an alliance was never quite realized, it was equally supported by the leadership of the CGT, who were being pushed by an increasingly agitated membership to join forces with the youth. The realization of this unification, in mass demonstrations on the large days of action, occurred despite initial conflicts between union stewards and radical youth. These were defused when the union leadership conceded the leadership of the demonstrations to the youth and the mass of unionized workers against an increasingly violent police repression.

These united movements managed to achieve what are, in an important sense, the biggest triumphs of the long cycle of struggles, and it is clear that the alliances forged among organizations representing diverse social layers were what enabled them to amass greater power and political effectiveness than most of their predecessors since the Great Recession. At one point, the French government sought to invoke the emergency law against the movement to ban demonstrations, but had to back down. Nor in the end was the government able to win an outright victory to get the law approved. The opposition, backed up by an overwhelming majority of the public, was too powerful. In a sense admitting political defeat but nonetheless insistent on securing its antilabor reform, the government was obliged to resort to a special power, Article 49.3 of the French Constitution, to pass the bill without a vote in Parliament.

## *In Place of Conclusion*

Throughout most of the history of capitalism, the world's capitalist classes have justified their rule with one or another version of the famous slogan that "what's good for General Motors is good for America." This means that it is in everyone's interest, including the working class, to see first to the profits of the employers, because only if the latter can make a profit will they be willing to accumulate capital and, so long as capitalist property relations prevail, only if they accumulate capital (increase investment and employment) can working people increase their living standards. Put differently, in order to make profits for themselves, capitalists have generally had no choice but to hire workers and pay them wages, along with purchasing means of production.

But in the last thirty years or so, this cliché has ceased to hold — and the world's capitalist classes no longer really proclaim it. During this period, the increase in income going to the capitalist class has resulted ever increasingly from the upward redistribution of income and wealth, rather than its production. Redistribution has taken place in basically two ways: by the process of production and by skipping production altogether. On the one hand, employers, while reducing investment to ever more derisory levels and securing equally derisory increases in productivity, take their income/profits by paying workers decreasing wages or slowing wage growth or speeding up work. Second, capitalists, and the rich more generally, transfer income and wealth directly from working people to themselves through politically constituted rip-offs: reducing taxes on the corporations and the rich and so on. Capitalist classes can no longer justify their rule by asserting that they must provide for workers if they are to enrich themselves. They cannot contend that "what's good for Goldman Sachs is good for America," because making money for Goldman Sachs or its counterparts in today's ruling class so often benefits no one but themselves.

The outcome has been disastrous for working people across the world, but it has also made for an enormous political opening. Capitalism can no longer secure the positive adherence of working people to the system because it does not provide for their needs, and everyone knows that. They must rely instead on two negative motivations to command allegiance: people's fear of losing their jobs, or that there won't be any, and people's fear of brutal repression

or punishment if they attempt to fight back. The emergence of these brutal conditions has engendered the marked step-up of class struggle that has taken place since the Great Recession.

That said, there has so far been a stunning failure on the part of the opposition movements that is painfully clear to everyone. Even the most highly unified and sophisticated struggles have failed to provide for their own continuation and to prepare for the next round. Their progenitors have been unable collectively to draw a balance sheet on the battles they have pursued, derive the appropriate political lessons, and attempt to figure out what these lessons imply for taking the struggle forward with greater success and effect. Nor have they been able to constitute the political collectivities required to enable those who wish to continue to fight to keep on organizing and learning, even as their own specific struggle comes to an end. To put it most simply and crudely, those who have pursued the series of economic and political fights that have broken out and evolved against the background of ongoing economic stress since 2007 have made no serious effort to build political organizations or develop political programs, despite the obvious necessity of doing so. To make this observation is to state the obvious. But confronting the yawning gap between objective potential and subjective capacity is no less urgent because it so plain to see. ✧

**If all social action is meaning-oriented,  
is the materialist view of class doomed?  
Many, if not most, social theorists seem  
to think so, and have abandoned the  
structural theory of class for a theory  
that presents it as a cultural construction.  
This essay shows that it is possible to  
accept the basic insights of the cultural  
turn, while still upholding a materialist  
theory of class structure and class formation.**

# RESCUING CLASS

*from the* CULTURAL TURN

VIVEK CHIBBER

**F**or more than a generation now, class theory has been deeply influenced by what is known as the “cultural turn.” Although the specific claims attached to it tend to vary across the disciplines, its practitioners share a set of baseline intuitions. Chief among these is the view that social practice cannot be understood outside of the ideological and cultural frames that actors carry with them — their subjective understandings of their place in the world. Social action is fundamentally meaning-oriented, which implies that theories of class have to attend to the ways actors subjectively interpret their social situations and how the frames they utilize are constructed in the first place. While this insistence on the interpretive dimension of social action is a pillar of the cultural turn, it is not the only one. The focus on ideas and meaning has encouraged a turn away from structural analysis and toward the valuation of contingency of social phenomena, and further, an insistence upon the local and particular, as against the more universalizing claims of traditional class theory.

A natural consequence of this shift has been the declining influence of the idea that class is fundamentally about *interests* and *power*, and a corresponding turn away from the macro-level class analysis associated with Marxian theory. In the disciplines of history and anthropology especially, but even in sociology, class has increasingly become viewed through the contingencies of its cultural construction rather than as an obdurate structural fact; its relation to social action is seen as working through the construction of agential identities, not via the operation of their objective interests. The transformation has not been total, of course. In the English-speaking world, the work of Erik Wright and Charles Tilly in the United States and John Goldthorpe in Britain has sustained a vital tradition of materialist class analysis. Still, the broad thrust of intellectual production has for some time now veered decidedly away from this approach.

But there are signs now of a growing unease with the all-encompassing embrace of culture. In an era when capitalism has spread to every nook and cranny of the world, subjecting labor and businesses to the same market-based compulsions; when patterns of income distribution have followed similar trends across a large number of countries in the Global North and South; when economic crises have engulfed almost the entire planet twice in less than ten years, bringing country after country to its knees; and when a broad shift in distributive inequalities has occurred across dozens of economies across the continents — it seems odd to remain in the thrall of a framework that insists on locality, contingency, and the indeterminacy of translation. It has become increasingly obvious to many that there are pressures and constraints that stretch across cultures and, more importantly, that these constraints are eliciting common patterns of response from social actors, regardless of culture and geography.

Nowhere is this shift more apparent than in the eye-popping success of Thomas Piketty's *Capital*. If we tear away the more technical aspects of his argument, what has resonated with readers is his message that capitalism has some basic, enduring properties that impose their weight on any economy in which it takes root.<sup>1</sup> Most fundamentally, he demonstrates that income distribution is governed by some simple relationships between basic economic variables and, just as importantly, that these variables also express enduring relations of power between class actors. Having control over economic assets gives capitalists power over their labor force, which they then utilize to capture the bulk of new income generated in the production process. What varies across time and

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

space is the degree to which this power advantage can be actuated. Whatever these variations, however, the fact of the power imbalance and its consequent income inequality is written into the logic of the system. Piketty's argument has captured what to many is the essence of our new Gilded Age — that we are living through a prolonged class war waged by the rich against the poor, a global war whose theater stretches across national boundaries and whose basic elements are common to actors regardless of culture.

Piketty is only the most spectacular example of a shift away from culture and contingency. Wolfgang Streeck, perhaps the leading theorist of European social democracy and one of the most influential proponents of constructivism in the 1990s, has called for scholars to place the structural dynamics of capitalism front and center once again.<sup>2</sup> So too the historical sociologist William Sewell, also a leading proponent of the cultural turn in the 1990s, has expressed for some time his sense that the emphasis on translation and agency has ended up erasing the underlying constraints of capitalism, right at a time when it has expanded its scope and power across the globe.<sup>3</sup>

One could expand this list considerably, but the basic outlines are clear — it is time to revive a materialist analysis of class and capitalism.

Even while the need for a revived materialism seems to enjoy widespread assent, progress toward it has been slow and episodic. This might in part be because no academic trend changes overnight; perhaps all we need to do is wait for a short period for the structural analysis of capitalism to gain influence. But this is unlikely. One of the reasons for the longevity of the cultural turn is undoubtedly the intuitive appeal of its foundational claims. Indeed, I will argue that some central arguments for cultural mediation are undoubtedly correct, and potentially devastating to an economic theory of class. Any response to the cultural turn, then, has to take account of these worries and show that, whatever arguments there are in favor of materialism, they have to acknowledge the ubiquity of culture.

In this paper I develop an argument in defense of such a materialist class analysis. I mean by this a theory in which class is defined by agents' objective location within a social structure, which in turn generate a set of interests that govern those agents' social action. But I will show that a theory of this kind

2 Wolfgang Streeck, *Re-Forming Capitalism: Institutional Change in German Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014); and especially his interview with NYU's Jonah Birch in *Jacobin*, "Social Democracy's Last Rounds," February 25, 2016.

3 William Sewell, *The Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Sewell is part of a team that has launched a new journal, *Critical Studies in History*, in large measure to revive the return to capitalism.

does not have to run afoul of the basic arguments of the cultural turn. Indeed, I will show that class does operate through culture, but it does so in a way that preserves the autonomous influence of economic structure. The issue, therefore, is not *whether* agents' meaning orientation influences social action, but *how* it does so. The difference between materialist class analysis and the more ideational variants is thus not on the relevance of culture per se, but on the ways in which that influence interacts with other, non-ideational factors. I proceed by first describing two of the most important criticisms leveled at structural theories of class. I then show that, properly conceived, a materialist account can accommodate both of these arguments and, indeed, is entirely consistent with them. On the other hand, a robust materialist theory can also explain the very phenomena that many theorists see as a challenge to the cultural turn — the enduring, obdurate facts about power and distribution in capitalism that seem to hold across space and time.

### *The Challenges to Materialism*

In the more traditional class theory, agents' structural location is supposed to impel them into patterns of social action, which can be predicted independently of their culture. But this makes it appear that, for materialists, class processes exist outside of culture, so that economic agents function on the basis of a rationality that has no connection to their identity or moral valuations. As many theorists have pointed out, this image of social structure cannot be sustained. Class action is every bit as steeped in meaning and values as any other kind of social practice. If this is so, we have to be suspicious of a theory that seems to evacuate culture from any domain of social interaction, even the economic.

Two arguments flowing from this worry have been especially important. The first has to do with its implications for the analysis of class structure, and is encapsulated in the following argument by William Sewell:

Structures cannot be neutral causal factors [as materialist theory implies], because all structures have to be interpreted by agents. How structures exert their influence, if at all, depends on the construction of meaning. Hence, structures and the resources with which they endow agents are the effect of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> William Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," in *Logics of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 135–36, emphasis added.

Sewell's argument here is significant for two reasons. The first is that it extends the centrality of meaning and cultural contingency from its typical domain of class *formation* to class *structure* itself.<sup>5</sup> Class theorists have long taken the structural dimension of class to be explicable independently of culture, more or less as an objective datum. Insofar as culture does play a significant role, it has typically been associated with the domain of class formation — when class actors become aware of their location in the structure and build their subjective identities around it. His argument encapsulates the intuition that has driven much of the disenchantment with older vintages of class analysis, which seemed to announce the domain of structure to be meaning-free.

Sewell is surely right in his suggestion that if meaning orientation is built into every social practice, then class structure too must be a cultural fact — since structures are nothing other than social practices reproduced over time. This is the second reason his argument is significant. Materialists cannot agree that social action is governed by agents' meaning orientation, but then deny that meaning and culture are built into class structure any less than they are into class formation. If the latter is steeped in culture, then so must be the former.

The second concern about materialist class theory is its presumptive determinism with regard to class formation. Once the class structure has been identified, it is supposed to also generate a very specific set of interests. Actors, being rational, are expected to pursue those interests collectively by waging class struggle. Structure is therefore endowed with a causal power to generate both an awareness of class interests and a desire to pursue them collectively. This is another way of saying that, according to materialist class theory, especially of the Marxian variant, once a class structure is in place, it is also expected to generate a particular set of *subjective identities* — of belonging to a certain class and of wishing to pursue a political agenda prioritizing that identity. But, the criticism goes, this is arbitrary. Social actors have many identities, and there is no justification for expecting that actors will settle upon a subjective identification with class instead of any of their myriad other social roles. Structural class theory works with the expectation that the experience of wage labor necessarily leads to class consciousness and, if it is found not to, then the case being studied is consigned to the status of “deviant,” an aberration.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of class structure and class formation, see Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985). I should acknowledge here the tremendous debt that this paper owes to Wright's work.

tion. But it turns out that the entire world deviates from the prediction of the theory. At some point, the argument goes, we have to accept that the flaw is in the theory, not the world.<sup>6</sup>

As with Sewell's argument, this concern about determinism or teleology is surely warranted. Any acceptable theory of class has to account for the fact that within the modern class structure, workers' identification with their class is more likely the exception, not the rule, and therefore the absence of class consciousness is not a deviation from the norm but rather is the norm. A viable class theory therefore has to provide mechanisms that account for this fact, not in an ad hoc fashion but as normal consequences of a capitalist economic structure. It then has to explain how and why, in certain conditions, a class identity can be forged — as the exception to the norm.

The challenge to class theory therefore comes from both sides. On the one hand, it has to be able to explain how the basic characteristics of capitalist production have successfully spread to every corner of the world, despite the enormous differences in culture and region, and how they display such a strikingly similar distributive pattern, again in spite of all the other differences in history and culture. This is a challenge for culturalist versions of the theory. On the other hand, if these facts seem to justify a turn to a more interest-based and structural understanding of class, this latter version has to show that it can accommodate the worries that animate so many of the critics of traditional theory and which have motivated them to turn to culture as an alternative framework for understanding class and capitalism. This is the challenge for Marxian and other materialist versions of the theory.

### *Culture and Social Structure*

We begin with Sewell's observation that structures cannot operate as neutral causal factors. The critical step in his argument is the claim that for structures to become causally efficacious, they have to be interpreted by agents, and that this takes place through some schema or set of codes provided by the local culture. It is therefore impossible to predict how, and even if, a structure will impinge on social action until we know something about the content of the codes or schema

<sup>6</sup> This criticism is so widespread that it has become something of a common sense in the field. But for cogent and influential arguments from two ends of the world, see Margaret Somers, "Narrativity, Narrative Identity, and Social Action: Rethinking English Working-Class Formation," *Social Science History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), 591–630, esp. 594–98; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 220–22.

that agents have available to them. Hence, it is the intervention of culture that is responsible for people's strategic orientation, not the underlying structures.

To illustrate what Sewell has in mind, consider the example of a religious congregation. The relations that bind together the priest with his parish are a structure of a kind. That structure is inert unless its relata — the people whom it binds together — accept their roles in it. But in order for them to accept these roles, the people first have to have it explained to them what the roles entail. If you simply herded people into a church without their having understood and accepted their roles, it would amount to nothing more than a collection of individuals occupying a small space together. Even if one of them, the priest, understood and accepted his place within it, it would still not constitute a structural relation unless his authority was recognized and accepted by the people in his congregation. Conversely, it would be meaningless for the congregation to understand its duties unless the person ordained as priest accepted the codes that came attached to his own location within the structure. People do not, therefore, simply stumble into the structure of a religious congregation. Their place within it is the *effect* of a certain structure of meaning. Culture therefore has both causal and explanatory primacy in the explanation of how this structure works.

Note that the real force of Sewell's argument, as suggested in the example, is that the successful intervention of culture in this fashion is a *contingent* process, making the activation of the structure also contingent as an outcome. The mere presence of a priest does not turn the people gathered in a church into his laity. The cooperation of a group of people as a congregation is a separate act, depending on whether or not their socialization into their roles is successful. But that socialization might very well fail — either because insufficient resources were poured into it or because the target audience remained unimpressed or unable to internalize the religious codes. If we could just *assume* the success of the interpretive schemes needed for the actors to accept their place within the structure, then Sewell's insistence that structure is an *effect* of meaning would become suspect — for we could very well accept that a social structure needs actors to understand and accept the roles that come with it but also be confident that once the structure is in place, the role identification will most likely come about. In that case, the causal independence of culture would be drastically reduced and, conversely, the causal independence of structure increased. If that were so, then to insist on the primacy of culture would simply be otiose — for

*culture* would be an effect of *structure*, and not vice versa, as Sewell suggests. Hence, the real power of his argument resides in its implication that not only does meaning activate structure, but its availability to carry out this task cannot be taken for granted.

Now, it is undoubtedly true that many social structures confirm to Sewell's description. It is easy to think of many other examples in which either a) a social structure depends on agents having internalized certain cultural codes or b) the internalization of those codes is itself a contingent outcome. Of course, as I have noted, Sewell does not present the latter condition as a separate proposition in his argument. He *derives* the causal independence of culture or meaning from proposition A — that social structures must be interpreted in order for them to take effect. But once we separate the two propositions, we can ask whether what he takes for granted might in fact be contested. Must it be the case that we have to treat the construction of an appropriate meaning orientation as a contingent social fact? Or could it be that there are some structures that radically reduce, or even extinguish, the contingency in meaning construction? If there are, then we could accept the proposition that a social structure has to be interpreted in order to take effect, but reject the second argument: that this process of meaning construction might fail to come about. It might be that, *pace* Sewell, once a structure of this kind is put in place, we can be confident that its mere implantation is all that is needed for the appropriate meaning orientation to follow. I will try to show that class is just such a structure.

### *What Makes Class Structure Different?*

Class relations are a structure substantially different from most any other. Whereas every structure has consequences for the actors who participate in it, the ones attached to class carry a special significance — they relate to actors' economic viability and, in this capacity, they set the rules for what actors have to do to reproduce themselves. This endows class structure with the ability to influence people's motivational set in a very different way from other social relations. Whereas most other relations have to depend on a contingent process of role identification on the part of agents, class radically reduces the contingency of whether or not such an identification will occur.

To see why, consider the employment relation in capitalism, which is a microcosm of the broader class structure. As in every structure, its relata have

to have the appropriate role internalization for its activation. Wage laborers have to accept their obligations and understand their meaning; capitalists have to internalize the rules attached to their location. The question, however, is whether there might be a failure in the meaning orientation needed for the structure's activation.

#### THE LOGIC OF WAGE LABOR

Let us start by considering the position of the worker. To make the example especially challenging for our theory, suppose that the person in the position of a wage laborer abhors the very idea of it, or that she was raised in a culture in which people relied on independent production for their subsistence and hence had no prior experience with or understanding of working for a wage. In both cases, the particular actor would be proletarianized while imbued with an understanding of economic reproduction that was not only different from what is needed for a capitalist class structure but inimical to it. There is no prior socialization into the role of worker — indeed, she enters position with a subjectivity that is inimical to her accepting the role. If this had happened in the example of the church congregation, so that individuals in the church were hostile to the idea of joining the congregation, they most likely would have walked away and thereby dissolved any possibility of sustaining its social structure. But in the case of the worker, is it reasonable to expect that, since she lacks the appropriate normative orientation, she could simply drift away, as did the potential members of the church congregation, and end up in some other kind of economic structure, one more in sync with her culture? If she has *in fact* been proletarianized, so that she *in fact* does not have access to the means of production, then the answer has to be negative.

To appreciate why the outcome would be different, it is worth considering the contrast between the two cases. The contrast rides on the difference between motivations that have to be learned through a process of socialization and those that are built into our basic psychological structure. The proletarian is someone who, by definition, does not have access to any income-generating assets other than her labor effort. She does not own any means of production, nor does she own government or corporate paper. In a capitalist structure, the only viable strategy for her physical reproduction is to seek out employment from those who control productive assets. And seek it out she will, because the

alternative is to perish. This means that the desirability of seeking employment is not something that she has to learn through a process of cultural construction. The desire is created by a motivation that is *independent* of whatever socialization she has been exposed to — the elemental drive to ensure her physical well-being.

This drive is a kind of cross-cultural desire-generator — it *creates its own* locally encoded normative stance of seeking out the means to ensure economic viability. Hence, if the proletarian has been taught to abhor the idea of wage labor, but finds that working for a wage is in fact the only option available for her survival, it creates a tension between her self-identification and her desire to survive. Now it is of course possible that in some rare cases, she will choose not to survive. But those cases are pathological — they are extremely rare cases of deviation from the norm. Aside from those few exceptions, the tension between *ex ante* socialization and the need for sustenance will be settled in favor of the latter, and hence a demotion of the normative orientation that urges her to abjure wage labor. In other words, if the proletarian's cultural training inclines her to abhor waged employment, the result will be a steady weakening and transformation of the codes imparted by her training, so that it is able to accommodate the turn to waged work.

The proletarian's acceptance of her role is effectuated by a coercive pressure from her class position. It is a kind of structural coercion. What I mean by that is that the pressure to accept the role does not require conscious intervention by another person — it is imposed simply by her circumstances, by the choice set that her location offers her. In the case of the potential member of the congregation, there is no parallel structural force pulling him back toward the church if he rejects the codes and meanings attached to it. Unlike the proletarian, the desire to conform to his place has to be created *ex nihilo* by the socialization that he undergoes. So if that socialization fails, or if he abhors the idea of a church the way that the proletarian despises the idea of wage labor, there is no independent desire-generator that induces him to question his preferences, as the proletarian did, and to then reject it in favor of the lure of the church. He might decide that he would rather continue in his own religion; or he might choose a different, competing one, or he could decide to dispense with religion altogether. There is nothing that pulls him into the social structure of the congregation, since none of these decisions *in themselves* undermine his well-being. He can happily adjust to any of them. In his case, the process of meaning creation really is a contingent one.

Now it is of course possible that some kind of sanctions are also placed on him, in a manner reminiscent of the proletarian, that impose costs on him should he choose to reject his role. He might be ostracized by the community and experience other kinds of social pressure or perhaps even physical punishment. But this is not in fact a parallel at all. In this latter instance, what we have are instances of *agent-imposed* sanctions. They require some kind of monitoring by social agencies dedicated to preventing transgressions of just this kind and, on top of that, willful intervention by individuals or the community. Short of these consciously imposed sanctions, the parishioner is free to walk away and refuse to accept his role. In the proletarian's case, there is no call for conscious intervention by anyone. She does not have to be monitored to ensure that she accept her role — she will accept it on her own volition. She will therefore orient her meaning universe in a way that enables her to find and then keep employment, so that she might survive. But if this is so, then we cannot say that class agency of the sort just described is the effect of meaning. To the contrary, we can suggest that the proletarian's *meaning orientation* is the effect of her *structural location*.

#### THE LOGIC OF BEING A CAPITALIST

Consider now the situation of her employer. Does being a capitalist also require a contingently acquired value orientation for his structural location to take effect? Interestingly, there is a venerable tradition in sociology that answers in the affirmative. For close to two decades in the postwar era, many proponents of modernization theory wondered whether the newly developing countries of the Global South would be able to embark on a path of capitalist development, as Europe had before them. They were inspired by a particular reading of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, which they took to be arguing that capitalism depends upon a specific meaning orientation appropriate to its economic logic.<sup>7</sup> For this brand of Weberian theory, the critical point is that having the right kind of value system is a *precondition* for capitalism to implant itself successfully, which makes the spread of this economic system dependent on a prior shift in culture. Hence, the worry was that Confucian, Buddhist, or Hindu religions might fail to provide the kind of normative outlook that Protestantism

7 I call this a particular reading of Weber because even while it offers a plausible interpretation of *The Protestant Ethic*, he is in fact somewhat inconsistent in arguing for the determining role of culture. But this will have to be taken up elsewhere.

generated in Western Europe. The market forces pushing their way into the East would thus remain stunted, because merchants and businessmen would lack the entrepreneurial spirit of their counterparts in Europe.<sup>8</sup>

Modernization theory went into rapid decline by the late 1970s, in part because it was clear that the regions that were supposed to have suffered from the absence of a culturally-induced entrepreneurial spirit were developing not only very rapidly but at rates that the world had never seen. Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and even India were experiencing economic growth orders of magnitude greater than any European country had during the first two Industrial Revolutions. What is more, their rates of private investment reached heights that had been thought unattainable just two decades prior. Where was the motivation for this investment coming from, in such diverse cultures, across so many regions, if their economic actors lacked the appropriate cultural orientation for it? If there was a specific “spirit” that had to be internalized by capitalists as a precondition to their success, it was clear that it was pretty widely available.

The alternative explanation for the spread of capitalist investment patterns is that it does not depend on prior implantation of an entrepreneurial spirit at all. Rather, it creates the needed outlook endogenously, through the pressure exerted on capitalists by their structural location. A capitalist is someone who not only employs wage labor, but has to compete on the market to sell his product. He is thus market-dependent in two ways — in having to purchase his inputs, as against generating them himself, and in having to bring in enough revenue from sales as needed to keep his operation afloat. The viability of his undertaking depends on out-competing his rivals in the market. The only effective way of achieving this in the long run is by finding ways to reduce his selling prices *without* cutting into his profit margins. This requires that he find ways of increasing his efficiency, hence reducing his unit costs and thereby preserving his margins even as he slashes the selling price or, conversely, maintaining his selling price while improving the quality of the product. But neither of these is possible in the long run without substantial investments in better inputs — better capital goods, skills, materials, etc.,

8 For arguments that the cultural orientation of Hindus would be an obstacle to capitalistic development, see K.W. Kapp, *Hindu Culture, Economic Development and Economic Planning in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963), and V. Mishra, *Hinduism and Economic Growth* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1962); for a less pessimistic view, albeit from someone who accepts that capitalism requires the prior existence of an appropriate cultural outlook, see Milton Singer, “Cultural Values in India’s Economic Development,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 305 (May 1956): 81–91.

which requires that he choose, on his own volition, to prioritize investing his earnings rather than consuming them. If he dissipates his earnings on personal consumption, he will of course increase his pleasure temporarily, but at the cost of undermining his viability as a capitalist. Simply surviving the competitive battle thus forces capitalist to prioritize the qualities associated with the “entrepreneurial spirit.”

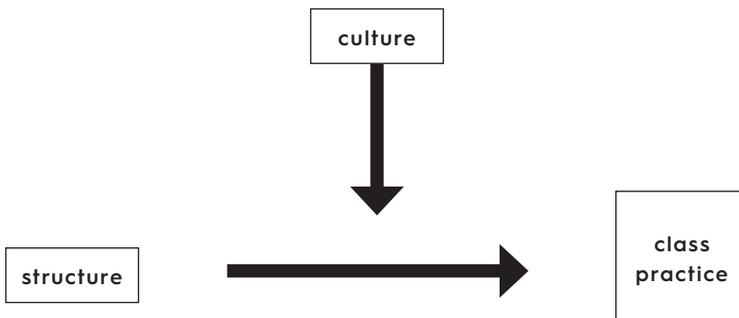
Hence, the pressure emanating from his structural location exercises its own discipline on the capitalist — whether he is Hindu, Muslim, Confucian, or Protestant. Whatever his prior socialization might have been, he quickly learns that he will have to conform to the rules attached to his location or his establishment will be driven under. It is a remarkable property of the modern class structure that any significant deviation by a capitalist from the logic of market competitiveness shows up as a cost in some way — a refusal to dump toxic sludge manifests as a loss in market share to those who will; a commitment to use safer but more expensive inputs shows up as a rise in unit costs, and so on. Capitalists thus feel an enormous pressure to *adjust* their normative orientation — their values, goals, ethics, etc. — to the social structure in which they are embedded, not vice versa, as with so many other social relations. The moral codes that are encouraged are those that help the bottom line. Sometimes this can be consistent with a non-market morality — as, for example, when offering to pay high wages just out of decency has the result of raising productivity. But the point is that the market tells the capitalist which elements of his moral universe are viable and which are not — rather than vice versa.

Of course, there will be many who fail to adjust. In these cases, the enterprises that they supervise or own will slowly lose competitiveness and will ultimately cease to be viable. But this in turn has two effects that only harden the tendency toward cultural adjustment — first, there will be a demonstration effect for other economic actors, both existing and potential capitalists, who will note that the refusal to abandon outmoded values caused the failure; second, it will reduce the proportion of the entrepreneurs who hold to the latter sort of beliefs and hence dilute their influence on the culture. There will therefore be a kind of selection process that winnows away those normative orientations that clash with the rules required of capitalist reproduction. So even though there will always be those who refuse to, or are unable to, adjust their moral universe to the requirements of being a capitalist, the market itself ensures that they remain on the fringes of the economic system.

## Two Models of Cultural Influence

The preceding discussion allows us a way of accepting that all action is steeped in meaning, while resisting the culturalist conclusions. We can agree that structures have to be interpreted by social agents; we can also agree that how social agents respond to their situation will depend on the intervening influence of culture. But we can resist the conclusion that many theorists think flows logically from these premises—namely, that structures are always and everywhere the *effect* of meaning. The way out is by making a distinction in the causal logic that underwrites culture's influence on different kinds of social relations. Both of the examples we have considered so far agree that structures have to be interpreted for them to exert an influence on social agents. The difference is that the stronger culturalist argument assigns a great deal of autonomy to culture as it intervenes in this fashion. This is what is implied in the argument that agents will align to their potential structural location only if they have internalized the appropriate normative orientation. The causal logic of this argument can be diagrammed thus:

### MODEL 1: INTERVENTION AS CAUSAL MEDIATION



Culture is here presented as a causal mechanism that *mediates* the relation between structure and action. Mediating mechanisms not only intervene between a causal agent and its effect but actively *shape* the impact of the antecedent cause.<sup>9</sup> To describe the role of meaning in this fashion captures the culturalist claim that structures are the *effect* of a contingent process of role

<sup>9</sup> For a description of the causal logic of mediating mechanisms, see Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978), 23–25.

internalization by social agents. It is the prior generation of meaning that makes possible the social structure; just as importantly, whether or not the appropriate interpretive scheme is in place cannot be prejudged. It is a contingent outcome of various social processes, making the viability of the structure itself highly unstable. The intervening mechanism's independence is a defining element in its mediating the relation between the outcome and the antecedent cause.

The culturalist argument turns on the assumption that if a mechanism intervenes between a cause and its effect, it will most likely function as a mediating mechanism. I have agreed that for many, even most, social relations, this model of determination does capture the causal logic at work. But the examples of the wage laborer and capitalist suggest that intervention can play out in a second, and quite different, fashion. In this second kind of influence, the intervening factor still provides the codes and meanings needed to activate the structures, but now its contingency and hence its independence are radically reduced. It does not independently shape the outcome so much as *it* is shaped by the *antecedent* cause. This turns it more into a *transmission* channel for the latter's influence. In this case, we have the *structure* shaping the agents' action orientation by generating the codes needed for its activation.

#### MODEL 2: INTERVENTION AS CAUSAL TRANSMISSION



Notice that in both models, the proximate cause for social action is culture. So both models conform to the theorem that structures have to be interpreted in order to be activated. Where they differ is in how they relate to the antecedent social structure. In model 1, they are more or less autonomous from the structure and thereby exercise an independent effect on action. But in model 2, the implication is that the social structure places limits on the variation in cultural codes.

The curved arrows denote a causal feedback loop that establishes the compatibility of the agents' cultural codes with the class structure. For the relation to be one of compatibility rather than a one-to-one causal determination means that the class structure does not require any *particular* constellation of meanings for it to be effective. Since all that is required is a condition of functional compatibility, any number of tropes might suffice. The causal relation between the economic structure and the agents' meaning universe is one of negative selection – it simply selects *against* those desires that would motivate the agent to ignore or reject the structure's demands. This is why it turns out that capitalist class compulsions can take root within a diverse range of cultures — because as long as the local culture can motivate actors in the appropriate way — for workers to show up to work and do what their employer tells them, and for capitalists to do what it takes to maximize profits — it can fit with the demands of the structure.

There is a further implication of the model that is worth noting; namely, that it does not require that *all* aspects of the cultural environment have to adjust to the class structure, but only those that come into conflict with the latter. The class structure selects against those aspects of the local culture that inhibit workers and capitalists from conforming to their economic roles. This means that aspects of the normative field that are not directly implicated in economic action have only a contingent relationship to the class structure. They might remain unchanged; they might change due to some unintended downstream consequences of class action; or they might change because of social dynamics utterly unconnected to the economic structure. The point is that there is no systematic causal connection between the two phenomena. Hence, the direct pressure exerted by capitalist relations on the surrounding culture can be quite limited in scope.

This model of cultural influence allows us to make sense of the indubitable fact that not only has capitalism spread across the world, but that the modal actors in these highly disparate economies — privately owned enterprises and wage laborers — conform to broadly similar patterns of reproduction across a bewildering range of cultures and traditions. The model does so in a way that respects the argument that the economy is as steeped in culture as any other domain of social action. Hence, if the argument I have offered is correct, then the worry about materialism — that it cannot acknowledge the meaning orientation of social action — turns out to be unfounded.

## *Class Formation and Cultural Intervention*

So far we have considered how capitalists and workers conform to the rules generated by their structural locations, regardless of their antecedent meaning orientation. If we now turn to a deeper examination of their class situation, one of its central dimensions is that it also binds the two actors together in a highly conflictual relationship. Capitalists find that in order to remain competitive, they have to strive constantly to extract maximal labor effort from their employees at the minimal feasible cost. Since wages are a key component of costs, this makes it rational for the individual capitalist to economize on wages, even while he strives to squeeze every unit of labor out of his employees. But workers experience this as a direct assault on elements of their own well-being, and their response is to search for ways to increase their remuneration while scaling back the quantum of effort they have to offer in return. Employers' drive to maximize profits therefore locks the two classes into a relation in which each needs the other, but there is a conflict of interest over the terms of their exchange.

This conflict can take many forms. Marx famously predicted that workers would recognize the virtues of collectively pursuing their common interests and would come together in organizations dedicated to this end. Their structural location would thus generate a process of collective identity formation, which in turn would in turn unleash the pursuit of their common interests. This he described pithily as the transition from being a class *in* itself to becoming a class *for* itself. It should be noted that while this is sometimes described as a teleological account of class formation — and, indeed, it has a history of being elaborated in just a fashion — it need not be. It is possible to reformulate it as a reasonable causal theory that describes how dimensions of workers' structural location make collective action not only rational but also likely.

First, capitalism itself partially organizes workers as it brings them into the same workplace. If we compare their situation with that of smallholding peasants, it is clear that the experience of repeated interaction in enclosed spaces for long periods of time lowers the costs of some critical inputs into collective action — communication, information exchange, planning, etc. Second, in coming together, they recognize their common situation. They see that they are all subject to broadly similar constraints, that they operate under the same structures of authority and suffer the same liabilities. Third, in this constant interaction, they create a common identity and hence a willingness to engage in common pursuits.

While Marx's argument can be presented in an acceptable causal form, the criticisms leveled at it are compelling. There have been episodes and instances in which workers have come together in a fashion consistent with his prediction, but there have been very long stretches in its history where we observe the opposite — not *conflict* but *stability*. Workers have shown an inclination to forge organizations for collective struggle, but this can hardly be viewed as a typical occurrence in capitalism. An equally likely situation is one in which efforts at class association are tried and fail, or where they are avoided altogether. Widespread membership in trade unions is a recent phenomenon in capitalist history and is largely confined to only a part of the global working class. Hence, the most we can say in favor of Marx's prediction is that it describes *one* possible outcome generated by the modern class structure. And it is easy to see why, in the absence of an account of the mechanisms that undermine this causal sequence, the theory can morph into a kind of teleology or at least an unjustifiably deterministic one — workers' structural location is deemed, in such accounts, to be sufficient in itself to trigger the formation of a class identity, which then impels them to create organizations around this identity and finally to forge ahead in pursuit of their common interests.

The challenge for a materialist theory is to show how it might be that while, under certain circumstances, workers' class location might incline them to converge around a strategy of collective resistance, it is just as likely to motivate them to pursue a strategy of individual accommodation. Class consciousness, and the forms of contestation that are attached to it, can then be understood as a product of some very particular conditions that might have to be produced and sustained, rather than assumed to fall into place through the internal logic of class structure. The absence of class consciousness among workers, and the sporadic or evanescent eruption of class conflict, can then be seen as being entirely *consistent* with a class analysis of capitalism rather than an indication of the declining salience of class.

### *Two Strategies of Class Reproduction — Individualized and Organized*

The key to the puzzle of class formation is that optimistic prognostications like Marx's, even when they are presented in a defensible causal language, skip a crucial step. They focus on the causal mechanisms that might incline workers toward class organization, but fail to describe those aspects of the class structure

that mitigate *against* this course of action. But a critical property of capitalist class structure is that it positions workers in such a way that they will typically find an individualized course of class reproduction to be more feasible than one reliant on collective organization. There are two broad kinds of obstacles that play this role. The first consists in workers' baseline vulnerability against the power of employers, and the other in the generic problems that arise in collective action.

### WORKERS' VULNERABILITY

Workers and their employers do not engage in political contestation in a neutral setting. They come together in a pre-existing field of power in which the employer wields enormous leverage over the worker. The reason for this is rooted in the class structure itself. Workers operate in a condition of generalized insecurity. Since they do not own productive assets of their own, they depend on waged employment under a capitalist. This dependence on their employer decisively shapes their inclination toward, and capacity for, collective action. Workers understand that they are able to hold on to their jobs only so long as it is desired by the capitalist, who can, for any variety of reasons, decide to throw one or many of them back into the labor market. The precariousness of employment is a baseline condition built into the position of being a worker, though of course its intensity will vary depending on how difficult it is to replace any particular employee. Hence, even though employers do not have direct legal or cultural authority over the life of any particular laborer, as is the case in slavery or serfdom, they still wield enormous indirect power over the latter.

This has a direct bearing on the likelihood of collective action. Workers typically have to prioritize the security of their employment over their inclination to struggle over the terms of that employment — in other words, they realize that having a badly paying or dangerous job is preferable to not having a job at all. But if workers' priority is to hold on to their jobs, it can only mean that they consciously forswear activities that would invite retaliation from the boss. In fact, if the employees are not already organized, the most appealing means of increasing one's job security is not by taking on the boss, but by making oneself more attractive to him — by working harder than the others, acquiring new skills, even offering to work for less.

In a situation of generalized labor market competition, the easier means for increasing one's security is not building formal organizations for collective

action — since this inevitably runs into conflict with the employer — but relying on the informal networks into which workers are born. These most commonly are networks of kin, caste, ethnicity, race, and so on. Since workers essentially inherit these connections ready-made, they become a natural source of support in normal times and especially in times of dearth. It is an irony of bourgeois society that, far from dissolving these extra-market ties, as Marx announced with such flourish in the *Communist Manifesto*, its pressures incline workers to cling to them with a desperate ferocity. It is important to note that these networks do not operate simply as material support societies. They also become a means of exerting control over the labor market, and through that, reducing the level of competition for employment. It is not just that jobs are secured through one's friends, family, or caste. It is that these connections are used to hoard job opportunities, sometimes by force, for members of one's own network. But this only intensifies a class orientation in which one's welfare is secured by non-class forms of association. Indeed, organized competition in the labor market through such ties has the effect of intensifying the divisions within the class. It runs directly against the principle of class organization.

#### INTEREST AGGREGATION

A second obstacle to class formation is what Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal have described as the problem of interest aggregation.<sup>10</sup> It is simple enough to suggest that workers have an interest in creating associations to bargain over the terms of their exchange with capital. But workers suffer from a particular liability when considering this exchange. Unlike capital, which can be separated from the person of the employer, labor power cannot be separated from the person of the worker. When she bargains over the exchange of her laboring activity, she immediately discovers that several elements of her well-being are directly implicated in the calculation — the intensity of work, the length of the workday, the level of the wage, health benefits, pensions, and so on. Organizations created for collective action are thus saddled with the task of seeking agreement among large numbers of workers on these different dimensions of their welfare.

A second and equally daunting obstacle is that, in the case of some workers, collective organization might in fact make them *worse* off. This is because some

<sup>10</sup> Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal, "The Two Logics of Collective Action," *Political Power and Social Theory*, Vol. 1 (1980): 67–115. This essay remains the foundational analysis of the dilemmas of class formation within capitalism.

workers are able to secure especially lucrative terms for themselves — perhaps due to possessing scarce skills or social connections — that make an individual bargaining strategy far more lucrative for them than a collective one. Whereas, in the preceding case, collective action would call for prioritizing one set of goals from a larger list of broadly congruent ones, in this case it would call for some workers *subordinating* their immediate welfare to the larger agenda. Of course, in the longer run these workers would also benefit in many ways from the security and leverage that membership in the association confers, but the reduction in immediate welfare will be real, and they can quite rationally decline to join. Hence, if they are to be brought into the fold, they must make their decisions on a calculus that is substantially different than that of their colleagues.

#### FREE RIDING

A third and perhaps the most debilitating hurdle of all is the well-known problem of free riding. Because the terms and benefits won by these associations are made available to all of their members regardless of the extent of the latter's contribution, it generates a perverse incentive. Since every worker knows that she will benefit if the association succeeds in its goals regardless of her individual participation in it, but she will also be no worse off if she shirks, this creates an enormous incentive for her to pass off the costs of participation to others. The result is that the effort to build associational power has to contend with a constant tendency among workers to refrain from participating.

Free riding is a phenomenon generic to any situation where public goods require collective action. But in a situation of generalized vulnerability and mutual competition — as is characteristic of workers' structural position — it becomes especially debilitating. It is not just that the individual worker will incur a cost if she decides to contribute to forging a class association. It is that the cost might be so high as to threaten her livelihood and thereby her economic security. The chances of having to incur this cost are in fact quite high, since employers expend considerable effort in monitoring and then rooting out employees who show any inclination of creating class organizations. Hence, even while wage laborers have a rich history of overcoming free-riding problems outside the workplace, where the risks attached to the effort are lower, it is much harder to do so at work, where the risks are so much greater — magnifying the generic dilemma.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> As Offe and Wiesenthal argue, the constraints on employers' capacity for collective action differ markedly with regard to all three factors. First, and most importantly, there is the

All three mechanisms that I have described are intrinsically connected to the class structure; they are a necessary component of it. All three also have the effect of *reinforcing* the atomizing effect of the labor market and *diluting* the impulse toward collective action and class consciousness. They help unlock the secret to one of the most important puzzles for social theory — how can a social system as potentially explosive as capitalism remain stable over time? The reason it can is that its class structure underwrites its own stability by making individual reproduction more appealing than organized contestation. Class antagonisms would make capitalism unstable if it were the case that workers could join together as a matter of course, create viable organizations for the pursuit of their interests, and threaten the political power of the class of capitalists. But the obstacles just described have the remarkable effect of making it more attractive to workers to eschew collective strategies and to opt instead for individualized defense of their basic welfare. This happens because adopting more individualized strategies incurs fewer direct costs — all the costs of time and money that go into building a union and then sustaining it — and also takes on fewer risks — such as the risk of losing employment if discovered or if they lose in their more militant tactics.

Hence, even though workers can, in certain conditions, forge the collective identity that class struggle requires, they have to overcome all the structural forces that constantly pull them apart. Far from falling into a teleological account of class formation, a careful delineation of the system's basic structure leads to the opposite conclusion: that there is no easy road from Marx's class in-itself to

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fact that while workers need associational power to be able to leverage better terms for the labor exchange, the employer does not. His structural location endows him with superordinate bargaining power on an individual level. This alone tilts the power balance in his favor so fundamentally that it outweighs all of the other factors in importance. But in those instances where the need does arise—as, for example, when employers band together as a response to labor's organizational success—the obstacles to doing so are relatively lower. First and most obviously, employers do not run the risk of retaliation by their antagonist, since the power to hire and fire is by definition monopolized by them. No capitalist has to fear being sacked by a worker or collectivity of workers, should they discover that he is launching an employer association. Second, even though capitalists compete in markets, they are not as beset by interest heterogeneity in their confrontations with workers. Firms typically have great difficulty in holding the line on agreements in the face of profit opportunities at each other's expense. But this is much less the case when they come together as a counter to labor organization. Since labor organizations are committed to expanding across the breadth of the labor market, every employer knows that whatever advantage he might gain temporarily from his competitor having to contend with a successful organizing drive, that advantage will be lost as the unions gain in strength and spread to his own workplace. Hence, employers see a common interest in stamping out labor organizations where and when they might arise. The fact that they only have to converge around this very narrow issue makes the heterogeneity of interests far less of an obstacle to them than to labor. See Offe and Wieselth, "Two Logics."

a class for-itself. Indeed, the puzzle now becomes quite different from the one imputed to class analysis by its critics. Instead of having to answer why it is that the class structure fails to impel workers toward class struggle, the challenge is to explain how it comes about that working-class associational power and the pursuit of collective class strategies are achieved at all. This is the focus of the next section and, as I shall argue, it is where cultural phenomena play a crucial role.

### *Bringing Culture Back In*

Class formation occurs when workers seek out collective strategies to defend their well-being, as against the individualized ones that are normally more attractive. This requires, in turn, either that the mechanisms that channel their energies away from collective organization are weakened or that workers increase their willingness to incur the sacrifice entailed in organizing. These are two analytically distinct solutions to the problem of class formation, each attacking one of the two elements that jointly affect the outcome. The first dampens the effect of the external environment in which workers make their judgments; the other changes the moral calculus on which workers make their judgments about the external environment.

It sometimes happens that workers find themselves in situations where the baseline obstacles to class organization are not as strong. Thus workers who are more skilled, and hence harder to replace, are less vulnerable to employer retaliation if they seek to create class organizations.<sup>12</sup> But naturally occurring advantages like these are not common and, even where they are, they are not in themselves sufficient. Even in cases where workers are handed some degree of insulation from the normal obstacles to class formation, it is never enough to neutralize the risks that organization entails. Hence, workers never have a garden path to self-organization, generated by the accident of occupation or location. They might have their leverage against their employers increased, but it never rises to equality; they might find it easier to find common ground, but technical change constantly disrupts whatever accord they hammer out among themselves; and even while the contribution of time and effort they have to make might be reduced, it never goes down to zero, so the inclination to shirk remains attractive. It requires something more than serendipity for workers to generate stable and enduring class organizations.

12 For an excellent account of how workers have used such situations to their advantage in class organizing, see Howard Kimeldorf, "Worker Replacement Costs and Unionization: Origins of the U.S. Labor Movement," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 78, No. 6 (2013): 1033–62.

The indispensable ingredient, in addition to a favorable external environment, is *cultural* — a shift in workers’ normative orientation, from individualistic to solidaristic. This flows directly from the fact that, when taking on the burdens of organizing, each worker is being urged to *sacrifice* scarce resources willingly for an undertaking that might very well, and often does, result in failure. Free riding is the most attractive response from an individual standpoint — hence avoiding it requires that workers include in their calculus the welfare of their peers, rather than simply their own welfare. They have to make their valuation of possible outcomes at least partly on how it will affect their peers, out of a sense of obligation and what they owe to the collective good. This is the essence of solidarism, of course, and it is no accident that “solidarity” has been the slogan of the labor movement across the world since its inception. In directing every worker to see the welfare of her peers as being of direct concern to herself, a solidaristic ethos counteracts the individuating effects normally generated by capitalism. In so doing, it enables the creation of the collective identity that, in turn, is the cultural accompaniment to class struggle.<sup>13</sup>

Two points are worth emphasizing here. The first is that creating a solidaristic ethos typically requires conscious intervention — it is not automatically generated by the class structure. Elements of mutuality and empathy are of course an everyday part of working-class life. Workers often collaborate in various ways at the workplace to defend themselves against managerial authority. Sometimes it is tacit and unsaid — as when they refuse to inform on one another or pick up the slack for less productive colleagues. At other times it is more explicit — as when workers cooperate to engage in a slowdown, create mutual aid societies, and so on. But these forms of cooperation are often ephemeral and dependent on particular constellations of individuals; most importantly, because they lack an organizational ballast, they do not generate bonds of trust strong and enduring enough to consistently overcome the centrifugal forces pulling workers apart. Workers know that in normal circumstances, they can rely on their colleagues for sympathy — but it is never clear how far this reliance can go and how deep the trust can be.

For a culture of solidarity to become part of workers’ strategic orientation requires conscious direction and agency. In its weakest form, this means a set of *routines* inside and outside work, designed to encourage the building of relationships and, through these, the sense of trust and mutual obligation that might

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13 Still one of the best discussions of this process is Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

sustain class organizing — monthly picnics, occasional meetings to air grievances, church events, cultural productions like plays and concerts, etc. All of these are examples of culture-generating actions that organizers initiate but that stop short of creating an organization. They often happen in contexts where it is simply too dangerous to create a real workers' association — as in much of the Global South even today — or as a lead-up to a formal organization.

A stronger form of cultural intervention, of course, comes from creating a formal organization like a trade union or party, which encompasses many of the informal routines that are practiced in its absence but goes beyond them in the construction of a working-class identity. Organizations encompass much of what is practiced in the informal routines I have described, but they give these a permanence and structure, making them an enduring part of working-class life. Even more importantly, they link the workers' collective *pursuit* of their welfare to collective *decision-making* about *strategy*. Spontaneous empathy and informal routines have the effect of generating a certain amount of trust among workers, but provide no reliable mechanism for coordinating their actions. Organizations provide a basis for greater trust and coordination because they are backed by a kind of institutional promise of support to their members. Just as importantly, because decisions are made in deliberative and democratic settings, they have legitimacy even with those who vote against the decisions. Hence, when the call for action goes out in the form of a strike or a slowdown, it is taken less as a command from above than as a *self-exhortation*.

The second point to note is that while creating a working-class identity is an act of social intervention, it is not a social *construction*. The culture of mutual identification that class formation requires is not created out of whole cloth, nor does it create an entirely new political calculus. It is built on, and continues to be constrained by, material interests. Hence, even while workers can and do operate with a sense of obligation toward the welfare of their peers, this rarely displaces a regard for their own well-being. Relatedly, while workers can be enjoined to undertake risks and sacrifices for the pursuit of a collective goal, their willingness to sacrifice does not mutate into outright altruism. Both of the more extreme orientations are possible, of course; they are typically the defining qualities of people known as organizers or, in a horrible bit of social-science jargon, “political entrepreneurs.” These are the members of the class who build their lives around their dedication to class organization, at enormous

personal cost and often at great risk. But the very fact that they stand out as a distinct layer within the class is evidence that they are anything but typical. The basic task of organizers is not to urge everyone else to be like them — since they know that this is a lost cause. It is, rather, to persuade their peers that the organizations and campaigns that they are advocating are desirable and possible. There will be some risk, and the participants will incur some costs, but they are justified because of the promised gains — in security, wages, autonomy, and so on. Solidarity does not evolve into altruism, nor does the willingness to sacrifice amount to an embrace of martyrdom.

This enduring relevance of material interests is apparent in several dimensions of working-class organization. Many of the pillars of trade unionism are primarily geared toward reducing the individual costs that go into collective action. This is classically evidenced in the construction of a strike fund, with the purpose of tiding workers over in the event of a work stoppage. The fund operates as a kind of insurance scheme that workers pay into that comes into effect in the event of a strike. The reason every union tries to build one is eminently practical — it is a recognition of the fact that their members will not engage in a campaign simply based on principle or identity. Their willingness to commit is disciplined by their judgment as to the toll that it will take on them — their ability to incur the costs that it will entail. Institutions like strike funds are the material supports upon which solidarity is built.

So workers base their judgments in some measure on what they are being asked to do. But they also assess the practicality of what they are doing *for* — that is, the goals of the campaign. Workers assess a campaign not only on the absolute costs that they are being asked to bear, but also on the realizability of the goals. There are limits beyond which they judge that the costs are not justified by the likelihood of success. They will perceive a certain level of sacrifice as reasonable if they deem the goal to be achievable, while the same quantum of sacrifice will be unacceptable if the goal is feared to be unrealistic. Of course, there is no science to assessing which goals are achievable and hence present an acceptable level of risk, and which are not. Judgments about this sometimes turn out to be mistaken; when they are, they can lead to a loss of trust in the organization and hence a decline in its legitimacy. Political organizers thus face the following challenge: If their judgments about the realism of campaigns are accurate, it can initiate a virtuous cycle in which success breeds workers' trust in the organization and in one another, which then makes it possible to undertake more ambitious

campaigns, which feeds back into the strength of the class organization. But if their assessments are wrong and the pursuit of overly ambitious goals leads to defeat, it can result in a loss of trust, demoralization, a disinclination toward solidarity, and a return to a defensive, individualistic orientation by the membership.

These aspects of class organizations show again that workers can *rationally* chose *not* to be organized. Classical Marxism often presented the situation of workers as if the only reasonable choice for them was to forge class associations. When it was found that the inclination to embrace this strategy was at best uneven within the class, it is not surprising that some early Marxists attributed this to a collapse of rationality among workers — this was the theory of false consciousness. In other words, they insisted that Marxist theory was right, but it was the *workers* who were mistaken in their judgment about their own interests. It is of course true that anyone can be misled or mistaken in their judgments about whether or not they are being harmed. But a theory that relies on attributing a systematic failure in judgment to large groups is indulging in a rather spectacular bit of special pleading.

A more plausible conceptualization of the problem is this — when workers contemplate the attractiveness of class association, they are implicitly comparing its feasibility against the option of an individualized strategy of reproduction, and each of these options has something to recommend it. While the collective option holds a promise of more leverage against their employer and hence the possibility of material gains, it also exposes the workers to new risks and a series of costs that they would not otherwise have to bear, *ceteris paribus*. Organizers, in a sense, ask workers to choose between two strategies, each of which comes with its own risk/reward matrix. The individualized route carries lower immediate risks but also exposes the worker to continued managerial despotism and lower economic welfare, whereas the collective strategy promises more power and better economic outcomes, but at a greater potential cost. The hard work of organizing is not simply to exhort workers into action; it is to attract them into membership by changing the risk/reward matrix that normally *disinclines* them from joining or participating in campaigns, thereby making the collective strategy a more attractive option. If the costs are too great or if the campaigns continue to run aground, solidarity will either never arise or will begin to erode. Workers then begin to drift toward the safety of keeping their heads down and returning to the more individualized strategy of reproduction.

In sum, class formation requires an ongoing process of cultural intervention, but its effectiveness is conditional on aligning it with workers' material interests. This account of culture in class politics acknowledges that class identities are not a natural or necessary outgrowth of the class structure. Indeed, the implications of my argument turn the classic Marxist account on its head. In the classical account, the class structure is taken to generate class consciousness, which in turn induces workers to build class organizations. I have tried to argue that, in fact, class consciousness is the *consequence* of class organization. Since the latter is an arduous process, highly vulnerable to disruption and precarious at its foundation, so is the formation of class identity. Hence, the fact that workers often do not identify their interests around their class location is not evidence for the weakness of a materialist class theory — it is what the theory should predict.

### Conclusion

After an unduly long hiatus, scholarly attention is turning once again, albeit slowly and haltingly, to the theorization of capitalism as an economic system. It happened a half-century ago, in the wake of the global labor conflagrations of the late 1960s, and it might continue in that direction today if the revolt against neoliberalism proceeds apace. But if this return to the analysis of capitalism is to be genuinely productive, it needs to steer clear of some of the weaknesses that have bedeviled it in the past. One of the most important instances has been an ambiguity about the role of culture in the structural and political dimensions of class processes. A perceived inattentiveness to culture has become the justification, over the past two decades, for the analytical overvaluation of its role. But the antidote cannot be a simple return to political economy as if the criticisms from the cultural turn were never made. It becomes important, then, to engage the arguments from culture and to take up the challenge that they have posed.

In this paper I have tried to show that while the concerns expressed by cultural theorists are warranted, they are not as damaging to materialist class analysis as they might seem. It is possible to accept the premise that all social action is filtered through culture while resisting the conclusion that class structure is therefore fundamentally shaped by it. On the other hand, there is every reason to support the causal importance of culture in the process of class forma-

tion, even while recognizing that it cannot dissolve some basic material interests that govern political conflict. Culture continues to operate in both dimensions of class reproduction, even if in different capacities. Two important conclusions follow from this.

The first is that we can affirm the old adage that class is fundamentally about interests and power. We have seen the material interests play the central role in both class structure and the dynamics of class formation. This allows us to explain how it can be that capitalism can implant itself, remain stable, and generate recognizable patterns of economic action across a bewildering variety of cultures and regions. It can do so because it operates on aspects of agents' motivational set that, even while influenced by local cultures, are not constructed by them. The second implication is that while we can affirm this universality of capitalist dynamics, there remains a crucial place for cultural analysis in its description. This is important, because one of the anxieties fueling the cultural turn was that structural analyses of capitalism seemed to take culture as being causally irrelevant and hence had nothing to say about how economic action interacts with meaning construction.

The argument I have developed shows that cultural analysis can be married to a materialist class theory in quite determinate ways, which differ in the two dimensions of class we have examined. If it is true that agents' meaning orientation has to adjust to the demands of their class location, then the challenge for cultural theory is to trace the processes through which this adjustment comes about. This will surely differ from location to location — the ways Hindu workers in India incorporate the logic of their economic situation into their worldviews will probably be different from the ways Catholics in Mexico do. What is more, the question can be tackled at varying levels of analysis — from micro-level ethno-methodological research on a factory or a mining town to a regional or national analysis of cultural change. On the other hand, for research into class formation, the challenge becomes to explicate the conditions in which political identities come to cohere around agents' class location instead of other aspects of their social situation. There is of course already a rich vein of historical work on this — though the sociological literature is thin in comparison. The point is that culture does not have any less space in a broadly materialist class analysis than it does in other ones. Where they differ is in the causal role that culture is accorded. ✧

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**This essay is written against the prevailing Black Power nostalgia that informs contemporary struggles against police violence. I argue that the discourse of black ethnic politics that is popular among antiracist activists is an outgrowth of the class fragmentation and anti-communism of the Cold War period, when black and white came to signify the new urban spatial-class divides. Instead of a left politics predicated on anti-racism and racial affinity, this essay urges a popular, anti-capitalist politics, rooted in situated class experiences, as the only viable means for ending the policing crisis and guaranteeing genuine public safety.**

# THE PANTHERS CAN'T SAVE US NOW

*Anti-Policing Struggles & the Limits of Black Power*

**CEDRIC G. JOHNSON**

**I**n early December 2013, Senegalese artist Issa Samb donned a black leather jacket and beret, grasped a spear in his left hand and a M1 carbine rifle in his right, and settled into a rattan throne. Samb's live performance replicated the 1967 photo of Huey Newton, carefully staged by Eldridge Cleaver in the *Ramparts* magazine office, that would become the most iconic representation of Black Panther Party militancy and internationalism. Samb chose to recreate the famous image in an abandoned storefront that had previously housed a Harold's Chicken restaurant, along Chicago's Garfield Boulevard. His performance was part of a weeklong series of events hosted by the University of Chicago to commemorate the 1969 police killings of Illinois Panthers Mark Clark and Fred Hampton and to encourage reflection on the party's legacy. Titled "The Best Marxist is Dead," Samb's performance might be read as a commentary on the perils of Black Power nostalgia and as a call for the renewed critique of capitalism within black public life and a radical left politics keenly attuned to new historical conditions.

Samb's performance is an homage that evokes Newton's notion of revolutionary suicide — the true show of radical commitment is the willingness to dedicate one's full energy and time, and potentially one's life, to revolutionary struggle. The performance title and Newton's radical pledge are both in keeping with the Panther quip, "The only good pig is a dead one." If the police constituted an "occupying army," then liberating the ghetto from their grip would require an equal magnitude of force and sacrifice.

Samb's performance recalled Newton, but it did not copy him. Samb's grey beard and locks contrasted sharply with Newton's clean-shaven, youthful appearance. And where Newton sits with his feet firmly planted, meeting his onlookers with a militant, unflinching gaze, Samb's legs were crossed and his countenance was more introspective, his eyes sullen. He was the old man who has outlived the revolution, or maybe he's a ghost. We worship long-dead heroes because they are no longer a part of the difficult tug and pull of historical forces that make our own world. Samb presented us with the revolutionary in the glass case — perhaps a reference to the macabre practice of embalming state socialism's founders in perpetuity. The revolutionary is entombed, walled off from our own cultural and social world, no longer a part of our sense of living political possibilities.

Sitting on the edge of some of Chicago's most impoverished and violent neighborhoods, the abandoned storefront itself signals death — yet another casualty in the cycles of divestment, real estate speculation, and displacement afflicting central cities across the United States. Not long into Samb's performance, these looming urban realities interrupted the celebration, after a scuffle broke out between groups of young men assembled in an upstairs art gallery for the opening reception. Within minutes, police cruisers careened onto the sidewalk, flak-jacketed officers rushed inside to quell the disturbance, and many attendees, some of them Panther veterans, were left shaking their heads in disbelief. In its juxtaposition of movement nostalgia and lingering urban misery, Samb's performance inspired revival, the revolutionary apparition staring back once again from a blighted corner of the ghetto.

The slogan "Black Lives Matter" rose to prominence the summer before Samb's storefront performance. Three black feminist activists created the Twitter hashtag after the 2012 vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen in Sanford, Florida. Over the past few years thousands have embraced the slogan, protesting sporting events, staging die-ins on sidewalks, occupy-

ing public offices, and shutting down highways. Such actions have forced the undeserved deaths of black civilians into the public conscience and created a crisis of legitimacy for the dominant approaches to urban policing. Although struggles against policing have a much longer lineage, the current renewal of antiracist organizing crystallized out of discrete historical conjunctures — the comprehensive surveillance of society through private and public security video feeds and smartphone cameras, the advent of social media networks that connect millions of users worldwide and enable instantaneous circulation of information, the hollowing out of the social welfare state and further deterioration of inner-city life in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis and ensuing recession, and the debates over postracialism that accompanied the Obama presidency.

Despite the frequency and power of mass demonstrations, at the time of this writing, we are no closer to achieving concrete, substantive reform that might curtail police violence and ensure greater democratic accountability. To be frank, if we are going to end this crisis and achieve genuine public safety and peace, the current struggles must grow beyond street demonstrations to build popular consensus and effective power. The road to reaching those ends is currently blocked. Part of the problem resides in the prevailing nostalgia for Black Power militancy and the continued pursuit of modes of black ethnic politics. Such nostalgia is underwritten by the vindicationist posture of recent scholarly writing on the subject and is abetted by the digital afterlife of movement imagery, which preserves the most emotionally impactful elements of the movement but is consumed in ways that forget Black Power's historical origins and intrinsic limitations.

At the heart of contemporary organizing is the notion of black exceptionalism. Contemporary Black Lives Matter activists and supporters insist on the uniqueness of the black predicament and on the need for race-specific remedies. “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise,” #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Alicia Garza explains “It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity and our resistance in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>1</sup> “When we say black lives matter,” Garza continues, “we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [that] Black poverty and genocide

<sup>1</sup> Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2>.

[are] state violence.” This essay takes aim at this notion of black exceptionalism and lays out its origins and limits as an analysis of hyperpolicing and, more generally, as an effective political orientation capable of building the popular power needed to end the policing crisis.

We begin by revisiting the social and ideological roots of black ethnic politics as we know it. Black Power unfolded within a context of class fragmentation; the decline of the left-labor militancy of the Depression, wartime, and the post-World War II years; and the transformation of metropolitan space after the 1949 Housing Act, which produced suburban homeownership and upward mobility for many whites and inner-city ghettoization and exploitation for the black poor. The combination of shifting urban demography, rising black political efficacy created by the Southern civil rights/desegregation campaigns, and the liberal statecraft of Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration framed the turn to Black Power and associated demands for black control of political and economic institutions. In the Black Power era, we can see the origins of contemporary hyper-ghettoization and intensive policing of the black poor as well as the ascendancy of postsegregation patron-client relations between an expanding black professional-managerial class and the mainstream parties, corporations, and private foundations. This evolution of Black Power as an elite-driven ethnic politics ultimately negated and transcended the revolutionary potential implied in calls for black self-determination and socialist revolution. If you believe that the “Movement for Black Lives” is the second coming of Black Power, this historical process may give us some sense of where it is going.

The notion of black ethnic politics remains at the heart of Black Lives Matter protests and falsely equates racial identity with political constituency. Black Power and Black Lives Matter as political slogans are rooted in racial-standpoint epistemology — that is, the notion that, by virtue of the common experience of racism, African Americans possess territorial ways of knowing the world and, by extension, deeply shared political interests. This common-sensical view is a mystification that elides the differing and conflicting material interests and ideological positions that animate black political life in real time and space.

The second part of this essay examines these differences and conflicts in light of the celebrated release of the *Vision for Black Lives* agenda, which contains a set of progressive policy demands but is guided by the counterproductive

assumptions of black unity politics, which have historically facilitated elite brokerage dynamics rather than building effective counterpower. Just as readily as it can be used to advance left social justice demands, the Black Lives Matter slogan can — and on occasion already has — become a vehicle for entrepreneurial branding and courting philanthropic foundations. Similarly, it can express bourgeois interests (e.g., “Black Wealth Matters”) and education-privatization agendas just as easily as it can express working-class interests and the promotion of public education.

The third section of this essay develops a critique of black exceptionalism, the central premise of contemporary discussions of inequality and campaigns against police violence. The current policing crisis and carceral state are not a reincarnation of the Jim Crow regime. They are, rather, core features of post-welfare-state capitalism, where punitive strategies for managing social inequality have replaced benevolent welfare-state interventions and where managing the surplus population has become a key function of law enforcement and the prison system. Allusions to a new Jim Crow racism continue to have moral sway in some corners and retain the capacity to mobilize citizens in large numbers, but the analysis that underpins them is inadequate to provide the foundations for building left politics. If the current struggles are to become an aggregate force powerful enough to win concrete gains in terms of social justice, a critical first step is for activists to abandon this tendency to substitute analogy for analysis. The premise of black exceptionalism obscures contemporary social realities and actual political alignments and forestalls honest conversations about the real class interests dominating today’s neoliberal urban landscape.

### *The Roots of Black Ethnic Politics*

The familiar leftist lore of Black Power is one of a heroic movement, a time when black denizens rose up in insurrection against imperialism on foreign shores and in the heart of the nation’s cities, a movement where revolutionary dreams of black liberation were crushed by state repression. The broad outlines of this story are true, but the history of Black Power is more complex. The origins of Black Power rest in the unique social and demographic realities of black urban life after World War II and, equally, in the social consequences and limits of the Second Reconstruction: liberal policy reforms produced by the interplay of

civil rights movement pressure and the presidential administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, which abolished legal segregation in the South and integrated blacks as consumer-citizens.

Black mass migration after World War II and the segregative dynamics of housing policy under the Harry Truman presidency created the social preconditions for this era of reform and black urban empowerment. A manifestation of real estate industry power, the 1949 Housing Act set in motion the radical spatial transformation of American cities, earmarking funds for urban renewal and public housing construction and creating federally insured mortgages for suburban single-family-home purchases — measures that combined to produce the urban-suburban wealth inequality that would define American public life for more than a half-century.

Housing discrimination and ethnic-enclave settlement patterns limited most blacks to the same proximal urban neighborhoods, even though those black ghettos were internally stratified along class lines, with the black middle class occupying better, safer housing stock.<sup>2</sup> Postwar urban renewal further concretized this residential apartheid, as federal interstate highways and other massive public projects bisected black neighborhoods, dispersing residents, destroying the urban fabric, devaluing adjacent property, and often serving as physical walls dividing black areas from those of other ethnicities. Slum clearance and the construction of tower-block housing, which were widely supported by downtown commercial interests and social reformers, momentarily improved the environs of those previously relegated to dangerous, unsanitary tenement conditions, but these developments were in effect a form of vertical ghettoization.

During the same epoch, the peacetime industrial demobilization undermined many black workers' attempts to find gainful employment and earn a living wage. Given their status as newcomers in many industries, they were among the first to be handed pink slips during cyclical downturns. The relocation of manufacturing facilities from city centers to suburban greenfields and the ongoing adoption of labor-saving production technology further diminished job prospects for less skilled and less educated black urban newcomers. Chrysler

2 Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy in the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012); Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: How the Struggle over Race and Real Estate Transformed Chicago and Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Making of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

autoworker James Boggs was among the first black intellectuals to offer a critical left perspective of industrial automation, cybernetics, and their political implications within and beyond the factory gates.<sup>3</sup> Boggs referred to the black men he increasingly saw standing idle on Detroit street corners as “outsiders,” “expendables,” and “untouchables,” those who were among the first to experience technological obsolescence and had little hope of industrial integration. This figure of black unemployed youth during the late fifties and early sixties should have served as a miner’s canary, a harbinger of the precarious conditions produced by labor arbitrage and technology-intensive production, as well as plain and simple prolonged recession and rationalization of the work force by way of speed-up. But their plight was drowned out in the high tide of postwar economic prosperity during the 1960s and early 1970s; in liberal circles, their condition was explained in a manner that disconnected the black urban poor from the rest of the working class. Black Power militants would speak directly to these conditions of unemployment and ghetto isolation, but their movement did not only emerge from below in response to the oppressive conditions facing the ghetto/black urban population, as is commonly asserted. Rather, it was also encouraged by liberal statecraft from above.

Historians of the Black Power era tend to neglect the relationship between its popular manifestations and Johnson’s War on Poverty initiative. This is an unfortunate oversight that may stem in part from the desire of some scholars to valorize black self-activity. But the resulting interpretive bias has no doubt stalled the development of analyses that fully appreciate the complex origins and built-in limitations of Black Power as a sociopolitical phenomenon. Even before “Black Power” became a popular slogan, one that was simultaneously edifying to many blacks who desired real self-determination and frightening to some whites who associated it with violent retribution, liberals in the Johnson White House were retailing their own version of black empowerment: one that addressed class inequality, but in a language of ethno-cultural exceptionalism.

Johnson’s assistant secretary of labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, took the lead in this regard, authoring his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* to build support for progressive legislation addressing urban poverty. In his 1965 Howard University commencement address, Johnson best summed up the core assumption of the Moynihan report when he asserted, “Negro poverty

3 James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review, 1963).

is not white poverty.”<sup>4</sup> Working under this notion of Negro exceptionalism, Moynihan argued that black poverty amid white prosperity was due to a combination of institutional racism and the alleged cultural pathology of the black poor themselves. This “culture of poverty” sentiment was widely embraced by Moynihan’s contemporaries, including such diverse figures as anthropologist Oscar Lewis, sociologist Kenneth Clark, and even democratic socialist Michael Harrington.<sup>5</sup> Yet some Black Power elements would also accept this culturalist argument, even if their politics were more radical — recall the Black Panthers’ formative position on the lumpenproletariat, which cast this substratum as dysfunctional but potentially revolutionary. This Cold War turn toward cultural explanations of minority poverty within the liberal wing of the New Deal coalition marked a rejection of the class-centered politics that had defined both the labor militancy of the interwar period and the political orientation of the postwar civil rights movement.

The shifting terrain of working-class consciousness and politics within American life during the sixties was the direct result of decades-long inter-related processes. Progressive labor activism was undermined in part by the rise in wages and benefits that resulted from the high levels of investment and employment that came with the long postwar boom, and which provided the basis for the expansion of a normative middle-class ideal of homeownership and leisure consumption. It was tamed, too, by the anticommunist witch-hunts that targeted unions, left parties, civil rights organizations, and Hollywood. Reflecting the balance of class forces during the 1930s, the New Deal was a tangible expression of the interests of particular blocs of capital as well as the outcome of constraints that workers and popular movements imposed on capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The National Recovery Administration sought to address the capitalist contradictions that led to the 1929 stock-market crash and ensuing crisis, the weak regulation of the financial markets, and the surplus-absorption problem stemming from the lack of effective demand for manufactured goods. The 1935 Wagner Act’s formal recognition of the right to organize was intended to stabilize labor-management relations and provide a means for resolving disputes in a manner that did not disrupt production and capital flows. This legislation

4 Lyndon B. Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill These Rights,’” June 4, 1965, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>.

5 See Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

6 Rhonda Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital and the State* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1988).

responded to the massive pressure from below that came with the explosion of labor militancy that culminated in three great urban general strikes in 1934. Those strikes had the effect of stimulating a wave of shop-floor organizing led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was founded in 1935 as a breakaway from the more conservative, craft-oriented American Federation of Labor. Through militant tactics and vigorous organizing, the CIO succeeded in unionizing workers in factories, steel mills, shipyards, docks, and packinghouses throughout the United States and Canada. In response to a wave of CIO-led strikes after the war, Congress passed the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which criminalized solidarity and the general strike, signaling the effective end of the era of CIO militancy — the organization was reunited with the AFL in 1955 — and ushering in a period of mostly business-centered labor relations.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to the popular view of the fifties as an era of mass quiescence, labor unrest continued through the decade, but the expansion of the consumer society and the growth of suburbia weakened progressive unionism. The hearts and minds of many American workers were won over to capitalist growth imperatives through the promise of rising wages, spacious tract housing, the personal mobility of automobile culture, and the enlarged leisure industries reflected in television, drive-in theaters, and shopping malls. The pastoral and technological comforts of suburbia reminded Americans of capitalism's virtues, while active state repression prescribed clear social consequences to those who dared openly criticize the system's contradictions and faults.

Beginning with the Palmer Raids of 1919 and 1920, where socialists and anarchists were rounded up, arrested and deported, the US state and local police took a more prominent role in repressing workplace organizing. With the creation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the national state consolidated, enlarged, and rationalized the policing of working-class militancy that in earlier moments of class struggle had been undertaken by Pinkerton saboteurs and hired guns. Reliance on repressive forces at the state and local level played an important part in limiting the impact of workers' mass militancy in the early New Deal years. After World War II and as US-Soviet tensions sharpened with the instigation of Truman, the ruling class undertook a concerted campaign to extinguish Communist influence within domestic trade unions. The campaign against the radical left, led by Congressman Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities, blacklisted and harassed scores of citizens suspected of

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 114–120.

Communist sympathy and took an obsessive interest in rooting out reds in the Screen Actors Guild, given the enlarged role of television and movies in shaping American leisure culture, romantic sentiments, and political dispositions.

McCarthyism was especially consequential for the struggle to defeat Jim Crow, since the Communist Party (CP) had played a pivotal role in addressing the “Negro question” during the interwar period through the Scottsboro Boys trials, the formation of the National Negro Congress (NNC), and organizing black sharecroppers in the Deep South. Black and white leftists with ties to the CP and the union movement also built powerful support networks and activist training programs, such as the Highlander Folk School. Red-baiting destroyed careers and reputations, bred suspicion and distrust within the Left, and had a chilling effect on the postwar civil rights movement, bolstering liberal integration as the most viable option for black emancipation within the Cold War context. Liberal antiracism found traction in this context of defeated labor militancy, one where open class analysis and commitment to socialist revolution often spelled financial and personal ruin for those who dared stray from the emergent Cold War rules of acceptable political discourse.

In his analysis of how liberals like Moynihan came to separate race and class, historian Touré Reed reminds us that during the interwar period, through World War II, and well after, organizing based on class was widely accepted as an effective way for blacks to amass power and secure economic gains — specifically participation in the dynamic labor movement of the era. Civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union and the wartime March on Washington Movement, Lester Granger of the National Urban League, Walter White of the NAACP, and John P. Davis of the NNC all “frequently argued that precisely because most blacks were working class, racial equality could only be achieved through a combination of anti-discrimination policies and social-democratic economic policies.”<sup>8</sup> Some latter-day Black Lives Matter activists, Reed notes, might well reject such a position, which was commonly held by labor and civil rights veterans during the sixties, as “vulgar class reductionis[m].” Although he would increasingly embrace a politics of insider negotiation during the sixties, veteran activist Bayard Rustin insisted

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8 Touré F. Reed, “Why Liberals Separate Race from Class,” *Jacobin*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/bernie-sanders-black-lives-matter-civil-rights-movement>; Touré F. Reed, “Why Moynihan Was Not so Misunderstood at the Time: The Mythological Presence of the Moynihan Report and the Problem of Institutional Structuralism,” *Nonsite* 17, September 4, 2015, <http://nonsite.org/article/why-moynihan-was-not-so-misunderstood-at-the-time>; William P. Jones, *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).

that black progress could only be achieved through the development of broad, interracial coalitions dedicated to social democracy, a position that drew the ire of some Black Power radicals.<sup>9</sup> The social-democratic perspective touted by Randolph, Rustin, and others was clearly expressed in their 1966 *Freedom Budget* and actually continued to resonate throughout the decade — perhaps most famously in the 1963 March on Washington but also, for example, in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike actively supported by Martin Luther King. But this political tendency was ultimately eclipsed by the liberal Democratic focus on racial discrimination and the culture of poverty as distinct problems, separate from the labor-management accord, unionization, and matters of political economy.<sup>10</sup>

The liberal decoupling of race and class supplanted more radical versions of working-class left politics with far-reaching political consequences, operating now as a form of common sense. During the sixties, this view of Negro exceptionalism filled the vacuum left by interwar labor militancy. It gained traction with the deepening physical separation of black and white workers, which came with the spatial transformation of cities that sent white workers and much industry to the suburbs and left blacks in the urban ghettos. Moreover, by framing the problem of black poverty in terms of discrimination and alleged cultural pathology, liberals, who were now strongly allied with capital, systematically failed to address structural unemployment and the prevalence of nonunion, unprotected employment, two of the root causes of durable poverty among urban blacks. Liberal antipoverty efforts were limited, as many black activists readily pointed out at the time. Unlike the New Deal legislation, which expanded collective bargaining rights and public works, the Johnson administration's Great Society legislation took care not to upset the lucrative patronage relations between the federal government and private contractors in the construction and defense sectors, central motors of the postwar economic boom. The Great Society was limited in its capacity to end black urban poverty but powerful in terms of its political impact, as it subsidized and legitimated the expansion of a postsegregation black political elite.

The Johnson administration oversaw a period of domestic social reform that restored black civil rights and went a step further in providing various forms of targeted aid to address racial and urban inequality. Historian Kent

9 Bayard Rustin, "'Black Power' and Coalition Politics," *Commentary* (September 1966): 35–40; Bayard Rustin, "The Failure of Black Separatism," *Harper's*, January 1970.

10 A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, *A Freedom Budget for All Americans: A Summary* (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1967).

Germany examines how War on Poverty reforms were implemented in New Orleans and their consequences for the growth of the black professional-managerial class there. He characterizes the War on Poverty approach as a soft state, “a loose set of short-term political and bureaucratic arrangements that linked together federal bureaucracies, neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, semipublic political organizations, social agencies, and, primarily after 1970, local government” to distribute federal funding to predominantly black neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> The Community Action Program, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Head Start, and Job Corps, as well as the 1966 Demonstration Cities legislation, were especially supportive of Black Power’s genesis and evolution.

These various programs of the War on Poverty encouraged black political incorporation along the established lines of ethnic patron-clientelism and nurtured a discrete form of bourgeois class politics, one that mobilized and rewarded the most articulate elements of urban communities of color. The Community Action Program sought the “maximum feasible participation” of the urban black and brown poor in devising solutions to their collective plight. The result was a form of ethnic empowerment that eventually enabled black constituencies to wrest control from white ethnic-dominated governments in many cities, but which also averted a working class-centered politics by institutionalizing the view that racial identity and political constituency were synonymous.

As it turned out, Black Power militancy and the managerial logic of the Great Society were symbiotic. Figures as diverse as Newark mayor Kenneth Gibson and Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale participated in and led anti-poverty programs. The Community Action Agencies provided established black leadership, neighborhood activists, and aspiring politicians with access, resources, and socialization into the world of local public administration. Moynihan later claimed that “the most important long-run impact” of the Community Action Program was the “formation of an urban Negro leadership echelon at just the time when the Negro masses and other minorities were verging towards extensive commitments to urban politics.” Recalling the quintessential political machine of Gilded Age New York, Moynihan concluded that “Tammany at its best (or worse) would have envied the political apprenticeship provided

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<sup>11</sup> Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship and the Search for the Great Society* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 15–16.

the neighborhood coordinators of the anti-poverty programs.”<sup>12</sup> Although Black Power evocations of Third World revolution and armed struggle carried an air of militancy, the real and imagined threat posed by Black Power activists helped to enhance the leverage of more moderate leadership elements, facilitating integration and patronage linkages that delivered to them urban political control and expanded the ranks of the black professional-managerial stratum. The threat of black militancy, either in the form of armed Panther patrols or the phantom black sniper evoked by public authorities amid urban rioting, facilitated elite brokerage dynamics and political integration. Instead of abolishing the conditions of structural unemployment, disinvestment, and hypersegregation that increasingly defined the inner city, Black Power delivered official recognition and elite representation.

Two of the most influential texts of the period, Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* and Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, both published in 1967, naturalized the rise of Black Power as entailing the black electoral takeover of urban politics by interpreting it in terms of the so-called ethnic framework, which saw the integration of successive waves of immigrants into American life by way of city government and its fruits.<sup>13</sup> In his opening chapter, “Individualism and the Open Society,” Cruse, implicitly adopting a liberal pluralist perspective, argued that American society was essentially organized through various social groups, with “ethnic blocs” being the most powerful.<sup>14</sup> He claimed that civil rights were a meaningless abstraction outside of the formal, influential political groups that could give them material and practical force. Following this logic, blacks possessed few rights, according to Cruse, because black leadership had failed to act in the nationalistic manner historically pursued by other ethnic groups. Carmichael and Hamilton concluded, in a similar vein, that “group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.”<sup>15</sup> Many argue that the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense represented a more revolutionary alternative to this more conservative black ethnic politics, and to a considerable extent it did. But it must be pointed out that the embrace by some

12 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty* (New York: Free Press, 1970).

13 Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967); Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

14 Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 9–10.

15 Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 44–45.

Panthers and other black radical organizations of the colonial analogy and other versions of black exceptionalism abided the same logics.

Organizations like the Black Panther Party fought against police violence, hunger, and slum landlords and mobilized local communities in solidarity with Third World liberation struggles. Creative intellectuals, artists, and musicians affiliated with the Black Arts Movement also unleashed a short-lived urban renaissance in which local black communities dreamed of a world where ghettos were seen not as zones to be escaped and abandoned, but as spaces that might be reborn, giving rise to a popular democratic urbanism not possible under the segregation and exploitation most blacks endured. Unlike the civil rights movement, however, which over the course of decades amassed the resources and popular support needed to wage a successful fight to defeat Jim Crow segregation, Black Power's radical tendencies attained mass resonance but never achieved truly national popular support for the revolutionary projects they advocated.

This crucial distinction between movement notoriety and actual popular power is conflated within the scholarship and folklore of Black Power.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, during the sixties and seventies, some whites supported the Panthers during their highly publicized court cases; many also funded the legal defense of jailed Panthers, because such imprisonment was on false grounds and threatened the rule of law and judicial due process. Others rallied alongside Panther cadre in opposition to the Vietnam War or supported specific initiatives, like their survival programs. But how many middle-class or working-class Americans fully embraced the party's call for socialist revolution, as they had the civil rights movement? And was this perspective, one inflected with Third Worldism and allusions to armed struggle, at all suited to the affluent, advanced industrial society in which it was propagated? These are questions that latter-day historians and fans of the Black Power movement have, for the most part, failed to answer or even to pose.

The interplay of patronage, solidarity, and surrogacy that defined relations between Black Power radicals and New Leftists obscured the deeper challenges that pervasive anticommunism and the intimate relation between commercial Keynesianism, local economic growth, and middle-class living standards and cultural expectations all posed for the development of a left revolutionary politics during this period. Mass demonstrations, urban rebellions, police

<sup>16</sup> Cedric Johnson, "Panther Nostalgia as History," *New Labor Forum* 23 (2): 112-15.

repression, and assassinations signaled a crisis of legitimacy for the nation's governing institutions and gave the impression of imminent revolution, but these events and the rhetorical excesses of the age also concealed the depth of social cleavages, the resiliency and unity of the ruling class, and the extent of conservative political commitments within the broader populace. In this context, black revolution was political theater for too many white Americans, rather than a project that connected effectively with their anxieties, daily struggles, and desires.

The failure to build powerful working-class solidarity during this particular historical juncture, of course, does not fall solely on the shoulders of Black Power radicals, who were often more courageous than any other political element in naming the system's failures and advancing a critique of imperial power, even under the threat of repression and death. If Black Power radicals tended to see urban black life as fundamentally distinct from that of whites, organized labor failed in the same regard, proving to be either unable or unwilling to invest in both cross-sectoral and intercommunity organizing — in other words, organizing the working class as a class *for itself*. This was, of course, a legacy of Taft-Hartley and the turn to K Street-oriented unionism, but it was an especially acute problem during the seventies and eighties, when the ruling class set about organizing to break the power of unions and roll back redistributive social policy.

Writing at the dawn of the Nixon era, Bay Area-based writer and activist Robert Allen was especially perceptive in grasping the nascent political realignments occurring underneath the pronouncement of the most militant demands of Black Power, and the role that the black professional-managerial class would play in the emerging political-economic order. Allen concluded that

the white corporate elite has found an ally in the black bourgeoisie, the new, militant black middle class which became a significant social force following World War II. The members of this class consist of black professionals, technicians, executives, professors, government workers, etc. . . . Like the black masses, they denounced the old black elite of Tomming preachers, teachers, and businessmen-politicians. . . . The new black elite seeks to overthrow and take the place of this old elite.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 18–19.

To accomplish this, Allen continued, “it has forged an informal alliance with the corporate forces which run white (and black) America.”<sup>18</sup> Limited but significant political integration had changed the face of public leadership in most American cities, with some having elected successive black-led governing regimes. In retrospect, the Black Power movement was a transitional stage where black popular discontent diversified the nation’s governing class.

The process of black Democratic Party incorporation was already under way but still in flux when Johnson signed omnibus civil rights reforms and initiated the political recruitment strategies of the War on Poverty. The previous generation of black political elites like Chicago’s William L. Dawson and Archibald Carey Jr., who began their political careers before World War II, had done so in the “Party of Lincoln.” A few, like Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke, remained in the Republican ranks even as the Southern desegregation campaigns gave way to the demand for Black Power. Already, during the 1960s, some black Democrats were being elected in those cities where the postwar migration had expanded the black population into a coveted voting bloc, and this first generation of black elected leadership remained largely committed to protecting the gains of the civil rights movement and what remained of the social welfare state.

During the seventies and eighties, many black-led city regimes actually succeeded in reducing incidences of police brutality against black citizens.<sup>19</sup> But that success in regulating police misconduct was short-lived, produced by the contingency of liberal black political leadership, integrating police departments, and the presence of activist black publics. This period of reform was largely brought to an end with the onset of the Reagan years, which witnessed the escalation of the War on Drugs, the horrifying rates of drug-related and gang violence that accompanied the crack epidemic, and the concomitant expansion of the carceral state. The achievements of the brief era of black-led police reform should remind us of the possibility of effective public remedy, but also of the limitations of Black Power. The efforts of black mayors and city-council majorities to curb police violence in the seventies and eighties were overrun by national and state-level forces that sought to manage growing inequality and impoverishment through incarceration; black politicians and constituencies who supported the War on Drugs were instrumental in legitimating and advanc-

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., “Black Urban Regime: Structural Origins and Constraints,” in *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Postsegregation Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.

ing those efforts. The turn to neoliberalism within the Democratic Party and the parallel collapse of the New Deal coalition have since transformed black political life, rendering appeals to big-tent race unity and the pursuit of traditional racial redress anachronistic. Such changes have facilitated the rise of a new black urban political leadership that has been consolidating its power through forging ever more extensive commitments to Democratic Party neoliberalism. This is the historical terrain of the Movement for Black Lives: one where reform is possible, but the forces arrayed in support of the carceral state cannot be explained in black and white.

### *The Movement for Black Lives and the Neoliberal Landscape*

The contemporary Movement for Black Lives is a diverse phenomenon — horizontal, decentralized, and driven by organizations like #BlackLivesMatter; the Dream Defenders; the Black Youth Project 100; Assata's Daughters; Freedom, Inc.; Southerners on New Ground; Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle; and dozens of other youth groups, black student unions, and community-based organizations. Contemporary protests have found broad support among liberals, black nationalists, socialists, clergy, politicians, and civil-liberties advocates. More than their predecessors, the activists now leading the fight against police and vigilante violence have foregrounded feminist and queer-affirming perspectives, demanding a culture of respect and participation to redress the historical dominance of civil rights and black political activism by heterosexual, male, and often religious leadership. As these struggles have grown in size and in their capacity to disrupt the normal order, like all social struggles they have developed their own subculture, with dedicated protest chants, memes, songs, and tactical styles and with youth activists sometimes referring to themselves as the new vanguard. As with the turn to Afrocentricism and black-nationalist-inflected rap music during the waning years of the Reagan-Bush era, the aesthetic politics of Black Power militancy have been resurrected, complete with clenched-fist salutes; talk of black consciousness, self-help, and black love; and an insistence that race unity is a prerequisite for effective political action.

The 2016 *Vision for Black Lives* agenda is a platform containing a battery of demands that connect police violence to broader matters of inequality. It reflects the real potential of the Black Lives Matter tendency but also the

extent to which its activism remains mired in unhelpful assumptions about the liberal-democratic political process. The *Vision* agenda was released by activists in the aftermath of national protests of the police killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Philando Castile near Saint Paul, Minnesota. The agenda also appeared after two black snipers killed police officers en masse in two separate incidents, after which Black Lives Matter protestors faced a wave of denunciation by “Blue Lives Matter” reactionaries. The agenda’s preamble boldly declares, “Black humanity and dignity requires black political will and power . . . We are a collective that centers on and is rooted in Black communities, but we recognize we have a shared struggle with all oppressed people; collective liberation will be a product of all of our work.”<sup>20</sup>

The *Vision for Black Lives* agenda contains an impressive list of left policy planks such as universal basic income, demilitarization of policing, an end to money bail, decriminalization of sex work and drugs, strengthening collective bargaining, and building a cooperative economy. If ever realized, it would go a long way toward creating a more just and civilized society. Some have cheered the agenda’s release as a major step toward consolidating power and as a marked departure from the kind of expressive politics that defined Occupy Wall Street, where anarcho-liberal political tendencies were openly hostile to the idea of making demands on the state. I agree with these observations in part, but the agenda and its underlying political assumptions nonetheless inherit many of the problems of Black Power politics and, quite honestly, fail to learn from the last half-century of black political development.

Not enough of those who have championed the agenda have critically reflected on the problems surrounding the pursuit of similar black agendas historically. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley praises the agenda as “less a political platform than a plan for ending structural racism, saving the planet and transforming the entire nation — not just black lives.”<sup>21</sup> Although he is surely aware of the fate of comparable agenda-setting efforts since the Black Power era, Kelley does not pause to consider the patent limitations of this brand of identity politics and the glaring fact that, even if the black population achieved broad unity around this agenda, which is unlikely, that would not be enough to compel city councils, state legislatures, or Congress to pass any of its demands. Despite its progressive aspirations, the *Vision* agenda will likely succumb to the same prob-

20 Movement for Black Lives, “Vision for Black Lives,” August 1, 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org>.

21 Robin D.G. Kelley, “What Does Black Lives Matter Want?” Boston Review, August 17, 2016, <https://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/robin-d-g-kelley-movement-black-lives-vision>.

lems as those produced during the Black Power movement because it proceeds from the specious view that effective politics should be built on the grounds of ethnic affinity rather than discrete political interests.

A comparable agenda was produced by participants at the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. Numbering in the thousands, that delegation was much larger, more politically integrated, and more broadly representative of the black population than the various organizations that produced the recent *Vision* agenda. And unlike today, when neoliberal politics unites both parties on matters of social policy, international trade, and economic development, at the time of the Gary Convention, the US Congress and the Democratic Party were still largely comprised of New Deal liberals and progressive urban politicians who broadly accepted the utility of state power to address racial discrimination and inequality. Despite this more favorable context and the actual political entrée and influence of the Gary delegates, little from their 1972 agenda ever materialized as local or national policy. Even before its closing gavel sounded, the convention delegation was rocked by defections over platform planks that supported Palestinian self-determination and an end to busing as a strategy for achieving school integration. Rather than developing into a means of maintaining black unity and collective power as organizers had hoped, competing groups and individuals marshaled the convention's national media exposure as means for bargaining with the mainstream parties.

The *Vision for Black Lives* agenda is not backed by the same kind of cadre of activists and veteran politicians who produced the 1972 Gary agenda. Those who crafted the *Vision* agenda are younger and less politically integrated, and some are openly suspicious of conventional partisan politics. It remains to be seen whether the Movement for Black Lives can develop a viable political approach capable of leveraging mass demonstrations into actual policy outcomes. In fact, when pressed to deal with this sort of basic tactical and strategic political question, some supporters dismiss them as antiquated and reformist. Yet without addressing these questions, producing a list of demands, no matter how visionary, will do little to end the current crisis and abolish poverty and racial inequality.

There are moments when the *Vision* agenda's framing of specific issues and policy proposals departs from the universal spirit of the 1972 Gary agenda and similar agendas produced during the sixties, like the 1966 *Freedom Budget*. A good illustration of this is where the *Vision* agenda turns to matters of political econ-

omy. In addition to voicing support for stronger workers' rights and protections, progressive taxation, and opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade bill, the agenda's economic justice section calls for "federal and state job programs that specifically target the most economically marginalized Black people, and compensation for those involved in the care economy."<sup>22</sup> But given the decades of backlash against means-tested social policy, it would seem that there would be some consideration of how to build popular support beyond the black population in our current political context. This would seem to require a willingness to push for universal public-works projects along the lines of the Civilian Conservation Corps — meaning a program that would be publicly financed, publicly managed, and subject to anti-discrimination regulation. The most progressive planks contained within the *Vision for Black Lives* agenda cannot be achieved without popular support and majority coalitions, but this version of identity politics, which aims high but remains narrowly committed to the ethnic paradigm, runs counter to those ends.

With some exceptions, the Movement for Black Lives more generally is guided by an understanding of political life that sees racial affinity as synonymous with constituency. This much is clear when the authors of the *Vision* agenda declare, "We have created this platform to articulate and support the ambitions and work of Black people. We also seek to intervene in the current political climate and assert a clear vision, particularly for those who claim to be our allies, of the world we want them to help us create." This passage assumes a rather simplistic view of black people's ambitions and interests and draws a false dividing line between the interests of blacks and non-blacks — "those who claim to be our allies." Clearly descendant from Black Power thinking, this statement presumes a commonality of interests among blacks and claims authority to speak on behalf of those interests with little sense of irony. Broad acceptance of the myth of a corporate black body politic authorizes the very elite brokerage dynamics that many younger activists dislike about established civil rights organizations.

Despite the insistence of some supporters that there is a progressive pro-working-class politics at the heart of Black Lives Matter activism, the rapture of "unapologetic blackness" and the ethnic politics that imbues various programmatic efforts will continue to lead away from the kind of cosmopolitan,

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22Movement for Black Lives, "Economic Justice," August 1, 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org/economic-justice>

popular political work that is needed to end the policing crisis. There are, of course, different ideological tendencies operating within the Movement for Black Lives: radical, progressive, bourgeois and reactionary. The spats between Black Lives Matter's founders and those who sought to use the hashtag without their permission reflected a proprietary sensibility more suited to product branding and entrepreneurship than to popular social struggle. If the Gary Convention experience is the model here, then what we might expect is the fracturing of the Movement for Black Lives into different brokerage camps, each claiming to represent the "black community" more effectively than the other but none capable of amassing the counterpower necessary to have a lasting political impact.

Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrice Cullors gives a sense of this problem when she says that she will continue to work with black neoliberals because of their common racial affinity. "That I don't agree with neoliberalism doesn't encourage me to launch an online assault against those who do. We can, in fact, agree to disagree. We can have a healthy debate. We can show up for one another as Black folks inside of this movement in ways that don't isolate, terrorize, and shame people — something I've experienced firsthand."<sup>23</sup> Cullors is right when she asserts that political work involves building bonds of trust and a willingness to respect different opinions. But such work is best undertaken outside the echo chambers of social media, which most often encourage irresponsible rhetoric, amplify identitarian assumptions, and suffocate public spiritedness. Cullors mistakes the core basis of political life, however. Sustained political work is held together by shared historical interests, especially those that connect to our daily lives and felt needs, not sentimental "ties of blood."

Cullors and many other activists embrace the Black Power premise of the necessity of black unity, once expressed in phrases like "operational unity" and "unity without uniformity" and in familial metaphors about "not airing dirty laundry" and settling disputes "in-house." The problem with this sentiment is that it reduces the divergent political interests animating black life at any given historical moment to happenstance, external manipulation, or superficial grievance. As well, this call for black unity is always underwritten by the fiction that other groups have advanced through the ethnic paradigm, a view that is patently ahistorical and neglects the role of interracial alliances in creating a more demo-

23 Patrice Marie Cullors-Brignac, "We Didn't Start a Movement. We Started a Network," Medium, February 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/@patrissemariiecullorsbrignac/we-didn-t-start-a-movement-we-started-a-network-90f9b5717668#.ijqrll79q>.

cratic, just society. This line of thinking always assumes that there is something underneath it all that binds black people together politically, but that reasoning must always rely on some notion of racial essentialism and a suspension of any honest analysis of black political life as it exists.

Just as there were black elites poised to advance a version of Black Power as black capitalism and patron-clientelism, similar forces exist within the contemporary Movement for Black Lives. One schism that has grown more pronounced is between those who support privatizing education and others who view charter schools and market-oriented reforms as attempts to break teachers' unions and diminish accountability, universal access, and equality in public schools. Ferguson activists Johnetta Elzie, DeRay McKesson, and Brittany Packnett have allied themselves with Teach for America, an education privatization group that supplies nonunion, low-wage, and inexperienced teachers to urban school districts. Pro-charter advocate and Saint Paul activist Rashad Anthony Turner renounced Black Lives Matter after national organizers called for a moratorium on charter schools.<sup>24</sup> When we look at local conflicts over education, such as those over the school privatization efforts undertaken by deposed Washington, D.C., mayor Adrian Fenty and education-reform mercenary Michelle Rhee, the formation of the New Orleans Recovery School District, or the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's subsequent neighborhood school closures and layoffs, we find blacks on both sides. In the fight to defend and improve public education, there is no unified "black interest" as such. In these instances, the assumptions of common racial interests run headlong into lived black politics and the diverse and conflicting constituencies operating within the black population at any given historical moment.

### *The Problem with Black Exceptionalism*

The Movement for Black Lives expresses black angst amid economic recession, home foreclosures and evictions, dwindling public relief, intense police violence, and prevailing social meanness, but the antiracist frame is inadequate for explaining the complex sources of this mass unease. We need to clarify the fundamental causes of contemporary inequality and the policing crisis, as well as the role of multicultural political elites and the humanitarian-

24 Beth Hawkins, "The Movement's Been Hijacked: A Black Lives Matter Leader Quits Over Public School Reform," *The 74 Million*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.the74million.org/article/the-movements-been-hijacked-a-black-lives-matter-leader-quits-over-public-school-platform>.

corporate complex in advancing the neoliberal project. To this end, a more critical approach to localized power and the actuality of racial representation might help activists better anticipate the forces and processes that cajoled and contained the 2015 mass protests in Baltimore and Chicago. In both these places, token firings, suspensions, and indictments of police, the dissipation of popular energy by nonprofits, and the opportunistic maneuvers of both black and white political elites of various stripes had the combined effect of deflecting mass pressure and preserving the status quo.<sup>25</sup> Liberal antiracism, with its core assumption of black exceptionalism, helps enable these social management dynamics because it overlooks the integrated nature of contemporary governance in many American cities and the crucial role that black elites can play in legitimating the current neoliberal order.

The hegemony of liberal antiracism stems from how well it stands in for an analysis of capitalist class relations. The spatial-economic reorganization of American cities after the Second World War — the creation of inner-city black public housing and suburban white single-family homes — entrenched black and white as the symbolic referents of class inequality in American public debate. Many whites who had endured tremendous hardship during the Great Depression improved their material condition by way of the historic post-war economic boom and the ensuing birth of the consumer republic, which for the first time made homeownership, quality education, job opportunities, and middle-class lifestyles available to them. During the same period, blacks were nominally integrated into the consumer society through civil rights pressure, anti-discrimination legislation and the arrival of black urban regimes that created a path to the middle class through public employment. During the 1970s, however, economic recession and labor force contraction, abetted by a national policy of urban neglect and ultimately neoliberalization, worked together to produce the hyper-ghettoization of the black poor. In the popular imagination, blackness became a synonym for poor, urban, indebted, uneducated, criminal, imprisoned, and dependent, even though the actual history and demography of the United States since the sixties finds African Americans in the minority for each of these categories, albeit overrepresented.

In that context, the Jim Crow analogy advanced by Michelle Alexander fails to provide an adequate empirical account of the social origins, motives,

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25 Cedric Johnson, "Afterword: Baltimore, the Policing Crisis and the End of the Obama Era," in *Urban Policy in the Time of Obama*, edited by James DeFilippis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 302–21.

and consequences of mass incarceration. Alexander emphasizes how the punitive policies of the War on Drugs were intended to, and did, adversely and disproportionately affect blacks.<sup>26</sup> To grasp this development, the Jim Crow analogy has proven to be a powerful and enduring concept for many activists, one that recalls the nation's undemocratic history and undermines popular claims that the country has reached a postracial epoch where colorblind meritocracy prevails. There are certainly some important parallels between the Jim Crow system and the contemporary prison state, in particular the many ways that convicted felons can be disenfranchised. Even after they have served their prison sentences, ex-offenders can lose the right to vote or participate in jury trials, to receive public assistance and federal student loans, to parental custody and visitation, and to gainful employment due to felon self-reporting requirements on job applications in many states. But the fact remains that the Jim Crow analogy obscures the actual material and social forces that have given rise to the carceral state, specifically the systematic production and reproduction of a surplus population by the contemporary model of capital accumulation that has driven the economy for decades.<sup>27</sup> As the long-term slowdown of investment and GDP growth, beginning in the 1970s, produced increasing numbers of (permanently) unemployed, neoliberals in both parties cut back the welfare state that had initially been established to provide social insurance to the jobless.

Contemporary patterns of incarceration and police violence are classed in a manner that is not restricted to blacks and whose central dynamics cannot be explained through institutional racism. Black professionals can still be subjected to police profiling and abuse; despite their different class position, they remain connected to working-class communities by way of social networks, kinship, and personal origins. These sociological aspects may help to explain the genesis and popularity of the Black Lives Matter hashtag, but they also obscure the essential historical motives of the policing crisis. The urban black poor should not be seen as exceptional because their ruination is an integral part of the broader political economy. Their plight as a reserve of contingent and unemployed labor is the consequence of neoliberal rollback, technological obsolescence, and informal-

26 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

27 For critical treatments of Alexander's work, see Marie Gottschalk, *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3-7, 119-67; James Forman Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow," *New York University Law Review* 87 (February 2012): 101-46.

ization, not the revival of Jim Crow racism. The expansion of the carceral state since the seventies has come to replace the welfare state as the chief means of managing social inequality.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant has used the term *hyperincarceration* rather than *mass incarceration* to more accurately describe what we are witnessing. US incarceration rates dwarf those of other advanced industrial societies, but aggressive policing strategies are not deployed en masse.<sup>28</sup> Rather than a system where all Americans are subject to arrest and incarceration, it is the relative surplus population, often confined to the ghettoized zones of the inner city, blighted inner-ring suburbs, and depopulated Rust Belt towns, who are routinely policed and imprisoned.

The racial justice frame simply does not adequately explain the current crisis of police violence, in which blacks are overrepresented but not the majority of victims. In 2015, there were 1,138 people killed by police in the United States, and of that number 581 were white, 306 were black, 195 were Latino, 24 were Asian or Pacific Islander, 13 were Native American, and the race/ethnicity of the remaining 27 was unknown.<sup>29</sup> Rather than prompting some version of “all lives matter” postracialism, these facts should encourage greater discernment on the part of those who want to create just forms of public safety. The unemployed, the homeless, and those who work in the informal economy or live in areas where that economy is dominant are more likely to be regularly surveilled, harassed, and arrested. Black Lives Matter activists posit universal black injury where, in fact, the violence of the carceral state is experienced more broadly across the working class. What is to be gained from adhering to political slogans that exclude certain victims and truncate the potential popular base for progressive reforms?

When confronted with the figure of the white convict, Alexander has argued that he is in fact “collateral damage,” the unintended victim in what is a fundamentally anti-black War on Drugs. Even when presented with

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28 Loïc Wacquant, “Class, Race and Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America,” *Daedalus* (Summer 2010), 78; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

29 *Guardian*, “The Counted: People Killed by Police in the U.S.” interactive database, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database> (accessed October 15, 2016); see also Lester Spence, “Policing Class,” *Jacobin*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/baltimore-police-department-of-justice-freddie-gray/>; Adolph Reed Jr., “How Racial Disparity Does Not Help Make Sense of Patterns of Police Violence,” *Nonsite*, September 16, 2016, <http://nonsite.org/editorial/how-racial-disparity-does-not-help-make-sense-of-patterns-of-police-violence>.

the contradiction between the Jim Crow analogy and the class dynamics of incarceration, Alexander doubles down and seems to think that referring to nonblack prisoners as collateral damage is still a politically useful approach. “When a white kid in rural Nebraska gets a prison sentence rather than drug treatment he needs but cannot afford, he’s suffering because of a drug war declared with Black folks in mind,” Alexander contends. “And by describing white people as collateral damage in the drug war it creates an opportunity for us to see the ways in which people of all colors can be harmed by race-based initiatives or attacks that are aimed at another racially defined group.”<sup>30</sup> This is a terrible evasion, an attempt to cling to an ideological faith even when actual social conditions require a different approach. The prison expansion and the turn to militaristic hyper-policing are not motivated principally by racism. Whether in Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood or the Ozark country of southern Missouri, the process of policing the poor is orchestrated by the same diverse cast of beat cops, case managers, probation officers, district attorneys, public defenders, prison guards and wardens, social reformers, conservative and liberal politicians, weapons manufacturers, lobbyists, nonprofits, and foundations: a kind of social control complex that has been growing by leaps and bounds as poverty, cynicism, and the surplus population increase and the neoliberal era grinds on.

### *Building Popular Consensus, Organizing for Power*

The root cause of the contemporary policing and incarceration crisis is not then the prevalence of new Jim Crow racism, but rather the advent of zero-tolerance policing and prison as the dominant means of managing a huge and growing surplus population in an age where the nation has abandoned the use of state power to guarantee the most basic material needs and protection from market volatility. Of course, reviving the liberal welfare state is itself inadequate to address the current malaise. Contemporary movements must go beyond the limited social amenities extended by mid-twentieth-century capital and create a society where there are no disposable people and where the right to health care, education, housing, and to one’s creative capacity and time are not determined and circumscribed by compulsory wage labor.

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30 “The Struggle for Racial Justice Has a Long Way to Go: Michelle Alexander interviewed by Matt Pillischer,” *International Socialist Review* 84 (June 2012), <http://isreview.org/issue/84/struggle-racial-justice-has-long-way-go>.

What should, in any case, be clear is that black ethnic politics is not enough to achieve social justice at this historical juncture. The contemporary struggle against policing has inherited many of the assumptions about black political life and Black Power that took shape during the sixties, even as many activists have criticized the lethargy and conservatism of the black establishment. What we know as black politics is not transhistorical, but the result of Southern desegregation campaigns, Cold War liberal statecraft, and party-patronage machinery, which combined to integrate black politicians and local black constituencies into the New Deal Democratic coalition. Even before the end of Jim Crow segregation, black political life always contained internal ideological diversity and expressed varying class interests. Black political development since the sixties has had the effect of both consolidating an elite-driven politics and identifying the expressed interests of that stratum with those of the black population as a whole.

This belief in common black interest has persisted even as the main material-spatial basis for that mode of thinking, the class-diverse black ghetto of the middle twentieth century, has vanished. As the middle class has gained access to better housing options and as national and local elites advance a new revanchist project of public-housing demolition and gentrification, the old racial ghetto has been transformed into a class-exclusive zone. This changing class geography of the black population is reflected in the shifting meaning of the term *ghetto*, which has evolved from a sympathetic social designation in the mid-twentieth century to an epithet most often used to condemn the alleged cultural pathology of the hyper-segregated and over-policed black poor.

Many on the Left have taken a deferential posture toward Black Lives Matter. Some have celebrated this upsurge of activism as the return of black left militancy after decades of movement implosion and stagnancy. Even where they might disagree, many white leftists and some established black figures are clearly uncomfortable airing their ideological and strategic disagreements with millennial black activists for fear of being portrayed as insensitive or unsympathetic.

Those who assert that liberal antiracism is a necessary phase en route to a more viable working-class left politics either suffer from bad faith or are engaging in the worst form of pandering — namely, supporting black-led political tendencies uncritically as a means of demonstrating one's antiracist commitments. Those who trade in such patronizing behavior either have not

taken the time to study the history of black political life since the sixties or are simply willing to ignore the class contradictions that black communities share with the wider population. Those who cling to liberal antiracism and defer to essentialist arguments about black interests fail to see that a politics that builds broad solidarity around commonly felt needs and interests *is* a form of antiracism, one that we desperately need right now if we are to have any chance of ending the policing crisis and creating a more civilized society.

The hegemony of identitarianism has reshaped the terms of left political debate and action in at least three detrimental ways. First, it has engendered popular confusion about political life, leading many to falsely equate social identity with political interests. Second, it has distorted how we understand the work of building alliances not on identity as such, but on shared values and demonstrated commitment. Third, the practice of relying on racial or other identities as a means of authorizing speakers has had a corrupting effect on left political struggles. The result is a degraded public sphere where all manner of landmines prohibit honest discussion and impose limits on political constituency and left imagination, such as notions of “epistemic deference,” “mansplaining,” arbitrary stipulations about “being an ally,” and so forth.

Contemporary battles against police violence and the carceral state address the sharpest edge of late capitalism and represent the struggle of the most submerged segments of the working class to survive under alienated, brutish conditions. Discourses of black difference, whether in the form of Cold War liberal antiracism, the colonial analogy, or contemporary Black Lives Matter rhetoric, forestall the development of an analysis that would treat the black urban poor not as separate and unique but as a dramatic manifestation of the precarity that defines working-class life more generally.

Black Lives Matter protestors have advanced an inspiring set of demands but these will remain in the realm of the imagination without effective power. As popular slogans, Black Power and Black Lives Matter are both significant in opening the door to forms of social struggle that were not relegated strictly to the workplace but addressed to a broader late capitalist geography. To the extent that they remain circumscribed by notions of racial affinity, contemporary campaigns against police violence and the carceral state, like Black Power struggles decades before, will fall short of creating the kind of deep, expansive opposition needed to exact real change. Such struggles must craft broad popular support if they are to succeed where others have failed.

On that December evening when my kids and I joined a dozen or so Chicagoans to watch Samb's performance, I thought back for a moment to the live mannequins who amused the Christmas shoppers of my childhood. Back then, crowds stood fixated on floodlit store displays and wondered aloud how long the performer could remain in character. Samb's performance seemed to pose the question in reverse: Would *we* break from character? His haunting imagery urged us to separate historical process from nostalgia, and political life from consumerism. Without the kind of protracted political engagement and real commitment that stretches beyond cadre and mass demonstrations, we run the risks of reducing social struggle to expressions of consumer niche identity, like the T-shirts, viral memes, and nouveau race films that Black Lives Matter has already spawned. As Samb's provocation reminds us, we can draw inspiration from past heroics, but the solutions we need must be worked out in and for our times. The actual demography of hyper-incarceration and the policing crisis requires that we organize against inherited urban-suburban political divisions, daily habits, clichéd thinking, and familiar social relations to discover common interests and popular power. There can be no end to hyper-incarceration, the policing crisis, and the underlying inequality without the difficult work of taking power and imposing a more democratic and humane order.✱

**One of the central claims of postcolonial theory is that it upholds the social agency of dominated groups. This essay focuses on some of the foundational texts in the field by Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha to examine how they analyze the place of resistance in gender relations. It shows that there is a considerable gap between what the theorists claim to show and what they actually argue in these texts. Instead of upholding women's resistance to patriarchy, they redefine agency so that acquiescence to patriarchy is presented as a struggle against it. This calls into question the contribution that postcolonial theory can make to subaltern politics.**

# SILENCING *the* SUBALTERN

*Resistance & Gender in Postcolonial Theory*

NIVEDITA MAJUMDAR

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MAJUMDAR

**A**mong critical and progressive academics today, the influence of postcolonial theory is unmistakable. Though born in the narrow confines of literature departments in the wake of Asian and African decolonization, its intellectual apparatus has increasingly become associated with more directly political commitments. Postcolonial theory today is viewed as an indispensable framework for understanding how power works in modern social formations and, in particular, how the West exercises its dominance over the Global South. Even more, it is lauded for its attentiveness to the marginal, the oppressed — those groups that have been relegated to obscurity even by political traditions ostensibly committed to social justice. On elite university campuses, the concepts associated with this theoretical stream have increasingly displaced the more traditional vocabulary of the Left, particularly among younger academics and students. Indeed, the two most influential political frameworks of the past century on the Left, Marxism and progressive liberalism, are often described not just as being inadequate as sources of critique, but as tools of social control.

The extraordinary success of postcolonial theory has not precluded some important and highly charged debates about its implications, most recently revived by the publication of Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. Chibber focuses on the work of theorists associated with the influential Subaltern Studies project, using them as exemplars of the wider approach. Regardless of what one makes of his arguments, it remains the case that in confining his attention to the Subaltern Studies school, he fails to address the work of some of the most important developers of the wider tradition — most notably Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. A reckoning with these theorists' work is indispensable because they are making theoretical contributions that are distinct from those of the Subaltern Studies school, and hence are not necessarily undermined by Chibber's critique.

This essay proposes to take up an issue which is at the very heart of postcolonial theory — the relationship between social domination and resistance and, specifically, how *gender* is conceptualized as a site of struggle within this framework. It does so via an examination of several of the classic, agenda-setting essays in the field: by Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Ranajit Guha. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>1</sup> and her commentary on Mahashweta Devi's "Draupadi,"<sup>2</sup> Guha's germinal foray into gender history in "Chandra's Death,"<sup>3</sup> and Bhabha's influential "The Commitment to Theory,"<sup>4</sup> which seeks to reinstate gender into a reading of the British miners' strike of 1984 and 1985, thus comprise my focus.

The theme of resistance is, of course, one of the signposts of the entire postcolonial turn. While the emphasis in the field's early years was on how forms of political agency arose in a colonial and postcolonial context and became embedded in movements for self-determination, this is no longer the case. Postcolonial theory today, under the influence of Bhabha, Spivak, and others, has taken on a far more ambitious agenda, going beyond the specificities of geographical location to generate more encompassing arguments

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

2 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Draupadi' by Mahasweta Devi," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Winter, 1981): 381–402.

3 Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," *Subaltern Studies V* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 135–65.

4 Homi Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *New Formations*, no. 5 (Summer 1988): 5–23.

about the nature of agency itself. In this respect it has, as many commentators have observed, become one of the most influential political theories on the contemporary scene, certainly to the point of rivaling the traditions inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What makes the postcolonial turn especially important is that it foregrounds precisely those forms of agency and political identity that have tended to remain at the periphery of Marxist and liberal considerations — gender, sexuality, and race in particular. Whereas these forms of oppression have only recently become analytical foci within the traditional left, they have been central to postcolonial theory from its inception.

Examining how postcolonial studies conceptualizes the problem of resistance and how resistance takes specific shape around gender has to be part of any assessment of the field. Several theorists in the recent past have taken on this problem, most notably Aijaz Ahmad in his brilliant *In Theory*, which set some of the basic terms of the debate between postcolonial theory and the more traditional left. But it has also been joined by Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, Terry Eagleton, and others, all of whom have expressed grave doubts about the evolution of the field and in particular its understanding of class politics. I propose in this essay to add to this body of critical work by carefully engaging with a small number of central texts of the postcolonial school.

The decision to focus on this handful of essays is intended to serve a specific purpose. In part, it is motivated by the fact that the works in question have been hugely influential in the field — indeed, so much so that some of them are even identified with the latter. But precisely because they exercise such inordinate influence, to criticize them without a careful engagement would be to invite skepticism toward, if not outright dismissal of, my claims. Just as importantly, it is through close examination of these texts that one can also raise the natural question about their reception and canonization in the field. Although other critics have cast doubt on some of the arguments made by Spivak, Guha, and Bhabha, the more specific issues that I raise — about the manner in which they conceptualize resistance and subalterneity — have rarely been taken up, much less debated. In other words, postcolonial studies has tended to take on board the very aspects of these essays that I find most objectionable. The indictment of the arguments in these texts should also, then, raise some worries about the intellectual culture in the field.

### Guha's Small Drama

Ranajit Guha's essay "Chandra's Death" occupies a special place in postcolonial scholarship. Even though it is not as influential as some of the other canonical works in the field, it has been recognized as an agenda-setting piece, not only by postcolonial theory's proponents but also by its detractors. Thus, Sumit Sarkar, an early defector from the Subaltern Studies project, of which Guha was a founding member, regards the essay as offering "glimmerings of an alternative approach" that was, sadly, abandoned.<sup>5</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, also a critic of the Subalternists, aligns with Sarkar in her assessment of the essay as a "profoundly humanist" engagement with the histories of the oppressed in its investigation of the layered complexity of human predicaments.<sup>6</sup> What is especially praiseworthy to many readers is its engagement with gender. "Chandra's Death" was published in the pivotal fifth volume of *Subaltern Studies* and was, in some measure, a response to admonishments from feminist scholars that the Subalternist project, in its first four volumes, had largely been blind to gender issues. After this essay, the historian Florencia Mallon lauded Guha for having provided a "powerful answer" to charges of ignoring women's agency.<sup>7</sup> So too, Gayatri Spivak praised the essay as having inaugurated the incorporation of gender into the Subalternist project.<sup>8</sup>

The essay is thus unusual in eliciting praise from all sides, not just from advocates for Subaltern Studies or postcolonial theory. Indeed, there is much in it to admire, not the least of which is Guha's prodigious research into the context for the events he recounts, the clarity with which he presents his case, and, of course, the commitment to bringing gender to the center of the Subalternist project. Guha's concern in the essay is to recover an instance of women's gendered solidarity in a highly patriarchal setting and how women strove to preserve their autonomy against the weight of male authority. I will argue, however, that it fails to make the case on both these counts — of showing female solidarity and agency. I argue that Guha mistakes self-preservation

5 Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern," in *Writing Social History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93.

6 Priyamvada Gopal, "Reading Subaltern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, edited by Neil Larsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 140–41.

7 Florencia Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," *American Historical Review*, vol. 99, no. 5 (December 1994): 1509.

8 Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2005): 434.

for solidarity. Insofar as he tries to make a case for women's agency, he does so by redefining the concept in such a way as to turn it into its opposite. In other words, Guha constructs a narrative in which an act of *acquiescence* is brandished as resistance. This amounts, not to a recovery of women's agency, but to its effacement.

The essay describes the circumstances leading to the death of a young woman named Chandra in mid-nineteenth-century rural Bengal. Chandra has had an affair with her brother-in-law Magaram and discovers that she is pregnant. Upon discovering this, Magaram approaches Chandra's mother and informs her that Chandra has two options available to her — to have an abortion or to be ostracized from the village as an adulteress — a punishment known as *bhek*, which Guha aptly describes as a “living death in a ghetto of social rejects.”<sup>9</sup> Chandra's mother decides in favor of the abortion and mobilizes her familial network to procure the necessary drugs. These are then administered to Chandra by her sister; they have the intended effect, but they also result in Chandra's own demise. Chandra's death is deemed a murder by the colonial authorities and Chandra's relatives are tried for the crime.

To Guha, this event has an intrinsic significance, which we will consider shortly. But it is also important in the way it has been absorbed into Indian historiography. Guha observes that the dominant tradition of historical analysis has little interest in small events like Chandra's death, since it is preoccupied with the master narratives of nation-building, statehood, capitalism, etc. — making historians oblivious to “the small drama and fine detail of social existence.” Second, Guha questions the appropriation of the event in legal discourse, which has the effect of reducing the “complex tissue of human predicament” to a mere *case*. The experience of the event and the humanity of the actors are all erased in the “abstract legality” that turns Chandra's relatives into “murderers.” Legal and historiographical discourses remain deaf to the “sobs and whispers” in which the subaltern voices speak.

Against the established weight of such renderings, Guha takes on the task of reconstructing a history of Chandra's death that “by bending closer to the ground . . . [would] pick up the traces . . . of a subaltern's life in its passage through time.”<sup>10</sup> So Chandra's death is important not just as an event but also as an analytical exercise, an act of historical recovery that at once excavates and honors the agency of actors buried under the weight of academic convention and also

9 Guha, “Chandra's Death,” 161.

10 *Ibid.*, 138.

demonstrates the shortcomings of dominant intellectual traditions. Even more, Guha seeks to establish the central role of gender both as a site of oppression and a fount of resistance, which the grand narratives of class and nation inevitably marginalize in their reconstructions of the events.

Guha begins by establishing the context for the decisions Chandra made. Her family belonged to the Bagdi caste, a stratum of landless laborers who resided in a western district of Bengal in the mid-nineteenth century. As rural proletarians, the Bagdis were at the bottom of rural society and reviled as a “filthy deposit” by higher-status castes in the village. In addition to being agricultural laborers, the men were also employed as the village’s night watchmen, guarding their employers’ property. Yet the men were branded as “incorrigibly prone to criminality,” and while Bagdi women were routine victims of sexual exploitation by upper-caste men, they were labeled as women of “easy virtue.”

In this setting of acute scarcity, the Bagdis relied on a complex system of local caste and subcaste alliances as a survival strategy. Bagdi children would marry within the sections of the subcaste to which they belonged, which amounted to several families in the two or three neighboring villages, so the village cluster was a “kinship region for six Bagdi families.”<sup>11</sup> In common with the rest of India and many rural societies, the marriage circles served not only as a site of biological reproduction but also as a crucial source of material support. Finding an appropriate household for their children to marry into was a central part of the survival strategy of these landless laborers. Anything that threatened the viability of that strategy, by extension, also posed a grave threat to the material welfare of the entire subcaste.

When Magaram approached Chandra’s mother and confessed his affair with Chandra, the implications were clear. If it were revealed that she had been impregnated by her brother-in-law, it would of course disgrace Chandra’s mother and immediate family. But it would also land a severe blow to the reputation of the larger group of families within the marriage circle. A woman’s honor, her fidelity, were among the most important elements in the reputation of any family and constituted an important marker of a village’s ability to establish internal order. The prestige of a caste, Guha points out, was primarily based on its “degree of purity,” which translated as a “maiden’s virginity, a widow’s chastity and a wife’s sexual fidelity.”<sup>12</sup> A child born out of wedlock in such a setting therefore threatened the delicate system of mutual dependence into which the Bagdis were inserted.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 152.

For Magaram, it made little difference whether Chandra opted for *bhek* or for abortion. Either choice would have insulated him from exposure. But the fact that Bhagobati decided in favor of abortion is, for Guha, significant, since it brought with it tasks and risks that *bhek* would not. The drugs to induce the abortion had to be procured from another village. Her own daughter, her sister, and their husbands and brothers had to be mobilized to arrange the matter. Each of these tasks carried an additional risk of exposure or failure. Chandra's sister Brindra was responsible for administering the drugs, but several men played an important role in arranging for payment and then, when it resulted in Chandra's demise, in burying her body nearby. In spite of the greater burdens, what is clear is that Bhagobati managed to secure the cooperation of much of her clan in covering up her daughter's illicit affair.

These are the basic facts about the events and the role of the various actors involved. Guha does an admirable job adding context and texture to the fragment that recounts the case. We are able to locate Bhagobati and her family in their setting and also to understand the awful choice with which she was confronted. Guha brilliantly exposes the brutality of the patriarchal order, its cold logic manifested especially in Magaram, who impregnated Chandra, and the women's attempts to minimize the inevitable damage to their well-being. Guha carries this out with exemplary clarity and sensitivity. But this is not what has made the essay a classic within postcolonial studies, for it is seen, we will recall, as a demonstration of subaltern *resistance*, an act of recovery that the traditions blinded by master narratives of class and nation systematically marginalize.

For Guha, the acts of resistance are to be found in Bhagobati's decision to abort Chandra's fetus and the women's consequent actions to carry it out. He presents these actions as an assertion of women's autonomy and solidarity. He reads Bhagobati's initiatives to prevent Chandra's excommunication as "a choice made by women entirely on their own in order to stop the engine of male authority from uprooting a woman from her place in the local society."<sup>13</sup> For Guha, the women's actions in the hour of crisis were nothing short of an "act of resistance" against a patriarchal order and in defense of "another woman, to fight for her right to a life of honour within her own society."<sup>14</sup> Further, Guha argues that the response was not merely dictated by the women's desire to protect an immediate family member; to read the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 162.

“resistance merely in terms of the obligations of kin and *kutum* is to ignore what is distinctive about it ... [it is] an *alternative solidarity* — a solidarity of women.”<sup>15</sup>

So what makes Bhagobati’s choice, and those of the other women involved, acts of resistance is that they were motivated by empathy and were intended to undermine patriarchy. The women enacted their agency in ways that are not picked up by dominant historiographical traditions, as a small history, in ways that do not conform to the image of struggle that Marxism, for example, has handed down. Hence, it is only through an approach that “bends closer to the ground” that we can locate this agency and see the resistance for what it was.

But Guha’s argument strains credulity. Take first the issue of the women’s motivation. Guha observes that much of what transpired was clearly impelled by a pervasive fear among the principals of losing status within the village. This fear bred a kind of solidarity among all the actors, men and women, which was expressed in their cooperation to effectuate Chandra’s abortion. Yet, he insists, if we look deeper, we will see that the women were not *fundamentally* driven by fear: “The solidarity born out of fear contained within it another solidarity activated by a different, indeed contradictory, principle — namely empathy. If it was the power of patriarchy that brought about the first, it was the understanding of the women which inspired the second.”<sup>16</sup>

What understanding? From Guha’s own account, had Chandra’s indiscretion been discovered, the consequences would have been dire for the whole clan, women included. Chandra would have had to accept *bhek*; in addition, however, for the wider clan, the mere association with her transgression could entail sanctions directed toward them. Guha explains their predicament:

Any violation of the norms in this respect could pollute all of an offender’s kin, especially her consanguines, and undermine the group’s ability to sustain and reproduce itself . . . the object of solidarity was also the person who could, by her transgressions, bring shame upon those she would most expect to stand by her when found guilty and share the rigour of all penalties prescribed by the *samaj*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 164–65, emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 152–53.

Given the likelihood of sanctions for Bhagobati and other kin, one can only wonder how Guha can present Bhagobati's actions as solidaristic and not self-interested. The choice of abortion had one unambiguous merit for the family — unlike *bhek*, which left a stigma for the entire clan, a successful abortion erased any evidence of Chandra's sin once and for all. Indeed, what risk it entailed was borne overwhelmingly by her. This is not to say that Bhagobati's choice for her daughter could not have been motivated by empathy. Perhaps Chandra expressed a greater fear of social ostracism than of the dangers that came with abortion; perhaps the women were aware of her preferences and acted on these, even though they turned out to also benefit them. It is certainly possible. The point is that Guha does not provide one bit of textual evidence to suggest that this was in fact the case. Indeed, in the text as presented by him, there is no evidence of this kind. All we have is Guha, mysteriously turning against his own presentation of the facts, and insisting that what appears to be a choice made out of fear and practicality was in fact an act of resistance.

One can legitimately object here that, under the slogan of “bending closer to the ground,” Guha is committing the very sin of which he accuses dominant traditions — of erasing the actual structure of events and sliding them, instead, into some master narrative. In this case, it is the narrative of “agency” and “resistance” that is the hallmark of postcolonial theory. Whereas for nationalist historians, every historical event is forced into the telos of nation-building, and for legal scholars into the narrative of crime and social order, in this instance a poor woman's death is turned into a heroic saga of collective struggle against patriarchy. This latter interpretation is no less guilty of overreaching than are the others.

But that is not the real problem with Guha's interpretation. If that was all there was to the matter, our critique would be no more than an academic quibble about texts. The deeper problem has to do with what his argument implies about resistance as a political act and about agency itself. Bhagobati was given a choice between two awful alternatives, a choice that was the product of the local patriarchal order. Neither she nor Chandra had any means, nor did they show any inclination, to change the choice set or even contest the terms on which the choices were offered. Their agency was limited to opting for one or the other — *bhek* or abortion. In the end, they went for the latter and Chandra paid for it with her life. Choosing between two options that have been generated by an oppressive social structure is not resistance — it is *acquiescence* to that order.

It is not, therefore, something to be *celebrated*, but the very circumstance that a critical analysis ought to *insist needs to be changed*.

The conservatism of Guha's argument shows in even sharper relief as he expands on what Chandra's relatives achieved and on the content of their resistance. Chandra's female relatives, he suggests, are able to resist because they're acting within a sphere where they're empowered — that of biological reproduction. Chandra's pregnancy itself opens up an autonomous space for women where "patriarchy retreat[s] in the face of women's determination to assert her control over her body." In pregnancy, women establish ownership of their bodies, and this constitutes a challenge which is genuinely dreaded by male authority. For it operates in an area of liminality not strictly governed by the will of husbands and fathers — an area which appears to the latter as fraught with uncertainty and danger, since women speak here in a language not fully comprehensible to men and conduct themselves by rituals that defy male reasoning.<sup>18</sup>

But it is not clear how the decision was in any way an assertion of control by Chandra over her body and, in that manner, patriarchy's "retreat." It was, after all, Bhagobati who made the choice, not Chandra, which made the act a relinquishment of autonomy by the woman, not an assertion thereof. Even worse, the decision was made in acquiescence to the demands laid out by the very "male authority" that Guha sees as somehow in retreat.

As if realizing the dubiousness of his claim, Guha turns to Simone de Beauvoir for support, quoting from *The Second Sex*, where she describes pregnancy as a "drama that is acted out within the woman herself" — and therefore, we are to infer, an assertion of her individuality.<sup>19</sup> But this only deepens Guha's folly, for not only does it misconstrue the following of a command for an assertion of autonomy, it quite dramatically distorts Beauvoir's argument regarding pregnancy and the body. Beauvoir never privileges the body as the site of resistance, nor does she consider childbirth as an assertion of autonomy. She insists, to the contrary, that a liberation from patriarchy presupposes a transcendence of the biological and of the domestic sphere, which Guha offers as the natural domains for women's agency. Indeed, when Guha describes women's embrace of natal care as operating in an "area of liminality," speaking in a "language not fully comprehensible to men," and "conduct[ing] themselves by rituals that defy male reasoning," he comes perilously close to excavating not women's resistance, but the hoary idea of the "feminine mystique."

18 Ibid., 163.

19 Ibid., 162.

To insist, as I do, on an interpretation that highlights the constraints under which Bhagobati labored rather than on her supposed resistance, is not to deny her agency. It is to point out that, for Bhagobati and for millions of women in her circumstance, agency is exercised in making the best of a horrible situation, day after day and year after year. It is to call attention to the fact that those circumstances are unjust precisely because no matter *which* choice is made, the outcome will be unjust. That is why it is the choice set itself that needs to be changed, by making it the object of struggle. By celebrating the choice as an act of antipatriarchal resistance, Guha turns Bhagobati's *resignation* to her condition into an act of resistance against it — and, in so doing, he both devalues and denatures what resistance entails. If merely choosing between the options given to you is to resist them, then why enjoin the oppressed to struggle against the choice set itself?

### *Spivak's Speech*

If Guha finds an act of subaltern resistance in Chandra's death, Gayatri Spivak finds one in a woman's suicide. Since its publication in 1988, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has taken its place as perhaps the most widely cited essay in post-colonial studies. It is seen as both a call for the acknowledgement of subaltern — especially women's — agency and an acknowledgement of its suppression. It has generated a cottage industry of interpretation, no doubt in part owing to the dense prose but also because of the sheer range of issues that Spivak throws into the mix. There are some obvious differences between her essay and Guha's recuperation of Chandra; while Guha draws primarily on archival research, Spivak's intervention is more focused on the landscape of poststructuralist theory. But they both seek to recover and acknowledge instances of women's resistance that either are ignored by establishment discourses or are suppressed in the exercise of power.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a complex, sprawling essay, the bulk of which is an engagement with contemporary — mainly French — philosophy through the prism of Foucault and Derrida. Spivak seeks to engage both the issue of imperialism in its relation to the Third World as well as the problem of revolutionary agency in the contemporary setting. It is therefore interesting that critical commentaries on the essay almost invariably foreground a tiny section at its very end that examines the fate of a young woman, then extricates

from the story some conclusions about the nature of subaltern — especially women's — agency. Although the portion of the essay dedicated to women's agency is short, the outsized attention it has garnered is probably deserved, for Spivak draws conclusions from it that carry enormous significance not only for theory but for practice.

Spivak relates the fate of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, a relative of Spivak's who hanged herself in 1926 Calcutta. Bhuvanewari's story interests Spivak because while her staging of her suicide exemplifies the "interventionist practice" that resistance entails, the absorption of her story into the broader culture reveals the futility of such gestures in the face of the patriarchal order. This patriarchy was instantiated clearly in the debate around widow immolation — known as *sati* — in British India. Spivak views this controversy as a clear example of women's agency being denied, in that the two poles of the controversy were both comprised of men — either as defending the practice or as denouncing it — but with neither side ever taking into account, or even bothering to discover, women's views on the matter. The absence of women's voices in a debate that was quintessentially about their interests embodies the erasure of subaltern agency.

Bhuvanewari, an unmarried woman, did not, of course, commit *sati*. But for Spivak, her act of suicide was nevertheless significant because it was an instance of resistance against the patriarchal ideology that generated *sati* — so that, through the suicide, Bhuvanewari "rewrote the social text of *sati*-suicide in an interventionist way."<sup>20</sup> She did so by carefully transmitting certain signals through the details of how she staged the event. Bhuvanewari was careful to hang herself during her menstrual cycle, so that it was clear that she was not pregnant at the time of her death. She did so because, in the patriarchal culture of Bengal, when teenage girls committed suicide, it was typically assumed that they had done so to cover up a sexual tryst that had been or was about to be discovered. Bhuvanewari knew that, like most female suicides, hers too would be viewed as the outcome of an illicit relationship. So she killed herself when she was menstruating as proof that she was not a victim of failed romantic passion.

We see, then, the significance of the suicide for Spivak. The theological basis of *sati* is a wife's unwavering devotion to her husband, evidenced in her willingness to end her own life when her husband dies. If Hindu theology, Spivak contends, silenced the woman's voice in this manner, so did imperial-

20 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 103.

ist British legal discourse which, even while banning the practice, remained unconcerned with women's subjectivity: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears ... into a violent shuttling between ... tradition and modernization."<sup>21</sup> For Spivak, Bhuvanewari rewrites this text by inserting female subjectivity into it. By offering physical proof that her death was not a consequence of a failed love for a man, Spivak claims that Bhuvanewari "generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny) in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male."<sup>22</sup>

The actual motivation for Bhuvanewari's act was revealed years later: Her relatives discovered that she had been a member of a militant anticolonial organization and had been given the responsibility of carrying out an assassination but found herself unable to fulfil her mission, for reasons that were never fully understood. Although Bhuvanewari kept these details to herself, she clearly wanted it to be known that, whatever the motivation for the suicide might have been, it was *not* the shame of an illicit affair and its consequences. For years her family remained in the dark about the background to her act, knowing only that it was not because of a pregnancy. It is the mystery that she left behind, the family's cluelessness about her death, that Spivak offers as confirmation of the idea that the subaltern cannot speak.

In the voluminous commentary generated by Spivak's essay, her reading of the event has not been without controversy. Critics have pointed out that Bhuvanewari can hardly exemplify the subaltern's inability to speak when Spivak herself retrieves her suicide act as a rewriting of the patriarchal text<sup>23</sup>: Surely the "interventionist act" is a kind of agency on the young woman's part, which by Spivak's own definition makes it a speech act. Another issue critics have raised is how a middle-class woman with Bhuvanewari's comfortable background can be characterized as "subaltern," so that she falls into the same category of oppression or marginalization as peasants and workers.<sup>24</sup> Still others have made the observation that, in reconstructing the motivation behind Bhuvanewari's actions and making an inference about what her reasons might

21 Ibid., 102.

22 Ibid., 103–104.

23 See, for instance, Abena Busia, "Silencing Sycorx: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique*, no. 14 (Winter 1989–90): 81–104.

24 Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, "Death and the Subaltern," in *Reflections on the History of an Idea: Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 117–38.

have been for ending her life, Spivak is assigning to her the very unitary subjectivity which she describes as an intellectual fantasy.<sup>25</sup> So we seem to have here a non-subaltern who does in fact speak, and with a coherent subjectivity that cannot in fact exist.

These criticisms have some merit; in response to them, Spivak has modified or redrawn some aspects of her analysis. In a revised version of the essay, she holds that in Bhuvanewari's case, the subaltern did speak in a manner, but was silenced in the fact that the broader patriarchal culture had no interest in hearing her.<sup>26</sup> As Spivak recalls, when Bhuvanewari's own relatives attempted to dissuade her from gathering the facts about the suicide, she was "unnerved by this failure of communication."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Spivak also allows that there are other forms of agency that women, and subordinate groups more generally, might have available to them — a point I will return to shortly. Indeed, she now takes the view that her declaration in the original essay, that the subaltern cannot speak, "was an inadvisable remark."<sup>28</sup>

So Spivak now agrees that it is possible for the subaltern to engage in resistance. But what has been largely ignored in this debate around her work, and is of deeper significance in any assessment of the politics of postcolonial theory, is *what counts as resistance*. Spivak's critics have been at pains to note the contradiction in her presentation of Bhuvanewari's action — that she describes the suicide as an interventionist act, and hence an attempt to disrupt patriarchal discourse, while also denying that it is such an act. But it needs to be emphasized that in making this criticism, the interlocutors implicitly agree with Spivak on one crucial point — that Bhuvanewari's action should indeed be understood as an attempt to "rewrite the social text of *sati*-suicide." Much of the debate thus turns on Spivak's reluctance to acknowledge the full weight of the young woman's disruptive act.

Just as we raised doubts about Ranajit Guha's presentation of Chandra's death as an act of gender solidarity and resistance, so might we question the very idea that Bhuvanewari's actions were an attempt to question, much less disrupt, the patriarchal field into which she had been inserted. Let us return for a moment to the specifics of her death. We know that she was entrusted with the job of a political assassination and for some reason found herself unable

25 Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 104–107.

26 Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 306–10.

27 *Ibid.*, 308.

28 *Ibid.*, 308.

to carry it out — which in turn seems to have led her to take her life. She also understood that, given the mores of Bengali culture, her suicide was likely to be apprehended as an admission of moral failure, of being guilty of illicit love. Hence her decision to show emphatically that any such interpretation would be an error, as evidence by her active menstrual cycle.

What this shows, however, is not that Bhuvanewari rejected or punctured Bengali patriarchal norms. It does not indicate a *denial* of the “sanctioned motive for female suicide,” as Spivak would have it. What it amounts to is an attempt on the young woman’s part to proclaim her innocence of accusations generated by those conventions — and hence, by implication, an *acquiescence* to those very conventions. Bhuvanewari was not calling for a rejection of the idea that women should abjure romantic entanglements not approved by their betters. She is merely proclaiming her innocence from the idea that she might have been guilty of such an act. Hence, just as in the case of poor Chandra’s untimely demise, Spivak takes an instance of a woman’s subordination to her circumstances as an example of her resistance to her subjugation. To be sure, the act did embody agency of a kind — it was a volitional stance intended to respond to something in her situation. But whatever else it was, it was also a plea *not* to be associated with the norms of impurity and transgression sanctioned by that very same patriarchal order. Bhuvanewari went to great lengths to assert her innocence from accusations of an immoral act, but never questioned the grounds on which acts such as those were deemed immoral. It was therefore an action carried out very much within the parameters internal to the order.

Thus, much like Guha, Spivak discovers resistance in this text — resistance that dominant discourses and conventions supposedly refused to recognize — not by uncovering it where it had in fact been obscured but by *redefining it* — or, more to the point, by turning it into its opposite. What is especially striking in this instance is that while she valorizes this act of *resignation* to the colonial patriarchal regime, she relegates to obscurity the parts of Bhuvanewari’s life that were *unambiguously* acts of resistance — namely, her involvement in the anticolonial movement. Spivak brings up this aspect of Bhuvanewari’s practice as part of the background to her actions, but then banishes it from the discussion, as if it has no bearing on our verdict regarding subaltern agency.<sup>29</sup>

Can we not, however, insist that it is not only relevant but in fact central to the matter? Bhuvanewari was apparently an active participant in a movement

29 For one of the few instances of this point being raised, see Priyamvada Gopal, “Reading Subaltern History,” 150.

that articulated the agency and the “speech” of hundreds of thousands of women in the colonial era. Indeed, if Spivak had explored a little further, she could have uncovered not just these actions but a rich archive of thousands of these women, in the peasant movement and in the Communist movement, which have been available for years in regional and national archives as well as in oral testimonies. Some such accounts from just one region of India were published in a pivotal volume some years after “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was written that provide some indication of how deeply involved rural women were in the revolutionary movement.<sup>30</sup> However, the experience of women in the movement was widely studied and known even by the late 1970s, when Spivak set about composing her essay, certainly enough so as to undermine any doubts about women’s capacity for political action.

The effacement of women’s agency when it takes organized, collective form is on display again in Spivak’s commentary on Mahashweta Devi’s “Draupadi.” The story is set in the context of the Naxalite movement in India, which emerged in 1967 as an armed insurgency by peasants against landed classes in rural Bengal. After the movement spread to the cities, the state unleashed a brutal counteroffensive, empowered with draconian antiterrorist laws, that succeeded in suppressing the insurgency’s first phase. Against this backdrop, Mahashweta Devi narrates the story of the capture of a young woman, Draupadi, an indigent tribal and a militant in the movement. She is on the run after participating in the assassination of a landlord; her husband, a fellow activist, has been killed by the police. Draupadi is good at hiding in the dense forests, home to her but almost impenetrable to the law enforcement teams. Ultimately, however, she is outwitted by a particularly ruthless and efficient army officer, Senanayak.

Unlike the officials who worked for him, Senanayak is something of an intellectual, having steeped himself in revolutionary literature in order to better analyze the Naxalite movement. He views Draupadi’s capture as a signal achievement for himself; once she is in custody, he initiates the inevitable process of interrogation. Once it becomes clear, however, that the young revolutionary is not going to make any revelations, Senanayak’s methods become ever more drastic. He eventually orders his minions to “make her” and disappears from the scene. Draupadi is brutally and serially raped all night long. In the morning, she’s ordered to clean herself, get dressed, and appear before

30 Stree Shakti Sanghatana et al., *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People’s Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1989).

Senanayak. Draupadi does go out to meet Senanayak, but does so naked, having refused the soap and water that were offered her. She appears before him with her mangled and mutilated body in full view and challenges him: “You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? . . . What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me.”<sup>31</sup> The story ends with Senanayak unable to move or answer, paralyzed by the terrible specter of this woman standing before him, brutalized but utterly defiant.

“Draupadi” is a key text illuminating both the brutality of the Indian state’s suppression of the Naxalite movement and the heroism and solidarity of the youth who comprised its political cadre. Draupadi joins the movement with her husband; she is clearly trusted and valued by her comrades, as evidenced by her inclusion in a political assassination; and she values the movement itself enough to withstand inhuman torture and rape at the hands of the police. But if we turn to Spivak’s commentary, these political and organizational dimensions of Draupadi’s agency are strenuously pushed to the background.

Spivak confines her focus to the final sentences of the story, when Draupadi is presented to Senanayak and refuses to clean and clothe herself for her interview. Draupadi the subaltern revolutionary comes into her own for Spivak only *after* her gendered brutalization: “It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman* that she emerges as the most powerful ‘subject.’”<sup>32</sup> It is in her refusal to follow instructions, in choosing not to act, that she emerges as a conscious agent, so that “she will finally act for herself in *not* ‘acting.’”<sup>33</sup> What Spivak means here is that Draupadi only takes control of her volitional self in her decision to refuse to clean up for an audience with Senanayak. It is in this refusal to act that she manages to “finally act for herself.” As for her life as a revolutionary prior to her capture, Spivak blithely dismisses it as Draupadi’s way of keeping “political faith as an act of faith toward [her husband].”<sup>34</sup> Her decision to join the movement, we are to assume, is not conscious political agency — that decision simply expresses her fidelity to her husband. Indeed, her immersion in the revolutionary movement only continues her gendered subordination, which is why, for Spivak, her torture marks a break, it provides her with the opening to emerge out of the shadows of the men in her life. It is only with her response to her torture, then,

31 Spivak, “Draupadi,” 402.

32 *Ibid.*, 389. Emphasis in original.

33 *Ibid.*, 389. Emphasis added.

34 *Ibid.*, 388.

that the “male leadership stops.”<sup>35</sup> By “male leadership,” Spivak here refers to Draupadi’s dead husband and comrade and, more pertinently, to the leadership of the Naxalite movement.

*Contra* Spivak’s reading, there is not even the slightest hint in the story that Draupadi joins the movement as her husband’s shadow, that her activism is shaped by a distant “male leadership,” or even that she sees her final defiant act toward Senanayak as her political awakening. To the contrary, in the events leading up to her capture, Mahashweta Devi offers us a window into the girl’s thoughts and we see her — now aware that her capture is imminent — anticipating the inevitable torture, and thinking of... what? Escape? Regrets? Bitterness toward the leadership? No, her mind goes to the fate of another comrade, whom she vows to emulate — a young *man* of twenty-two who bit his tongue off during torture rather than reveal the information demanded of him. “That boy did it,” she reminds herself. Then her thoughts return to her martyred husband, also killed in an encounter. “I swear by my life. By my life, Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told.”<sup>36</sup>

Everything we learn about Draupadi’s state of mind, every thought that Devi reveals to us in her narrative, is presented to generate an organic link between Draupadi’s political conviction, her commitment to her comrades — male and female — and her contemptuous dismissal of Senanayak’s command. The inner sources upon which she draws throughout her ordeal include her gender identity, of course. But they also include a steely courage, a sense of obligation to the sacrifices of others, and an unshakable commitment not to endanger the lives of other comrades — all of which come from her political conviction as a revolutionary, and all of which Spivak sweeps aside with the back of her hand.

This gesture by Spivak not only devalues and submerges Draupadi’s political agency, it reinserts a highly paternalistic, and hence patriarchal, view regarding her choices. Her subjectivity is affirmed when she steps forth and expresses awareness of her subjugation specifically as a woman — when the brutalization is to her body. Spivak denies her this when Draupadi rejects her brutalization as a *class* subject and joins in with her comrades to overturn that class hierarchy. So when she fights alongside the male members of her underground squad, she is *not* yet fully a subject; when she declares to her dead husband, “I swear by my life. By my life, Dulna by my life,” this is merely “an act of faith toward her husband,” *not* an

35 *Ibid.*, 388.

36 *Ibid.*, 397 and 399, respectively.

act of political commitment or principle. Why not? Why is she assumed to be a passive follower of commands when she is in the company of men, instead of a political actor fully aware of the imperatives behind her choices? Surely a feminist reading of the text might at least allow for the possibility that she proceeds with an understanding of her interests when she takes up arms against the landlord armies of Eastern India, no less than when she taunts Senanayak while in captivity?<sup>37</sup>

The congruence with Spivak's treatment of Bhuvaneshwari is striking. But whereas in Bhuvaneshwari's case the facts about her political past were shrouded in obscurity, this is not so with Draupadi. The bulk of the narrative in "Draupadi" is dedicated to highlighting precisely those dimensions of the woman's consciousness that Spivak dismisses as irrelevant. And this is what makes Spivak's interpretation of the narrative especially puzzling. What Spivak holds up as a paradigm of resistance is Draupadi's refusal to obey a single command, not her refusal to abide by an exploitative and patriarchal social order. What is admired is her act as an individual, not her willing and conscious participation in a revolutionary movement — and not just as an individual but as a *woman*. As Spivak puts it herself, only when Draupadi experiences violence that "can only happen to a woman" does she come into her own as a historical subject — not when she experiences violence as an indigent peasant or a revolutionary. There is a direct line connecting this argument with Guha's valorization of a woman's biological realm as the natural habitat for her resistance — a remarkable return to the very tropes that feminists have tried for decades to overturn.

### *Bhabha's Negotiation*

The marginalization of women's class agency finds an even more pointed expression in Homi Bhabha's influential essay "The Commitment to Theory." Written just a few years after the British miners' strike of 1984, Bhabha's essay uses that event as an emblem of all the problems that arise from classical socialist views on power and interests, politics and resistance. Much as Spivak and Guha do, Bhabha seeks to rescue women's agency from the narrow confines of conventional political theorizing, not to mention the actual practice of class politics. Whereas socialism privileges the politics of class, Bhabha seeks to restore the salience of other interests and identities inevitably ignored under the singular weight of economic issues.

37 For a critique along these lines, see Darshan Perusek, "Post-Colonial Realities, Post-Structuralist Diversions: An Unamused Exchange," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 5 (January 29, 1994): 243–49.

Bhabha does not seem to view the strike, in its essence, as a response to Margaret Thatcher's offensive against the working-class families in the mining towns, though of course he does recognize that it was her decision to close down the pits that triggered the conflagration. For Bhabha, the essence of the strike lay in the men's attempt to preserve the traditions and cultures — the way of life — of the mining communities. "The choice," he observes, "was clearly between the dawning world of the new Thatcherite city gent and a long history of the working man, or so it seemed to the traditional Left and the New Right."<sup>38</sup> So it was a clash between two conflicting visions of the social order, both male — the emerging world of the "city gent" and the venerable culture of the "working man." The class culture of the miners was, for Bhabha, constructed around the male identity and hence patriarchal to its roots. He contends that it was around precisely this traditionalism of the laboring classes that the strike was "enjoined": though the strike mobilized entire communities, "the revolutionary impulse . . . belonged squarely to the working class male," with women decidedly relegated to the inevitable "heroic supporting role."<sup>39</sup>

The strike was another instance in which working-class men crafted their strategy to defend not only their economic interests but also their dominant position in the gender order. In other words, it was a demonstration of how one set of interests was promoted at the expense of another. But as it happened, it became the occasion for a dramatic overturning of the very patriarchal order that the men were trying to sustain. The men relied on the fact that their women would internalize their framing of the issues and fall into line. In fact, the women's approach to the conflict turned out to be "startlingly different and more complex" than that of the men.<sup>40</sup> Once involved in the struggle, "many women began to question their roles within the family and the community — the two central institutions which articulated the meanings and mores of the *tradition* of the laboring classes around which ideological battle was enjoined."<sup>41</sup> The result was a churning of the inner world of the mining communities themselves, as women rejected and then walked away from the world that their men had constructed for them.

Bhabha presents this episode as an illustration of his view that the rise of "class politics" is a discursive creation — a construct created by the placement of a rigid conceptual grid on a world in which interests and identities are in fact

38 Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," 12.

39 Ibid., 12.

40 Ibid., 11–12.

41 Ibid., 12, emphasis in original.

highly fluid. It finds order only by erasing or suppressing all the myriad complexities that constitute the social world. This complexity goes down to the level of the individual. Hence, for women in the mining towns, the strike opened up both a dilemma and an opportunity. The women were not “class” subjects, as their men defined them. They were also gendered subjects, and both identities coexisted. This created a dilemma: “What does a working woman put first? Which of her identities is the one that determines her political choices?”<sup>42</sup> What many of the women decided, he argues, is that they would embrace their gender identities — which meant a rejection of their imposed class identities and of the social order and priorities that the men were trying to defend.

Bhabha’s point is not as simple as saying that the mining women came to discover their gender identities or interests only when they set aside those associated with class. It is the more radical thesis that the very idea of fixed identities or objective interests is mistaken. There simply is no such thing as a class interest, for what we know as “class” is the product of a discursive grid imposed on a fluid and shifting landscape. Thus he approvingly quotes Stuart Hall’s assertion that even while we might agree that people have interests, “material interests on their own have no necessary class belongingness.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, there is no identity or constellation of interests for agents to be wedded to, or to commit to, for they are and remain divided subjects. “There is no simple political or social truth to be discovered,” he argues, “for there is no unitary representation of political agency, no fixed hierarchy of political values and effects.”<sup>44</sup> What the strike achieved for its women was not a widening of their social identity, so that it might embrace their status as class actors as well as gendered actors; it supposedly revealed to them the intrinsic *artificiality* of those categories.

Bhabha therefore describes the effects of the struggle in a very particular manner. When the women joined the struggle against Thatcher’s attack — and, in so doing, also brought matters of gender into the movement — they did not merely *add* a dimension to their political identities. They constructed a new *hybrid* that is not an additive compound of two elements, but something more — “a rearticulation, or translation of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender), *but something else besides.*”<sup>45</sup> The question that naturally arises is: What is this new hybrid complex that works upon class and gender identities but leaves both behind? Bhabha never

42 Ibid., 14.

43 Ibid., 14.

44 Ibid., 13.

45 Ibid., 13. Emphasis in original.

describes it. It remains unnamed and unspecified, but he is quite clear about the notion that, upon emerging from and rejecting their class identities, the women of the mining towns moved on to a new form of social identification that could be described neither as class nor gender.

Bhabha illustrates his argument by drawing on an article written by Beatrix Campbell for the *Guardian* at the one-year anniversary of the strike.<sup>46</sup> Campbell had interviewed a number of women active in the struggle to see how it had affected their lives, both during the conflict and in its aftermath. The interviews are supposed to have illustrated how the women were initially divided by their two identities, but then, though the course of the strike, transcended both to create a new gestalt.

If we examine the testimonies that Campbell's article relates, however, the picture that emerges is rather different from the one advanced by Bhabha. All of the women interviewed do recall a transformation in their perspectives, if not their lives, as a consequence of their experience in the struggle. Gendered conventions were denaturalized for all of them in varying degrees. Yet not one of the women Campbell interviews viewed their gendered identity to be in conflict with their class identity. These working-class women accepted the logic of the strike, the inherent class contradiction that it embodied, without any hesitation. They all seemed to have viewed the attack on the miners as an attack on them no less than on their husbands; they all looked back at the strike with admiration and even nostalgia.

Campbell describes the experience of Margaret Storr, to whom the experience of the strike opened up an entirely new life even as she continued with her old roles. A housewife and mother of four, the strike transformed her marriage. After some hesitation, she participated in the strike support efforts, and also joined her husband on the picket line. The decision, she recounts, transformed the relationship: "My husband Paul and I talked a lot during the strike — and since. Our marriage is a lot happier since, because we talk and we say what we feel . . . he listens to me now because he knows I mean it." She continues, "I used to have trouble with my nerves. But I never took a Valium during the strike and I have never taken a tablet since. . . . How come I didn't get anxiety during the strike? It gave me strength." Campbell reports that Storr keeps a scrapbook of the strike and finds the need to dive back into it occasionally, for since those heady days "she has sunk back into her shell."

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46 Beatrix Campbell, "Monday Women: Pitting Their Wits? Fate of Women's Support Groups in Aftermath of the Miners' Strike," *Guardian*, August 25, 1986.

Campbell then turns to Margaret Dransfield, who, unlike Storr, had been politically active all her life. The strike nonetheless transformed her consciousness in complex ways. She realized that she had absorbed most of her political beliefs passively, but after her experience in the struggle, became more independent in her judgment. “The strike was hard work,” Dransfield recounts, “but I thoroughly enjoyed it, and it was a challenge.” In its aftermath, Dransfield went through a period of withdrawal, but soon reactivated her political identity: “Politics is very important to me now. I’m in CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] and I went to the German Common.” Lynn Dennett reports that the strike opened up her life in entirely new ways. As an activist, she recalls, “I got a taste for not knowing where I’d be the next day, and I wanted more.” After the strike, she divorced her husband. Crucially, she has no regrets; to the contrary, she credits those days with giving her the confidence to strike out on her own. She and three of her friends had been active in fundraising: “Of the three of us who went out fund-raising, we’ve all left our husbands. It was the strike that gave us the confidence to go. I learned how repressed I’d been. . . . I’m at peace now.” The final woman Campbell interviews is Kim Young, who also divorced after the strike and, like Dennett, credits the strike experience for her transformation. The fault wasn’t her husbands, she recalls: “Our husbands had their faults, but they were nice men, it wasn’t that so much.” So what was it? Campbell asks. It was, Young recounts, that “the strike was a diving board for a lot of women. They were able to say what they actually felt.”

In brief, what emerges from these testimonies has almost no connection to Bhabha’s summary of them. The women overturned the norms of the patriarchal order, no doubt, but none of them questioned the importance of their class interests, nor of the identities attached to the latter. The strike triggered a restructuring of gender codes, but it simultaneously reaffirmed to them their class identities. In other words, whereas Bhabha’s description of the new complex is that, with respect to class and gender, it was “neither the one nor the other,” the testimony of the women suggests something very different — it was *both* the one *and* the other. The women grew into and embraced their interests with respect to gender, but did so while continuing to embrace their class solidarity. It was not something they grew out of or left behind. To the contrary, it was something they saw as a necessary part of their emancipation and, further, an engagement of which they remained proud. Even the women who left their husbands seemed aware of the necessity of the class response to Thatcher.

The women saw their class interests and identities as real because Margaret Thatcher was kind enough to draw their attention to them. To the men and women in the mining communities, the intent behind the assault was quite clear — to break one of the most powerful unions in the country. The decision to fight back was not motivated by something as nebulous as defending a traditional “way of life” — though of course this was part of what the miners were trying to sustain. The struggle was “enjoined” for something more mundane — to defend their homes and basic livelihoods. All of the women interviewed by Campbell show a clear awareness of this as the animating issue, and none of them place their emancipation from gender constraints in opposition to it. Bhabha’s argument crucially relies on a displacement of the logic of the strike from these interests held in common by both genders to one that pits the women against the men. Even more, he describes it in essentially cultural terms — as a battle to defend the traditions of the working class — rather than the terms in which the women themselves viewed it, which revolved around their very real interests as women and as miners.

Of course, there were many women whose experience of the strike would have been very different from that of the women Campbell interviewed. For many, the strike would surely trigger painful and even negative memories, and it would not be difficult to find women who regretted their participation in it or whose subordination in the home continued or even intensified. Perhaps they would even blame the strike and the traditional mining culture for this outcome. Political conflicts never settle evenly upon individual lives and the forces that they unleash are often more brutal than the circumstances that give rise to them. The argument here is not that Margaret Storr’s testimony captures the essence of women miners’ experience in the days of struggle. The point, rather, is that *Bhabha* thinks that it *does* — or at least, that his distorted interpretation of it does. His view not only denies the possibility that the class interests of the women were real — every bit as real as their gender interests — but also the possibility that the women might be aware of this and uphold the sanctity of both.

So just as Spivak pushes Draupadi’s class politics to the background when she analyzes Mahashweta Devi’s text, so Bhabha effaces the women’s agency as *miners*, not just women. In both instances, women are taken seriously as political actors only on the condition that they keep their goals confined to gender issues. Draupadi is deemed a “true subject” only after she undergoes a

brutalization *specific* to women, and the wives from the collieries acquire political maturity only when they grow out of their identification with their class. Even more, when the subjects of these texts express a political consciousness broader than the one assigned to them by these theorists, this consciousness is either dismissed as manipulation (Spivak) or simply ignored (Bhabha). Perhaps this is not quite so confined a space as the one endorsed by Guha, who locates Chandra and her mother's heroism in their embrace of the biological — in this instance, the women are at least allowed some dalliance with politics. But the leash remains tight.

### Conclusion

There is something eminently praiseworthy about a theoretical framework setting out to recover the agency of the oppressed, to recognize instances and forms of resistance that so often are buried under the weight of posterity. To the extent that postcolonial theory has contributed to this enterprise, it is to be lauded and its insights upheld. Guha, Spivak, and others are entirely correct to insist upon the salience of the local as a site of contestation, and to insist that any political theory worth its salt has to be able to connect to the quotidian struggles that extend beyond the economic realm.

They are not, of course, the first to embrace such a challenge. For decades, socialists and Marxists have understood that political struggles unfold in specific places and times — in particular workplaces and specific localities, not on a plane hovering above them. Whatever political analysis flowed from their theory would therefore have to be relevant at the micro level, not just on some rarified plane reserved for grand theory. If there is something novel about postcolonial theory, it is not that its practitioners are the first to insist on the importance of the local — though they often make out as if they were. Their claim to innovation has to rest on their success in recovering dimensions of agency that other radical theories are unable or unwilling to recognize.

The essays examined above have achieved notoriety because of their putative success on this dimension — in highlighting instances of resistance impugned or ignored by more conventional narratives. But as we have seen, this success is based on rather questionable grounds. Guha and Spivak recover instances of resistance only by *redefining* the concept and, indeed, by having it transform

into its *opposite* — what they brandish as subaltern agency are in fact instances of acquiescence. Of course there is something admirable, even heroic, in the choices made by Chandra and her family, as well as by Bhuvanewari. What we see is women making the best of the choices that are handed to them. They are trying to preserve their dignity in circumstances that are intrinsically hostile to them. But they do so while taking their constraints as a given, not by trying to transform those constraints. If we are to now accept actions such as these as emblematic of political action, as episodes of struggle, then there ceases to be any distinction between a dominant ideology and a critical theory — for it is the signature of a dominant ideology that it enjoins subaltern groups to accept their location as parametric and to then make the best of what they've been handed.

Indeed, it is fair to say that what these essays achieve is the denigration of the very concept of agency, something at the very heart of the postcolonial project. In obscuring the effects of social circumstances, in denying — implicitly or explicitly — the role of structure, the theorists under consideration whisk away what makes political praxis distinctive as a volitional act. For what is political agency if not a form of practice aimed at the structures of power within which it is embedded? Whether it aims to reproduce them, as in ruling-class strategies, or seeks to transform and undermine them, as is the case with subaltern classes, political agency is defined by its relation to these fields of power. But with Spivak and, in particular, Guha, it seems that it is the simple exercise of will that enables the actions of their protagonists to serve as political agency — even those actions that are an acquiescence to their subjugation.<sup>47</sup>

If we turn to the question of gender in particular, the conservatism of all three theorists is unmistakable. There is a baseline commitment to upholding the distinctiveness of patriarchal domination, to insist that it cannot be collapsed into class — which is entirely laudable and has to be the lynchpin of any sustainable feminist politics. But all three theorists go much further than that. In Spivak's and Bhabha's cases, the political agency of the women in their texts is not so much recognized as it is whittled down, so that it is recognized on the condition that it is *confined* to issues of gender. Bhuvanewari and Draupadi are both dedicated militants in revolutionary movements, yet in neither case does Spivak acknowledge, much less analyze, the importance of their choices in this domain. Bhabha takes a story of women's amalgamation of their gender identity to class solidarity and turns it into a struggle of one against the other.

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47 I would like to thank Aijaz Ahmad for pressing me on this point.

Guha, for his part, demarcates and then sanctifies the biological as not just an acceptable domain of struggle for women but the natural one. The accompaniment to this curious promotion of gender as the preferred site of resistance for women — however narrowly it is defined — is the consistent denigration of class politics, indeed of organized politics in most *any* form. It is not that struggles of the latter kind are denigrated *tout court*, but they are presented as irrelevant or unnatural for women.

What makes this contrasting treatment of the women characters' politics interesting is that the denigration of their class agency is not a case of unbalanced treatment. It is not that Spivak and Bhabha, for example, just give more importance to one aspect of their women's political involvement than to another. Rather, they altogether suppress aspects of the texts that would invite another interpretation. The elements of the narratives that highlight the women's commitment to organized and class politics are simply ignored. We only learn about them by reading the texts ourselves. In other words, aspects of political agency that are very much part of the textual record are suppressed by the narrative favored by the theorists — *the very sin of which they accuse the holders of grand narratives*. In this case, it is a quite particular and narrow conception of gender politics displacing and marginalizing the various dimensions of the women's broader political agency.

What this amounts to saying is that postcolonial theory should not be described as a theory that systematically dismantles master narratives. Instead, it should be taken as functioning with its *own* preferred narrative — a distinct unease with class and organized politics, whether as an analytical category or as a form of political engagement. This anxiety with class also sits well with the general intellectual climate in which postcolonial theory has developed and flourished. As Aijaz Ahmad observed in his intervention two decades ago, the field came into its own precisely when working-class movements around the world fell into a steady retreat and a general pessimism set in about class politics. During the years in which postcolonial theory has flourished, the sense of despair very quickly morphed into a general hostility to class which has not only pervaded cultural studies but has extended to most every nook and cranny of the academy. This at least partially explains why the rather blatant antipathy to women's class agency and the pessimism regarding resistance have largely escaped scrutiny in the field.

While there could be other sources for this antipathy to class politics, in Spivak's case it also seems to emanate from a genuine theoretical confusion. Upon several occasions, she has expressed an understanding of subalterneity that precludes class struggle as a real option in the Global South. One of the defining aspects of the proletariat in the South, she contends, is that it is inserted into politics in a manner fundamentally different from that in the advanced West. In the West, the working class matures into class politics largely through "its training in consumerism," whereas "the urban proletariat in comprador countries must not be systematically trained in the ideology of consumerism (parading as the philosophy of a classless society) that, against all odds, *prepares the ground for resistance*."<sup>48</sup> In fact, in the sprawling export-processing zones and subcontracting arrangements typical of economic development in these parts of the world, the suppression of workers' wages means that "the training in consumerism is almost snapped."<sup>49</sup> Hence, what makes a politics organized around class interests so unrealistic in the Global South is that the working class does not get properly trained in it, and what makes that training so rare is that its source is not available to them — an immersion in the ideology and practice of consumerism.

It's curious that critics have hardly paid any attention to the strange assertion of consumerism being a training ground for, or the fount of, class politics. We are to believe that the simple experience of work — the subordination to the employer's authority, long hours, brutal pace of labor, physical intimidation, exposure to injury, insecurity — that all of *this* is not what impels labor to organize. It is not the daily degradation and humiliation or the experience of grinding poverty that is behind class politics. It is, rather, the participation in consumerism. Now, Spivak has to know that there is a pivotal and venerable distinction between consumption and *consumerism*. Whereas the former refers to the quotidian act of physical reproduction by workers, the latter points to an ideological formation in which the internalization of goods is turned into an end for itself. The central importance of consumerism has been noted by many social theorists since Marx, most notably members of the Frankfurt School — but only as a development that *impedes* class consciousness and secures the working class ever more firmly to the mast of capitalism. In redescribing it as the training ground for capitalism, Spivak exhibits confusion on multiple levels. She obscures what is and has been the real source of working-class resistance in capitalism

48 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" revised edition, 42.

49 *Ibid.*, 42.

— the experience of oppression and exploitation in the class relation — and at the same time sanctifies as the real source of such politics what is in fact one of the main obstacles to it.

Regardless of the reasons, a dismissal of women's class agency is evident in these texts, and it has profound implications for postcolonial theory's political claims. Our reading confirms the observation made by other critics: that postcolonial theory has not so much enriched the critique of a globalizing capitalism as it has weakened the resources to resist it. While there is no question that the subaltern class's political agenda must be an expansive one in this era, the struggle against capital is surely at its core. But no such struggle can be waged without a clear conception of what counts as resistance — how to distinguish between strategies that question the dominant order and those that accept its terms — and how to organize to make that resistance more effective. Women's collective agency around their gender and class interests have to be indispensable parts of deepening that resistance. It is remarkable that in these essays, which are foundational to the development of postcolonial theory, such concerns are either denigrated or dismissed altogether. What is even more striking is that in all the commentary that they have generated, these maneuvers have either gone unnoticed or have been set aside as being of minor consequence. Both of these facts are redolent of not just the direction that the theory has taken, but also of the larger intellectual culture of the field. ✧

**The drastic decline of the US auto industry over the last half-century, which has ravaged the city of Detroit and other former production centers in the southern Michigan region, is typically explained as the result of union contracts that escalated the cost of labor to levels that required US automakers to move jobs to other countries. In this essay, we disprove the “greedy union” narrative. Relying on an analytic history of the rise and decline of the Detroit production culture, we demonstrate that the decline of the Detroit region resulted from management’s decision to reorganize production to prevent the workers from using their structural leverage to gain a share of control over production processes. This strategy for gaining the upper hand in the class struggle, however, also undermined the flexible production system pioneered in Detroit. This reduced the rate of product innovation and undermined their ability to compete on the basis of production efficiency, leaving outsourcing jobs in order to cut labor costs as the only viable option.**

# COLLATERAL DAMAGE

## *How Capital's War on Labor Killed Detroit*

JOSHUA MURRAY & MICHAEL SCHWARTZ

**I**n July 2013, Detroit was the news story of the month when it became the largest US city to fall into bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup> In January 2016, the city of Flint became the news story of the month when President Obama declared a state of emergency there — two years after its residents began drinking lead-poisoned water.<sup>2</sup>

These two events highlighted an epic fall from grace for a region that, five decades earlier, had been the poster child for ascendant American capitalism.<sup>3</sup> In 1960, Detroit's 1.5 million residents had the highest per capita income among the country's big cities; Flint's 200,000 residents had the highest per capita income among the world's medium-sized cities. Five decades later, both cities had lost most of their populations and all of their prosperity.<sup>4</sup> The median family income in Detroit was \$25,769,<sup>5</sup> a little less than 50 percent of the national average of \$51,939. With nearly 40 percent of all families in both Flint

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1 Monica Davey and Mary Williams Walsh, "Billions in Debt, Detroit Tumbles Into Insolvency," *New York Times*, July 18, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/us/detroit-files-for-bankruptcy.html>.

2 Hannah Rappleye, Lisa Riordan Seville, and Tracy Connor, "Bad Decisions, Broken Promises: A Timeline of the Flint Water Crisis," NBC News, January 19, 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/bad-decisions-broken-promises-timeline-flint-water-crisis-n499641>.

3 All data presented on the decline of the region from the 1960s onward is taken from the US Census, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the American Community Survey.

4 Detroit's population declined by 65 percent; Flint's losses were 51 percent.

5 Karen Bouffard, "Census Bureau: Detroit Is Poorest Big City in US," *Detroit News*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/09/16/census-us-uninsured-drops-income-stagnates/32499231>.

and Detroit living below the poverty line — double the Michigan rate and triple the national rate — the two cities were among the poorest in the United States.

Virtually everyone agrees that the engine of this collapse was the inability of the Big Three auto makers to compete — in price or quality — with foreign auto manufacturers, leading to the decline and departure of the auto industry.

Though there are a range of explanations for *why* the US auto industry could not compete with foreign automakers, most place the greatest emphasis on the high wages and benefits paid to Detroit area workers. The most common version blames the United Auto Workers (UAW), charging it with bludgeoning the auto industry into concessions that created a huge cost-of-labor disadvantage, which ultimately resulted in the industry migrating to areas with more competitive labor rates. This version is dominant among right-leaning analysts,<sup>6</sup> the business press,<sup>7</sup> and the mainstream media,<sup>8</sup> including Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists such as Paul Ingrassia.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper we will offer a dramatically different account of this decline, which we will briefly outline in this introduction. We will then debunk in detail the hegemonic “greedy union” narrative. Finally, we will fully assert our own analysis in sufficient detail to document the novel elements in our argument.

### *The Story in Brief*

The accelerated deindustrialization of Detroit during the 1970s was indeed a reaction by the Big Three to the arrival of Japanese (and European) automobiles in the US market, but high wages in Detroit were not the primary or even secondary reason for their actions. Instead, the 1970s crisis derived from the incapacity of the Big Three to match the new and upgraded features incorporated into the imports and/or implement flexible production systems that

6 See, for example, James Sherk, “Auto Bailout Ignores Excessive Labor Costs,” Heritage Foundation, WebMemo #2135 on Economy, November 19, 2008, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2008/11/auto-bailout-ignores-excessive-labor-costs>.

7 See, for example, Matt Patterson and Julia Tavlas, “The UAW, Having Stripped Detroit Bare, Looks to the South,” *Forbes*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2013/04/16/the-uaw-having-stripped-detroit-bare-looks-to-the-south/#7dcd55117059>; *Investor’s Business Daily* “Who Killed Detroit?” editorial, March 23, 2011, <http://www.investors.com/who-killed-detroit->

8 See, for example, Jena McGregor, “What Killed Detroit? Let’s Not Forget the ‘Who,’” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2013/07/19/what-killed-detroit-lets-not-forget-the-who/>; CNN Money, “What’s Really Killing Detroit: Union Workers,” December 8, 2008, [http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2008/autos/0811/gallery.autos\\_crisis\\_causes/5.html](http://money.cnn.com/galleries/2008/autos/0811/gallery.autos_crisis_causes/5.html).

9 Paul Ingrassia, *Crash Course: The American Automobile’s Road to Bankruptcy, Bailout — and Beyond* (New York: Random House, 2011).

would allow continuous improvement in production efficiency. Moreover, these incapacities were not timeless features of “Fordism.” Forty years earlier, the Detroit production culture had been home to a fully flexible production system that was copied in Europe and Japan in the years after World War II. But, as the system was implemented overseas, the captains of capital in Detroit dismantled it as part of a successful effort to defeat the campaign of unionized auto workers, who were utilizing the leverage flexible production conferred to demand a proportionate share of the massive profits it generated and to attain a degree of veto power over the intensification of the work process. Ironically, had the workers succeeded in resisting this attack on their power, Detroit would have been much better positioned to match the price and quality of the imports.

The 1970s decline of Detroit therefore originates in the 1920s, when US auto executives accepted Henry Ford’s insight that flexible production would be subject to intolerable amounts of disruption — even by a small number of discontents — unless workers were granted very high wages — the “five-dollar day” — as well as a full set of ancillary benefits, including lifetime employment. The 1920s “effort bargain” that Ford struck with his workers rested on “shared benefits and shared sacrifice,” in which the workers endured the vagaries of recessions and model changeovers in exchange for guaranteed reemployment and increased wages in high-profit expansionary times.

When the Depression reduced auto sales by 50 percent, management chose to abandon the pre-crash effort bargain, opting to preserve their profits (General Motors never had a losing year) while imposing all the “sacrifice” on the workers, including massive firings, regular furloughs for those still employed, drastic wage cuts, and intolerable intensification of production. This worked for a while (including record profits in the dark Depression year of 1936), but eventually the auto workers figured out how to translate their leveraged location within the system into the definitive disruption that Henry Ford had forestalled with the five-dollar day. The denouement was the Great Flint Strike of 1936 and 1937, thousands of wildcat strikes during World War II, and the ascendancy of the UAW, which forced management to begin to reinstall the effort bargain that had prevailed before the Depression.

At the end of World War II, the captains of the auto industry could have chosen two different paths. They could have accepted the demands of their now-unionized workers for an expanded — and explicit — version of the (previously

implicit) 1920s effort bargain, in which workers would not only share in the profits of their labor, but also gain a degree of control over the intensity of the production process. Or they could choose to undermine worker power by eliminating the workers' leverage. They chose the latter. They dispersed production away from Detroit to segregate new workers from the militant unionists and make strikes more difficult to organize; they eliminated single sourcing of all key components, so that work stoppages in one plant would not interrupt production elsewhere; and they maintained large stockpiles of inventory at every work station so that upstream work stoppages would not (quickly) interrupt production. This massive restructuring of production did reduce workers' leverage, but it also had the unintended consequence of dramatically decreasing production efficiency and the rate of innovation.

While the Big Three and their suppliers invested vast sums of capital in creating this dispersed, ossified, and less efficient production structure, the resurgent auto companies in Japan and Europe implemented and elaborated the flexible system that Detroit had pioneered. Unlike the Big Three, they accepted the constraints of the system, rewarding their workers with very high wages, lifetime employment, and a degree of influence over production methodology. Of course, for fifteen or twenty years after the dismantling of flexible production — but before the arrival of foreign imports — the Big Three saw record profits. When the imports began arriving in the late 1960s, however, the US auto industry spent far more money to produce a demonstrably inferior product. This advantage continued to amplify, because the Japanese and Europeans could and did regularly introduce new features and more efficient production methods, an innovative dynamic that the rigid US system could not match.<sup>10</sup>

Experiments with reinstating flexible production revealed the necessity of writing off billions in dispersed facilities and investing further billions in reconfiguration. Industry leadership chose instead to double down on their strategic retreat from Detroit — seeking to answer the cost-saving efficiency and innovation of the imports with drastically reduced labor costs — by relocating in low-wage areas inside and outside the United States and by demanding immiserating givebacks from their unionized employees. The fate of the Detroit region was sealed.

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<sup>10</sup> Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Ira Magaziner and Robert Reich, *Minding America's Business: The Decline and Rise of America's Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

## The Myth of the Greedy Union

The hegemonic narrative of Detroit's decline rests on the assumption that labor costs in Japan and Europe were dramatically lower than those in the United States, giving the imports a price advantage that allowed them to penetrate the US market in the late 1960s and threaten the viability of the US industry. In this narrative, the key moment becomes the UAW's successful insistence — when the imports started arriving — on maintaining its unsurpassed wage package. By the 1970s this intransigence led, the narrative goes, to the forced migration of the industry to locations with cheaper labor costs — first the nonunion American South, then across the border to Mexico.

The premise of this portrait is wrong: The job migration supposedly triggered by foreign invasion and declining market share began in 1947, twenty years before the imports arrived, at a time when the Big Three's domestic and world market shares were rapidly expanding.<sup>11</sup> By 1962 (when imports were a measly 5 percent), 134,000 manufacturing jobs and 10 percent of the population had already been lost in Detroit.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the “greedy union” argument has been asserted with the thinnest veneer of evidence.<sup>13</sup> A typical instance occurred during the 2008 auto industry financial crisis. *New York Times* reporter Bill Vlasic (falsely) asserted that a massive wage and benefits differential between unionized workers in Detroit (\$74 per hour) and nonunion Toyota workers in Tennessee (accurately listed at \$45 per hour) prevented the Big Three from matching “the cost structure of nonunion plants operated by foreign automakers in the United States.”<sup>14</sup> Reuters reporter Paul Ingrassia blamed this (mythical) differential on the UAW, which had been “shaped through confrontation” and therefore “kept demanding more and more” until it had priced the US auto industry out of the market.<sup>15</sup>

In 2008, these analyses had become fantastical. The average hourly wage of Big Three workers was substantially below the \$45 wage rate that Toyota paid in

11 J.M. Rubenstein, *The Changing US Auto Industry: A Geographical Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

12 Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). Market share numbers come from Ward's Auto Group statistics.

13 J.Holusha, “U.S. Japanese Wage Gap: Dispute over Its Extent,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1982.

14 Bill Vlasic, “U.A.W. Makes Concessions to Help Automakers,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/business/04auto.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/business/04auto.html?_r=0). The numbers themselves are taken from Sherk, “UAW Workers.”

15 Ingrassia, *Crash Course*.

Tennessee because the figure of \$74 in wages and benefits religiously repeated in the US press accrued only to a tiny minority of ready-to-retire unionized workers in Detroit. The rest of the US auto workers were paid magnitudes less — after fifty years of union concessions for new Detroit workers and production migration to low-wage regions of the United States. The approximately 50 percent of Big Three employees located outside the United States (mostly in Mexico) were paid around one-tenth of the \$74 pay package — that is, less than ten dollars per hour.<sup>16</sup> So, unlike Toyota, which paid its workers an average of \$45 per hour, the US assemblers paid a select few very high wages and the vast majority much less, bringing their cost of labor to substantially below the \$45 Toyota average.<sup>17</sup>

Why, then, did US manufacturers spend \$1,700 more per vehicle to produce an inferior automobile?<sup>18</sup> The answer lies in the ossified state of US production methodology back in the 1970s, which led to fifty years of falling further and further behind the increasing efficiency of flexible production.

Looking back then to the late 1970s, when the United States was in fact paying somewhat higher wages than Japan, the competitive disadvantage of the US auto industry derived mainly from production inefficiency. This deficit was first documented in a series of longitudinal studies by William Abernathy's research group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).<sup>19</sup> Tables 1 and 2 reproduce key evidence from their 1981 measurement. Table 2 documents the Mazda – GM comparison, demonstrating that only a quarter (\$546) of the massive \$2,133 cost-of-production differential derived from lower wages. Almost three-quarters (\$1,687) derived from three aspects of flexible production. These included:

- ▲ A \$600 (31 percent) savings for Mazda because GM required thirty extra hours of labor (fifty-three versus eighty-three) to assemble a comparable automobile. This differential derived from Japanese production innovations during the twenty-five years after US manufacturers abandoned flexible production.

<sup>16</sup> *Automotive News*, "Mexico's Auto Boom Is about Wages," February 1, 2012, <http://www.autonews.com/article/20120201/BLOG06/120209989/mexicoE2%80%99s-auto-boom-is-about-wages>; General Motors, *General Motors Annual Report 2014*, [https://www.gm.com/content/dam/gm/en\\_us/english/Group4/InvestorsPDFDocuments/2014\\_GM\\_Annual\\_Report.pdf](https://www.gm.com/content/dam/gm/en_us/english/Group4/InvestorsPDFDocuments/2014_GM_Annual_Report.pdf); Ford Motor Company, *Ford Motor Company 2014 Annual Report*, [http://corporate.ford.com/annual-reports/annual-report-2014/files/2014\\_Ford\\_Annual\\_Report\\_sm.pdf](http://corporate.ford.com/annual-reports/annual-report-2014/files/2014_Ford_Annual_Report_sm.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Nick Bunkley, "Ford Tops GM in U.S. Factory Jobs; Dearborn Company's UAW Work Force Has Trailed Rival's Since at Least '30s," *Automotive News*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.autonews.com/article/20150215/OEM/302169970/ford-tops-gm-in-u.s.-factory-jobs>.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Wayland, "Toyota's Per-Car Profits Lap Detroit's Big 3 Automakers," Feb 22, 2015, <http://www.detroitnews.com>

<sup>19</sup> W.J. Abernathy, *The Productivity Dilemma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

◀ A \$547 (25 percent) advantage for Mazda in the cost of components, deriving from geographical proximity of the suppliers, sole sourcing, and the participation of Mazda's suppliers in the improvements deriving from flexible production.

◀ A \$380 (18 percent) advantage deriving from Mazda's "diligent control of the whole system of production" — that is, the tightly coupled character of flexible production, including, for example, the savings in delivery expenses due to the extremely low storage expenses incurred through low inventories and just-in-time deliveries.

**TABLE ONE**  
COMPARATIVE COSTS AND LABOR PRODUCTIVITY  
IN SELECTED UNITED STATES AND JAPANESE  
AUTOMOBILE COMPANIES, 1981<sup>20</sup>

	Ford	GM	Mazda	Nissan
<b>LABOR PRODUCTIVITY</b>				
Employee hours per small car	84	83	53	51
<b>COSTS PER SMALL CAR</b>				
Labor cost per hour	\$22	\$22	\$11.70	\$11.62
Total labor costs	\$1,848	\$1,826	\$620	\$593
Purchased components & materials	\$3,650	\$3,405	\$2,858	\$2,858
Other manufacturing costs	\$650	\$730	\$350	\$350
<b>TOTAL MANUFACTURING COSTS</b>	<b>\$6,148</b>	<b>\$5,961</b>	<b>\$3,828</b>	<b>\$3,801</b>
<b>COST RATIO VERSUS MAZDA</b>	161%	156%	---	---
<b>NON-MANUFACTURING COSTS</b>				
Shipping, tariffs, etc.	\$350	\$325	\$1,100	\$1,200
<b>TOTAL COSTS</b>	<b>\$6,498</b>	<b>\$6,286</b>	<b>\$4,928</b>	<b>\$5,001</b>

<sup>20</sup> Table adapted from W.J. Abernathy, K.B. Clark, and A.M. Kantrow, *Industrial Renaissance: Producing a Competitive Future for America* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 61.

**TABLE TWO**

SOURCES OF COST-OF-PRODUCTION AND PRICE  
DIFFERENTIALS GENERAL MOTORS AND MAZDA, 1981<sup>21</sup>

GM-MAZDA	\$ DIFFERENTIAL	% OF DIFFERENTIAL
<b>MANUFACTURING COST DIFFERENTIAL</b>	\$2,133	100%
Wages and benefits	\$546	26%
Differential hours of production	\$660	31%
Cost of components	\$547	26%
<b>OTHER MANUFACTURING COSTS</b>	\$380	18%
<b>NON-MANUFACTURING COST DIFFERENTIAL</b>		
Shipping, tariffs, etc.	-\$775	
<b>SELLING COST DIFFERENTIAL</b>	\$1,358	

Because of flexible production, the Japanese auto manufacturers were producing better cars for less than two-thirds the cost of the Big Three (for example, a GM car might run \$5,961, while a comparable Mazda was \$3,828). Despite the substantial costs of US tariffs and trans-Pacific shipping (\$775) — which more than offset the lower wages in Japan — Japanese manufacturers were still able to sell a superior product for more than a thousand dollars below the six thousand charged by US manufacturers. Most significantly, the gap did not shrink over the next decades (even as Japanese wages increased and surpassed those in the United States), because the US system could not reduce the efficiency gap.

When confronted with the indisputable differences in production efficiency, US manufacturers, supported by loyal journalists and scholars, offered a slightly amended greedy-union analysis, arguing that the extra hours of production in the assembly and component plants resulted from work rules and other unproductive behavior imposed by the UAW and its members. This never-documented claim was rebutted by the arrival of Japanese and European transplant factories that seamlessly implemented flexible production with the same workers. In one perfect test case in the mid-1980s, “Toyota took over the Fremont plant, one of GM’s worst, a factory known for sex, drugs and defective vehicles. And as part of an historic joint venture, Toyota turned the plant into one of GM’s best, practically overnight.”<sup>22</sup> There was no magic to this transformation

<sup>21</sup> Calculated from Table 1 and from *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Langfitt, “The End of the Line for GM-Toyota Joint Venture,” National Public Radio, March 26, 2010, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125229157>.

except the use of the flexible production system, which included delivering the union wages and benefits to the very same workers whom GM had blamed for its production inefficiency. The experiment definitively demonstrated that the inefficient production system — not overpaid, disruptive union workers — was at the root of the cost-of-production crisis.

With such overwhelming on-the-ground evidence, why didn't the US industry reestablish flexible production and thus permanently close the cost-of-production gap? We will deal with this issue in detail below, but here we can point to the greatest barrier to reconfiguration: the massive cost of dismantling the dispersed, multisource, high-inventory system. In the 1970s, the captains of the industry opted for what appeared to be a less expensive — though ultimately unsuccessful — option: close the cost-of-production disadvantage by lowering labor costs enough to offset production inefficiency. As the statistics in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, this would require a drastic reduction in wages, to about one-third the prevailing wage (\$22 per hour) at the time of the Abernathy study. That is, if the Big Three could reduce average wages from \$22 per hour to \$7 per hour — and if shipping costs and tariffs for the Japanese were maintained — the Big Three could hope to match the prices (but not the quality) of the imports.

As incredible as this policy might seem in retrospect, it was adopted by the Big Three and vigorously pursued. Its linchpin involved accelerating the process of migration away from unionized Detroit to low-wage areas, particularly to Mexico, where wages in 1981 were as low as fifty cents an hour.<sup>23</sup> By moving a substantial portion of production across the border and demanding givebacks from US workers in Detroit and elsewhere, the Big Three sought to reach their \$7-per-hour “break-even” point and neutralize the efficiency advantage of flexible production.

Beverly Silver, in her foundational study of the class-struggle dynamics of the global auto industry, identified this strategy as a “spatial fix” in which inefficient, labor-intensive manufacturers migrated to low-wage areas in order to offset the cost-of-production advantage through more efficient competition, leaving behind devastated local economies.<sup>24</sup> As practiced by US automakers starting in the 1980s, it created a vicious circle in which the industry lurched from crisis to crisis. Each episode of new migration and union givebacks lasted until the imports set up shop in the low-wage areas and/or developed new cost-of-production advantages through the ongoing innovation inherent in

23 Rubenstein, *Changing US Auto Industry*, 243.

24 Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

flexible production. Never able to convert to flexible production, the Big Three responded to each iteration with a new round of migration and givebacks, justified by invoking the “greedy union” analysis.

### *The Rise and Decline of Flexible Production in the United States*

The initial success of the imports in the US market derived from an already massive cost-of-production advantage and the US assemblers’ failure to readopt the flexible production system. In this section we will scrutinize the fateful decision by the US industry to abandon Detroit-centered flexible production and replace it with a dispersed, multisource, high-inventory system that would later collapse under pressure from the imports.

#### THE EARLY HISTORY OF FLEXIBLE PRODUCTION IN DETROIT

Before World War I, Henry Ford’s development of the moving assembly line transformed automobile manufacturing from a boutique industry catering to a handful of wealthy sportsmen into the central sector in the American economy supplying the primary transportation for the American working class.<sup>25</sup> The development process occurred on the floor of the constantly enlarging Highland Park, Michigan, plant, with continuous collaboration among engineers, product and tool suppliers, and line workers. The interactive process yielded new tools, novel uses of existing tools, frequent reorganization of the assembly process, creative resolution of production bottlenecks, and subdivision of the work into time-commensurate sequential tasks. This constant process of collaborative change depended on sole sourcing of components and physical proximity of sub-assembly stations, as well as on just-in-time delivery and other celebrated (and enormously profitable) features of flexible production.

The most celebrated of these new features was the capacity for continuing innovation in both product design and production efficiency. Between 1910 and 1914, for example, the Ford team reduced the time for assembling the constantly evolving Model T Ford by 80 percent (from seven hours to ninety minutes) while reducing the selling price to under \$400, affordable by the typical \$15-per-week skilled worker.<sup>26</sup>

25 Among myriad accounts of this development, the most cited source is D.A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800–1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

26 National Park Service, “Highland Park Ford Plant,” *Detroit: A National Register of Historic*

By 1914, however, worker discontent reached a crescendo, focused on the combination of immiserating wages and the brutality of the constantly accelerating assembly line.<sup>27</sup> Though a series of union organizing drives, including a notable effort by the revolutionary International Workers of the World, failed to win union recognition or substantive changes, the definitive expression of workers' capacity to disrupt flexible production occurred in 1914, when the massive Highland Park plant experienced 400 percent turnover among its sixty thousand workers. While not organized as a "job action" coupled with demands for redress, each day hundreds of workers simultaneously came to the same conclusion: that the combination of taxing and dangerous working conditions at Highland Park with poverty-creating low wages constituted a very good reason to miss work or quit, especially if other, less exhausting jobs were available. As a result, on an average day as many as a thousand workstations were left unattended, creating production bottlenecks at random locations in the assembly process.

Any large system is vulnerable to organized collective action, but massive turnover and absenteeism can be absorbed without drastic disruption in institutions with autonomous and redundant structures. In the tightly coupled flexible production system Ford was developing, however, even unorganized and unfocused mass action was massively disruptive. The daily, even hourly, production stoppages, the cost of discarding masses of defective and half-completed components, the extra labor required to repair large numbers of misassembled vehicles, and the production slowdowns required to accommodate newly hired workers unfamiliar with the system all conspired to erode the productivity and profitability of the still-being-developed assembly line. The increasing tide of disruption in 1914, alongside the growing threat of union activity in Detroit, convinced Henry Ford that the viability and future of flexible production depended on creating incentives that would replace the chronic turnover with high levels of worker commitment.<sup>28</sup>

In 1915, in a radical attempt to resolve the endemic disruption, Henry Ford tripled the wage rate to five dollars per day and announced a new labor regime. The promised effort bargain included a host of other benefits that are associated in modern scholarship with flexible production systems, including a version of permanent employment in which workers were furloughed during

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*Places Travel Itinerary*, n.d., <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/detroit/d32.htm>.

27 C.F. Sorensen, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York: Norton, 1956); Hounshell, *From the American System*, chapter 6; M. Schwartz, and Drew Fish, "Just-in-Time in Old Detroit." *Business History* 40 (June 1998): 48:71.

28 Ford, *My Life and Work*.

recessions but assured rehiring when profitability returned, and a promise of cooperative rather than dictatorial relationships on the shop floor.<sup>29</sup> The high-wage regime converted positions at Ford from low-end, semiskilled jobs to the remunerative equivalent of unionized craftsmen and the most coveted job in Detroit.

This effort bargain between workers and management at Ford — hailed by journalists, politicians, and scholars as “enlightened capitalism” — diffused throughout the auto industry in the Detroit area, eliminated calamitous turnover and other disruptive expressions of worker discontent, and assured that line workers would fully participate in the shop-floor teamwork that drove the constant evolution of the flexible production system. The moral economy that emerged, in which labor and management would suffer together during bad times (for example, the vicious recession of 1919) and then prosper together in subsequent boom periods, would survive into the early part of the Great Depression.

### *The Decision to Abandon Flexible Production*

After the crash of 1929, auto sales declined by 50 percent and did not significantly revive until the late 1930s.<sup>30</sup> The Big Three nevertheless thrived; Ford and Chrysler endured only two modestly unprofitable years while General Motors recorded no losses at all, with profits surpassing the 1928 record as early as 1936. This was accomplished by wholesale abandonment of “enlightened capitalism” and a restoration of the pre-1915 work regime, including massive permanent layoffs, 50 percent reductions in annual pay for those remaining, and unprecedented speed-ups, while at the same time maintaining the pace of product and process innovation. At first, workers endured these privations as part of shared “hard times” and kept up their part of the effort bargain, including shop-floor cooperation with the many changes in production technology. They decisively rebelled, however, when their immiseration deepened even after the profitability of the Big Three was fully restored.

29 W.A. Lewchuk, “Men and Monotony: Fraternalism as a Managerial Strategy at the Ford Motor Company,” *Journal of Economic History* 53 (December 1993): 824–55; Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz, “Moral Economy, Structural Leverage, and Organizational Efficacy: Class Formation and the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike, Detroit 1936–37,” *Critical Historical Studies* 2 (2015): 219–59.

30 This discussion is based on Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz, “Moral Economy.” See also S. Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); H. Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers* (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1947).

The critical moment arrived with the 1936–37 Flint sit-down strike, which is remembered as the strike that paved the way for industrial unionization in the United States.<sup>31</sup> It was equally significant for conclusively proving that the tight coupling of flexible production systems meant that a small number of workers strategically placed at production bottlenecks could almost instantly cripple production. In the case of Flint, the assembly-line workers targeted what GM executives and workers referred to as “mother plants” — factories that made essential parts for most or all of GM’s models. Henry Krause, the editor of the *Flint Auto Worker* newspaper and a key UAW organizer, described the meticulous logic that informed this choice:

The union’s strategy held that the chief burden of the strike must be borne by Flint’s Fisher One and by Cleveland-Fisher, with the former taking the lead. . . . In particular, the great dies and enormous presses needed to stamp out the mammoth simplified units of the new “turret top” bodies were concentrated in the Cleveland and Flint body plants. Possibly three-fourths or more of the corporations’ production were consequently dependent on these two plants; an interlocking arrangement that was not unusual.<sup>32</sup>

After this strategy worked to close down virtually all GM production within three days, and — after two months of confrontation — won the auto workers union representation at GM, the UAW targeted defeated Chrysler. As companies across the Detroit region capitulated, the virulently antiunion Ford management recognized that workers had the club hand and negotiated a settlement without a strike.

Soon after the settlement of the Flint strike, GM replicated a portion of Flint’s engine and axle production in Buffalo, New York, explaining the move as an effort “to get away from labor-torn Flint.” Beyond recruiting what it hoped would be a workforce less prone to disruption, the move would also provide an alternate source for engines and axles, thus lessening “the impact of a strike at a particular plant.”<sup>33</sup> The epicenter of the Flint strike was no longer a “mother plant,” meaning that the “choke points” there were neutralized — the Buffalo plant could prevent system-wide production stoppages triggered by work stoppages at the (previously) bottleneck workstations at Flint.

31 Fine, *Sit-Down*; Silver, *Forces of Labor*.

32 Kraus, *Many and the Few*, 79.

33 A.J. Kuhn, *GM Passes Ford, 1918–1938: Designing the General Motors Performance Control System* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 148–49.

World War II delayed the implementation of this strategy, particularly because the flexible production methods were crucial to the massive retooling involved in transitioning to war production (no automobiles were manufactured between 1942 and 1945); implementing the evolving designs for trucks, tanks, and airplanes; and answering the government's demands for ever-increasing production. At the same time, the vulnerabilities of flexible production to worker discontent became a major issue when management began relying on unremunerated labor intensification rather than production innovation to meet demands for increased production. In the early 1930s, it had taken nearly seven years before workers rebelled against such speed-ups.<sup>34</sup> This time, management expected the "no-strike" pledge — promulgated by President Franklin Roosevelt himself and rigorously supported by the UAW leadership — to forestall production disruption by channeling labor complaints into the federal mediation process.<sup>35</sup>

But, with the industry fully organized and shop-floor workers willing to disobey local and national UAW leadership, quiescence lasted only six months. During the 1940s, which included conversions into and out of war production during World War II (testimony to the remarkable flexibility of the system), the auto workers — joined by workers in all the core industries — utilized production-crippling sit-downs (mostly wildcat strikes initiated without union leadership) to enforce union contracts and exercise a kind of veto power over unremunerated or debilitating intensification of production. In the second half of 1942, *Monthly Labor Review* counted nearly three thousand strikes in the United States, followed by further increases in 1943 and reaching a crescendo of 4,956 strikes in 1944.<sup>36</sup> Sociologists Jerome Scott and George Homans conclude that the total was "greater in number . . . than any other year of the country's history."<sup>37</sup> After a hiatus in 1945 — and the end of the no-strike pledge — the peace-transition year of 1946 took its place as the biggest strike year in US history.

During this decade workers thus learned that they must exploit their power in order to force management to comply with the axiom of shared sacrifice and shared reward. This lesson crystallized into a collective decision by the unions to replace their pre-Depression trust in management with the daily threat of

34 Joshua Murray and Michael Schwartz, *The Rise and Fall of Detroit: How the American Automobile Industry Destroyed its Capacity to Compete* (New York: Russell Sage, forthcoming in 2017); M. Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick, 1980); Fine, *Sit-Down*.

35 Murray and Schwartz, "Moral Economy."

36 While this number reflects strikes in all industries, auto was the leader.

37 Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*.

utilizing their structural leverage — and the disruption that activated it — to prevent any nonnegotiated changes in wages, working conditions, and — most critically — unremunerated speed-ups.

Auto industry executives reluctantly began to reinstitute part of the effort bargain, realizing that much higher remuneration would be needed to quiet the protest. They began restoring much of the pre-Depression wage and benefits packages. But it was that assertion of partial worker control that was most troubling to GM CEO Alfred P. Sloan, who spoke for the industry when he wrote: “Our rights to determine production schedules, to set work standards, and to discipline workers were all suddenly called into question.”<sup>38</sup>

The choice to disperse production was thus animated by the determination to preserve unconstrained management power. To put it bluntly, management chose to restructure the industry in order to stop their workers from constraining management’s autonomy over the work process. James Rubenstein’s definitive study of auto-industry geography documents the rigor with which the Big Three pursued this strategy between 1947 and 1962, a period of massive expansion. They located virtually all new plants outside southern Michigan, while establishing at least two widely separated plants to fabricate each component. At the same time, they shuttered scores of Detroit-area plants, yielding a decline of 134,000 Detroit industry jobs.<sup>39</sup>

This strategy was not animated by market or profit pressures, nor by a commitment to further increasing productivity. The US auto industry was at the zenith of world capitalism in profitability and market dominance. During the late 1940s and throughout 1950s, the Big Three’s market share exceeded 90 percent, GM and Ford were ranked number one and number three in the Fortune 500, and GM became the first company to register \$1 billion in profits.<sup>40</sup>

So why were the captains of the auto industry willing to sacrifice the innovative dynamic of flexible production and future increases in labor productivity in order to achieve unfettered power over the production process? This choice illustrates the larger principle best enunciated by Dan Clawson and Harry Braverman: production methodology decisions are often designed to enhance

38 A.P. Sloan Jr., *My Years with General Motors* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 406.

39 Abernathy, *Productivity Dilemma*.

40 *Wards Auto*, “U.S. Vehicle Sales Market Share by Company, 1961–2015,” January 22, 2016, <http://wardsauto.com/datasheet/us-vehicle-sales-market-share-company-1961-2014>. *Fortune*, “Fortune 500: A Database of 50 Years of *Fortune*’s List of America’s Largest Corporations,” accessed October 7, 2016, at [http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500\\_archive/full/1955](http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500_archive/full/1955); *TIME*, “Earnings, Past the Billion Mark,” November 7, 1955, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,807967,00.html>.

management control of the production process — and therefore capitalists' share of the surplus. These sorts of innovation are not necessarily “labor saving.” In fact, they often result in decreased efficiency — that is, they increase the amount of labor needed to produce the product, either through more labor hours or increased intensity of labor.<sup>41</sup>

The choice for power over productivity must be understood in its larger competitive context. Even though the shift to dispersed production slowed, and to some extent even reversed, the previously rapid growth of production efficiency, the absence of outside competition meant that the industry suffered no loss of profits or market share as the production structure ossified. By the mid-1950s, the US auto industry had stopped improving the quality of its offerings, instead using cosmetic changes and Madison Avenue to convince the public that its products were better than ever. Whether or not Big Three executives understood that they had sacrificed flexible production or simply saw this process as the “maturation” of the industry, they were not — at the time — confronted with the implications of their “class struggle” strategy. It would be twenty years before its significance was made clear.

In the meantime, in Japan and Europe, flexible production began to flourish. In 1950, Eiji Toyoda, the architect of Toyotaism, visited the Ford plant at River Rouge, Michigan, and returned home determined to emulate flexible production. Over the next twenty years, Toyotaism diffused throughout the Japanese industry, while German and Swedish automakers applied principles from the GM and Ford plants that had arrived in the 1920s. It is important to note that in both Europe and Japan, the automakers *explicitly* accepted institutionalized constraints on what Sloan had called “our rights to determine production schedules, to set work standards, and to discipline workers,”<sup>42</sup> perhaps best exemplified by Toyota's instituting pull cords that allowed all assembly-line workers to stop production if they could not keep up.

By the late 1960s, the Big Three were fully rooted in the inflexible, dispersed, and decoupled production system they had created and could implement neither the superior design features of the foreign automobiles (ranging from clocks that worked to huge gas-mileage advantages) nor their vastly more efficient production methods. As their immense fixed costs made

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41 D. Clawson, *Class Struggle and the Rise of Bureaucracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

42 Sloan, *My Years*, 406.

efforts at flexibility too expensive, the Big Three found that lowering wage packages was the only quickly profitable way to overcome their production inefficiency. This turned the already-well-established process of abandoning Detroit into a tidal wave of manufacturing migration, first to low-wage (nonunion) areas inside the United States, and then to Mexico and other foreign destinations.<sup>43</sup>

### *On the Superiority of Flexible Production*

We return now to the dramatic price and quality advantages that fueled the invasion of Japanese and European imports into the US market, and analyze the vulnerability of the US system — called “mass production” in those days — to this cycle of “creative destruction.”

#### WHY IS FLEXIBLE PRODUCTION MORE PRODUCTIVE?

The complex contrast between dispersed mass production and geographically concentrated flexible production can be compressed into three intertwined dimensions: flexibility, production networks, and labor process.<sup>44</sup> We begin with *flexibility*:

- ▲ Flexible production produces an evolving variety of products that satisfy the nuances of consumer demand.
- ▼ Mass production creates standardized products that appeal to large proportions of the market.
- ▲ Flexible production utilizes continuous innovation to increase productive efficiency and change the mix of products.
- ▼ Mass production utilizes stable technology and long production runs to reduce the cost of production.
- ▲ Flexible production utilizes multipurpose machines, which requires collaborative interaction among product designers, production engineers, and (increasingly skilled) production personnel.

43 Rubenstein, *Changing US Auto Industry*.

44 This comparison of flexible production and mass production is taken from R. Florida and M. Kenney, “Transplanted Organizations: The Transfer of Japanese Industrial Organization to the U.S.,” *American Sociological Review* 56 (June 1991): 381–98; Piore and Sabel, *Second Industrial Divide*; Rubenstein, *Changing US Auto Industry*; Abernathy et al., *Industrial Renaissance*; and M. Schwartz, “Japanese Enterprise Groups: Some American Parallels,” *Shoken Keizai*, no. 180 (1992): 123–32.

- ▼ Mass production utilizes single-purpose machines in multiyear production runs, during which workers follow rigid routines established by production engineers.

This contrast in flexibility interacts with a parallel contrast in *production networks*:

- ▲ Flexible production relies on spatially concentrated and tightly coupled production complexes connected by collaborative relationships among separate plants, seeking to continuously enhance efficiency through modification of machinery and methods while sustaining just-in-time delivery and low rates of defects.
- ▼ Mass production utilizes multisourcing, decoupled networks, competitive supply contracts, and large inventories of standardized components, seeking to minimize costs and create a buffer against disruption.
- ▲ Flexible production involves long-term sole-sourcing relationships with component suppliers who invest in continuous innovation.
- ▼ Mass production utilizes low-bid short-term contracts among multiple suppliers, utilizing slow-changing buyer-supplied designs.

The flexibility and production network differences interact with contrasting *labor processes*:

- ▲ Flexible production relies on cooperative relationships among workers, technical professionals, and management, with any breakdown in this collaboration slowing change and disrupting production.
- ▼ Mass production, with decoupled production and process stability, relies on close supervision rather than cooperative collaboration to ensure labor productivity.
- ▲ Flexible production must offer rich rewards to production workers to forestall the disruption of uncommitted workers and maintain the trajectory of continuous increases in production efficiency.
- ▼ Mass production, insulated from disruptive worker discontent by decoupled multisourcing and rigorous supervision, can increase productivity through close supervision and unremunerated intensification of production.

- ▲ Flexible production achieves enhanced profitability primarily through increased production efficiency while enskilling and rewarding line workers.
- ▼ Mass production achieves enhanced profitability primarily through reducing cost of labor, and through unremunerated increases in the speed of production (speed-ups).

#### HOW DOES FLEXIBLE PRODUCTION LEAD TO LOWER COSTS?

The tightly coupled, geographically dispersed, and multilateral cooperative relationships in flexible production enable the trial and error essential to both product and process innovation. With suppliers clustered around assembly, redesigned parts can be constructed, modified, and produced with minimal time lost. With committed skilled workers, new machines or configurations can be quickly integrated and mastered. With minimal just-in-time inventories, even drastic changes do not involve discarding stockpiles of suddenly obsolescent parts.

In a mass production system, the costs of innovation are often prohibitive. It may be too costly to implement an efficient new production method if it requires integrating processes separated by hundreds of miles. Spatial separation and worker hostility make cooperative trial-and-error innovation impractical, forcing the creation of expensive design facilities far from the site of production and major shutdowns during the implementation process. Innovation is further slowed by large stockpiles, forcing delays in implementation until obsolescent inventory is exhausted.

The importance of these key dimensions of flexible production resulted in the \$2,200 cost-of-production differential discussed above. As Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, contrasting *labor processes* were a major source of this differential: Mazda saved \$546 per car because its continuously improved manufacturing process reduced labor time by thirty hours, while GM had eschewed production efficiency in favor increasing profits through control and reduction of the price of labor. Contrasting *production networks* yielded similar differences: Mazda paid \$547 per car less for component parts, a consequence of two decades of cooperative, innovative relationships with its suppliers, while GM eschewed lower component costs and used competitive short-term supply contracts to prevent cost increases. *Flexibility* at Mazda — in addition to its role in labor processes and production networks — generated additional savings: Mazda saved \$380

per car compared to GM by using just-in-time inventories, flexible machinery, and other features that made change less frictional, while GM built expensive new facilities to accommodate six-month inventories and postponed cost-saving innovations that inflexible machines could not accommodate.

Our analysis of the superiority of flexible production is not new; it was fully documented by the first generation of scholars studying the indisputable contrast in product quality and production efficiency between US and foreign assemblers.<sup>45</sup>

The linchpin of this literature was a specially designed index developed by Abernathy's MIT project, which tracked the rate of innovation in the US auto industry from 1920 to 1972.<sup>46</sup> That index demonstrated that the rate of innovation during the pinnacle of flexible production (1920 to 1936) was twice that of the period when flexible production was abandoned (1952 to 1972). This decline coincided with the ascendancy of flexible production in Japan and Europe, graphically illustrating the source of the 1980 differences between GM and Mazda.

Perhaps the most important single instance of failed innovation during this critical period involved unit body construction, an innovation that made bodies stronger, lighter, and less expensive to assemble and that was a necessary prerequisite for conversion to fuel-efficient small cars.<sup>47</sup> European and Japanese assemblers reconfigured their tightly connected flexible systems to accommodate this innovation in the 1960s, reducing production costs immediately and beginning the sustained drive toward increased fuel efficiency. The Big Three, on the other hand, aborted implementation when it became apparent that they would have to concentrate production in Detroit and shutter many of their newly constructed production facilities in low-wage areas of the United States.

In the oil-crisis years of the 1970s, the US industry was poorly positioned to begin developing the fuel-efficient automobiles that the market demanded. Converting to small, fuel-efficient models would require rapid change in addition to the hugely expensive conversion to unit body. This intractability — after aborted efforts at cut-rate conversion — led the Big Three to import flexibly produced small cars manufactured by their European subsidiaries or Japanese

<sup>45</sup> The most comprehensive analysis can be found in Kenney and Florida, *Beyond Mass Production*, chapter 5; and Florida and Kenney, "Transplanted Organizations."

<sup>46</sup> Abernathy et al., *Industrial Renaissance*, 152–214. The researchers coded every innovation introduced from 1914 onward. They divided all innovations into four categories: drive train, process and assembly, body and chassis, miscellaneous, and then weighted them on a seven-point transience scale (1 = little to no impact on the production process, 7 = very disruptive to products or processes). They then divided the history into major epochs and computed an innovation scale for each.

<sup>47</sup> Abernathy et al., *Industrial Renaissance*.

competition.<sup>48</sup> Decades later, when the Big Three had still failed — despite numerous efforts — to produce a competitive small car in their dispersed North American plants, Ford repeated this strategy, adapting two of its European models, the Focus and Fiesta, for North American sale.<sup>49</sup> In 2010, Big Three trucks still had not converted to unit body construction.

We turn now to two follow-on questions: Why hasn't class conflict caused the Japanese to abandon flexible production, and why didn't the Big Three reestablish flexible production when the source of their competitive crisis became clear?

### *Why Did The Japanese And Europeans Maintain Flexible Production?*

The product life cycle perspective, the hegemonic theory of industrial organization during the 1980s, offered a narrative of industry maturation that portrayed the ossification of US auto production as virtually inevitable.<sup>50</sup> In this narrative, the pace of innovation ebbed in all dynamic industries, but the concessions extracted by structurally empowered workers continued unabated, causing a profitability crisis. This compelled a trend toward stabilized product design and production methods, a process that took shape in auto — according to this view — through dispersed and decoupled production.

In the 1980s, this evolutionary description comported with the histories of many US core industries, including auto, steel, chemicals, and construction. Even then, however, some industries violated the rule; the computer industry, for example, continued to evolve. Moreover, auto itself disconfirmed this narrative in two ways. First, in 1914, there was the stalled innovation and profitability crisis signaled by 400 percent turnover at Ford, as discussed earlier; instead of following the maturation narrative to product and process stability, Henry Ford instituted reforms, restoring worker commitment, preserving flexibility, and triggering a two-decade continuation of dynamic innovation.

The second auto-industry violation of the maturation narrative is that flexible production — including unabated concessions to workers and dramatic

48 Murray and Schwartz, "Moral Economy."

49 A. Taylor, *Sixty to Zero: An Inside Look at the Collapse of General Motors — and the Detroit Auto Industry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 238.

50 R.T. Vernon, "International Investment and International Trade in the Product Life Cycle," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 80 (May 1966): 190–207.

innovation — continued for sixty years in Japan and Europe. Toyota, the vanguard of the imports, not only eschewed the “maturation” transition to product and process stability in Japan, it also pioneered exporting the full system to the United States and Europe. In 2012, when Toyota produced 60 percent of all its cars outside of Japan,<sup>51</sup> it operated self-sufficient, geographically concentrated flexible production complexes on three continents and continued to reap the rewards of flexibility four decades after entering the world market.

These events disconfirm the inevitable maturation narrative. Why, then, did US assemblers march down the road to stability? Two elements explain this evolution in industry dynamics: the conviction among foreign executives — not shared by US top management — that flexible production was essential for continued competitiveness; and the conviction among US industry executives — not shared in Japanese and European executives — that accepting workers’ influence over production would ultimately become untenable.

Consider the contrasting attitudes between US and foreign auto executives toward the importance of flexible production. Philip Caldwell, a top manager at Ford during the abandonment of flexible production and the company’s CEO during the import crisis, spoke for the industry as a whole in 1983 when he told *Automotive Quarterly* that there were no meaningful differences between the Japanese and US production structures:

Eiji Toyoda told me himself in Tokyo, last year, there was no mystery to the development of Toyota in Japan. He merely came to see the Ford Rouge Plant in 1950 — and then went back to Japan and built the same thing.<sup>52</sup>

Caldwell thus had no understanding that the dispersed and decoupled system he presided over in the 1980s was fundamentally different from the fully concentrated flexible system Eiji Toyoda observed at River Rouge and emulated in Japan. Most significantly, he could not appreciate that it was this contrast that accounted for the competitive disadvantage his company suffered.

William Abernathy remarked on this same ignorance when he lamented the casual way the Big Three had abandoned flexible production:

<sup>51</sup> Toyota, “Vehicle Production, Sales and Export by Region,” accessed October 7, 2016 at [http://www.toyota-global.com/company/profile/figures/vehicle\\_production\\_sales\\_and\\_exports\\_by\\_region.html](http://www.toyota-global.com/company/profile/figures/vehicle_production_sales_and_exports_by_region.html)

<sup>52</sup> Cited in J.P. Womack, D.T. Jones, and D. Roos, *The Machine that Changed the World* (New York: Maxwell MacMillan International, 1990).

American manufacturers have long shared in a rich patrimony that needed only diligent care and attention to confer great benefits. But for reasons that might at the time have seemed excellent, they turned away from that inheritance.<sup>53</sup>

This lack of appreciation for the “great benefits” of flexible production does not, by itself, explain its abandonment in the United States, especially since the rate of innovation had not slowed and there was no profitability crisis to impel a search for change. As we have documented above, the shift to dispersed production was impelled by the Big Three’s determination to defeat the structural power of their workers.

But why weren’t the Japanese manufacturers similarly impelled? Many early analysts attributed the lack of disruptive rebellion in Japan to the docile culture of the Japanese workforce, thus allowing the continuation of flexible production. This cultural assumption was simply wrong; Japanese workers had been ferociously rebellious until management conceded the same sort of pacifying concessions Henry Ford had granted.<sup>54</sup> As in the United States, Japanese auto-workers had been organized by Communists committed to using their structural power to extract high wages and ameliorate the intensity of the production process. This culminated in a long 1953 strike that — though ultimately defeated — paralyzed Toyota and signaled an era of chronic production disruption.

Eiji Toyoda understood the significance of these events: he could — like Henry Ford — offer concessions that would produce long-term labor peace, or he could — like the Big Three after World War II — negotiate short-term wage settlements while implementing production changes that would undermine the workers’ ability to disrupt. Choosing Henry Ford’s “enlightened capitalism,” Toyoda instituted a moral economy surprisingly similar to that which existed during the 1920s in the United States. In exchange for commitment to the flexible production system, including eschewing disruptive protest against the ongoing rigors of the line and material sacrifices during periodic hard times, the workers would share in the rewards of prosperity and retain a degree of veto power over innovations that intolerably intensified the labor process.

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<sup>53</sup> Abernathy et al., *Industrial Renaissance*, 79. For a comprehensive analysis of the abandoned “patrimony,” see S.R. Helper, “Strategy and Irreversibility in Supplier Relations: The Case of the U.S. Automotive Industry,” *Business History Review* 65 (Winter 1991): 781–824.

<sup>54</sup> This account is taken from C. Berggren, *Alternatives to Lean Production: Work Organization in the Swedish Auto Industry* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992); see also Murray and Schwartz, “Moral Economy.”

Toyota's management made no effort to conceal the fact that the concessions to worker welfare and power contained in the new effort bargain were a result of the strike. They saw them as necessary, because without them they could not continue developing the flexible production system that made them competitive in the Japanese and global markets. Toyoda simply acknowledged, as Howard Kimeldorf has aptly put it, that the workers had "increased the costs of disruption to the point that . . . [there was] little economic advantage in continued resistance."<sup>55</sup> That this understanding remained intact over the subsequent sixty years was most visible when Japanese companies arrived in the United States; Toyota offered its US workers above-market wages and the other guarantees pioneered in Toyota City, whether or not the workers had union protection. In doing so, they immunized themselves from the chronic disruptions US assemblers had suffered with the same workforce.<sup>56</sup>

Studies of Japanese managerial practices documented the contrasting work processes after thirty years of divergent evolution, culminating in the Japanese invasion of the US market during the 1970s.<sup>57</sup> Scholars settled on three sets of virtues that distinguished Toyotism from mass production: lifetime employment, work teams, and worker-management cooperation — precisely the aspects of workers' demands that GM CEO Alfred Sloan had declared an unacceptable infringement on management "rights . . . to determine production schedules, to set work standards, and to discipline workers."<sup>58</sup> Despite the dire consequences Sloan anticipated, the Japanese and European executives accepted these constraints and adhered to the underlying moral economy they implied, and the Japanese arrived in the US market with superior products selling for \$2,000 less than automobiles produced under full management autonomy.

The labor regime that developed at Toyota and elsewhere did not create a labor utopia on the assembly line; this lack of perfection perhaps explains the

55 H. Kimeldorf, "Worker Replacement Costs and Unionization: Origins of the U.S. Labor Movement," *American Sociological Review* vol. 78, no. 6 (2013): 1055.

56 Silver, *Forces of Labor*, 67; Kenney and Florida, *Beyond Mass Production*.

57 For a thorough analysis of the Japanese labor system, see Kenney and Florida, *Beyond Mass Production*: chapters 2 and 3, particularly pages 36–46; W.G. Ouchi, *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1981); Womack et al., *The Machine*; and A. Altshuler, M. Anderson, D. Jones, D. Roos, and J. Womack, *The Future of the Automobile: The Report of MIT's International Automobile Program* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984). See also R.W. Hall, *Driving the Productivity Machine: Production and Control in Japan* (Falls Church, VA: American Production and Inventory Control Society, 1981); Abernathy et al., *Industrial Renaissance*; L. Armstrong, "Frugal, Reclusive Commanders of an Industrial Army," *Businessweek* (November 4, 1985): 45–46.

58 Sloan, *My Years*, 406.

failure of Sloan's dire prediction. Consider Christian Berggren's catalogue of oppressive elements in Toyotatism.<sup>59</sup> First, despite the work groups, the intense division of labor into simple tasks forced workers to endure hours of mind-numbing repetition; second, the speed of the line and arduousness of the work stressed the workers' physical and emotional capacities; third, collective performance responsibilities did not ameliorate brutal competition for promotion; and fourth, cooperative decision-making constrained but did not eliminate management's ability to institute unremunerated labor intensification.

Perhaps Sloan failed to appreciate the moderation of actual worker-demanded concessions. The effort bargain that Toyota workers honored for more than sixty years — and the one that US auto workers fought to restore after the immiserating Depression experience and the successful 1937 Flint strike — involved accepting the taxing, often brutal aspects of flexible production. In exchange they received a “fair” share in the rewards of the system: very high wages for semiskilled labor, a form of job security generally reserved for elite professionals, and the power to ameliorate the worst aspects of intensified production. The longevity of flexible production at Toyota (and elsewhere in Japan and Europe) thus constituted management's choice made to implement substantial concessions — and endure the costs of these concessions during industry recessions — in exchange for workers enduring the rigors of the system without chronically activating their (ever-present) structural leverage.

What, then, was at stake after World War II in the confrontation between US auto management and workers? Management was determined to maintain unfettered access to mass layoffs, wage decreases, and unremunerated labor intensification as a device for maintaining or increasing profits. Sloan and his colleagues understood that institutionalizing lifetime employment, work teams, and worker-management cooperation would preclude utilizing the early Depression strategy for maintaining profitability during a crisis and that the militant, unionized Detroit workers would not wait six years to activate their structural leverage to defend themselves and enforce the “shared sacrifice” aspect of the moral economy. In the prosperous postwar world, US auto management was willing to grant wage concessions but not to compromise on their prerogative to place the burden on workers during periods of low demand.

In preserving their autonomy, however, US manufacturers abandoned flexible production at the very moment when the rest of the automobile world was

59 Berggren, *Alternatives to Lean Production*.

adopting it. Caldwell's comments demonstrate that they did not appreciate that they were fundamentally changing production structure. Had they understood the long-term consequences, they might have decided to grant these concessions to their workers in exchange for preserving a trajectory of innovation. If they had, they might have experienced less profitable years during subsequent recessions — and they might have avoided the competitive crisis.

### *Path Dependence & the Inability to Reinstitute Flexible Production*

If a lack of foresight — combined with a determination to defeat workers' leverage over management decision-making — led the US assemblers to abandon flexible production, why couldn't hindsight, hard earned in the crises of the 1970s, animate a reverse transformation?

US automakers actually did try to reintegrate flexible principles into their production systems. These efforts were fatally slowed and ultimately undermined by management's unwillingness (or financial incapacity) to write off the huge fixed costs of the parallel production facilities scattered around North America, as well as to discard the massive stockpiles of suddenly obsolescent parts. These limits on the scope of flexibility initiatives were further constrained by the Big Three's attempts to quickly close the \$2,000-per-car production-cost differential by doubling down on their twenty-year-old strategy of lowering labor costs through moving plants to low-wage destinations while demanding wage and benefit givebacks at unionized plants. This accelerated labor immiseration interacted with the return of empowering elements of flexibility to set in motion new rounds of disruptive protest, which management then processed as proof that flexibility could not be reinstated.

A typical early example of these half-measures was GM's attempt to establish tight coordination among parts facilities, component suppliers, and final assembly plants along Auto Alley, the thousand-mile corridor between Detroit and Mobile, Alabama.<sup>60</sup> The vast distances precluded full implementation of just-in-time inventories and collaborative innovation, and the hoped-for cost reductions did not materialize. GM then resorted to cutting labor costs by moving final assembly to Mexico, ending the experiment.

GM's far more ambitious billion-dollar project, aimed at developing and producing the newly-designed J-body Chevrolet Cavalier and Pontiac Sunfire,

<sup>60</sup> Rubenstein, *Changing US Auto Industry*.

highlights the path-dependent ossification created by twenty years of dispersed parallel production and exacerbated by the self-defeating strategy of combining flexibility with labor immiseration.<sup>61</sup> The centerpiece of this experiment was implementing the tight coupling and cooperative work groups essential to flexibility in the troubled stamping plant in Lordstown, Ohio.<sup>62</sup> But GM was unwilling (or unable) to absorb the huge expense involved in reconcentrating the rest of the production complex, because recentralization required shuttering the (recently completed) low-labor-cost plant in Ramos Arizpe, Mexico, and expanding (at significant cost) its sister Lansing, Michigan, plant, with its higher labor costs. In leaving the dispersed, multisourced production complex intact, GM essentially sought to implement “flexible production in one plant.”

The experiment died at birth. The dispersed structure dramatically slowed the “trial and error” process of maximizing production efficiency for the new models. The J-cars reached the dealers months behind schedule, costing the company \$2 billion in lost sales and 1 percent of their ever-declining market share. After production began, newly arising kinks in the system in one locale often required bringing together personnel from facilities separated by as much as 1,900 miles before they could be corrected, producing downtime while changes were made upstream and downstream. Transport and coordination glitches created chaos with just-in-time deliveries and endemic downstream shutdowns, particularly in Ramos Arizpe. Underlying all these problems lay the lack of commitment among the non-Lordstown workers who had been excluded from the flexible production effort bargain; their alienation caused disruptions that percolated through the system. Richard Wagoner, the executive in charge, conceded that GM should have created a tightly coupled production complex: “If it had been the same plant, same processes, and same productivity it would have been easy.”<sup>63</sup>

Wagoner’s comment brings into focus the series of path-dependent choices made over half a century, starting in 1929, when Big Three management chose to break the effort bargain. Workers did not call them to account until the 1936 Flint strike, but during the ensuing decade made it clear that they could and would enforce the effort bargain themselves, utilizing the structural leverage inherent in the flexible system. While management did respond to wage and benefit demands, conceding to the union a substantial share of the surplus generated by flexible

61 This account of the J-Body at Lordstown initiative is based on T. Keenan, D. Smith, and J. Lowell, “The Story Behind GM’s Costly J-Car Launch,” *Wards Auto* (April 1, 1995); and Taylor, *Sixty to Zero*.

62 Taylor, *Sixty to Zero*.

63 Keenan et al., “Story Behind GM’s Costly J-Car Launch.”

production, they hardened in their determination to retain the unfettered control of the production process that they had exercised in the early Depression, which had allowed them to transfer the brunt of the sacrifice to the workers.

The transformation they undertook to achieve this unfettered autonomy set the industry on the path to ossification, a path that could have been avoided by sharing power with workers. This path involved huge investments in inflexible plants and machinery, slowing the rate of innovation in product design and production methodology, and relying on labor intensification to increase productivity. When the imports arrived, this path had become a paved highway with few exits.

Unwilling to absorb the huge transitional losses needed to reestablish flexible production, Big Three management resorted to accelerating the class war. But this strategy was inherently temporary because flexible production continuously produces new production efficiencies that restore the cost differential, while the depressed wages pioneered by the Big Three allowed the imports to pay lower wages as well.

The 40 percent decline in US auto-industry market share between 1975 and 2015 was fueled by this process. Each round of market-share losses triggered another round of migration to ever lower-wage areas, and — following the next round of innovation — a new round of market-share losses. By 2016, the Big Three had remained viable only because of repeated bailouts by taxpayers and government-sponsored labor givebacks. In the meantime, Detroit, Flint, and the other once-prosperous auto-manufacturing centers had become the most painfully visible collateral damage of management's seventy-year war against worker empowerment.

### *Analysis and Conclusion*

Geographically compact centers of flexible production are common in the history and geography of industrial development. Their key features and dynamics have been documented in many different industries, most forcefully analyzed by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel's *The Second Industrial Divide* and Michael Storper and Robert Walker's *The Capitalist Imperative*.<sup>64</sup> This extensive literature makes clear that the history of Detroit, however unique in its particulars, is an example from which we can extract important insights into the forces that tend to sustain or degrade flexible production. More importantly, we can extract

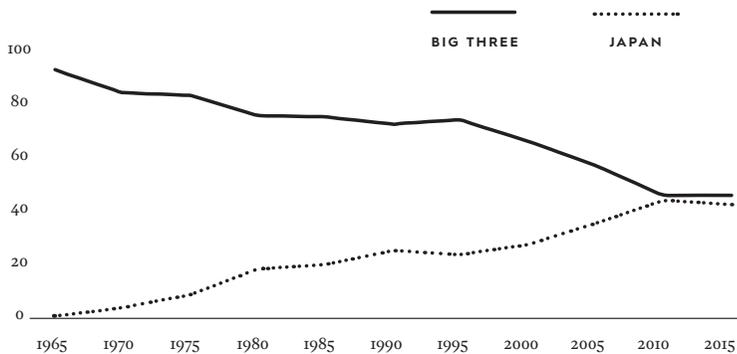
64 See also Silver, *Forces of Labor*; Helper, "Strategy and Irreversibility," Sabel and Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives."

conclusions about the agency needed to maintain the leverage of workers and therefore countervail the endemic tendency of management to dismantle the innovative virtues of the system and immiserate the host communities.

At each moment in this history, human agency—initiated mostly by management, but also by labor—introduced changes in the existing structure, chosen from a set of limited options, and thus created a new reality with new sets of options. The cumulative results produced the constrained choices faced by the Big Three when the imports arrived, which set the parameters for fifty years of virtual and actual bankruptcy. Figure 1 illustrates the US decline and concomitant Japanese ascent.

### FIGURE ONE

BIG THREE AND JAPANESE AUTOMOBILE MARKET SHARE IN THE UNITED STATES, 1970-2015



The first thing to note about Figure 1 is that in 1965 the Big Three still controlled 90 percent of the US market. They had broken the effort bargain thirty-five years earlier and had not suffered any market-share consequences for this breach. General Motors began dispersing production in 1938; by 1955 all of the Big Three had dispersed production and given up the virtues of the flexible system. Thus, we can see very clearly that the decision to violate the industry’s moral economy worked well for management for more than thirty years, and the decision to abandon flexible production paid off for over a decade.

Figure 1 also illustrates, however, that those decisions set in place a production structure that could not compete with foreign companies using flexible production. Starting in 1965, when Japanese companies first entered the market, the Big Three began to “bleed out.” Over the next fifty years, Ford, GM, and Chrysler—despite

drastic structural reorganization and repeated infusions of corporate welfare—saw a steady, seemingly inevitable, loss of market share. The flexible Japanese automakers, on the other hand, enjoyed a steady, seemingly inevitable increase.

Understanding the points of inflection in this path to the demise of the US auto industry and the even more spectacular decline of Detroit allows us to determine when and if human agency could have created a different path that would have preserved flexible production and avoided the subsequent calamities. We turn, therefore, to the first inflection point: management's choice to abrogate elements of the 1920s effort bargain — and risk the collapse of flexibility — in order to transfer early Depression “sacrifice” to the workers, even while applying and benefitting from flexible production. This choice highlights an underanalyzed trait of capitalism: Creative destruction does not necessarily produce greater efficiency, though the system's compulsions place immense pressure on management to maximize profits. This compulsion leads to engaging in ferocious class warfare when it promises to protect or increase profits, even when it involves abandoning previously serviceable production structures. In many circumstances, the collateral damage of these choices (in auto, the loss of efficiency and slowing of innovation) is either invisible to top management, or — when visible — has little discernible impact on (short-term or even long-term) corporate profitability or viability. In the auto industry — and many other US core industries — this choice of class struggle has resulted in locked-in structural arrangements that guaranteed industrial decline and collapse.<sup>65</sup>

By World War II, this propensity had become ingrained in management strategy and was particularly salient when they attempted to combine unremunerated labor intensification while utilizing flexibility to convert to war production. The combination produced massive disruptions in wartime production as the workers applied their fully activated structural leverage to exercise control over changes in the work process.

Then, starting in the late 1940s, management sought to eliminate workers' power to resist process changes — and thus assure the long-term availability of these profit-making measures — by transforming a production structure that had empowered workers, but also dismantling the flexible system that had projected auto to the pinnacle of world capitalism. This clarifies that auto industry management made real choices that engineered the demise of flexibility, and that the pressure of the capitalist system to maximize profitability animated this choice.

65 Clawson, *Class Struggle and the Rise of Bureaucracy*; Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*.

But it is also important to note that this was a strategic choice and not an inevitable, market-dictated response. To see this, we need to look past the twenty years of record Big Three profits during and after dismantling flexible production. One might argue that the class-struggle decision (and abandonment of flexibility) represents farsightedness by management and that it produced both short *and* long-term profits until an unknowable thing happened — foreign competition using flexible production arrived.

We believe that this argument, while plausible, misses a key dynamic of the auto industry in the United States and of capitalism more generally. All decisions about major investment in fixed capital (auto plants in particular) constitute judgments about uncertain futures and therefore give agency to those making decisions over capital flows. The top management of the Big Three *were not compelled* by markets, profit concerns, or other structural compulsions to abandon flexible production. Instead they *chose* this option among several they could have adopted.

To document the discretionary component of this decision, we note that GM began restructuring production immediately after the Flint strike. Alfred Sloan and his management team paused this dispersal because the onset of World War II forced them to utilize the incredible flexibility of the Detroit production culture to retool for military production; they expected the no-strike pledge to neutralize the disruptive control of the workers and therefore allow them to apply early-Depression labor intensification strategies. This stalled the already-decided-upon abandonment of flexible production.

The success of wildcat strikes in resisting speedups during World War II, while reconfirming management's judgment that only reconfiguring production would eliminate worker leverage, also definitively demonstrated that the auto industry could be massively profitable even in the context of fully expressed worker power. Thus, it affirmed the innovative and labor-saving features of flexible production as an engine for increasing profitability. As the Big Three exited the war years, they had a clear choice, as did the Japanese and European assemblers: whether to acknowledge and institutionalize worker leverage in the production process and expect to increase profits through continued innovation in product and production process, or to seek increases in profits through reduced labor costs. There could not have been any certainty in choosing class struggle over flexible production.

It might be argued that the choice for class struggle was tipped by the fact that the war decimated both the European and Japanese auto industries, stalling their

arrival for twenty years and guaranteeing the absence of flexible competition in the near future. This might have been the case after World War II, but GM had already decided on dispersal in 1937. If there had been no war, all evidence suggests that GM would have gone ahead with production dispersal, Ford and Chrysler would have followed, and the foreign competition would have arrived decades sooner.

We conclude that the US auto industry's decision to abandon flexible production constitutes a trait of capitalist production: when faced with a branch point in which workers obtain and utilize disruptive leverage to systematically extract remunerative and work process concessions, management — unless explicitly aware of the long-term virtues of the system (as the Japanese were) — will sacrifice efficiency and innovative capacity to obtain or retain unfettered control. In the absence of capitalist consciousness of the long-term virtues of trading off some control for maintenance of a given system, only labor can restrain this destructive tendency of capitalism.

After World War II, then, the confrontation between management and workers constituted a battle over the distant future viability of the US auto industry and over the middle-term prosperity or immiseration of the Detroit region. Though it is not clear to what degree both sides appreciated this circumstance, during that postwar moment, the agency of management to engineer decline was tangibly constrained by the workers and their union. A brief consideration of the condition of the class struggle at that moment suggests that the autoworkers and their union might have prevailed in an explicit confrontation over the production process, and perhaps preserved flexible production. This confrontation had three loci: a set of struggles on the shop floor (where workers had been protesting lost jobs and intensification of the work process), within the union (where many workers called for influence over work processes and factory construction), and between the union and management (over whether workers should have a voice in changes in product and production structure).

These debates congealed into the battle between business unionism and social unionism, with the main point of contention summarized as the demand for “worker control of production.” Within the UAW, the business unionists won this battle, largely because they successfully expelled the Communists, who were the backbone of the social union faction, and then negotiated the “Treaty of Detroit.”<sup>66</sup> This was, in effect, a grand compromise: generous wage and job tenure concessions were institutionalized in exchange for workers desisting

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66 J. Stepan-Norris and M. Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

from challenging management autonomy on all issues relating to production siting, management, and methodology.<sup>67</sup>

It is impossible to know for sure, had the social unionists prevailed, whether they might have defeated the dismantling of flexible production. Even if they could not achieve global union-contract concessions on the flight from Detroit, they might have challenged individual departures and localized labor intensification with sufficient rigor to increase “the costs of disruption to the point that . . . [there was] little economic advantage in continued resistance.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, with a quantum of foresight, they might have framed their campaign as an effort to protect the Detroit region and the US automobile industry itself from a predatory and self-destructive management strategy and, ultimately, from the darkest tendencies of capitalism.

Viewed from this perspective, the auto workers who organized the Flint strike and fought a decade-long battle with management over what appeared to be their narrow self-interest actually represented the principal force fighting for the survival of Detroit and the viability of the US-based automobile industry. It appears, at least in retrospect, that accepting business unionism was not just a poor choice but constituted a strategic error of the first order, one that betrayed not only the interests of the workers but the welfare of the auto industry, the Detroit region, and the country as a whole.

An ironic conclusion thus emerges from this history of the auto industry and the dynamics of industrial capitalism that it reveals. The inevitably invoked mantra that greedy workers and their too-powerful and too-successful union engineered the collapse of the auto industry and the consequent decline of Detroit is false. If the workers and their union had only been *more* successful and *more* powerful, they might have, they could have, and maybe they *would* have forced management to preserve flexible production and save both the industry and Detroit. This pattern might well apply to what has fashionably been called “industrial decline” in its many incarnations around the world.✽

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67 Even the wage gains negotiated in the Treaty of Detroit constituted a compromise on the effort bargain sought by workers. Instead of continuing the process of recovering the lost share of the surplus during the 1930s, the Treaty only allowed pay raises proportional to new productivity increases; see M. Mizruchi, *The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Thus, it abandoned the effort to gain back lost increases and the long-term goal of increasing labor’s share of the surplus.  
68 Kimeldorf, “Worker Replacement Costs.”

**This is a skeptical interrogation of the widely-accepted belief that white working-class voters elected Trump. A careful analysis of Rust Belt counties that voted for Obama in 2012 demonstrates a strong correlation between recent plant closures and the collapse of the Clinton vote, but shows only a limited movement toward Trump. Several hundred thousand white, blue-collar Obama voters, at most, voted for Trump's vision of fair trade and reindustrialization, not the millions usually invoked. The mogul's real election "miracle" was retaining the Romney vote and avoiding the widely predicted defections of Republican women and conservative minorities. He achieved this surprising result by letting evangelicals write the Republican platform and then nominating one of their heroes as VP. None of this mitigates, however, the current bankruptcy of Democratic policies in the old industrial heartland.**

# THE GREAT GOD TRUMP & *the* WHITE WORKING CLASS

MIKE DAVIS

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**H**istory has been hacked. Trump's "impossible" victories in June and November, together with the stunning challenge of Sanders's primary campaign, have demolished much of elite political wisdom as well as dethroning the two dynasties, the Clintons and Bushes, that have dominated national politics for thirty years. Not since Watergate has so much uncertainty and potential disorder infected every institution, network, and power relationship, including the Trump camp itself. What was unimaginable a few months ago, has now come to pass: the alt-right has a foot inside the White House, a hate-curdled maniac advises national security, a white supremacist controls the machinery of the Justice Department, the coal industry owns the Commerce Department, and a wealthy homeschooler is in charge of national education policy. Obscure billionaires like the DeVoses and Mercers who have spent years transforming Michigan and Texas into right-wing policy laboratories will now cash their support for the president-elect into the kind of national influence once enjoyed by Rockefellers and Harrimans. Carbon has won the battle of the Anthropocene and *Roe v. Wade* has been put on the butcher's block. Out of an election that was supposed to register the increasing clout of women, millennials, anti-climate-change activists, and people of color, a geriatric far right has wrested policy-making power on a terrifying scale.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to the Pew Research Center (3 February 2016), there were 10.7 million more eligible voters in 2016 than in 2012. "More than two-thirds of net growth in the US electorate during this time has come from racial and ethnic minorities."

Trump's victory, of course, may turn out to be the ghost dance of a dying white culture, quickly followed by a return to Obamian, globalist normalcy or, conversely, we may be heading into the twilight zone of homegrown fascism. The parameters of the next four years are largely unknown. Much depends on whether the Republicans succeed in incorporating the old industrial states of the upper Midwest into their mid-continental *reich* of solidly red Southern and Plains states. In this case, their structural electoral advantages, as the *National Review* recently pointed out, might override the popular vote for another decade.<sup>2</sup> But whatever the scenario, the issue of the utmost immediate importance to the Left is whether or not the Sanders coalition, including the progressive unions that backed him, can be kept alive as an independent movement bridging the racial and cultural divides among American working people. An extraordinary restructuring of political camps, cadre, and patronage is taking place in an atmosphere of chaos and uncertainty, but we need to understand more clearly whether 2016 actually reflects, or necessarily anticipates, a fundamental realignment of social forces.

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## I. BREAKING BAD

*“This is not going to be an election on niceness.”*

— Trump

The mainstream narrative, accepted by much of the Right and the Left, is that Trump rode a wave of white working-class resentment, mobilizing traditional nonvoters as well as alienated blue-collar Republicans and Democrats, some of whom were also attracted to Sanders. Political analysts, as well as Trump himself, emphasized the campaign's affinities with European right-nationalist movements that likewise claim to fight against globalization in the names of forgotten workers and small businesses. Endlessly cited have been exit polls that demonstrate Trump's extraordinary popularity among non-college white

2 Jeremy Carl, “The Red Wall,” *National Review*, 5 December 2016. “By the presidential election of 2020, Census Bureau projections indicate that non-Hispanic whites will be down to around 61 percent of the population. By 2050 that share will have dropped to almost exactly half.” Depending on which criterion is used (education or occupation) the white working class will be 41 or 37 per cent of the adult population in 2020. Alternatively, using an income-based definition, “yields an estimate of 20 per cent of families qualifying as white working class.” (Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, “The Rise of a Mass Upper-Middle Class,” in Ruy Teixeira (ed.), *Red, Blue and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics*, Brookings Institution, D.C. 2008, pp. 133-34.)

men, although the same polls indicate that he ran up his highest margins in middle-class Republican constituencies. (If the polls in Wisconsin and elsewhere are to be believed, moreover, a fifth of Trump voters had an unfavorable opinion of their candidate and held their noses when they checked his box.)<sup>3</sup> In any event he flipped a third of the counties that had voted for Obama twice. However, until the US Bureau of the Census's Current Population Survey releases its analyses of turnout demographics, political scientists can only speculate on whether changes in allegiance or changes in turnout were chiefly responsible for the results.<sup>4</sup>

What follows is skeptical interrogation of this narrative using county-level vote data to compare the 2016 presidential campaign with the 2012 campaign in older industrial regions of the Midwest and Appalachia.<sup>5</sup> A number of distinct voting patterns emerge, only one of which actually conforms to the stereotype of the "Trump Democrats." The phenomenon is real but largely limited to a score or so of troubled Rust Belt counties from Iowa to New York where a new wave of plant closure or relocation has coincided with growing immigrant and refugee populations. Election punditry has consistently conflated blue-collar votes long captured by Republican presidential candidates with the more modest and localized defection of working-class Democrats to Trump. Several hundred thousand white, blue-collar Obama voters, at most, voted for Trump's vision of fair trade and reindustrialization, not the millions usually invoked. I'm not implying that these substantial beachheads cannot be expanded in the future by continued appeals to white identity and economic nationalism, but merely that they have been over-interpreted as the key to Trump's victory.

The "miracle" of the mogul's campaign, apart from his cunning success in manipulating negative media coverage to his advantage, was capturing the entirety of the Romney vote, without any of the major defections (college-educated Republican women, conservative Latinos, Catholics) that the polls

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3 Craig Gilbert, "Great Lakes battlegrounds turned tide to Trump," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 9 November 2016.

4 Vanessa Williamson and Carly Knight, "Choose your own election postmortem: part two," *Brookings*, 16 November 2016.

5 All statistics are derived from *Ballotpedia*; the *New York Times* (county data 100 per cent count); the *Cook Political Report* (raw votes); and the *US Election Atlas* (<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>"State & County QuickFacts." At time of writing, the *Daily Kos's* very useful breakdown of the presidential vote by congressional district was incomplete. *Caveat empot*: all 2016 figures are subject to final count figures (not yet available at time of writing) and in some of the tables have been rounded off to the nearest thousand or tenth of a percent.

had predicted and Clinton had counted upon. As in an Agatha Christie mystery, Trump eliminated his dazed primary opponents one after another with murderous innuendo while hammering away on his master themes of elite corruption, treasonous trade agreements (“greatest job theft in the history of the world”), terrorist immigrants, and declining white economic opportunity. With the support of *Breitbart* and the alt-right, he essentially ran in Patrick Buchanan’s old shoes.

But if visceral nationalism and white anger gave him the nomination it was not enough to ensure that the big battalions of the GOP, especially the evangelicals who had supported Ted Cruz, would actively campaign for him. Trump’s stroke of genius was to let the religious right, including former Cruz cheerleaders David Barton and Tony Perkins, draft the Republican program and then, as surety, to select one of their heroes as his running mate.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Rebekah Mercer, whose family super-PAC had been Cruz’s chief backer, seconded Trump her crack political team: pollster Kellyanne Conway, Citizens United head David Bossie, and *Breitbart* chair Stephen Bannon. (“It would be difficult to overstate Rebekah’s influence in Trump World right now,” one insider told *Politico* after the election.)<sup>7</sup> This fusion of the two anti-establishment Republican insurgencies was the crucial event that many election analysts overlooked. They exaggerated the blue-collar “populist” factor while underestimating the equity acquired by the right-to-life movement and other social-conservative causes in Trump’s victory. With the Supreme Court at stake and Pence smiling from the dais, it was easier for the congregation to pardon the sinner at the head of the ticket. Trump, as a result, received a larger percentage of the evangelical vote than Romney, McCain, or Bush, while Clinton underperformed Obama among Catholics, especially Latinos (down 8 points).<sup>8</sup> Against all expectations, Trump also improved on Romney’s performance in the suburbs.

But — and this is a very important qualification — he did not increase

6 As the *New York Times* editorial board epitomized “the most extreme platform in memory”: “retrograde positions that include making no exceptions for rape or women’s health in cases of abortion; requiring the Bible to be taught in public high schools; selling coal as a ‘clean’ energy source; demanding a return of federal lands to the states; insisting that legislators use religion as a guide in lawmaking; appointing ‘family values’ judges; barring female soldiers from combat; and rejecting the need for stronger gun controls.”

7 Kenneth Vogel, “The heiress quietly shaping Trump’s operation,” *Politico*, 21 November 2016.

8 In Pew exit polls, a majority of self-identified white evangelical voters said they were voting against Clinton, not for Trump. See Kate Shelinutt, “Trump Elected President, Thanks to 4 in 5 White Evangelicals,” *Gleanings*, 17 November 2016.

Romney’s total vote in either the South or the Midwest; indeed he fell slightly shy in both regions. Clinton, however, received almost one million fewer votes than Obama in the South and almost three million fewer than the president in the Midwest. (See tables one and two.) Abdicating any serious effort in smaller industrial towns and cities, she focused almost entirely on major metropolitan counties and media markets. Furthermore, in contrast to Obama, she had no outreach strategy toward evangelicals and her position on late-term abortion, even if misrepresented, alienated untold numbers of Obama Catholics. Likewise, she ignored Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s urgings to invest campaign resources in rural areas. While Trump was factory-hopping in the hinterlands, her itinerary skipped the entire state of Wisconsin as well as major contested centers such as Dayton. The Clinton camp obviously believed that aggressive campaigning in the last weeks by the Obamas and Sanders, reinforced by celebrities such as Springsteen and Beyonce, would ensure strong turnouts by African Americans and millennials in the urban cores while she harvested votes from irate Republican women in the suburbs.<sup>9</sup>

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**TABLE ONE**

**2016 VS 2012 (IN MILLIONS)**

**10 SOUTHERN STATES (EXCLUDING TX & FL)**

2012	
Obama 11.46	Romney 13.8
2016	
Clinton 10.6	Trump 13.75

**9 MIDWESTERN STATES (INCLUDING PA)**

2012	
Obama 17.43	Romney 15.78
2016	
Clinton 14.51	Trump 15.35

<sup>9</sup> Where Clinton did win previously red suburbs, most notably in metropolitan Atlanta (Cobb and Gwinnett counties) and Houston (Fort Bend County), the key factor may have been recent increases in the minority population more than disaffected Republican women.

**TABLE TWO**

CLINTON VS OBAMA

(LOSING/WINNING MARGIN)

	CLINTON	OBAMA (2012)	STEIN
<b>Wisconsin</b>	-27,000	+205,000	31,000
<b>Michigan</b>	-12,000	+450,000	51,000
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	-68,000	+288,000	49,000
<i>margin</i>	-107,000	+943,000	131,000
<b>Ohio</b>	-460,000	+104,000	44,000
<b>Iowa</b>	-148,000	+90,000	11,000
<b>North Carolina</b>	-177,000	-97,000	.....
<b>Florida</b>	-120,000	+83,000	64,000
<b>Minnesota</b>	+44,765	+226,093	.....
<b>New Hampshire</b>	+2,736	+40,659	.....
<b>USA (millions)</b>	64.818	62.611	<i>10.7 mil. more eligible voters in 2015</i>
<b>Eligible voters</b>	26.5%	30.6%	

She inexplicably ignored danger signals from the Rust Belt, going “totally silent on the economy and any future plan that would be helpful to people.”<sup>10</sup> Her stupefying inattention to voter unrest in long-Democratic non-metropolitan counties proved to be her undoing in the electoral college, despite big popular majorities on the West Coast. (She equaled or exceeded Obama’s 2012 proportion of the vote only in Massachusetts, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, and California — the latter three, of course, proof of a tremendous Latino mobilization).<sup>11</sup> In three key states — Florida, Wisconsin, and Michigan — an additional factor in her defeat was a smaller, less energized African American

10 Stanley Greenberg quoted in Eleanor Clift, “How Macomb County Created and Killed the Clinton Machine,” *The Daily Beast*, 28 November 2016. Greenberg continues: “She no longer ran on change, she ran on continued progress [Obama legacy] in a change election. She lost the election in the final two weeks because of avoidable things that could have put them in the lead.”

11 She also outperformed Obama in some strategic suburban counties around D.C., Philadelphia and Milwaukee, but in the latter two cases it was not enough to overcome Trump’s margins in small cities and rural areas. See Amy Walter, “The Story of the Suburbs,” *The Cook Political Report*, 14 November 2016.

turnout than in 2012.<sup>12</sup> Welfare reform and super-incarceration, like NAFTA, had come back to haunt her. Furthermore, in Wisconsin and Michigan she failed to rally Sanders's youth support and in both states Jill Stein's vote ended up larger than Clinton's margin of defeat.

But we should be cautious about dumping all the blame on Clinton and her troubled inner circle. If she had been the principal problem, then local Democrats should have consistently outperformed her. In fact, that seldom happened and in several states her vote was significantly higher than the hometown Democrats. The malaise of the Democrats, it should be clear, permeates every level of the party, including the hopelessly inept Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. In the Midwest, in particular, the Democrats have largely been running on retreats, nominating failed veterans such as former Milwaukee mayor Tom Barrett (who lost to Scott Walker in 2012) and ex-Ohio governor Ted Strickland (slaughtered by Rob Portman in the Senate race). Meanwhile, for the gifted team around Obama, holding onto the White House, not strengthening the state parties, has been the relentless and at times exclusive priority. East of the Rockies, as a result, Republicans have surpassed their 1920 benchmark in state legislative seats. Twenty-six states are now Republican "trifectas" (control of both chambers and the governorship) versus a mere six for the Democrats. Progressive initiatives by Democratic cities such as Minneapolis (paid leave) and Austin (sanctuary) face the veto of reactionary legislatures.

In addition, as Brookings researchers have recently shown, since 2000 a paradoxical core-periphery dynamic has emerged within the political system. Republicans have increased their national electoral clout yet have steadily lost strength in the economic-powerhouse metropolitan counties. "The less-than-500 counties that Hillary Clinton carried nationwide encompassed a massive 64 percent of America's economic activity as measured by total output in 2015. By contrast, the more-than-2,600 counties that Donald Trump won generated just 36 percent of the country's output — just a little more than one-

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<sup>12</sup> According to the *Miami Herald* (12 November 2016) while total voter turnout was up 3 percent in Florida, the share of voters identifying as Democrats fell from 35 to 32 percent, despite huge efforts by the Clinton campaign in South Florida. The Democrats' Achilles' heel was the Black vote in northern Florida, especially in the Tallahassee, Gainesville and Hillsborough areas where turnout was lower than in 2012. Meanwhile in metro Detroit, Clinton's underperformance vis-à-vis Obama was two-thirds a result of a smaller majority in Wayne County and one-third due to Trump's success in winning Macomb County, home of the original "Reagan Democrats."

third of the nation's economic activity."<sup>13</sup> Trump voters, the countryside against the cities, have become something like the American version of the Khmer Rouge. Parts of this "other America," to be sure, have always been Stone Age Republican territory, dominated by big farmers, Elmer Gantries, small industrialists and bankers, and the descendants of the KKK. But the not-so-benign neglect of once staunchly Democratic factory towns and mountain coal country is a reflection both of the marginalization of the former CIO unions within the party and — here the stereotype is accurate — the preempting priorities of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street. Digital America is blue and Analog America, despite being poorer, is red.

Finally, we need to acknowledge the bizarre framework of the contest. In comparative election analysis, the structure of the system is usually assumed to be unchanging between cycles. This was manifestly not the case in 2016. Thanks to the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, this was the second presidential election with the dark money floodgates wide open and, in contrast to 2012, the national party apparatuses lost control of the primaries to the shadow parties of Trump and Cruz and, in the case of the Democrats, to the unprecedented grassroots-financed crusade of Sanders. It was also the first election conducted after the gutting of key sections of the Voting Rights Act and the widespread adoption of voter-suppression strategies by Republican state legislatures. As a result, "14 states had new voting restrictions in effect in 2016, including strict voter ID laws, fewer opportunities for early voting and reductions in the number of polling places."<sup>14</sup> Poll closures were outrageously extensive in Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama.

And as a horrified David Brooks emphasized, this was first "post-truth" election, surreally awash in Trumpian lies, false news manufactured in Macedonia, invading chatbots, "dark posts," dog whistles, conspiracy theories, and a deadly drip of hacked email revelations. Of all the thumbs on the scale, however, including the interventions by Comey and Putin, the most disastrous for the ex-secretary of state was the mainstream media's decision to "balance" reportage by giving equal coverage to her emails and Trump's serial sexual assaults. "[O]ver the course of the 2016 campaign, the three network news shows devoted a total of 35 minutes combined to policy issues — all policy issues. Meanwhile, they devoted 125 minutes to Mrs. Clinton's emails."<sup>15</sup>

13 Mark Muro and Sifan Liu, "Another Clinton-Trump divide: High-output America versus low-output America," *Brookings Brief*, 29 November 2016.

14 "Voting Rights in the Age of Trump," *New York Times*, 19 November 2016.

15 Paul Krugman, "The Populism Perplex," *New York Times*, 25 November 2016.

## 2. THE MYTHIC BLUE WALL

*“Looking ahead to future presidential elections, the Trump strategy points to a red wall that could be bigger and more beautiful than the Democrat’s blue one.”<sup>16</sup>*

Clinton’s “blue firewall” cracked in Minnesota; was narrowly breached in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania; and totally collapsed in Ohio (and Iowa, if we consider it a Democrat-leaning state.) Whole swathes of 2012 Obama counties in northwestern Illinois, eastern Iowa, western Wisconsin and Minnesota, and northern Ohio and New York were won by Trump. The “margin shift” — winning or losing percentage of Clinton 2016 versus Obama 2012 — was over 15 points in West Virginia, Iowa, and North Dakota; 9 to 14 points in Maine, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Hawaii, Missouri, Michigan, and Vermont. In southern Wisconsin’s former auto belt (Kenosha and Rock counties), where Obama had crushed Romney by huge margins in 2012, the Democratic vote was down 20 percent and the former UAW stronghold of Kenosha went for Trump. Even in New York Clinton finished 7 points behind Obama, thanks to a massive Republican vote in eastern Long Island (Suffolk County) and poor support from blue-collar Democrats in older industrial districts upstate. According to exit polls, she won 51 percent of union households, a poor showing compared to the 60 percent of Obama in 2008 and 2012. Trump beat the union vote of the previous three Republican candidates and in Ohio won a flat-out majority.

This pattern is particularly ironic since Democrats in many of these areas had cast outsized votes for her during the 2008 primaries. Indeed this had been presumed to be Clinton country. “How could they lose Michigan with 10,000 votes!” groused veteran pollster Stanley Greenberg, a key architect of Bill Clinton’s 1992 victory, when he saw the final figures. But one overriding fact determined the outcome: the Republicans have had an aggressive strategy for winning dominance in the Rust Belt, supported by an impressive infrastructure of state-level think tanks, regional billionaire donors, and wizard

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<sup>16</sup> Carl, “The Red Wall.” Carl quotes from a memo he wrote in 2015: “According to the modeling done here, if [Candidate X] could win white voters at Reagan 1984 percentages (66 per cent) and at Bush 2004 turnout levels (67 per cent) and we assume African-American turnout was to return to historical levels and percentages for Democrats, we could win the presidency without winning a single Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or Arab vote. Think about that, because is a staggering statement and it’s a true one.”

gerrymanderers from the Republican State Leadership Committee. In contrast, the Democrats, especially those in the industrial but non-metropolitan counties so common throughout the upper Midwest, have been left to swing in the wind by a national party that (the 2009 General Motors and Chrysler rescues aside) offers no remedies to further decline and communal pauperization.

As readers of David Daley's bestselling *Ratf\*\*ked* know, Rove and his conservative quants responded to the meltdown of Republican power in 2008 with an audacious scheme for retaking power in Washington through control of decennial redistricting. The Midwest was the bullseye. "There are 18 state legislatures," Rove wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "that have four or fewer seats separating the two parties that are important for redistricting. Seven of these are controlled by Republicans and the other 11 are controlled by Democrats, including the lower houses in Ohio, Wisconsin, Indiana and Pennsylvania. Republican strategists are focused on 107 seats in 16 states. Winning these seats would give them control of drawing district lines for nearly 190 congressional seats."<sup>17</sup>

In the event, as Daley shows, chump change (about \$30 million) spent on targeted state races in 2010 produced a revolution in party power with the Republicans winning nearly seven hundred seats and control of key legislatures in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan as well as Florida and North Carolina. Computer-generated redistricting punctually produced a dream map that made Republican control of the House virtually invulnerable until the 2020 census, despite the demographic forces favoring Democrats. The *piece d'resistance* was the gerrymandering of Ohio overseen by John Boehner. "The GOP controlled the redrawing of 132 state legislative and 16 congressional districts. Republican redistricting resulted in a net gain for the GOP state house caucus in 2012 and allowed a 12-4 Republican majority to return to the US House of Representatives — despite voters casting only 52 percent of their vote for Republican congressional candidates."<sup>18</sup> (There are worst cases: in North Carolina in 2012 Democrats won a majority of the congressional vote statewide but gained only four out of thirteen House seats.)

<sup>17</sup> It's important to recall that Ohio, the key to Bush's 2004 victory, swung dramatically to the Democrats in 2006, in part because of plant closures and job losses. The rest of the Midwest except Missouri followed in 2008. The Democrats had a clear mandate to address the region's distress and, as with Appalachia, failed to produce major policy initiatives — apart from Obamacare — to support local Democrats. The 2009 auto bailout's political impact faded with the flight of the auto parts industry to Mexico.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in David Daley, *Rat F\*\*ked: The True Story Behind the Secret Plan to Steal America's Democracy*, Liveright, New York, 2016, pp. 86-87.

REPUBLICAN LOCK ON MIDWESTERN STATE HOUSES

December 2016

(DEM/REP)	HOUSE	SENATE	GOVERNOR
Minnesota	79/57	33/34	D
Iowa	41/59	20/29	R
Missouri	46/117	8/26	R
Wisconsin	35/64	13/20	R
Michigan	47/63	10/27	R
Illinois	67/51	37/22	R
Indiana	30/70	9/41	R
Ohio	33/66	9/24	R
Pennsylvania	81/122	16/34	D

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In the Midwest the 2010 Tea Party victories brought a new generation of feral Republicans to power, many of them groomed by far-right think tanks such as Indiana’s Policy Review Foundation (once headed by Mike Pence), Michigan’s Mackinac Center, Wisconsin’s MacIver Institute, and Minnesota’s Center of the American Experiment, all of them spoiling for a fight to the death with the region’s public-sector unions and progressive big-city governments. Coordinating through the State Policy Network (sixty-five conservative think tanks) and the American Legislative Exchange Council, they launched campaigns to destroy public-sector bargaining rights, defund unions through right-to-work laws, and privatize public education through vouchers. They focused in other words on increasing their structural and legal advantages in ways that Democrats would find difficult, even impossible to roll back. Unions and students, of course, conducted an epic resistance in Wisconsin but were unable to recall Scott Walker, in large part because of the lackluster character of the Democratic candi-

date. In Ohio the unions were more successful and repealed right-to-work by referendum, but in Indiana, Michigan and West Virginia, Republican majorities rammed through right-to-work and in Michigan, a Mackinac Center-inspired receivership for Detroit's schools.<sup>19</sup>

The Republican down-ticket in 2016, from Senate incumbents to state representatives and judges, ironically benefited greatly from Trump's poor backing from the Kochs and other conservative mega-donors who switched funding from the presidential race to preserving control of Congress. For the first time super-PACs spent more on the Senate races than the presidential campaign. Trump, whom the *New York Times* estimated received \$2 billion of free publicity from the media, was little affected, but the huge injection of dark money into state races was revolutionary. More than three-quarters of Senate campaign funding came from out-of-state sources in 2016 and "just three groups, One Nation [Adelson], the Koch network's Americans for Prosperity, and the US Chamber of Commerce, account[ed] for 67 per cent in dark money spending."<sup>20</sup> The result, according to some political scientists, has been the "nationalization" of state politics. "As a result of the growing connection between presidential and state elections the once clear divide between state politics and national politics has largely disappeared in most of the country."<sup>21</sup> Thus for the first time in history, there were no split votes in 2016 between Senate candidates and presidential contenders; the thirty-four states with Senate contests all voted the same party for both offices.

It is no secret that the inadvertent ally of the Republicans in the Rust Belt has been Obama himself, whose lofty conception of the presidency does not include being the leader of the party, at least not in the old-fashioned, out-in-the-hustings style of an LBJ or even Clinton. In 2010, 2012, and again in 2014, Democratic candidates bitterly complained about their lack of support from the White House, especially in the upper South, Louisiana, and Texas.

As a result, Obama ended his presidency with the Democrats having lost nearly one thousand legislative seats across the country. Republicans legislatures are now targeting Missouri and Kentucky — possibly Ohio again, as well

19 Andy Kroll, "Behind Michigan's 'Financial Martial Law': Corporations and Right-Wing Billionaires," *Mother Jones*, 23 March 2011.

20 See Chris MacKenzie, *Outside Influence: Out of State Money in the 2016 Senate Elections*, US PIRG Education Fund, 24 October 2016; and Ian Vandewalker, *Election Spending 2016*, Brennan Center for Justice, NYU.

21 Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster, "The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US elections in the 21st century," *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016), p. 21.

as Pennsylvania and New Hampshire — as the next right-to-work states. (In Missouri and New Hampshire right-to-work amendments recently had been passed by the legislatures but were vetoed by Democratic governors. Both states now have Republican governors.) You might call it the Southernization or Dixiefication of the Midwest.

### 3. CRADLES OF THE CIO

*In 1934, a konor predicted not merely the coming of a four-funnelled steamer with Mansren on board but an event which was to become a very important element in the Cargo ideology of northern Dutch New Guinea movements: the miraculous coming of a factory.*<sup>22</sup>

The millenarian aspects of the Trump campaign — the magical nativism and promise of a world restored — have received surprisingly little comment although together with his erratic ravings they were perhaps its most striking features. Clinton's promise to competently manage the Obama legacy seemed utterly jejune next to Trump's assurance, more chiliastic than demagogic, that "jobs will return, incomes will rise, and new factories will come rushing back to our shores." Among "Trump Democrats" especially, those white working-class Obama voters who flipped Ohio and Pennsylvania, the embrace of Trump took on the desperate overtones of the Papuan cargo cult, its members praying for factories, described in Peter Worsley's classic *The Trumpet Shall Sound*.

If Trump is one part P.T. Barnum and one part Mussolini, he's become another part John Frum: the "mysterious little man" [an American sailor?] with bleached hair, high-pitched voice and clad in a coat with shining buttons" whom some Melanesians worship because he supposedly brought cargo out of the sky to the island of Tanna during World War II.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the day, is the Trumpian field of dreams — Mexicans depart, Chinese surrender,

22 Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia*, second edition, Schocken Books, New York 1968, pp. 136 & 153

23 Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (Originally published in 1957). The author, a Communist anthropologist, collaborated with the famed CP Historians Group, especially with Hobsbawm with whom he shared similar interests in millenarian movements, and was one of the founders of the *New Left Review*. His important contributions have been overlooked in most accounts of these two germinal milieus of contemporary left thought.

factory jobs return home — that much different from a landing strip hacked out of the jungle?

But perceived anthropological condescension is precisely what drives people in Dubuque, Anderson, and Massena to pick up their pitchforks against “elite liberals” as well as “establishment conservatives.” “Deplorables” indeed. The counties in Table 4 all have industrial unionism in their DNA; they were the cradles of the CIO in the great labor wars of the New Deal. With few exceptions (1972 and 1984) they remained loyally Democratic in rain, sleet, and snow, voting strongly for Obama in 2008. So why, in the face of positive economic indicators and the lowest national unemployment rate in a decade, did these older industrial counties suddenly desert the Democrats and embrace Trump’s reindustrialization cargo cult? Fumbling with the odd pieces of the Trump puzzle, the *Economist* decided that “the pitch of economic anxiety motivating Mr. Trump’s supporters has been exaggerated.”<sup>24</sup> But when analysis goes micro, plentiful reasons for such anxiety emerge. Table 5 itemizes plant closures that occurred *during* the campaign season — striking evidence of a new wave of job flight and deindustrialization. In almost all of these flipped counties, a high-profile plant closure or impending move had been on the front page of the local newspaper: embittering reminders that the “Obama boom” was passing them by.

Some examples: Just before Christmas, West Rock Paper Company, the major employer in Coshoctin County, closed its doors. In May, GE’s century-old locomotive plant in Erie announced that it was transferring hundreds more jobs to its new facility in Fort Worth. The day after the Republican Convention ended in Cleveland, FirstEnergy Solutions announced the closure of its huge generating plant outside of Toledo, “the 238th such plant to close in the United States since 2010.” At the same time in Lorain, Republic Steel formally reneged on its promise to reopen and modernize the enormous three-mile-long US Steel plant that had once been the area’s largest employer. In August, meanwhile, GE warned of the closing of its light bulb plants in Canton and East Cleveland. Simultaneously, pink slips were being handed out to workers at Commercial Vehicle Group’s big stamping plant in Martin’s Ferry on the Ohio River (Belmont County). “I think 172 job losses in the community and even the county in an area like ours is devastating,” said the local superintendent of schools.

COUNTY (CITY)	OBAMA/CLINTON	ROMNEY/TRUMP
	2012/ 2016	2012/ 2016
<b>CO</b>		
Pueblo (Pueblo)	-31%	-11%
<b>IL</b>		
Madison (Granite City)	-14%	+16%
<b>IW</b>		
Dubuque (Dubuque)	-20%	+10%
<b>MI</b>		
Bay (Tri-Cities)	-19	+19
Macomb (Warren)	-15	+17
Saginaw (Saginaw-Midland)	-18%	+6%
<b>MN</b>		
St Louis (Duluth)	-21%	+14%
<b>NY</b>		
Broome (Binghamton)	-8%	+9
Niagara (Lockport)	-20%	+22%
<b>OH</b>		
Trumbull (Warren)	-29%	+28%
Mahoning (Youngstown)	-24%	+27%
Ashtabula (Ashtabula)	-34%	+27%
Summit (Akron)	-12%	0
Lorain (Lorain)	-24%	+12%
Stark (Canton)	-25%	+11%
<b>PA</b>		
Beaver (Aliquippa)	-18%	+6%
Erie (Erie)	-16%	+24%
Lackawanna (Scranton)	-16%	+39%
Luzerne (Wilkes-Barre)	-20%	+34%
<b>QUAD CITIES IL/IW</b>		
Scott (Davenport)	-20%	+2%
Rock Island (Moline)	-8%	+8%

**TABLE FOUR**

'TRUMP DEMOCRAT'

COUNTIES

(CONTINUED)

COUNTY (CITY)

**WI**

Kenosha (Kenosha)

Rock (Janesville)

**WV**

Kanawha (Charleston)

OBAMA/CLINTON

2012/ 2016

-20%

-20%

-13%

ROMNEY/TRUMP

2012/ 2016

+4%

+3%

+6%

*"This is another kick in the gut to the valley, with the coal mines closing, the power plant and now this. It's just one piece of bad news after another."*<sup>25</sup>

**TABLE FIVE**

PLANT CLOSURES DURING CAMPAIGN

(BY COUNTY)

**MADISON**

*East Alton coal plant*  
+ *US Steel* \* 2090 jobs

**ROCK ISLAND**

*Exelon* \* 800 jobs

**DUBUQUE**

*FlexSteel*  
+ *CVG* \* 456 jobs

**SCOTT**

*Kraft Heinz* \* 1000 jobs

**TRI-CITIES**

*Weadock power plant*  
+ *Dow Midland* \* 750 jobs

**MACOMB**

*Faurecia auto parts* \* 350 jobs

**ST. LOUIS**

*Caraustar* \* 100 jobs

**BROOME**

*Emerson Electric* \* 60 jobs

**NIAGARA**

*Chemours* \* 200 jobs

**ASHTABULA**

*First Energy coal plant*  
+ *Super K-Mart* \* 300 jobs

**LORAIN**

*Republic Steel*  
(reopening cancelled)

**STARK**

*Hoover + Dover GE*  
\* ~150 jobs

**SUMMIT**

*Parker Hannifin*  
+ *Plasti-Kote* \* ~200 jobs

**TRUMBULL**

*Resco + Alliance Castings*  
+ *Warren Steel* \* ~1000 jobs

**BEAVER**

*Allegheny Technologies*  
\* 600 jobs

**ERIE**

*GE* \*1500 jobs

**MAHONING**

*Exterran*\*68 jobs

**LACKAWANNA**

*BAE* \*III jobs

But what about race? Trump, of course, won the white vote nationally by 21 points (one point more than Romney), and his campaign rallies were Woodstocks for bigots. Yet as commentators on both the Right and the Left have emphasized, these flipped counties had with only one exception voted at least once for Obama. (Trump nationally won 10 percent of Obama supporters.) Perhaps a distinction that needs to be made is between the true *Sturmtruppen* who mobbed the rallies and the former Obama voters who joined the cargo cult in protest. As a British journalist, contradicting his own paper's characterization of the white working class as the "engine" of the insurgency, pointed out: "At over a dozen Trump

<sup>25</sup> Trip Gabriel, "How Erie Went Red: The Economy Sank, and Trump Rose," *New York Times*, 12 November 2016; Devin Henry, "Company announces closure of Ohio coal plants," *The Hill*, 22 July 2016; and Shelley Hanson, "Local Plant Closings Shock Ohio Valley," *The Intelligencer: Wheeling News-Register*, 5 December 2016.

rallies, in almost as many states, over the past year, your correspondent has met lawyers, estate agents, and a horde of middle-class pensioners — and relatively few blue-collar workers.”<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand there is evidence for a regionally generated backlash, long nurtured by Tea Party types, against immigrants and refugees. In part this may be the result of federal policies that allocate refugees to areas with cheap housing and a low cost of living where they’re often perceived as competitors for remaining service-sector jobs as well as beneficiaries of state support denied to citizens. Erie, where refugees now constitute a tenth of the population and a labor reserve army for the nearby casino industry, is a well-known example. In other Rust Belt areas, such as Reading, Pennsylvania, rapidly growing Mexican communities have been the target of sustained nativist attacks, encouraged by Tea Party and alt-right types. In a recent study of the state policies and programs, Ohio was ranked worst in its treatment of undocumented immigrants; a rating that was confirmed when Republicans in the legislature drafted a congratulatory message (HCR 11) to Arizona and Sheriff Joe Arpaio.<sup>27</sup>

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DAVIS

#### 4. A NOTE ON A FORGOTTEN LAND

*“We’re going to put the miners back to work!”  
Trump declared just minutes into his speech. The crowd  
roared, Trump smiled, and several miners frantically  
waved aloft signs that read “Trump digs coal.”<sup>28</sup>*

Newfoundland, Ordinary, Sideway, and Spanglin are hamlets in Elliot, a typical Appalachian county in eastern Kentucky. Its residents once grew tobacco and corn, now many of them — fortunate by local standards — work at the Little Sandy state prison. Elliot’s great distinction, however, is its voting record: the last white county in the South to vote Democratic. Indeed it has been blue in every presidential election since the county was formed in 1869. George McGovern, Walter Mondale, and Michael Dukakis all won here, and in 2008 Obama buried McCain by a two-to-one margin. In 2012, despite having endorsed gay rights, he nudged past Romney. Last year, however, Elliot finally put out the lights for the Democrats, voting 70 percent for Trump and the old-time religion of the Republican platform.

<sup>26</sup> *The Economist*, 5 November 2016, p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> “Ohio rated worst in immigrant policy,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, 17 April 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Jenkins, “Appalachia Used to be a Democratic Stronghold,” <https://thinkprogress.org/appalachia>

In all of postwar political history, Appalachia (defined by its regional commission as 428 upland and mountain counties from Alabama to New York) has had only a single season in the sun. Thanks to best-selling books by New York socialist Michael Harrington (author of *The Other America*) and maverick Kentucky lawyer Harry Caudill (*Night Comes to the Cumberland*s), the region briefly became a major focus of the War on Poverty, but then was shunted aside after the inauguration of Nixon. The largest concentration of white poverty in North America, the Southern mountains have been orphaned not just in Washington but also in Frankfort, Nashville, Charlestown, and Raleigh where coal lobbyists and big power companies have always dictated legislative priorities. Traditionally their henchmen were county Democratic machines and the blue faded from Appalachia only reluctantly at first. Carter won 68 percent of the vote in the region and Clinton 47 percent in 1996. However as the national Democrats became increasingly identified with the “the war on coal,” abortion, and gay marriage, local Blue Dogs were euthanized by popular vote.<sup>29</sup> The United Mine Workers and Steelworkers, under the best leadership in decades, fought desperately in the 1990s and 2000s for a major political initiative to defend industrial and mining jobs in the region but were turned away at the door by the Democratic Leadership Council and the ascendant New York/California congressional leadership.

Ironically, Clinton this time around did have a plan for the coal counties, although it was buried in the fine print of her website and poorly publicized. She advocated important safeguards for worker health benefits tied to failing coal companies and proposed federal aid to offset the fiscal crisis of the region’s schools. Otherwise her program was conventional boilerplate: tax credits for new investment, boutique programs to encourage local entrepreneurship, and subsidies for the cleanup and conversion of mining land into business sites (Google data centers were mentioned — talk about cargo cults). But there was no major jobs program or public-health initiative to deal with the region’s devastating opiate pandemic. It was a mirror image, in other words, of her equally slim offerings to the urban poor. Ultimately the plan made no difference, as the only Clinton promise that everyone remembered was: “We’re going to put a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business.” Her only Appalachian victories

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29 Mountain counties were also key to Clinton’s loss in Pennsylvania. “52 of the state’s 67 counties are classified as Appalachian, and these counties cast 44 per cent of the state’s total votes in both 2012 and 2016. Obama lost the Appalachian counties by about 1750,000 votes. Clinton lost them by about 492,000.” Cited in Larry Sabato’s Crystal Ball, 19 November 2016, <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/16-for-16>.

were a couple of college counties. Trump meanwhile hitched a ride with Jesus and recapitulated Romney's vote.

The exception was West Virginia where the Democratic wipeout was so enormous that it will probably end up in *Guinness World Records*. Only Wyoming gave Trump a higher percentage of its presidential vote. But even more striking than his 42-point margin of victory was the fact that Clinton received 54,000 fewer votes than were cast earlier for candidates in the Democratic primary — a contest that Sanders (125,000 total) won in every single county. The failure to carry primary voters was a stunning index of her unpopularity. Meanwhile the Mountain Party, West Virginia's sui generis affiliate of the Greens, focused on the governor's race (won by billionaire Democrat and self-proclaimed pro-coal populist, Jim Justice) and picked up 42,000 votes, an encouraging result. Otherwise the Republicans took over the legislature and congressional delegation of this once-famous Democratic state for the first time since dinosaurs roamed the earth.

Making sense of West Virginia's non-linear politics is not always easy, especially since the Democratic Party has largely devolved into a personal election machine and survivalist cult for Joe Manchin (ex-governor, now senator) and his sidekick, Jim Justice, but one lesson is clear and it probably holds true for most of Appalachia: a large minority of working people, custodians of a heroic labor history, are ready to support radical alternatives but only if they simultaneously address the economic and cultural crises of the region. The struggles to maintain traditional kinship networks and community social fabrics in Appalachia or, for that matter, in the embattled Black-majority counties of the former cotton South, should be every bit as important to socialists as defending individual rights to make free reproductive and gender choices. They're usually not.

## 5. WHAT WITCHES BREW

*"Any future demagogue who attempts to carve a road to power in the United States – for instance through the next depression if one comes – is almost certain to follow Huey's path."*

"Huey Long, had he lived," wrote John Gunther in *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), "might very well have brought Fascism to America." Is Trump giving good ole'boy fascism a second chance? Like Gunther's Long, he's also "an engaging monster," as well as "a lying demagogue, a prodigious self-seeker, vulgar, loose ... a master

of political abuse.” Likewise he has “made every promise to the underpossessed,” appearing “a savior, a disinterested messiah.” But the great Kingfish actually made good on most of his pledges to the plain folk of Louisiana. He did bring them “cargo” in the form of public services and entitlements. He built hospitals and public housing, abolished the poll tax, and made textbooks free. Trump and his billionaire cabinet, on the other hand, are more likely to reduce access to health care, increase voter suppression,<sup>30</sup> and privatize public education. “Fascism,” if that’s our future lot, will not “come in disguised as socialism,” as Gunther predicted (and Sinclair Lewis before him), but as a neo-Roman orgy of greed.<sup>31</sup>

This analysis has focused on only one part of the puzzle of the heartland: the old industrial and coal counties, now in decline for two generations. It is hardly a comprehensive account. The regional portrait, for example, might look considerably different if we took the perspective of the larger public-sector and health industry workforces. Moreover the story of the Rust Belt is in many ways the old political news; the major novelty of the last election was the politicization of the downward mobility of young college graduates, especially those from working-class and immigrant families. Trumpism, whatever its temporary successes, cannot unify millennials’ economic distress with that of older white workers because it interposes geriatric white privilege as the touchstone of all of its policies. The Sanders movement, in contrast, has shown that heartland discontent can be brought under the canopy of a “democratic socialism” that reignites New Deal hopes for fundamental economic rights and the Civil Rights Movement’s goals of equality and social justice. The real opportunity for transformational political change (“critical realignment” in a now-archaic vocabulary) belongs to the Sanderistas but only to the extent that they remain rebels against the neoliberal Democratic establishment and support the resistance in the streets.

Trump’s election has unleashed a legitimization crisis of the first order and the majority of Americans who opposed him have only two credible political rally points: the Sanders movement and the ex-president and his coterie. While our hopes and energies should be invested in the first, it would be foolish to underestimate the second. With Hillary’s descent into hell, there is no successor

30 John Gunter, *Inside U.S.A.*, Harper & Brothers, New York 1947, pp. 809-812. This almost 1000-page portrait of immediate postwar America is a time capsule that everyone should find time to open, if only to discover how much the present only recapitulates the past.

31 At stake are birthright citizenship and congressional apportionment by population — both of which are opposed by many Trump supporters.

to Obama. The only world-class political figure left on the American scene, he will become even more formidable out of office, particularly as his presidency becomes heavily burnished with nostalgia. (Most will forget that the current debacle, beginning with the rout of Democrats in 2010, bears the signature of a president who pardoned Wall Street while deporting 2.5 million immigrants.) Chicago is likely to become the capital of a government in exile with the Obamas directing efforts to reinvigorate the Democratic Party and centrist politics without ceding power to the Left. (If this dual power scenario seems fanciful, one should recall the precedent of Teddy Roosevelt at Sagamore Hill during the Taft years.) Those who believe that the Progressive Caucus now holds the balance of power within the Democratic Party may be rudely disenchanted when Obama again picks up the lance on behalf of the party's elites.

Meanwhile Trump, augur of fascism or not, seems destined to be the American Macbeth, sowing brutal chaos throughout the dark highlands of the Potomac. The political and social war that is now inevitable in the United States could shape the character of the rest of the century, especially since it is synchronized with similar eruptions across the European Union and the collapse of left-populist rule in South America. As Trump's spiritual godfather, Pat Buchanan, recently gloated: "The forces of nationalism and populism have been unleashed all over the West and all over the world. There is no going back."<sup>32</sup> Hair-raising global scenarios are only too easy to imagine. One could envision, for instance, an angry, foundering Trump regime that represses protest and incites late 1960s-like revolts in US cities, while futilely trying to reconcile its contradictory economic policies and promises. The ensuing geo-economic turmoil might prompt Europeans to invite China to take increasing monetary and financial leadership within the OECD bloc. In this scenario, 2016 would mark the end of the "American century." Alternately, Beijing might be unwilling or unable to arrest a world downturn or prevent a partial unraveling of transnational production chains. It might pivot from the Pacific toward Eurasia. In that case, 2016 might be remembered as the birthday of de-globalization and a world more recognizably like the 1930s than the 2000s. ....✎

32 "Populist-Nationalist Tide Rolls On," 29 November 2016, <http://Buchanan.org/blog>.

**The New Historians of Capitalism (NHC) claim that their refusal to “define” capitalism is a historical and theoretical virtue. In reality, NHC do have a concept of capitalism — a system of trade, finance and extra-economic coercion and dispossession. Unfortunately, these social processes have existed trans-historically. The problems with such an approach are particularly evident when the NHC turns to the discussion of plantation slavery in the United States. Recent works by Johnson, Baptist and Beckert clearly establish that the southern planters had to “sell to survive” and were compelled to maximize profits. However, their confusion of capitalism with trade, finance, and compulsion leads to numerous historical errors, an inability to analyze the specific dynamics of commercial plantation slavery, and ultimately, a failure to explain the origins of the US Civil War.**

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# SLAVERY *and the* NEW HISTORY OF CAPITALISM

CHARLES POST

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POST

WALTER JOHNSON

*River of Dark Dreams:  
Slavery and Empire  
in the Cotton Kingdom.*  
Cambridge, MA:  
Harvard University Press,  
2013. 526 pp.  
\$35 cloth.

EDWARD BAPTIST

*The Half Has Never Been  
Told: Slavery and the Making  
of American Capitalism.*  
New York: Basic Books,  
2014. 498 + xxvii pp.  
\$35 cloth.

SVEN BECKERT

*Empire of Cotton:  
A Global History.*  
New York: Alfred A.  
Knopf, 2014. 615 + xxii.  
\$35 cloth.

The financial crisis of 2008, which initiated a global slump in profitability and accumulation, profoundly shook the neoliberal consensus. Waves of bankruptcies, stagnant output, and growing unemployment challenged the blind faith in unregulated markets and produced a renewed interest in critical accounts of capitalism, exemplified by the astounding success of Piketty's provocative *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most strikingly, Karl Marx, long dismissed as a utopian thinker whose alternative to capitalism failed with the collapse of the bureaucratic economies, experienced a very real rehabilitation. Even *TIME* admitted that "if you leave aside the prophetic, prescriptive parts of Marx's writings, there's a trenchant diagnosis of the underlying problems of a market economy that is surprisingly relevant even today."<sup>2</sup>

1 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

2 Peter Gumble, "Rethinking Marx," *TIME*, January 29, 2009, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1873191\\_1873190\\_1873188,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1873191_1873190_1873188,00.html).

Against this newly favorable backdrop, the *New York Times* recently declared that “a specter is haunting university history departments: the specter of capitalism.”<sup>3</sup> The *Times* was referring to the growing intellectual influence of the “New Historians of Capitalism” (NHC) group across academia and their assumption of strategic positions in prestigious history departments such as Harvard, Cornell, Brown, and the New School. Long neglected during the “linguistic turn” of the historical profession away from the systematic investigation of social and economic structures and processes, capitalism had once again become an object of serious historical inquiry thanks to the NHC.

The New Historians promise to reinvent the study of capitalism, yet they insist that the best way to accomplish this is to refuse, at least for the time being, to specify what they mean by it. As Seth Rockman of Brown University, a central figure in the new movement, puts it:

If the goal is to figure out what capitalism is and how it has operated historically, scholars seem willing to let capitalism float as a placeholder while they look for ground-level evidence of a system in operation. The empirical work of discovery takes precedence over the application of theoretical categories. . . . Recent work shows little interest in demarcating certain economic activities or actors as pre-capitalist or proto-capitalist relative to a predetermined standard of actual capitalism. By extension, “transitions” are not overarching preoccupations of the recent scholarship, with less attention given to the timing of a “market revolution,” shifts between modes of production . . . the turmoil of the current global economy has revealed a system wildly inconsistent with theorized accounts of “pure” capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Still, as Althusser argued, *silences* are not innocent, and while the New Historians remain mute about the social relations and economic processes that distinguish capitalism, they do have an eclectic, if implicit, conceptualization of it. They start with elements of Adam Smith’s notion of “commercial society,”<sup>5</sup>

3 Jennifer Schuessler, “In History Departments, It’s Up with Capitalism,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/education/in-history-departments-its-up-with-capitalism.html>.

4 “What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 34 (Fall 2014): 442. Similar arguments are made by most of the participants, including Sven Beckert, in “Interchange: The History of Capitalism,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (September 2014): 503–36.

5 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937 [1776]).

where capitalism is simply an economy geared toward maximizing profits through specialization and market exchange. To this they append warfare, especially commercial warfare, along with the contemporary fascination of many Marxists with financial networks and appropriation/expropriation by legal-physical coercion.<sup>6</sup> The NHC theorization of capitalism thus puts front and center elements that are widely found in precapitalist societies, indeed transhistorically — trade, finance, violence — while downplaying aspects that have traditionally have been seen as defining both capitalism’s essence and its historical specificity.

By contrast, for many Marxists, what is indispensable for understanding capitalism is precisely the distinctive set of social-property relations and rules of reproduction that distinguish it from all previous social forms. Under capitalism, by contrast with all noncapitalist forms of social labor, both nonproducers (capitalists) and producers (workers) find themselves lacking direct market access to the means to reproduce themselves, with the consequence that they are obliged to produce and sell competitively, at the lowest cost compared to price, if they are going to survive. It is the competitive constraint, itself a consequence of the rise of historically specific social relationships, that engenders capitalism’s unique compulsions toward productive specialization, accumulation of labor and means of production, and labor-saving technical innovation.<sup>7</sup>

The strengths and weaknesses of the NHC are on display in three new books on plantation slavery in the United States by central figures in the school: Walter Johnson and Sven Beckert of Harvard and Edward Baptist of Cornell. These works are a powerful antidote to the “nonbourgeois civilization” historians, in particular Eugene Genovese, who argue that plantation slavery was an atavistic throwback to precommercial, almost seigneurial societies.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, for these NHC, plantation slavery is not only a thoroughly capitalist form but was essential to the development of industrial capitalism in both Britain and

<sup>6</sup> The influence of David Harvey, possibly the preeminent interpreter of Marx today, is clear.

<sup>7</sup> The concepts of social-property relations and rules for reproduction are derived from the work of Robert Brenner. See his “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong” in Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century* (London: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2007), 49–111. Brenner’s work, of course, is ultimately rooted in Marx’s mature work in the three volumes of *Capital*.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989 [1961]). For a critique of Genovese and other “nonbourgeois civilization” histories of slavery, see Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 121–31.

the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Reviving the celebrated thesis of Eric Williams,<sup>9</sup> if in somewhat revised form, all three authors argue that plantation slavery in the Caribbean and the United States created markets, provided capital, and produced profits that enabled the transition to industrial capitalism in both Britain and the United States. For Beckert, “Slavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade, and the assertion of sovereignty over people and land by entrepreneurs were at . . . [the] core . . . of *war capitalism*,” which was “the foundation from which evolved the more familiar industrial capitalism.”<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Beckert, and Baptist thus claim that without plantation slavery, itself an emanation of war capitalism, industrial capitalism could not have arisen.

All three of these books bring important new historical insights to the study of US plantation slavery. But their flawed conception of capitalism’s origins and dynamics leads them to make historically unsustainable claims concerning both the way slavery operated and the relationship of the plantation economies to the emergence of industrial capitalism. In the end, none of these works even attempts to provide an adequate explanation of the causes of the most important conflict over the existence and expansion of plantation slavery — the US Civil War.

### *Cotton Slavery: As Capitalist as Modern Economies*

#### EDWARD BAPTIST: INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY VIA INCREASING TORTURE

Edward Baptist, like his colleagues Johnson and Beckert, sees US plantation slavery as quintessentially capitalist and points to the rising productivity of slave labor in the harvesting of cotton as exemplifying slavery’s ultracapitalist dynamism. Baptist takes as his point of departure the striking finding of Alan J. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, in their pathbreaking studies on biological innovation and productivity growth in the antebellum cotton South,<sup>11</sup> that during the first sixty

<sup>9</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014 [1944]). Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman (eds.), *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery: The Legacy of Eric Williams* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) brings together critical reflections of economic historians on the Williams Thesis.

<sup>10</sup> Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xv–xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Alan J. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chapter 4; “Biological Innovation and Productivity growth in the Antebellum Cotton South,” *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2008): 1123–71.

years of so of the nineteenth century “cotton picked per slave quadrupled, with picking efficiency increasing at 2.3 percent per annum, substantially faster than the advance of labor productivity in the overall economy.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Baptist explicitly rejects Olmstead and Rhode’s claim that this increase resulted from the introduction and diffusion of new cotton hybrids, combined with the movement of cotton cultivation to more fertile lands. He argues instead that what explains the spectacular growth in productivity was the perfection of a system of *torture*, which he terms the “pushing system.” Baptist’s fundamental proposition is that “enslavers used measurement to calibrate torture in order to force cotton pickers to figure out how to increase their own productivity and thus push through the picking bottleneck.”<sup>13</sup>

Now, there is no doubt that improvements in the application of force were central to the impressive gains in output per slave achieved on plantations in the pre-Civil War South. The introduction of gang labor on cotton plantations, which featured close supervision by overseers and a detailed division of tasks in harvesting, was indispensable in bringing about the increase in the *intensity* of labor that was fundamental in producing the major increase of labor productivity achieved under slavery.<sup>14</sup> Nor would the “clearing of the frontier” by way of deforestation that laid the basis for large-scale cotton cultivation in the Southwest have been possible without the backbreaking work of the slaves. The latter could be elicited only with the help of the lash. But the fact remains that Baptist’s claim that ever-increasing *torture*, rather than the introduction of new cotton hybrids, was the source of a nearly 400 percent increase in labor productivity over nearly six decades is dubious.

Above all, planters held their wealth overwhelmingly in the form of slaves rather than land, a proclivity which reflected the relative scarcity of labor compared to land in the cotton South. This meant that the planters could rationally resort to the whip to increase output only up to the point that this threatened the bodily health of their slaves, for *preserving the value* of their slaves had to be the planters’ overriding goal. As Gavin Wright, Roger Ransom, and other economic historians have pointed out, Southern planters invested most of their surpluses in slaves and often went deeply into debt in order to

12 Olmstead and Rhode, “Biological Innovation,” 1124.

13 Baptist, *Half the Story*, 130.

14 See R. Keith Aufhauser’s classic essay “Slavery and Scientific Management,” *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1973): 811–24.

do so.<sup>15</sup> Any master who killed or permanently maimed a slave, especially a slave who had been mortgaged to purchase other slaves or land, would be going against the profit maximizing that Baptist believes defined the planters as capitalists.<sup>16</sup>

But the claim that physical torture produced increases in productivity over several generations is itself problematic. Baptist recognizes that the “pushing system” was in place on cotton plantations by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century and that “in 1861, the basic mechanics of arms, backs, and fingers remained as they had been in 1805.”<sup>17</sup> Were the planters really able to raise the intensity of torture over sixty years so as to bring about a steady increase in the intensity and dexterity of their slaves’ labor marked enough to increase their output by a factor of four? In view of the planters’ level of violence and slaves’ intensity and dexterity of labor at the start of the period, Baptist never explains how the planters’ reliance on the whip could possibly yield ever more productive results. In the words of Alan Olmstead, “One might ask how a mangled human, tortured and weakened by daily beatings[,] could recover in short [enough] order to perform any work, let alone achieve a previously unattainable standard.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that torture was ubiquitous, and appears to have been accompanied by different levels of increase in output per slave in different regions and at different times, only adds to Baptist’s difficulty in making his case.<sup>19</sup>

#### WALTER JOHNSON: SLAVERY’S OVERSPECIALIZATION AND FALLING RATE OF PROFIT

Walter Johnson argues that plantation slavery is a form of commodity production no less capitalist than our own because it (over-)specialized in the production of cotton, experienced falling profitability, and expanded geographically in order to compensate. According to his *River of Dark Dreams*, the planters’ drive to push the specialization of cotton to the absolute limit prevented them from producing food to nourish the slaves, obliging them to

<sup>15</sup> Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Roger L. Ransom, *Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of Slavery, Emancipation and the American Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to John Clegg, who shared his “Capitalism and Slavery,” *Critical Historical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 281–304, with me prior to publication, for this key point.

<sup>17</sup> Baptist, *Half the Story*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> “Roundtable of Review for *The Half Has Never Been Told*,” *Journal of Economic History* vol. 75, no. 3 (September 2015): 920.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 920–21.

purchase it on the market. The resulting tendency of the cotton South as a whole toward monoculture rendered the region dependent on food brought in from farmers in the Northwest, but planters were unable to import it in sufficient amounts. Slaves were thus left on the verge of starvation due to food shortages, even as they were perpetually overworked and overpunished, driven to constantly increase production by the whip and other instruments of torture. The upshot, according to Johnson, was that slaves could not but experience rising mortality and declining fertility rates and were unable to reproduce themselves biologically. For Johnson, there could hardly be clearer evidence of a system under stress resulting from pushing specialization too far.

Nevertheless, longstanding historical research directly contradicts Johnson's claim. As early as 1970, Robert Gallman demonstrated that the production of corn — used as food for both slaves and livestock (mostly pigs which were consumed on the plantations) — increased together with cotton production on Southern plantations.<sup>20</sup> The complementarity of the production cycles of cotton and corn allowed plantations to cultivate both and keep slaves employed throughout the year. The cotton South achieved self-sufficiency in foodstuffs, just as North American slaves were able to reproduce their populations from relatively early on, and high rates of natural reproduction continued to be supported by rising plantation food production throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Far from being overspecialized, the antebellum South's diversification provided the foundations for its particular form of cotton-driven development.<sup>22</sup> Johnson argues that a recurring crisis of profitability in the cotton South drove the geographic expansion of slavery into the Southwest to compensate — a “spatial fix” along the lines conceptualized by David Harvey.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the only evidence Johnson even attempts to muster for declining profitability in the antebellum South is beside the point at best — from steamship lines operating on the Mississippi River. On the other hand, Johnson never engages the massive literature, beginning with Conrad and Meyer in 1955,<sup>24</sup> that demonstrates that *cotton cultivation* was a

20 Robert E. Gallman, “Self-Sufficiency in the Cotton Economy of the Antebellum South,” *Agricultural History* vol. 44, no. 1 (1970): 5–23.

21 Ira Berlin (ed.), *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London: Frank Cass, 1991); Sam Bowers Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoe Cake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840–1860* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

22 This literature is summarized in Richard Steckel, “A Peculiar Population: The Nutrition, Health, and Mortality of American Slaves from Childhood to Maturity,” *Journal of Economic History* vol. 46, no. 3 (1986), 721–41.

23 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, chapter 4.

24 Alfred H. Conrad and John R. Meyer, “The Economics of Slavery in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 66, no. 2 (1955): 95–130.

profitable investment for slaveowners before the Civil War. While there is considerable debate about the source of slavery's profitability, it is "generally accepted that slavery was a profitable enterprise."<sup>25</sup> Johnson's claims that plantation slavery was a form of social labor that was so specialized that its workers were unable to reproduce themselves biologically, and that could not avoid the same form of crisis deriving from a falling rate of profit that modern capitalism experiences, simply cannot stand up to historical scrutiny.

#### SVEN BECKERT: WAR CAPITALISM

Beckert's analysis of cotton plantation slavery as emerging out of the development of what he dubs "war capitalism" is the most theoretically and historically ambitious conceptualization of those adduced by the three authors. As do Johnson and Baptist, Beckert equates capitalism with commerce, finance, and forms of appropriation by means of legal-physical coercion, above all colonization. He admits that his "war capitalism" is identical to what has commonly been recognized as "merchant capitalism,"<sup>26</sup> but he sees it as the world-historical instrument of militarily-backed commerce, by which British merchants, supported by the British state, seized ever-increasing control of the market for fine cotton textiles produced by skilled artisans in India, as well as the market for raw cotton for cotton cloths produced in the West Indies and Brazil. It is from this strategic position in control of the commerce in key commodities, according to Beckert, that British war capitalism was able to superintend the American colonization effort in general — and, more to the point, to dominate the agrarian transformation that made the US South the center of world production of raw cotton, and, from there, the Industrial Revolutions in both Britain and the United States.

Nevertheless, Beckert's "war capitalism," as it evolved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, actually was associated with two quite distinct, and to a significant degree separate, processes of European colonization in the Western Hemisphere. These came out of two vastly different forms of economic evolution and had entirely divergent outcomes that can in no way be explained in terms of the workings of "war capitalism" or merchant capitalism.<sup>27</sup> The colonial empires built by Spain, Portugal, France, and Holland represented a *continuity* of feudal-absolutist expansion. The European thrust into the Americas arose initially as

25 Trevon D. Logan, "Roundtable," *Journal of Economic History*, 924–25.

26 Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, xvi.

27 This point is brought out in Robin Blackburn's review of Beckert, "White Gold, Black Labour," *New Left Review*, vol. 95 (September–October 2015): 159.

one response to the late medieval crisis of seigniorial incomes in the Iberian Peninsula and sustained itself as a response to the absolutist monarchies' fiscal crises in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These states were inextricably involved in continuing warfare with one another, but they could not raise sufficient taxes to finance their military commitments without tending to bankrupt the relatively stagnant peasant agricultures that were the ultimate source of their income. The absolutist states initiated their colonizing ventures to secure the funds that they could not amass at home, but the empires they created ended up extending the increasingly costly international political-military competition among feudal ruling classes and states that had characterized the precapitalist European political economies from the start.

State-sanctioned merchant companies were often behind the trade and colonization efforts; thanks to the governments that supported them, they tended to enjoy monopolies in the provision of slaves and other imports (tools, food, clothing) as well as in the marketing of colonial produce (sugar, coffee, cotton). It is true that, by the eighteenth century, French sugar and slave merchants servicing the Caribbean colonies had, as independent entrepreneurs, broken through the royal monopolies. But the French absolutist legal code forbade them from seizing the land and slaves of planters to cover debts that those planters had failed to pay. As a result, French planters, unlike British and later US planters who *were* legally subject to such seizures when they did not pay their debts, avoided market dependence and the associated subjection to market compulsion.<sup>28</sup> As a result, absolutist colonization reproduced *feudal* dynamics *outside* of Europe. Profits from the absolutist states' slave colonies flowed into the coffers of the crown, funding continued military-political competition in Europe and beyond, as well as into the treasuries of the merchants, who used their wealth to purchase venal offices (tax-farming) or manors where they could extract traditional rents and fees from the peasantry.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the English colonial empire was the first *capitalist imperialism*.<sup>30</sup> Rather than being driven by the fiscal demands of a feudal-absolutist state, English colonization in the seventeenth century was the product of a dynamic agrarian capitalism in which the capitalist tenant farmer was the emblematic figure. Dependent upon the market and thus subject to intercapitalist competition, capitalist tenant farmers specialized their output, accumulated land and tools, and introduced technical

28 Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern* (London: Verso, 1997), 282–83, 444–45.

29 *Ibid.*, chapters II–V, VII.

30 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2003), chapters 4–5.

innovations that raised their productivity so that they could pay commercial rents to their capitalist landlords. Separated from their means of subsistence, these farmers and their wage laborers were obliged to purchase goods formerly produced in their households. In turn, the growth of the agricultural productivity that they underwrote brought down food prices and opened the way for greater purchases of discretionary items throughout the economy.<sup>31</sup> The result was the emergence of a mass domestic market consisting not only of cloths previously produced in the home, but new, “exotic” goods like coffee, tobacco, and sugar secured from the colonies.

The merchants who organized the colonization of the English Caribbean and North America were not the “company merchants” who enjoyed royal monopolies but, rather, “new merchants” who derived from ranks of shopkeepers and sea captains. They competed among themselves to supply American colonists with laborers (initially indentured servants, later slaves), food, clothing, and tools as well as to supply English consumers with the planters’ tobacco, sugar, and coffee.<sup>32</sup> These merchants not only developed the trade in colonial products but directly organized plantation production in the English New World. They and their descendants saw to the imposition of a colonial land law that allowed merchants to seize land and slaves from planters who failed to pay their debts, forcing the planters into market dependence and subjection to the competitive constraint.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Social-Property Relations & Rules for Reproduction of North American Cotton Slavery*

Ultimately, the flaws in all three accounts of the dynamics of plantation slavery in the Americas derive from their failure to specify the specific *social-property relations* and *rules of reproduction* of this form of social labor.<sup>34</sup> Slaveowning planters in the United States and the British Caribbean were *market dependent* — they had to “sell to survive.” Unlike feudal lords, whose possession of landed

31 The importance of the English domestic market, based on agrarian capitalist social-property relations, for colonial products is in marked contrast to the *absence* of such a market in France. The French peasantry, secure in their possession of landed property and capable of producing the bulk of their own subsistence, purchased little colonial produce. According to Blackburn (*Making of New World Slavery*, 445), “France, with two to three times the population of Britain, consumed only half as much sugar.” While France re-exported over 70 percent of colonial products to continental Europe, the vast majority of British colonial imports were consumed in the home market.

32 Robert P. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Part I.

33 Claire Priest, “Creating an American Property Law,” *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 120, no.2 (2006)

34 The following is based primarily on Post, *American Road to Capitalism*, chapter 2.

property was reproduced through politically enforced custom, planters were not free to “withdraw” from the market and resume subsistence production when prices fell and squeezed their profits.<sup>35</sup> Put another way, these slaveholders were compelled, *like capitalists*, to minimize costs and maximize revenues in order to reproduce themselves as slaveholders — that is, to maintain possession of their means of production with regard to land and slaves. It is this market *compulsion* that explains many of what appear to be “capitalist” characteristics of plantation slavery: the organization of centralized gang labor with a detailed division of tasks, the accumulation of more slaves and land, the collateralization of slaves and land to finance expansion, and the constant search for new techniques that could boost labor productivity.

But slavery, despite the planters’ market dependence, did not duplicate the workings of capitalism with wage labor because the relationship of master and slave, *unlike* the relationship of capitalist and wage worker, *set up barriers* to planters effectively cutting costs in the ways that capitalists do — in particular, by way of the relatively continuous introduction of labor-saving technological changes, as well as of productive specialization.

Under slavery, the nonproducers did not purchase the *labor power* — ability to work for fixed periods of time — of the direct producers. Instead, the planters purchased *the laborers*.<sup>36</sup> Put another way, the slave was a form of *fixed capital* — a constant element of the production process that could not easily be expelled from production in order to facilitate the relatively continuous introduction of techniques that improved labor productivity. So, if planters introduced cost-cutting techniques that saved labor, they would not be able, like their capitalist counterparts, to simply lay that labor off. They would be stuck with continuing ownership of the laborer(s), having to keep them around until they could find purchasers.<sup>37</sup>

35 On the dynamics of feudalism, see Withold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

36 While the buying and selling of direct producers as “means of production in human form” requires their legal unfreedom, it is *not* legal freedom that distinguishes wage labor from slave labor. Wage labor is compatible with a variety of forms of legal-juridical compulsion — indentured servitude, vagrancy laws, laws compelling workers to remain at a job for the length of their contracts, etc. What distinguishes wage labor from slave labor is the purchase and sale of *labor power* rather than the purchase and sale of the *laborer*. Even bonded wage workers can be expelled from production — fired — whereas slaves must be *sold*. See Charles Post, “The Separation of the ‘Economic’ and the ‘Political’ under Capitalism: ‘Capital-Centric Marxism’ and the Capitalist State,” *Verso Books Blog*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2345-charles-post-the-separation-of-the-economic-and-the-political-under-capitalism-capital-centric-marxism-and-the-capitalist-state>.

37 John Clegg (“Capitalism and Slavery,” 302), working from the same theoretical framework

It is true that, like other noncapitalist forms of social labor, slavery did bring about *episodic* improvements in productivity. However, unlike under capitalism, which tends to spur more or less ongoing technical change, innovation under slavery had a “once and for all” character.<sup>38</sup> The most important technique brought in under plantation slavery in the United States was the Petit Gulf cotton hybrid in the early nineteenth century, which brought major productivity increases indeed. But despite Olmstead’s assertion that improvement in cotton hybrids was a relatively continuous process,<sup>39</sup> his and Rhodes’ book actually demonstrates that, though a number other cotton hybrids were introduced before the Civil War, they did little to raise output per slave in the cotton harvest.<sup>40</sup> The nearly 400 percent increase in harvesting labor produc-

as this essay, argued that masters purchased the slaves’ labor power. He cites the existence of a domestic slave trade organized by specialized slave traders to demonstrate the essential “liquidity” of slave markets and their ability to allocate slaves to the most efficient producers.

There are several problems with this argument.

First, a relatively small percentage of slaves were allocated through the domestic slave market — half a million, or approximately 10 percent of the total slave population, over forty years.

Second, as Clegg recognizes, most of these slaves became available when their owners either abandoned plantation production for household-based, more capital-intensive farming, or went bankrupt. As a result, the market for slaves bore a greater resemblance to the market for used fixed capital than the market for labor power under capitalism. In order for a firm to successfully *excess* used fixed capital, there must be *both* the supply of used fixed capital (from either the realization of its value over several production cycles or when a firm goes bankrupt) *and the demand* for fixed capital from other capitalist producers (usually in low-wage zones of the world economy who can use the machinery profitably). Put simply, *excessing* fixed capital — *or slaves* — requires *both buyers and sellers*. By contract, *excessing* labor power requires *only* the constant replenishment of the *supply* of labor power through the introduction of labor-saving tools and machinery and/or the expropriation of noncapitalist peasants and artisans. The capitalist labor market does *not* depend upon the demand for labor power matching its supply. In fact, capitalist accumulation necessarily creates a *surplus* of labor power in the form of a reserve army of labor — which *cannot* exist under slavery. For a discussion of the differing dynamics of capital and labor markets, see Howard Botwinick, *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Differentials Under Capitalist Competition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Finally, purchasing slaves was a much riskier proposition than hiring wage workers. As Walter Johnson pointed out in his first book, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), one of the great problems facing planters investing relatively large sums of money in slaves was determining whether or not the slaves were actually capable of performing the tasks they were to be assigned. A capitalist who hires a wage worker who is unwilling to carry out or incapable of carrying out the tasks they are assigned can simply fire the wage worker, while a slaveowner would have to find another slaveowner to buy their “defective” means of production in human form.

38 Robert P. Brenner, “The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,” *New Left Review* 104 (July–August 1977): 36–37.

39 Olmstead, “Roundtable,” 920.

40 Olmstead and Rhodes, *Creating Abundance*, table 4.2, 117–18, lists three hybrids other than Petit Gulf introduced before the Civil War: Cluster/Dixon (1843), Semicluster/Peerless (1847), and Eastern Big Boll/Truitt (1857). The former two were characterized as “difficult, trash” to pick. Only Eastern Big Boll/Truitt, introduced on the eve of the war, was characterized as “easier” to pick.

tivity in the six decades before the Civil War was mainly the consequence of the diffusion of the Petit Gulf hybrid to older regions of cotton cultivation from the Southwestern frontier, as well as the movement of plantation agriculture to more fertile soils.<sup>41</sup>

The difficulty of continuously introducing labor-saving technical innovation under plantation slavery shaped this form of social labor's distinctive rules for reproduction. On the one hand, the planters' inability to easily replace slaves with improved tools and machinery meant that *geographic expansion* — the addition of more land and more slaves — was often the most rational and rapid way of increasing output in the face of rising prices. Plantation slavery thus entailed *accumulation without technical innovation*. On the other hand, the need to preserve the slaves' value as fixed capital required that they be maintained whether they labored or not, and this provided an incentive for planters to try and keep their slaves working *year-round*. The seasonal character of agriculture — the disjunction between labor and production time — did not make this easy.<sup>42</sup> But the complementarity of the production cycles of cotton and corn and the availability of surplus land for the slaves' independent production of food for themselves allowed planters to keep their slaves employed year-round without interfering with the increased production of cotton. Plantation slavery thus entailed *accumulation without specialization of output*.

Plantation slavery's noncapitalist social-property relations and rules of reproduction limited the development of the home market and industrialization in the regions it dominated or expanded into. Plantations' relative technical stagnation, their minimal demand for new plant and equipment, and their ability to produce sufficient foodstuffs at home meant that markets in the slave South for means of production and means of consumption were extremely limited. The antebellum South was therefore the least urbanized and industrialized region in the United States. Indeed, slavery tended to suppress industrialization. As Olmstead argues, historians have reached a "consensus" that plantation slavery "was detrimental to economic development" in the regions it dominated or came to dominate. But "capitalism survived the Civil War and emancipation in excellent health" and continued to flourish.<sup>43</sup>

41 For a discussion of differential soil productivity in the antebellum South, see James D. Foust and Dale S. Swan, "Productivity and Profitability of Antebellum Slave Labor: A Micro-Approach," *Agricultural History*, vol. 44, no. 1 (January 1970): 44–45.

42 On labor versus production time in agriculture, see Susan Archer Mann, *Agrarian Capitalism in Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), chapter 1.

43 Olmstead, "Roundtable," 923.

## *Was Slavery Necessary to Capitalist Industrialization?*

Perhaps the strongest case for the necessity of slavery, as an emanation of “war capitalism,” to make industrialization possible is presented by Beckert, who argues that without plantation slavery, the key industry in the industrialization process — cotton textiles — would have been starved of raw materials. In an essay written after the publication of *Empire of Cotton*, Beckert claims:

Europe’s ability to industrialize rested entirely on the control of expropriated lands and enslaved labor in the Americas. It was able to escape the constraints of its own resources because of its increasing and often violent domination of global trade networks, along with control of the huge territory of the Americas.<sup>44</sup>

### THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN BRITAIN

Clearly, the accelerated production of raw cotton on North American slave plantations made possible a smooth supply to meet the demand of English factories experiencing industrialization. As Beckert makes clear in *Empire of Cotton*,<sup>45</sup> cotton had been produced across the Americas, Africa, and Asia by peasant households for millennia. Secure in their possession of landed property, these peasants produced cotton as *one* of a number of products primarily for their household consumption. Only *physical surpluses* of cotton, like any other crop or animal, were sold as part of “safety first” (household-village consumption first) peasant production. As a consequence, the dominance of peasant production in most of the world slowed the supply of raw cotton throughout the system. In this historical context, once the cotton gin had been invented in 1793, North American plantation slavery could emerge as a superior form of cultivation of raw cotton that could and did effectively respond to any increase in supply it was called upon to meet, specifically the historic demand generated by an Industrial Revolution in full swing, experiencing its most powerful wave of technical innovation.

But if the revolution in the supply of raw cotton that took place in North America played an historic role in sustaining the British Industrial Revolution, it can in no way be said to be responsible for it. The opposite is much more the

<sup>44</sup> Sven Beckert, “Slavery and Capitalism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/SlaveryCapitalism/150787>.

<sup>45</sup> Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, chapter 1.

case. Beckert argues that “Europeans became important to the world of cotton not because of new inventions or superior technologies, but because of their ability to reshape then dominated global cotton networks.”<sup>46</sup> But it is hard to see how he can sustain this position in view of the actual relationships between the supply of raw cotton under the aegis of “war capitalism,” the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of slave production of cotton on Southern plantations.

The fact is that the British Industrial Revolution had completed its initial phase before North America began to supply *any* cotton to Britain whatsoever. On the other hand, the explosion of the North American cotton supply that began in the 1790s only occurred because the Industrial Revolution continued in those years to gather steam; it is hard to see how or why this would happen absent that stimulus. Industrialization caused the rise of raw cotton production in the American South, not the other way around.

Up through the early decades of the Industrial Revolution, from around 1760 through 1790, British industry relied for its raw cotton on imports from Brazil and the West Indies and, to some extent, older sources in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and beyond. Yet, whatever the previous role of English merchants in supplying raw material from these places, it is not possible to believe that they, or other British merchants, required this previous experience with raw cotton imports, or related networks they might have established in relationship to it, to seize the world-historical opportunity that opened up in the trade of raw cotton from the US South following the invention of the cotton gin. Whatever British “war capitalism” had accomplished in taking over and building the trade in finished cottons played no role and was simply left behind with the emergence of the world-historical nexus between British industrialism and the raw cotton production on North American plantations.

What, then, was the source of Britain’s industrialization and Industrial Revolution? It is possible here to offer only a skeletal outline, which proceeds from the account of the rise of agrarian capitalism in England already sketched. The transition to capitalism in British agriculture, manifesting a transition from production based on a possessing peasantry to production based in market-dependent, specialized producers, was responsible for an unprecedented growth in agricultural productivity: an agricultural revolution. The associated long-term decline in relative food prices made possible a historic increase in spending on discretionary nonfood items, and, in aggregate, unprecedented growth in the

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46 *Ibid.*, 30.

domestic market. The sustained increase in demand for goods such as drove a dramatic movement of the labor force out of agricultural production and into nonagricultural employment in general and towns in particular. The increase in population in English towns during the century between 1650 and 1750 was greater than for the whole of Europe in the same period. By 1750, well before the rise of the factory and associated technological innovations, about 55 percent of the population was in nonagricultural employment, manifesting a process of capitalist industrialization unprecedented in European or indeed world history and laying the groundwork for the Industrial Revolution.<sup>47</sup>

The same increase in agricultural productivity that underpinned the growth of a mass domestic market for nonfood industrial goods had “freed” a growing portion of the population for work in industry — initially located in farm households in combination with the production of raw wool or meat for the market, increasingly based in households specialized in textiles and then ultimately crowded into industrial districts. As artisans and minor merchants competed to produce textiles (initially woolens, later cotton), they attempted to overcome the rising costs of dispersed production (lack of control over raw materials, lack of discipline of the labor forces) by seeking to centralize production in factories. This was ultimately made possible by labor-saving, cost-reducing technologies focusing on centralized machinery driven by inanimate power (steam and water) that drove an epoch-making series of innovations in spinning and weaving.<sup>48</sup> A precocious process of agricultural revolution had made possible the capitalist industrialization of the economy that opened the way for the British Industrial Revolution.

#### INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN THE NORTHERN UNITED STATES

Much of Baptist’s *Half the Story Is Never Told* is devoted to demonstrating that the expansion of plantation slavery was *necessary* to the development of industrial capitalism in the United States. He sees the contribution as taking place in

47 For the foregoing interrelated processes of agricultural revolution, rise of the domestic market for consumer goods, and relocation of the labor force out of agriculture, see the fundamental works of E.A. Wrigley — notably, “Urban Growth and Agricultural Change: England and the Continent in the Early Modern Period,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 15, no.4 (Spring, 1985), esp. pp.700-701, and “The Advanced Organic Economy,” in *Continuity, Chance and Change. The Character of the Industrial Revolution in England*, New York: Cambridge University Press (1988), chapter 2 — and of Robert Allen — notably “Economic Structure and Agricultural Productivity in Europe. 1300-1800,” *European Review of Economic History*, vol.4, no.1 (2006).

48 Michael A. Zmolek, *Rethinking the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

two ways: the allocation of Southern profits to financing of Northern industry and the export of Southern cotton driving US growth in general.

According to Baptist, “The north’s industrial sector was built on the backs of enslaved people.”<sup>49</sup> He argues that profits from slave-produced cotton exported from the United States flowed from the South to British banks, in particular Baring Brothers. The British banks’ profits then underwrote the advance of credit to US banks, which was used to finance planters’ purchase of more slaves and land, speculation in public lands, and the construction of canals in the 1820s and 1830s and of railroads in the 1840s and 1850s in the US North.

However, there is little or no evidence that profits from plantation slavery actually financed antebellum Northern manufacturing. With the exception of a minority of cotton textile firms, Northern industry financed itself by way of neither bank loans nor the stock market.<sup>50</sup> Prosperous artisan producers who were transforming themselves into small capitalist industrialists organized and financed the greater part of US manufacturing in the years before 1865, often in partnerships with small-scale merchants, those who marketed the artisans’ manufactures.<sup>51</sup> Simply put, the producers and merchants who organized the US antebellum Industrial Revolution self-financed it, without recurring to the profits of plantation slavery.

Baptist argues, more generally, that the export of slave-produced cotton was, overall, the driving force of US economic development. Baptist realizes that Douglas North’s original claim that the expansion of cotton exports drove US growth by creating a market for Western farmers is unsustainable.<sup>52</sup> However, his alternative argument is without evidential basis. Baptist recognizes that while cotton made up the vast majority of US exports before the Civil War, exports made up a very small portion of the US economy in that period, and so appar-

49 Baptist, *Half the Story*, 322.

50 Lance Davis, “The New England Textile Mills and the Capital Markets: A Study in Industrial Borrowing,” *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1960): 1–30.

51 Harold C. Livesay and Glen Porter, *Merchants and Manufacturers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) remains the most important work on this question. See also Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), chapter 2 and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), chapter 3.

52 Douglas C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States, 1790–1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), Part II; and his critics: Albert Fishlow, “Antebellum Regional Trade Reconsidered,” in R.L. Andreano (ed.), *New Views in American Economic Development* (Cambridge, MA: Schoken Books, 1965); Dianne Lindstrom, “Southern Dependence on Interregional Grain Supplies: A Review of the Trade Flows, 1840–1860,” *Agricultural History* vol. 44, no. 1 (1970): 101–13.

ently lacked the heft to push the economy forward. However, by way of a series of “back of the envelope calculations,” he tries to show that the share of cotton exports in the gross domestic product only scratch the surface of cotton’s actual contribution.<sup>53</sup> To the South’s cotton exports, Baptist adds the value of Southern land and slave sales, the value of inputs used to produce cotton, “money spent by millworkers and Illinois hog farmers,” and other forms of economic activity and reaches the conclusion that slavery and cotton actually accounted for at least 40 percent of US gross domestic product. However, as a number of critics have pointed out, this is an illegitimate method of calculation.<sup>54</sup> Assets, like land and slaves, are wealth, not output — stocks, not flows — so they cannot be counted as part of the GDP. The inclusion of both the value of inputs in the production of cotton and the value of cotton exported is a clear case of “double-counting.” And the inclusion of the demand generated by Northern workers and farmers is never justified. As Logan, an economic historian, argues,

Baptist never gives a ballpark calculation of what the consumer and producer surpluses due to enslavement were, and [only] if we had such a measure could we say how much American (and world) GDP growth was due to American enslaved labor.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Origins of US Capitalism and the Civil War*

US capitalism’s roots are to be found in the transformation of Northern family farming after the American Revolution, not in the evolution of Southern slavery.<sup>56</sup> Under the Articles of Confederation and just after, independent household producers unleashed a series of struggles, highlighted by Shays’ Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the Fries Rebellion, that had the goal of enabling them to preserve their landed property in a form that would relieve them of having to engage in competitive market production. But the enactment of the Constitutional Settlement and the establishment of the federal state brought about their defeat, with huge consequences for the emergence of capitalism in the United States.

53 Baptist, *Half the Story*, 321–22.

54 Olmstead, “Roundtable,” 923; Logan, “Roundtable,” 925; Bradley A. Hansen, “The Back of Ed Baptist’s Envelope,” *Bradley A. Hansen’s Blog*, October 30, 2014, <http://bradleyahansen.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-back-of-ed-baptists-envelope.html>.

55 Logan, “Roundtable,” 925.

56 The following is based on Post, *American Road to Capitalism*.

The rise of taxation and of landlords' and creditors' ability to evict their tenants if they did not pay their rent or their debts forced independent producers into competitive production for the market in order to hold onto their property. The federal government established land policies that effectively commodified the public lands expropriated from Native Americans and went on to carry on land sales with no maximum prices or acreage. Several waves of land speculation ensued during the antebellum period, which had the effect of compelling settlers to go into debt to purchase land at inflated prices. The outcome of all these processes was to require farmers to specialize, accumulate capital, and innovate if they hoped to acquire land, retain it, and ultimately expand their holdings. The resulting transition to a petty-capitalist form of agriculture (with little reliance on wage labor) in the North created the home market for emerging capitalist industry, as household producers abandoned the production of their own means of consumption and came to demand increasingly sophisticated labor-saving tools and machinery. The subordination of household producers to the competitive constraint (that is, the law of value) proceeded unevenly in the Ohio Valley and Great Plains prior to the 1840s. Pockets of independent production persisted until the depression of 1837 to 1844, in the face of waves of land speculation. In the wake of the financial panic of 1837, however, falling prices for grains, rising prices for land, increased mortgage debt, and rising taxes completed the capitalist transformation of Northern agriculture. As farmers in the 1840s and 1850s further specialized output and sought new tools and methods, this agricultural revolution brought down food prices and further deepened the home market. The ensuing US industrialization had at its core an "agro-industrial complex" — a set of interrelated industries that processed agricultural products (flour milling, meat packing), produced farm tools and machinery, and developed new hybrid seeds and fertilizer. The completion of the capitalist transformation of Northern agriculture after 1840 had the effect of radically altering the relationship of Southern plantation slavery to the US economy. Prior to the mid-1840s, the dominance of independent household production in the northwest and plantation slavery in the South allowed merchant capital, led by New York, and Southern cotton merchants, along with speculators in land and transport infrastructure, to organize the US economy. As long as merchants "buying cheap and selling dear" bound together economic activity in the United States, the expansion of plantation slavery deepened commodity circulation. As Baptist argues, the export of slave-produced cotton facilitated the import of British

capital, which led to further land speculation rather than investment in industrial production.<sup>57</sup> But the fact remains that the stepped-up speculative purchase and sale of land had the *unintended consequence* of speeding up the transformation of Northern agriculture by further undermining independent household production, and this issued in the dominance of productive capital in agriculture and manufacturing across the US economy.

After the mid-1840s, the driving force of economic development in the United States was the deepening of the agrarian home market and the growth of capitalist manufacturing. It was at this juncture that the continued geographic expansion of slavery, which was the fundamental form by which it developed, became an obstacle to the development of capitalism in the United States. Small-scale capitalist agriculture could not develop in the regions where plantation slavery prevailed, as planters appropriated the best-located and most fertile land and left more marginal lands to be occupied by independent household producers. As a result, the home market and industrialization were extremely limited. The further geographic expansion of slavery after around 1844 would have blocked the spread of petty-capitalist agriculture, short-circuiting the development of Northern industry. It was this transformation that provided the *social basis* for the polarization of American politics over the future of the Western territories (“free soil” versus “slave soil”) that led to the US Civil War. This was a turning point in the history of US capitalism, the origins and consequences of which have all but disappeared from the most of the new histories of capitalism and slavery. ❦

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57 In personal correspondence, John Clegg argues that British capital would have flowed into the antebellum United States whether or not it had exported cotton. A rapidly growing population and little transport infrastructure would have provided ample opportunities for profitable investment. While this is true, he also recognizes that cotton exports *facilitated* the importation of British capital.

## NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS

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