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Not a Nation of
Immigrants

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

François Maspero, *Monthly
Review* & Left Cooperation

ANDY MERRIFIELD

the
Capitalinian

The First Geological Age of the Anthropocene

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Notes from the Editors

In July 2021, popular protests erupted in Cuba for the first time in a generation, in an event that had the mark of Washington all over it (Helen Yaffe, “What’s Actually Going on in Cuba?” *Novara Media*, July 20, 2021). The immediate background to these protests was the U.S. tightening of the six-decades-long embargo in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, by means of the Donald Trump administration’s imposition of 243 additional financial sanctions on Cuba, subsequently carried forward by the Joe Biden administration. The recent tightening of the economic blockade on Cuba, plus the related economic sanctions directed at Venezuela, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths there, can be understood only in the context of the new era of financial warfare, which the United States has unleashed on targeted countries.

A little over a decade and a half ago, in 2004, Washington launched a whole new strategy of financial war, with the creation within the U.S. Treasury Department of the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, together with the Office of Intelligence and Analysis – the first intelligence office assigned to a treasury department anywhere in the world. These new organizations within the U.S. Treasury were to be the headquarters of a grand strategy utilizing Washington’s financial leverage, based on the role of the U.S. dollar as the hegemonic foreign-exchange currency, to cut off the economic circulation of targeted states. More than 60 percent of all global foreign exchange reserves are denominated in the U.S. dollar, which also plays the preponderant role in international currency transactions. This has allowed the United States to create, as part of its “rules-based international order,” a coercive global framework extending U.S. financial jurisdiction to every country, economic entity, and person engaged at any point in U.S. dollar transactions anywhere in the world.

More specifically, Washington has imposed strict rules of compliance with U.S. standards on all of the world’s banks. It has given itself the right to designate any country, economic entity, or person in the world as a “terrorist” organization or individual, or

The Capitalinian

The First Geological Age of the Anthropocene

JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER AND BRETT CLARK

The geologic time scale, dividing the 4.6 billion years of Earth history into nested eons, eras, periods, epochs, and ages, is one of the great scientific achievements of the last two centuries. Each division is directed at environmental change on an Earth System scale based on stratigraphic evidence, such as rocks or ice cores. At present, the earth is officially situated in the Phanerozoic Eon, Cenozoic Era, Quaternary Period, Holocene Epoch (beginning 11,700 years ago), and Meghalayan Age (the last of the Holocene ages beginning 4,200 years ago). The current argument that the planet has entered into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, is based on the recognition that Earth System change as represented in the stratigraphic record is now primarily due to anthropogenic forces. This understanding has now been widely accepted in science, but nevertheless has not yet been formally adopted by the International Commission on Stratigraphy of the International Union of Geological Sciences, which would mean its official adoption throughout science.

Under the assumption that the Anthropocene will soon be officially designated as the earth's current epoch, there remains the question of the geological age with which the Anthropocene begins, following the last Holocene age, the Meghalayan. Adopting the standard nomenclature for the naming of geological ages, we propose, in our role as professional environmental sociologists, the term *Capitalinian* as the most appropriate name for the new geological age, based on the stratigraphic record, and conforming to the historical period that environmental historians see as commencing around 1950, in the wake of the Second World War, the rise of multinational corporations, and the unleashing of the process of decolonization and global development.¹

In the Anthropocene Epoch, it is clear that any designation of ages, while necessarily finding traces in the stratigraphic record, has to be seen, in part, in terms of human socioeconomic organization, not purely geologically. The most widely accepted social-scientific designation for the predominant world economic system over the last few centuries is

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capitalism. The capitalist system has passed through various stages or phases, the most recent of which, arising after the Second World War under U.S. hegemony, is often characterized as global monopoly capitalism.² Beginning with the first nuclear detonation in 1945, humanity emerged as a force capable of massively affecting the entire Earth System on a geological scale of millions (or perhaps tens of millions) of years. The 1950s are known for having ushered in “the synthetic age,” not only because of the advent of the nuclear age itself, but also due to the massive proliferation of plastics and other petrochemicals associated with the global growth and consolidation of monopoly capitalism.³

The designation of the first geological age of the Anthropocene as the Capitalinian is, we believe, crucial because it also raises the question of a possible second geological age of the Anthropocene Epoch. The Anthropocene stands for a period in which humanity, at a specific point in its history, namely the rise of advanced industrial capitalism following the Second World War, became the principal geological force affecting Earth System change (which is not to deny the importance of numerous other geological forces, which are not all affected by human action, such as plate tectonics, volcanism, erosion, and weathering of rocks, in shaping the Earth System’s future). If capitalism in the coming century were to create such a deep anthropogenic rift in the Earth System through the crossing of planetary boundaries that it led to the collapse of industrial civilization and a vast die-down of human species ensued – a distinct possibility under business as usual according to today’s science – then the Anthropocene Epoch and no doubt the entire Quaternary Period would come to an end, leading to a new epoch or period in geological history, with a drastically diminished human role.⁴ Barring such an end-Anthropocene and even end-Quaternary extinction event, the socioeconomic conditions defining the Capitalinian will have to give rise to a radically transformed set of socioeconomic relations, and indeed a new mode of sustainable human production, based on a more communal relation of human beings with each other and the earth.

Such an environmental climacteric would mean pulling back from the current crossing of planetary boundaries, rooted in capital’s creative destruction of conditions of life on the planet. This reversal of direction, reflecting the necessity of maintaining the earth as a safe home for humanity and for innumerable other species that live on it, is impossible under a system geared to the exponential accumulation of capital. Such a climatic shift would require simply for human survival the creation of a radically new material-environmental relation with Earth. We propose that this necessary (but not inevitable) future geological age to succeed

the Capitalinian by means of ecological and social revolution be named the *Communian*, derived from communal, community, commons.

The Anthropocene versus Capitalocene Controversy

The word *Anthropocene* first appeared in the English language in 1973 in an article by Soviet geologist E. V. Shantser on “The Anthropogenic System (Period)” in *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. Here, Shantser referred to the Russian geologist A. P. Pavlov’s introduction in the 1920s of the notion of the “‘Anthropogenic system (period),’ or ‘Anthropocene.’”⁵ During the first half of the twentieth century, Soviet science played a leading role in numerous fields, including climatology, geology, and ecology, forcing scientific circles in the West to pay close attention to its findings. As a result, the Shantser article would have been fairly well known to specialists, having appeared in such a prominent source.⁶

Pavlov’s coining of *Anthropocene* was closely connected to Soviet geochemist Vladimir I. Vernadsky’s 1926 book *Biosphere*, which provided an early proto-Earth System outlook, revolutionizing how the relationship between humans and the planet was understood.⁷ Pavlov used the concept of the Anthropocene (or Anthropogene) to refer to a new geological period in which humanity was emerging as the main driver of planetary ecological change. In this way, Pavlov and subsequent Soviet geologists provided an alternative geochronology, one that substituted the Anthropocene (Anthropogenic) Period for the entire Quaternary. Most importantly, Pavlov and Vernadsky strongly emphasized that anthropogenic factors had come to dominate the biosphere in the late Holocene. As Vernadsky observed in 1945, “Proceeding from the notion of the geological role of man, the geologist A. P. Pavlov [1854–1929] in the last years of his life used to speak of the *anthropogenic era*, in which we now live.... He rightfully emphasized that man, under our very eyes, is becoming a mighty and ever-growing geological force.... In the 20th Century, man for the first time in the history of the Earth knew and embraced the whole biosphere, completed the geological map of the planet Earth, and colonized its whole surface. *Mankind became a single totality in the life of the earth.*”⁸

The current usage of *Anthropocene*, however, derives from atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen’s recoinage of the term in February 2000, during a meeting of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he declared, “We’re not in the Holocene any more. We’re in the...Anthropocene!”⁹ Crutzen’s use of the term *Anthropocene* was not based on stratigraphic research but on a direct understanding of the changing Earth System rooted principally in perceptions of anthropogenic climate change and the anthropogenic thinning of the ozone layer (re-

search for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1995). Crutzen's designation of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch thus reflected, from the beginning, a sense of crisis and transformation in the human relation to the earth.¹⁰ As Crutzen, geologist Will Steffen, and environmental historian John McNeill declared a few years later: "The term Anthropocene...suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*. The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state."¹¹ Similar views on the effect of anthropogenic changes on the Earth System were presented by one of us in the early 1990s: "In the period after 1945 the world entered a new stage of planetary crisis in which human activities began to affect in entirely new ways the basic conditions of life on earth.... As the world economy continued to grow, the scale of human economic processes began to rival the ecological cycles of the planet, opening up as never before the possibility of planetary-wide ecological disaster. Today, few doubt that the [capitalist] system has crossed critical thresholds of sustainability."¹²

Perhaps the best way of understanding the changes brought about by the Anthropocene Epoch, as depicted by science, is in terms of an "anthropogenic rift" in the history of the planet, such that the socioeconomic effects of human production – today largely in the form of capitalism – have created a series of rifts in the biogeochemical processes of the Earth System, crossing critical ecological thresholds and planetary boundaries, with the result that all of the earth's existing ecosystems and industrial civilization itself are now imperiled.¹³ By pointing to the Anthropocene Epoch, natural scientists have underscored a new climacteric in Earth history and a planetary crisis that needs to be addressed to preserve the earth as a safe home for humanity.

It should be mentioned that the widespread notion that the Anthropocene Epoch stands for "the age of man," frequently presented in the popular literature, is entirely opposed to the actual scientific analysis of the new geological epoch. Logically, to refer to anthropogenic causes of Earth System change does not thereby ignore social structures and inequality, nor does it imply that humanity has somehow triumphed over the earth. Rather, the Anthropocene Epoch, as conceptualized within science, not only incorporates social inequality as a crucial part of the problem, but also views the Anthropocene as standing, at present, for a planetary ecological crisis arising from the forces of production at a distinct phase of human historical development.¹⁴

Yet, despite the crucial importance of the designation of the Anthropocene Epoch in promoting an understanding not only of the current phase of

the Earth System but also of the present ecological emergency, the notion of the Anthropocene has come under heavy attack within the social sciences and humanities. Many of those outside the natural sciences are not invested in or informed about the natural-scientific aspects of Earth System change. They therefore react to the designation of the Anthropocene within geochronology in purely cultural and literary terms divorced from the major scientific issues, reflecting the famous problem of the “two cultures,” dividing the humanities (and frequently the social sciences) off from natural science.¹⁵ In this view, the prefix *anthro* is often interpreted as simply having a human-biological dimension while lacking a socioeconomic and cultural one. As one posthumanist critic has charged, not only the notion of the Anthropocene, but even “the phrase *anthropogenic climate change* is a special brand of blaming the victims of exploitation, violence, and poverty.”¹⁶

Today, the most prominent alternative name offered for the Anthropocene is that of the *Capitalocene*, conceived as a substitute designation for the geochronological epoch of the Earth System following the Holocene. Leading environmental historian and historical-materialist ecological theorist Andreas Malm argues that the Anthropocene, as the name of a new epoch in the geologic time scale, is an “indefensible abstraction” since it does not directly address the social reality of *fossil capital*. Thus, he proposes substituting the Capitalocene for the Anthropocene, shifting the discussion from a geology of humankind to a geology of capital accumulation.¹⁷ In practical as well as scientific terms, however, this runs into several problems. The term *Anthropocene* is already deeply embedded in natural science, and it represents the recognition of a fundamental change in human and geological history that is critical to understanding our period of planetary ecological crisis.

More importantly, although it is true that the Anthropocene was generated by capitalism at a certain phase of its development, the substitution of the name *Capitalocene* for the *Anthropocene* would abandon an essential critical view embodied in the latter. The notion of the Anthropocene as demarcated in natural science stands for an irreversible change in humanity’s relation to the earth. There can be no conceivable industrial civilization on Earth from this time forward where humanity, if it is to continue to exist at all, is no longer the primary geological force conditioning the Earth System. This is the critical meaning of the Anthropocene. To substitute the term *Capitalocene* for *Anthropocene* would be to obliterate this fundamental scientific understanding. That is, even if capitalism is surmounted, through a “Great Climacteric,” representing the transition to a more sustainable world order, this fundamental boundary will remain.¹⁸ Humanity will continue to operate on a level in which the scale of human production rivals the biogeochemical cycles of the planet, and hence the choice is between unsustainable human

development and sustainable human development. There is no going back (except through a civilizational crash and a massive die-down) to a time in which human history had little or no effect on the Earth System.

If a truly mass extinction and planetary civilizational collapse were to occur, this would be an end-Anthropocene or even end-Quaternary extinction event, not a continuation of the Anthropocene. As the great British zoologist E. Ray Lankester (Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley's protégé and Karl Marx's close friend) remarked in 1911 in *The Kingdom of Man*, given its massive and growing disruption of the ecological conditions of human existence, humanity's "only hope is to control...the sources of these dangers and disasters."¹⁹

The enormous historical, geological, and environmental challenges now facing humanity demand, we believe, a shifting of the terrain of analysis to the question of *ages* rather than *epochs* in the geologic time scale. If the world entered the Anthropocene Epoch around 1950, we can also say that the Capitalinian Age began at the same time. The Capitalinian in this conception is not coterminous with historical capitalism, given that capitalism had its origins as a world system in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Rather, the Capitalinian Age was a product of global monopoly capitalism in the wake of the Second World War. In order to understand the historical and environmental significance of the emergence of the Capitalinian and to put it in the context of the geologic time scale, it is first necessary to address the question of the changeover from one geological age to another, stretching from the late Holocene Epoch to the early Anthropocene Epoch.

From the Meghalayan to the Capitalinian

The Holocene Epoch (*Holocene* means entirely recent) was first proposed as a division of geologic time by the French paleontologist Paul Gervais in 1867 and formally adopted by the International Geographic Congress in 1885. It dates back to the end of the last ice age and thus refers to the warmer, relatively mild Earth-environmental conditions extending from roughly 11,700 years ago to the present, covering the time during which glaciers receded and human civilizations arose.²⁰ It was not until around a century and a half after it was first proposed that the Holocene Epoch was formally divided into geological ages. This occurred with the modification of the geologic time scale by the International Commission on Stratigraphy in June 2018, dividing the Holocene into three ages: (1) the Greenlandian, beginning 11,700 years ago, with the end of the Pleistocene Epoch and the beginning of the Holocene; (2) The Northgrippian, beginning 8,300 years ago; and (3) the Meghalayan, extending from 4,200 years ago to the present.

Dividing the Holocene into ages represented a more difficult problem than in other epochs of the Quaternary, given the relatively calm environmental-climatic character of the Holocene.²¹ The first division of the Holocene, the Greenlandian, posed no problems because it corresponded to the criteria giving rise to the Holocene Epoch itself. The Northgrippian came to be designated in terms of an outburst of freshwater from naturally dammed glacial lakes that poured into the North Atlantic, altering the conveyor belt of ocean currents, leading to global cooling. The demarcation of the third division was not as straightforward. There were archaeological reports beginning in the 1970s of a megadrought 4,200 years ago (circa 2200 BCE) lasting several centuries, which was thought to have led to the demise of some early civilizations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and elsewhere.

In 2012, paleoclimatologists discovered a stalagmite in Mawmluh cave in the Meghalaya state in northeast India that pointed to a centuries-long drought. This was then taken as the geological exemplar or “golden spike” for the Meghalayan Age. In their original July 15, 2018, press release on the Meghalayan, entitled “Collapse of Civilizations Worldwide Defines Youngest Unit of the Geologic Time Scale,” the International Commission on Stratigraphy went so far as to declare that a civilizational collapse had occurred around 2200 BCE: “Agricultural-based societies that developed in several regions after the end of the last Ice Age were impacted severely by the 200-year climatic event that resulted in the collapse of civilizations and human migrations in Egypt, Greece, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Yangtze River Valley. Evidence of the 4.2 kiloyear climatic event has been found on all seven continents.”²²

This resulted in sharp rebuttals by archaeologists, who argued that the evidence for the sudden collapse of civilizations due to climate change around 2200 BCE does not in actuality exist. Although civilizations did decline, it was most likely over longer periods of time, and there were reasons to believe that an array of social factors played a more significant role than the megadrought.²³ As archaeologist Guy D. Middleton wrote in *Science* magazine: “Current evidence...casts doubt on the utility of 2200 BCE as a meaningful beginning to a new age in human terms, whether there was a megadrought or not.... Climate change never inevitably results in societal collapse, though it can pose serious challenges, as it does today. From an archaeological perspective, the new Late Holocene Meghalayan Age seems to have started with a whimper rather than a bang.”²⁴

The Meghalayan controversy, whatever the final outcome, highlights a number of essential facts. First, as early as 4,200 years ago, geologic time became intertwined in complex ways with historical time. In the case of the Meghalayan, the geological demarcation drew much of its salience

from a seeming correspondence to the historical-archaeological record. Second, although the International Stratigraphic Committee moved away from its original reference to the collapse of civilizations and sought instead to define the Meghalayan simply in terms of geologic-stratigraphic criteria, the question of social conditions associated with a geological age can no longer be avoided. Third, during the Holocene, from the earliest civilizations to the present, the issues of environmental change and civilizational collapse recur, on an evermore expanding global scale.

If the Meghalayan Age did in fact come into being in the context of a megadrought, the end-event signaling the passing of the Meghalayan (and the Holocene) happened around 1950, leading to the start of what the Anthropocene Working Group posits as the Anthropocene Epoch and what we are proposing as the accompanying Capitalinian Age.²⁵ This transition in geologic time, which is deeply intertwined with distinct socio-historical relations, is associated with the Great Acceleration of global monopoly capitalism in the 1950s, resulting in an age of planetary ecological crisis. This has involved a move away from an environmentally “highly stable epoch” to one “in which a number of key planetary boundary conditions, notably associated with the carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, are clearly outside the range of natural variability observed in the Holocene.”²⁶ Here, megadroughts, megastorms, rising sea levels, out-of-control wildfires, deforestation, species extinction, and other planetary threats are emerging in fast order – not simply as external forces, but as the product of capitalism’s anthropogenic rift in the Earth System.

The Capitalinian Age

The “golden spike” in geologic time determining the end of the Holocene Epoch and the Meghalayan Age – as well as the corresponding emergence of the Anthropocene Epoch and what we are proposing as the Capitalinian Age – has not yet been determined, although a number of candidates are being pursued by the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy. The two most prominent of these are radionuclides, the result of nuclear testing, and plastics, the creation of the petrochemical industry – both of which are products of the synthetic age and represent the emergence of a qualitative transformation in the human relation to the earth.²⁷ While the “Anthropocene strata may be commonly thin,” they “reflect a major Earth System perturbation” in the mid-twentieth century, “are laterally extensive, and can include rich stratigraphic detail,” in which distinct “signatures” of a new epoch and age are evident.²⁸

Anthropogenically sourced radionuclides stem primarily from the fallout from numerous above-ground nuclear tests (and two atomic bombings

in war) commencing with the U.S. Trinity detonation at 5:29 a.m. on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico.²⁹ The first thermonuclear detonation was the Ivy Mike test on Enewetak Atoll on November 1, 1952. This was followed by the disastrous Castle Bravo test at Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954, the explosion of which was two and a half times what had been projected, raining down fallout on sailors in a Japanese fishing boat, the *Lucky Dragon*, and on residents of the Marshall Islands, who ended up with radiation sickness. The United States conducted over two hundred atmospheric and underwater tests (and others were carried out in the 1950s and '60s by the Soviet Union, United Kingdom, France, and China), introducing radioactive fallout in the form of Iodine-131, Caesium-137, Carbon-14, and Strontium-90. This nuclear fallout, especially the gaseous and particulate forms, which entered the stratosphere, was dispersed throughout the biosphere, generating widespread global environmental concern, connecting the entire world's population, to some extent, in a common environmental fate.³⁰

Radionuclides primarily from nuclear weapons tests are thus the most obvious basis for demarcating the beginning of the Anthropocene Epoch and the Capitalinian Age. They have left a permanent record throughout the planet in sediments, soil, and glacial ice, serving as "robust independent stratigraphic markers" that will be detectable for millennia.³¹ The effects of nuclear weapons, beginning with the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, stand for a qualitative change in the human relation to the earth, such that it is now possible to destroy life on such a scale that it would take perhaps as much as tens of millions years for it to recover.³² Indeed, the theory of nuclear winter developed by climatologists suggests that a massive global thermonuclear exchange, generating megafires in a hundred or more major cities, could lead to planetary climate change, more abruptly and in the opposite direction from global warming, through the injection of soot into the stratosphere, causing global or at least hemispheric temperatures to drop several degrees (or even "several tens of degrees") Celsius in a matter of a month.³³

The advent of nuclear weapons technology thus stands for the enormous change in the human relation to the earth around the 1950s, marking the Anthropocene, leaving a distinct signature in the stratigraphic record; it also serves as a moment when specific radioactive elements were introduced into the body composition of all life.³⁴ Nuclear weapons technology is of course not entirely separable from nuclear energy use, which also presents dangers of global radioactive contamination as in the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima.

Plastics, which emerged as a major element of the economy in the 1950s, were the result of developments in organic chemistry, associated with the

Scientific and Technical Revolution and the Second World War. They are a product of the petrochemical industry, thus standing for the further development of fossil capital, which dates back to the Industrial Revolution.³⁵ As of 2017, over “8,300 million metric tons...of virgin plastics have been produced,” exceeding that of almost all other human-made materials.³⁶ Plastic waste is so pervasive that it is found dispersed throughout the entire world. In fact, “molten plastics...have fused basalt clasts and coral fragments...to form an assortment of novel beach lithologies,” and deep ocean mud deposits include microplastics.³⁷ The majority of plastic, made from hydrocarbon-derived monomers, is not biodegradable, resulting in an “uncontrolled experiment on a global scale, in which billions of metric tons of material will accumulate across all major terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems on the planet.”³⁸ Due to these conditions, plastic is seen as another potential stratigraphic indicator of the Anthropocene.³⁹

The production of plastics and petrochemicals in general, like nuclear weapons testing, represents a qualitative shift in the human relationship with the earth. It has resulted in the spread of a host of mutagenic, carcinogenic, and teratogenic (birth-defect causing) chemicals, particularly harmful to life because they are not the product of evolutionary development over millions of years. Like radionuclides, many of these harmful chemicals are characterized by bioaccumulation (concentration in individual organisms) and biomagnification (concentration at higher levels in the food chain/food web) representing increasingly pervasive threats to life. Microplastics actively absorb carcinogenic persistent organic pollutants within the larger environment, making them more potent and toxic.⁴⁰ Plastics are durable and resistant to degradation, properties that “make these materials difficult or impossible for nature to assimilate.”⁴¹ The omnipresent character of plastics in the Capitalinian is evident in the massive plastic gyres in the ocean and by the existence of microplastic particles in nearly all organic life.

Ecological scientists, such as Barry Commoner, Rachel Carson, Howard Odum, and others, singled out both radionuclides and plastics/petrochemicals/pesticides as embodying the synthetic age that emerged in the 1950s. They provided detailed accounts of the transformation in the relationship between humans and the earth, which today are reflected in contemporary charts on the Great Acceleration, presenting such Earth System trends as the dramatic increase in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide, ocean acidification, marine fish capture, land use change, and loss of biodiversity. The epicenter for such global environmental disruption has been the United States as the hegemonic power of the capitalist world economy, dominating and characterizing this entire period. In our analysis, the economic and social system of the United States thus epitomizes

the Capitalinian, as no other nation has played a bigger historical role in the promotion of the “poverty of power” represented by fossil capital.⁴²

At the start of what we are calling the Capitalinian, global monopoly capital, rooted within the United States, entered a period of massive expansion, fueled by the rebuilding of Europe and Japan, the petrochemical revolution, the growth of the automobile complex, suburbanization, the creation of new household commodities, militarization and military technologies, the sales effort, and the growth of international trade. With the endless quest for profit spurring the accumulation of capital, production and the material throughputs to support the economic system’s operations have greatly expanded, placing more demands on ecosystems and generating more pollution.⁴³

Since plastics and other synthetic materials associated with the expansion of the petrochemical industry were readily incorporated into industrial operations, agricultural production, and everyday commodities, new ecological problems inevitably emerged. As Commoner explained in *The Closing Circle*, “the artificial introduction of an organic compound that does not occur in nature, but is man-made and is nevertheless active in a living system, is very likely to be harmful.”⁴⁴ Such materials do not readily decompose or break down in a meaningful human-historical time frame and thus end up accumulating, presenting an increasing threat to ecosystems and living beings. Pesticides and plastics that have these characteristics are therefore a violation of the informal laws of ecology.

Given the operations of monopoly capitalism and its technological apparatus, the largely uncontrolled development of synthetic materials results in a particularly dangerous situation, often referred to as “the risk society.”⁴⁵ In the words of Peter Haff, a professor of environmental engineering at Duke University, a capitalist technostructure “has emerged possessing no global mechanism of metabolic regulation. Regulation of metabolism introduces the possibility of a new timescale into system dynamics – a lifetime – the time over which the system exists in a stable metabolic state. But without an intrinsic lifetime, i.e., lacking enforced setpoint values for energy use,” this system “acts only in the moment, without regard to the more distant future, necessarily biased towards increasing consumption of energy and materials,” racing ahead “without much concern for its own longevity,” much less the continuance of what is external to it.⁴⁶

The uncontrollable, alienated social metabolism of global monopoly capitalism, coinciding with the introduction of radionuclides from nuclear testing, proliferation of plastics and petrochemicals, and carbon emissions from fossil capital – along with innumerable other ecological problems resulting from the crossing of critical thresholds – is manifest-

ed in the Capitalinian Age, associated with the present planetary crisis. Capitalism's relentless drive to accumulate capital is its defining characteristic, ensuring anthropogenic rifts and ecological destruction as it systematically undermines the overall conditions of life.

Today the moment of truth looms large. We currently reside within a "Great Climacteric" – first identified in the 1980s by geographers Ian Burton and Robert Kates – a long period of crisis and transition in which human society will either generate a stable relation to the Earth System or will experience a civilizational collapse, as part of a great die-down of life on earth, or *sixth extinction*.⁴⁷

The future of civilization, viewed in the widest sense, demands that humanity collectively engage in an ecological and social revolution, radically transforming productive relations, in order to forge a path toward sustainable human development. This entails regulating the social metabolism between humanity and the earth, ensuring that it operates within the planetary boundaries or the universal metabolism of nature. Viewed in these terms, there is an objective historical necessity for what we are calling the prospective second geological age of the Anthropocene: the Communion.

The Dawn of Another Age: The Communion

In a remarkable intellectual development in the closing decade of the Soviet Union, leading Soviet geologists, climatologists, geographers, philosophers, cultural theorists, and others came together to describe the global ecological crisis as a *civilizational crisis* requiring a whole new *ecological civilization*, rooted in historical-materialist principles.⁴⁸ This viewpoint was immediately taken up by Chinese environmentalists and has been further developed and applied in China today.⁴⁹ If historic humanity is to survive, today's capitalist civilization devoted to the single-minded pursuit of profits as its own end, resulting in an anthropogenic rift in the Earth system, must necessarily give way to an ecological civilization rooted in communal use values. This is the real meaning of today's widely referred to planetary "existential crisis."⁵⁰

In this Great Climacteric, it is not only essential to bring to an end the destructive trends that are ruining the earth as a safe home for humanity, but also, beyond that, it is vital to engineer an actual "reversal" of these trends.⁵¹ For example, carbon concentration in the atmosphere is nearing 420 parts per million (ppm), peaking in May 2021 at 419 ppm, and is headed rapidly toward 450 ppm, which would break the planetary carbon budget. Science tells us that it will be necessary, if global climate catastrophe is to be avoided, to return to 350 ppm and stabilize the atmospheric carbon dioxide at that level.⁵² This in itself can be seen as standing for the necessity of a new ecological civilization and the anthropogenic generation of a new Communion Age

within the Anthropocene. This ecorevolutionary transition obviously cannot occur through the unbridled pursuit of acquisitive ends, based on the naive belief that this will automatically lead to the greater good – sometimes called “Adam’s Fallacy,” after the classical economist Adam Smith.⁵³ Rather, the necessary reversal of existing trends and the stabilization of the human relation to the earth in accord with a path of sustainable human development can only occur through social, economic, and ecological planning, grounded in a new system of social metabolic reproduction.⁵⁴

To create such an ecological civilization in the contemporary world would require a radical (in the sense of *root*) impetus emanating from the bottom of society – outside the realm of the vested interests.⁵⁵ This overturning of the dominant social relations of production requires a long revolution emanating from the mass movement of humanity. Today’s realities are therefore giving rise to a nascent *environmental proletariat*, defined by its struggle against oppressive environmental as well as economic conditions, and leading to a revolutionary path of sustainable human development. Broad environmental-proletarian movements in this sense are already evident in our time – from the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brazil, the international peasants’ movement *La Via Campesina*, the Bolivarian communes in Venezuela, and the farmers’ movement in India, to the struggles for a People’s Green New Deal, environmental justice, and a just transition in the developed countries, to the Red Deal of the North American First Nations.⁵⁶

The advent of the Communian, or the geological age of the Anthropocene to succeed the Capitalinian, barring an end-Anthropocene extinction event, necessitates an ecological, social, and cultural revolution; one aimed at the creation of collective relations within humanity as a whole as a basis for a wider community with the earth. It thus requires a society geared to both substantive equality and ecological sustainability. The conditions for this new relation to the earth were eloquently expressed by Marx, writing in the nineteenth century, in what is perhaps the most radical conception of sustainability ever developed: “From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation [socialism], the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men [slavery]. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* [good heads of the household].”⁵⁷ In the view of the ancient Greek materialist Epicurus, “the world is my *friend*.”⁵⁸

The revolutionary reconstitution of the human relation to the earth envisioned here is not to be dismissed as a mere utopian conception, but

rather is one of historical struggle arising out of objective (and subjective) necessity related to human survival. In the poetic words of Phil Ochs, the great radical protest singer and songwriter, in his song “Another Age”:

The soldiers have their sorrow
The wretched have their rage
Pray for the aged
It’s the dawn of another age.⁵⁹

In the twenty-first century, it will be essential for the great mass of humanity, the “wretched of the earth,” to reaffirm, at a higher level, its communal relations with the earth: the dawn of another age.⁶⁰

Notes

1. John R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: The Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016), 38–47; Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
2. A classic work in this regard is Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966).
3. Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Bantam, 1972); John Bellamy Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History of the Environment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 112–18; Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); Murray Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974); Joel B. Hagen, *An Entangled Bank* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 100–21; Robert Rudd, *Pesticides and the Living Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1964).
4. Johan Rockström et al., “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature* 461, no. 24 (2009): 472–75; Will Steffen et al., “Planetary Boundaries,” *Science* 347, no. 6223 (2015): 736–46; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010): 13–19; Giovanni Strona and Corey J. A. Bradshaw, “Co-extinctions Annihilate Planetary Life During Extreme Environmental Change,” *Scientific Reports* 8, no. 16274 (2018); James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), ix, 224–26.
5. E. V. Shantser, “Anthropogenic System (Period),” in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 140; Alec Brookes and Elena Fratto, “Toward a Russian Literature of the Anthropocene,” *Russian Literature* 114–115 (2020): 8. See also Anonymous (likely written by E. V. Shantser), “Anthropogenic Factors of the Environment,” in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, 139.
6. John Bellamy Foster, “Late Soviet Ecology and the Planetary Crisis,” *Monthly Review* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 1–20.
7. Vladimir I. Vernadsky, *The Biosphere* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1998).
8. Vladimir I. Vernadsky, “Some Words About the Noosphere,” in *150 Years of Vernadsky*, vol. 2, *The Noosphere*, ed. John Ross (Washington DC: 21st Century Science Associates, 2014), 82. (Vernadsky clearly meant *period* here, in geochronology, rather than *era*.) See also Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, Colin P. Summerhayes, Martin J. Head, and Reinhold Leinfelder, “A General Introduction to the Anthropocene,” in *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, ed. Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, and Colin P. Summerhayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6.
9. Will Steffen, “Commentary,” in *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change*, ed. Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin, and Paul Warde (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 486; Paul J. Crutzen, “The Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (2002): 23; Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 27–28. Marine biologist Eugene Stoermer used the word *Anthropocene* a number of times in the 1980s to refer to the growing human impact on the earth in published articles. But unlike Pavlov in the early twentieth century (who impacted Vernadsky), as well as Crutzen in the early twenty-first century, who launched the current investigations into the Anthropocene, Stoermer’s use of the term at the time had no discernible impact on geological and Earth System discussions. See Andrew C. Revkin, “Confronting the Anthropocene,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2011; Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 27.
10. Will Steffen et al., “Stratigraphic and Earth System Approaches to Defining the Anthropocene,” *Earth’s Future* 4 (2016): 324–45.
11. Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614; Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 28–29.
12. Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet*, 108.
13. Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated,” *Anthropocene Review* (2015): 6–7. The notion of an anthropogenic rift is closely related to the conception of a carbon rift, developed within environmental sociology, expanding on Karl Marx’s early conception of a metabolic rift in the human relation to the environment through production. See Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 121–50.
14. Ian Angus, *A Redder Shade of Green: Intersections of Science and*

Socialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 70–71. As Angus explains, "Anthropocene names a planetary epoch that would not have begun in the absence of human activity, not one caused by every person on Earth."

15. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

16. Jason W. Moore, "Who Is Responsible for the Climate Crisis?," *Maize*, November 4, 2019. For a critique of such views, see Angus, *A Redder Shade of Green*, 67–85.

17. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 391. Malm himself coined the term *Capitalocene* in 2009. See Jason W. Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene?," introduction to *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM, 2016), 5.

18. Ian Burton and Robert W. Kates, "The Great Climacteric, 1798–2048: The Transition to a Just and Sustainable Human Environment," in *Geography, Resources and Environment*, vol. 2, ed. Robert W. Kates and Ian Burton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 393; John Bellamy Foster, "The Great Capitalist Climacteric," *Monthly Review* 67, no. 6 (November 2015): 1–18.

19. E. Ray Lankester, *The Kingdom of Man* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 31–32.

20. Mike Walker et al., "Formal Ratification of the Subdivision of the Holocene Series/Epoch (Quaternary System/Period): Two New Global Boundary Stratotype Sections and Points (GSSPs) and Three New Stages/Subseries," *Episodes* 41, no. 4 (2018): 213.

21. Walker et al., "Formal Ratification," 214.

22. "Collapse of Civilizations Worldwide Defines Youngest Unit of the Geologic Time Scale," International Commission on Stratigraphy, July 15, 2018.

23. Paul Voosen, "Massive Drought or Myth? Scientists Spar Over an Ancient Climate Event Behind Our New Geological Age," *Science*, August 8, 2018.

24. Guy D. Middleton, "Bang or Whimper?: The Evidence for Collapse of Human Civilizations at the Start of the Recently Defined Meghalayan Age Is Equivocal," *Science* 361, no. 6408 (2018): 1204–5.

25. Michael Walker, who chaired the geological working group that introduced the division of the Holocene into ages, insists that the designation of the Meghalayan Age in no way compromises the notion of an Anthropocene Epoch beginning in 1950. It would simply lop off seventy years from the end of the Meghalayan. "You're Living in a New Geologic Age, the Meghalayan," *CBC News*, July 23, 2018.

26. Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch," *Newsletters on Stratigraphy* 50, no. 2 (2017): 210.

27. Colin N. Waters et al., "The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene," *Science* 351, no. 6269 (2016): 137–47; Colin N. Waters, Irka Hajdas, Catherine Jeandel, and Jan Zalasiewicz, "Artificial Radionuclide Fallout Signals," in *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, 192–99; Reinhold Leinfelder and Juliana Assunção Ivar do Sul, "The Stratigraphy of Plastics and Their Preservation in Geological Records," in *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, 147–55. The most important thinker developing the analysis of the synthetic age was Barry Commoner. See Commoner, *The Closing Circle*; Barry Commoner, *The Poverty of Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Barry Commoner, *Making Peace with the Planet* (New York: New Press, 1972); Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet*, 108–24.

28. Zalasiewicz et al., "Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch," 212–13.

29. On the significance of 1945 as a shift in the human relation to the earth, see Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 49–50; Paul M. Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, "Capitalism and the Environment," *Monthly Review* 41, no. 2 (June 1989): 3.

30. John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 502–3; Richard Hudson and Ben Shahn, *Kuboyama and the Saga of the Lucky Dragon* (New York: Yoseloff, 1965); Ralph E. Lapp, *The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon* (London: Penguin, 1957).

31. Zalasiewicz et al., "Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch," 211; Waters et al. "Artificial Radionuclide Fallout," 192–99; Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "When Did the Anthropocene Begin?," *Quaternary International* 383 (2014):

196–203; "A New Geological Epoch, the Anthropocene, Has Begun, Scientists Say," *CBC News*, January 7, 2016.

32. Stephen Jay Gould, *Eight Little Piggies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 71; John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992), 70–72.

33. Stephen Schneider, "Whatever Happened to Nuclear Winter?," *Climatic Change* 12 (1988): 215; Richard P. Turco and Carl Sagan, *A Path Where No Man Thought: Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race* (New York: Random House, 1990), 24–27; R. P. Turco and G. S. Golitsyn, "Global Effects of Nuclear War," *Environment* 30, no. 5 (1988): 8–16. The nuclear winter concept led to wide discussions of the actual indirect effects of a global thermonuclear exchange, the scientific consensus that emerged, as Schneider indicated, was "that the environmental and societal 'indirect' effects of a nuclear war are... probably more threatening for the earth as a whole than the direct blasts or radioactivity in the target zones." Schneider, "Whatever Happened to Nuclear Winter?," 217.

34. Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 45–53.

35. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 107–15; Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene*, 167–69; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 247–58.

36. Roland Geyer, Jenna R. Jambeck, and Kara Lavender Law, "Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made," *Science Advances* 3, no. 7 (2017).

37. Zalasiewicz et al., "Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch," 212–13.

38. Geyer, Jambeck, and Law, "Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made," 1, 3.

39. Zalasiewicz et al., "The Geological Cycle of Plastics and Their Use as a Stratigraphic Indicator of the Anthropocene," *Anthropocene* 13 (2016): 4–17; Waters et al., "The Anthropocene Is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene"; Leinfelder and Ivar do Sul, "The Stratigraphy of Plastics and Their Preservation in Geological Records"; Juliana Assunção Ivar do Sul and Monica F. Costa, "The Present and Future of Microplastic Pollution in the Marine

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40. Tamara S. Galloway, Matthew Cole, and Ceri Lewis, "Interactions of Microplastic Debris throughout the Marine Ecosystem," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 1 (2017); Susan Casey, "Plastic Ocean," in *The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2007*, ed. Mary Roach (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 9–20.

41. Geyer, Jambeck, and Law, "Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made," 3.

42. Carson, *Silent Spring*; Commoner, *The Closing Circle*; Commoner, *The Poverty of Power*; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, "Rachel Carson's Ecological Critique," *Monthly Review* 59, no. 9 (2008): 1–17.

43. Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital*; Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*.

44. Commoner, *The Closing Circle*, 40.

45. Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992).

46. Peter Haff, "The Technosphere and Its Relation to the Anthropocene," in *The Anthropocene as a Geological Time Unit*, 143.

47. Burton and Kates, "The Great Climacteric, 1798–2048," in *Geography, Resources and Environment*, vol. 2, 393; Foster, "The Great Capitalist Climacteric"; Richard E. Leaky and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* (New York: Anchor, 1996).

48. See A. D. Ursul, ed., *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983). Following the 1983 publication of *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, the vice president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, P. N. Fedoseev (also Fedoseyev), who had written the introductory essay on ecology and the problem of civilization in the above edited book, incorporated a treatment

of "Ecological Civilization" into the second edition of his *Scientific Communism*. Chinese agriculturalist Ye Qianji used the term in an article he wrote for *The Journal of Moscow University* in 1984, which was translated in Chinese in 1985. See P. N. Fedoseyev (Fedoseev), *Soviet Communism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986); Qingzhi Huan, "Socialist Eco-Civilization and Social-Ecological Transformation," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27 no. 2 (2016): 52; Jiahua Pan, *China's Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 35; Aran Gare, "Barbarity, Civilization, and Decadence: Meeting the Challenge of Creating an Ecological Civilization," *Chromatikon* 5 (2009): 167.

49. On China and ecological civilization, see Pan, *China's Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization*; John B. Cobb Jr. (in conversation with Andre Vitcheck), *China and Ecological Civilization* (Jakarta: Badak Merah, 2019); Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 6, 20, 25, 417–24.

50. "Interview—Greta Thunberg Demands 'Crisis' Response to Climate Change," *Reuters*, July 18, 2020.

51. Sweezy, "Capitalism and the Environment," 6.

52. "Carbon Dioxide Peaks Near 40 Parts Per million at Mauna Loa Observatory," NOAA Research News, July 7, 2021; James Hansen et al., "Target Atmospheric CO₂: Where Should Humanity Aim?," *Open Atmospheric Science Journal* 2 (2008): 217–31.

53. Duncan Foley, *Adam's Fallacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

54. István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (London: Merlin, 1995); John Bellamy Foster, "The Earth-System Crisis and Ecological Civilization," *International Critical Thought* 7, no. 4 (2017): 439–58; Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*,

401–22; Foster and Clark, *The Robbery of Nature*, 269–87; Fred Magdoff, "Ecological Civilization," *Monthly Review* 62, no. 8 (2011): 1–25.

55. Mere technological change is insufficient to effect the necessary ecological and social transformation since technology is itself constrained by the underlying social relations. In his essay "Technological Determinism Revisited," economist Robert Heilbroner indicated that modern economics ideology tends to focus on "the triadic connection of technological determinism, economic determinism, and capitalism." However, this triadic connection insofar as it exists in reality, it can be argued, limits technological or productive rationality, while often pushing it in irrational directions, since capitalism as a system promotes accumulation "by ignoring all effects of the changed environment [and indeed all effects on the changing of the natural environment] except those that affect our maximizing possibilities" for profit. Robert Heilbroner, "Do Machines Make History?," in *Does Technology Drive History?*, ed. Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 72–73.

56. "Science for the People Statement on the People's Green New Deal," Science for the People, accessed July 23, 2021; Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future* (London: Verso, 2019); Red Nation, *The Red Deal* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2021); Max Ajl, *A People's Green New Deal* (London: Pluto, 2021).

57. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 911.

58. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 141; Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), 3–4.

59. Phil Ochs, "Another Age," *Rehearsals for Retirement*, 1969.

60. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963).



The history of mankind is like palaeontology. Owing to a *certain judicial blindness*, even the best minds fail to see, on principle, what lies in front of their noses. Later, when the time has come, we are surprised that there are traces everywhere of what we failed to see.

—KARL MARX TO FREDERICK ENGELS,
March 25, 1868, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 557.

Not a Nation of Immigrants

ROXANNE DUNBAR-ORTIZ

On George Washington’s birthday, 2018, the Donald Trump administration’s director of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, L. Francis Cissna, changed the agency’s official mission statement, dropping the language of “a nation of immigrants” to describe the United States. The previous mission statement had said the agency “secures America’s promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship, and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system.”¹ The revised mission statement reads: “U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services administers the nation’s lawful immigration system, safeguarding its integrity and promise by efficiently and fairly adjudicating requests for immigration benefits while protecting Americans, securing the homeland, and honoring our values.”²

The Trump administration’s official negation of the United States as a nation of immigrants was unlikely to change the liberal rhetoric. During Joe Biden’s 2020 bid for the presidency, the campaign issued a statement on his immigration plan, titled “The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants,” asserting that “unless your ancestors were native to these shores, or forcibly enslaved and brought here as part of our original sin as a nation, most Americans can trace their family history back to a choice – a choice to leave behind everything that was familiar in search of new opportunities and a new life.”³ Unlike the previous “nation of immigrants” statement, the Biden campaign did acknowledge prior and continuing Native presence, as well as specifying that enslaved Africans were not immigrants. However, the new rhetoric continues to mask the settler-colonial violence that established and maintained the United States and turns immigrants into settlers.

It appears ironic that Trump positioned himself as anti-immigrant, being the son of an immigrant mother (from Scotland) and the grandson of an immigrant paternal grandfather (from Germany), as well as being married to an immigrant (from Slovenia). But Trump was not against European immigrants. In a January 2018 staff meeting on temporary immigration status, Trump asked, “Why do we need more Haitians? Take

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them out.... Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here? Why do we want all these people from Africa here? They're shithole countries.... We should have more people from Norway."⁴ The month before, referring again to Haitians, Trump said that they "all have AIDS," and about Nigerians, he said that once they had seen the United States, they would never "go back to their huts" in Africa.⁵

In his quest for the presidency, Trump made immigration the center of his campaign, focusing on the exclusion of Mexicans, promising to build a border wall and militarize the southern border. He claimed that "the U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems," and railed that, "when Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people, but I speak to border guards."⁶

Democratic Party politicians and liberals in general insisted that Trump and his supporters were un-American in denying the nation-of-immigrants ideology that has been a consensus for more than a half century and remains a basic principle of the Democratic Party. Most people around the world viewed the United States as a nation of immigrants, while questioning if the country was backsliding on its promise in electing Trump.

With the Democratic Party back in power in 2021, the nation-of-immigrants rhetoric appears to be firmly back in place, although the exclusionary policies of the United States will continue as they did during the Barack Obama administration.

As Osha Gray Davidson, who has collected dozens of examples of how "nation of immigrants" is used, points out, the phrase is generally used to counter xenophobic fears.⁷ But the ideology behind it also works to erase the scourge of settler colonialism and the lives of Indigenous peoples. "We in America are immigrants, or the children of immigrants," is the refrain.⁸ The theme of Mitt Romney's acceptance speech as the Republican nominee for president in 2012 included "a nation of immigrants": "Optimism is uniquely American. It is what brought us to America. We are a nation of immigrants."⁹ Speaking at a Nevada high school to a large audience, President Obama said: "We are a nation of immigrants, and that means we are constantly being replenished with fighters who believed in the American dream, and it gives us a tremendous advantage over other nations."¹⁰ Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, in 2016, evoked a nation of immigrants, with "the Statue of Liberty reminding us of who we are and where we came from. We are a nation of immigrants, and I am proud of it."¹¹

"A nation of immigrants" was a mid-twentieth-century revisionist origin story. The United States emerged from the Second World War undamaged by bombs and heavy population loss, which was the experience of

most combatant nations. In fact, the United States became a beefed-up industrial powerhouse exhibiting military might, including the atomic bomb. It was poised to become the economic, military, and moral leader of the “free world.” The Soviet Union, the country that actually defeated the army of the Third Reich, was the new adversary. U.S. postwar administrations scrambled to conceal any trace of the U.S. colonialist roots, system of slavery, and continued segregation as they developed military and counterinsurgent strategies to quell national liberation movements in former European colonies. The Soviet Union and Communist China, which took power in 1949, denounced Western imperialism and colonialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Pacific, and the Caribbean.

In 1958, then U.S. senator John F. Kennedy, surely informed by liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., published the influential and best-selling book *A Nation of Immigrants*, which advanced the notion that the United States should be understood or defined through the diversity of the immigrants it had welcomed since independence.¹² This thesis was embraced by U.S. historians and found its way into textbooks and school curricula. It is neither coincidental nor surprising that Kennedy would introduce this idea, as, at the time, he was strategizing how to become the first president born of immigrants – albeit very wealthy ones – and the first Catholic president in a Protestant-dominated culture. Aspiring to the presidency, Kennedy introduced a clear context and narrative in which he could transform this negative into a positive. This founding text of “a nation of immigrants” was published during Kennedy’s 1953–59 first term as U.S. senator from Massachusetts, two years before he was elected president.

Given that, in the twenty-first century, immigration is practically synonymous with the México-U.S. border established in 1848, it is striking that Kennedy never mentioned México or Mexicans or the U.S.-México border in the text, nor did he use the terms *Latino* or *Hispanic*. Yet, this was 1958, late in the period of the contract labor Bracero Program, which began during the Second World War. A total of two million Mexican citizens, with the participation of the Mexican government, migrated to the United States, particularly California, as de facto indentured agricultural workers under time-limited contracts. Meanwhile, the burgeoning agribusiness industry in California recruited even more Mexican workers outside the program, without documentation or civil rights, and subject to deportation. More egregious than Kennedy’s omission of any mention of México or the border is that the federal program known by its offensive official name “Operation Wetback” began during Kennedy’s first year as senator and continued beyond his senatorial career through his presidency. “Operation Wetback” began in 1954 to round up and deport more than a million

Mexican migrant workers, mainly in California and Texas, in the process subjecting millions – many who were actually U.S. citizens – to illegal search, detention, and deportation, forcing them to forfeit their property. Workers were deported by air, trains, and ships far from the border, leaving those who were U.S. citizens stranded and without the documents enabling them to return to their homes in the United States. “Operation Wetback” was a repeat of the Herbert Hoover administration’s deportation of a million Mexicans in the 1930s, dubbed “Mexican Repatriation.”

Regarding the status of Indigenous peoples in Kennedy’s nation-of-immigrants scheme, the then senator wrote: “Another way of indicating the importance of immigration to America is to point out that every American who ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants.” The exception, Kennedy went on, was “Will Rogers, part Cherokee Indian, [who] said that his ancestors were at the docks to meet the Mayflower.” But Kennedy disagreed, claiming that “some anthropologists believe that the Indians themselves were immigrants from another continent who displaced the original Settlers – the aborigines.” This is the bogus speculation of U.S. white nationalists who claim that those imagined original aborigines were in fact European, possibly Irish. A few pages on in the text, in the only other mention of Native Americans, Kennedy refers to them as “the first immigrants,” while dismissing their presence as “members of scattered tribes.”¹³

Equally unsettling, Kennedy includes enslaved Africans as immigrants, although the book contains the infamous drawing of a slave ship, with humans chained down on their backs, scarcely an inch between each, packed like sardines. It is striking to read how profoundly Kennedy whitewashed history by noting that “the immigration experience was not always pleasant” or that “the Japanese and Chinese brought their gentle dreams to the West Coast.” He failed to mention the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or its extension a few years later to all Asians.

This idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants was hatched in the late 1950s, and while Kennedy was its ambassador, it came to reflect the U.S. ruling-class response to the challenges of the post-Second World War anticolonial national liberation movements, as well as civil and human rights social movements domestically. In the United States, the National Congress of American Indians was founded in 1944 by D’Arcy McNickle, Helen Peterson, and other longtime Indigenous activists. At the same time, African-American attorneys and other professionals were developing a legal strategy for desegregating public schools, while in 1951, more radical African Americans, including Paul Robeson and members of the Civil Rights Congress, petitioned the recently established Unit-

ed Nations with the detailed document *We Charge Genocide*, based on the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. A mass movement against segregation was emerging. Around the same time, Native American activists were contextualizing the situation of Native nations within the decolonization/national liberation context, and Mexican farmworkers were organizing in the fields, defeating the Bracero Program and forming unions.

These cracks in the racial order of settler colonialism and capitalism constituted a radical departure in a society locked down in patriarchal white domination and obsessed with “real” Americanism. At the end of the Second World War, the U.S. social, economic, and political order was solidly and confidently a white patriarchal Protestant republic, dominated by corporations with worldwide investments and financial reserves, along with a massive military machine far greater than that of any other country in the world. Unionization movements, primarily made up of white workers, were seduced by home ownership and middle-class status, their unions becoming business oriented with their own profit-making privatized health care, while the United Kingdom and Western European states responded to militant union demands to institute universal, public health care. Black descendants of enslaved Africans lived under a totalitarian Jim Crow system in the former Confederate states and were ghettoized and discriminated against when they escaped the South in migrations for northern and coastal industrial urban areas that were stalked by police forces resembling slave patrols. Native Americans were abandoned on shrunken land bases that could not support life, forcing many to find work in nearby or faraway cities, while Congress began reversing New Deal reforms that had acknowledged the Native land base and governments. This culminated in the congressional termination of Native status and land bases in 1953, an erasure that took the Red Power movement two decades to reverse. Meanwhile, Irish and Central, Southern, and Eastern European immigrants, mainly Catholics and Jews, had made gains in being accepted as equal – that is, as white. But on the West Coast, U.S. citizens of Chinese and Mexican descent were discriminated against and subject to deportation, while U.S. citizens of Japanese descent had been incarcerated in wartime concentration camps, stripped of their property and citizenship rights. Ads for jobs segregated men and women as well as white and Black, with lower wages for women and Black workers. Ivy League universities were overwhelmingly white and for men only, with quotas to limit the number of Jewish men.

The explosion that cracked the white republic was the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court school desegregation decision under Chief Justice Earl Warren, who

ironically, as the wartime attorney general of California, had facilitated rounding up Japanese Americans for federal incarceration. Based on decades of organizing for African-American desegregation, the order for school desegregation under *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was a great achievement, but the backlash commenced immediately. White Citizens' Councils organized all over the United States, linking racial integration with communism and labeling it un-American. Within three years of the Supreme Court desegregation decision, the white nationalist John Birch Society was launched by Robert Welch, the heir to the Welch candy fortune in Massachusetts, along with others such as Fred Koch, father of the Koch brothers, who, in the twenty-first century, have funded legislation and movements to end all government benefits and promote the privatization of public goods. The Supreme Court composition was the target of this white nationalist movement, using the Republican Party as the vehicle, and had largely achieved its goals with the Trump administration's appointment of three justices, shifting the court's ideological spectrum to five ultraconservative justices, one moderate conservative, and three liberal ones.¹⁴

The promise of permanent progress was the context within which the Black civil rights movement grew and contributed momentum to other ongoing movements for liberation, including Puerto Rican independence and Native American self-determination, as well as the Mexican farmworker unionization movement of the 1960s, the women's and LGBTQ rights movements, and the rising student anti-imperialist and antiwar movements that grew in opposition to the accelerating U.S. war to overthrow the government of Vietnam. The counterrevolution against these advances brought Richard Nixon, then Ronald Reagan, to the presidency. By the 1990s, capitalism and militarism were triumphant in dissolving the Eastern European socialist bloc and organized liberation movements that had taken state power in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, which became shadows of their former aspirations.

The first highly visible sign of a well-organized counterrevolution inside the United States vying for political power was the evangelical anti-abortion mass movement that soared following the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision to decriminalize abortion in 1973. And, significantly, the relatively benign, century-old National Rifle Association was taken over by the Second Amendment Foundation, a white nationalist organization that had been founded in 1974 by Harlon Carter, who had been the border chief of the 1950s mass deportation of Mexicans in "Operation Wetback." This is the moment when the Second Amendment became a white nationalist cause, relying on the right-wing ideology of originalism – that is, interpreting the original meaning of the U.S. Constitution. Parallel to postwar liberation movements,

the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency ran counterinsurgent operations against national liberation movements before and after they took power in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa, while J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation ran similar operations against domestic movements, including COINTELPRO, a domestic counterintelligence program. Anticommunism was the connective tissue among these organizations until the socialist bloc collapsed in 1990, although anticommunism remained a social and political weapon of control domestically and internationally.

In the mid- and late 1960s and early '70s, while the U.S. war in Vietnam raged, the then liberal U.S. ruling class and its brain trust sought ways of responding to social demands while maintaining economic, political, and military domination. They settled on multiculturalism, diversity, affirmative action, and, yes, the nation-of-immigrants ideology in response to demands for decolonization, justice, reparations, social equality, public spending on social welfare, and an end to U.S. imperialism, counterinsurgency, and overthrow of governments. Given attempts to offset an exclusive emphasis on white settler history and the winning of the West as the nationalist triumphal narrative, "a nation of immigrants" fit the multicultural agenda. No longer was the United States a "melting pot" of assimilation to whiteness but rather a many-colored quilt. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants* had called the United States "a nation of nations." Despite the surging of white nationalism during the twelve-year period of the Reagan-Bush administrations, by the early 1990s, the "waves of immigrants," "nation of immigrants," and Native peoples as "the first immigrants" narrative Kennedy had conceived was a consensus concept as it entered public school textbooks. This neoliberalism also triggered textbook wars over history standards, with the right wing pushing for and demanding a return to the original narrative, especially founding fathers iconography to support their constitutional philosophy of "originalism."

During the nearly two centuries of British colonization of the North Atlantic coast and up to U.S. independence, the great majority of European U.S. settlers were Protestant Anglo-Saxon, Scots-Irish, and German-speaking (before Germany was a nation-state). From 1619 onward, there was a steadily increasing number of enslaved Africans. When the United States won independence, the founders inscribed in the Constitution the requirement that citizenship could be held by white males only. Despite expressed fears, especially by Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist Party regarding immigration and the Alien and Sedition Acts, no immigration laws or procedures existed, not even during the arrival in the 1840s of 1.5 million Irish famine refugees. In 1875, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that only the federal government, not the states, could

create immigration laws and that regulation of immigration was a federal matter, though the federal immigration service was not established until 1891. Tellingly, the first federal immigration law, which created the foundation for U.S. immigration, was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. It is crucial to recognize that when and how “immigration” as such began, it was based on overt, blatant racism and a policy of exclusion, and it has never lost that taint. Although immigrant bashing is not new, and has long targeted Asian and Mexican workers, it has become a more fraught issue as it crystallized in the late twentieth century and accelerated in the early twenty-first century, targeting Mexicans, Asians, and Arab Muslims.

Yet, those who defend immigrants and immigration, mostly metropolitan liberals, often immigrants or children of immigrants themselves, employ the idea of a nation of immigrants naively without acknowledging the settler-colonial history of the United States and the white nationalist ideology it reproduces. Such advocates were caught by surprise and in shock when Mexican hating led to a successful presidential campaign in 2016, and even more surprised by the January 6, 2021, white nationalist violent takeover of the U.S. capitol.

The elephant in the room of immigration is the U.S. military invasion and annexation of half of Mexican territory that spanned more than two decades, from 1821 to 1848. During that same period, the eastern half of the United States was being ethnically cleansed with the forced removal of Native nations. White supremacy and settler-colonial violence are permanently embedded in U.S. topography. The United States has a foundational problem of white nationalism that was not new to Nixon or Reagan or Trump.

White nationalism was inscribed in the founding of the United States as a European settler-colonial expansionist entity, the economy of which was grounded in the violent theft of land and in racial slavery, and with settlers armed to the teeth throughout its history, presently numbering over three hundred million people with the same number of firearms in civilian hands. Yet only a third of the population own those guns, an average of eight each, and 3 percent of the population own 50 percent of the guns in civilian hands. A great majority of this minority of gun owners are white men who are descendants of the original settlers, or pretend to be.¹⁵ These descendants are most obvious in the former Confederate and border states, but are also in reality scattered in clusters and communities in all parts of the United States. They are the latter-day carriers of the U.S. national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempt to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settler into an “indigenous people,” believing that they are the true natives of the continent, much as the South African Boers regarded themselves as the “true”

children of Israel, powered by Calvinism; the Calvinist Scots settlers did in Ulster, Ireland; or Zionist settlers in Palestine – all established by an imaginary God-given covenant making them the chosen peoples.

Given the powerful influence of this cultural, religious, and demographic minority, it is essential to acknowledge its existence in order to understand persistent white supremacy and mistrust of non-European immigrants as well as Indigenous North Americans, descendants of enslaved Africans, and Mexicans. Since the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, the United States has launched counterinsurgent wars in Afghanistan and Arab countries, accelerating anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States. And although U.S. evangelicals enthusiastically support the settler state of Israel, which matches their religious belief that Jesus will return when Jews return to Jerusalem, there is an underlying anti-Semitism in U.S. white nationalism, mostly centered on a narrative of imagined Jewish domination, which works to transfer responsibility for capitalist exploitation from European and European U.S. ruling classes to a behind-the-scenes Jewish conspiracy and control. The sacred text of U.S. white nationalists, *The Turner Diaries*, first published in 1978, is a fictional illustration of that anti-Semitism. It is mixed with hatred of Black Americans and all people of color, the argument being that Jews use people of color to conceal their devious plan of dominance, and that the Black civil rights movement was controlled by Jews, because white nationalists deem people of color as not fully human and incapable of theory or action on their own.¹⁶

Those current realities and their history underlie the narrative of the nation of immigrants. We can see this, for example, in the contemporary neoliberal celebration of founding father Alexander Hamilton. During the Obama administration, the nation-of-immigrants chorus became a best-selling musical, celebrating Hamilton as an immigrant. More than a year after Hamilton premiered on Broadway in 2015, writer and director Lin-Manuel Miranda, who is of Puerto Rican heritage, staged a private performance at the White House for President Obama and his family and invitees. Before the show began, Obama spoke in praise of the work, saying that, “in the character of Hamilton – a striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination – Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family, and every immigrant family.”¹⁷ Portraying Hamilton as an immigrant, although he was a British colonial settler in New York and virulently suspicious of “aliens,” obfuscates while celebrating his role, as a federalist, in structuring the fiscal-military state, a capitalist state created for war. Further, portraying continental-based Puerto Ricans as immigrants obscures the continued U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico.

Yet, the genesis of the first full-fledged settler state in the world went beyond its predecessors in 1492 Iberia and British-colonized Ireland, with an economy based on land sales and enslaved African labor, and the implementation of the fiscal-military state. Both the liberal and right-wing versions of the national narrative misrepresent the process of European colonization of North America. Both narratives serve the critical function of preserving the “official story” of a mostly benign and benevolent United States as an anticolonial movement that overthrew British colonialism. The pre-U.S. independence settlers were colonial settlers just as they were in Africa and India or like the Spanish in Central and South America. The nation-of-immigrants myth erases the fact that the United States was founded as a settler state from its inception and spent the next hundred years at war against the Native nations in conquering the continent. Buried beneath the tons of propaganda – from the landing of the English “pilgrims” (Protestant Christian evangelicals) to James Fenimore Cooper’s phenomenally popular *The Last of the Mohicans* claiming settlers’ “natural rights” not only to the Indigenous peoples’ territories but also to the territories claimed by other European powers – is the fact that the founding of the United States created a division of the Anglo empire, with the U.S. becoming a parallel empire to Great Britain, ultimately overcoming it. From day one, as was specified in the Northwest Ordinance, which preceded the U.S. Constitution, the new “republic for empire,” as Thomas Jefferson called the new United States, envisioned the future shape of what is now the forty-eight states of the continental United States. The founders drew up rough maps, specifying the first territory to conquer as the “Northwest Territory.” That territory was the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes region, which was already populated with Indigenous villages and farming communities thousands of years old. Even before independence, mostly Scots-Irish settlers had seized Indigenous farmlands and hunting grounds in the Appalachians and are revered historically as first settlers and rebels, who in the mid-twentieth century began claiming indigeneity.

The narrative of the nation of immigrants also excludes the history of enslaved Africans, who were hauled in chains thousands of miles from their villages and fields, naked and with no belongings, and forcibly denied not only their freedom but also their languages, customs, histories, and nationalities. Not only were they used as forced and unpaid labor, but their very bodies were legally private property to be bought and sold, soon creating a thriving, legal domestic slave market, which by 1840 was of greater monetary value than all other property combined, including all the gold in circulation, all bank reserves, and all real estate.¹⁸ The Cotton Kingdom was the fiscal-military center of U.S. capitalist development with the industrial production of cotton, giving rise to a permanent racial capi-

talism, even after legalized slavery ended. Plantation owners and managers maintained a military-like counterinsurgency to control the enslaved workers, often calling in the U.S. army to quell insurrections. During Reconstruction, following the Civil War, Ku Klux Klan terrorism against Black political and economic power was the result of the inadequacy of the U.S. army occupation of the former Confederate states. Army divisions were being shifted west of the Mississippi to destroy Native nations and seize the rest of continent. With the end of the occupation, Jim Crow segregation laws gave rise to a form of policing that spread in the twentieth century to major urban areas as African Americans fled the South and that continues in the twenty-first century. The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified after the Civil War, changed all-white citizenship to include those African Americans freed from enslavement (although still male only), but continued segregation, discrimination, and police killings, creating a kind of contingency of full citizenship.

Anglo settlers seized the agricultural lands of Indigenous peoples of the Southeast for plantation agribusiness in cotton and importing enslaved people from the original slave states for the grueling labor. One group of U.S. slavers moved into the Mexican province of Texas soon after the Mexican people won their decade-long war for independence from Spain. The two-year U.S. military invasion of México that began in 1846 finally seized México City in 1848. Under U.S. occupation, the Mexican government, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was forced to relinquish the northern half of its territory. What became the states of California, Arizona, New México, Colorado, Utah, and Texas were then opened to Anglo settlement, and in the process legalizing those Anglo slavers in Texas who had already settled there illegally. The Indigenous nations in the seized territory – the Apache, Navajo, Kiowa, and Comanche – resisted U.S. conquest for decades, as they had resisted the Spanish empire. The small class of Hispano elite in New México had welcomed and collaborated with U.S. occupation, which led to late-twentieth-century Hispano claims of indigeneity while living on lands their ancestors had forcibly taken from the Indigenous pueblos. This then was another site of the fiscal-military state and racial capitalism taking hold to contribute to U.S. imperial dominance.

Meanwhile, the English colonization of Ireland led to the 1840s famine and the first mass migration to the United States. The Irish refugees were mostly Catholic and despised by the majority U.S. Anglo-Protestants, but they quickly became the nation's second-largest European national group, a political force with which to be reckoned. Many settled in urban slums and had few skills, having been agricultural workers. They took whatever unskilled jobs they could find, the men and boys working on the docks,

pushing carts, digging canals, and constructing the railroad, and obtaining work as slave patrollers in the Cotton Kingdom and early urban police forces. Women worked as housekeepers and nannies, in factories, and often in sex work. How subsequent generations of Irish Americans became settlers, even one of their own ascending to the presidency in 1960, is a tragic story.¹⁹ As well, the nearly cult-like formation of twentieth century urban police forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigation drew on Irish recruits until they became dominant and definitive as police. Racialized urban policing increasingly became a major component of the fiscal-military state.

Then there were European immigrants, mostly Catholic and Jewish, who were considered not quite white. During the 1880s alone, more than five million Central and Eastern Europeans arrived in search of jobs in burgeoning industrial and mining sites in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Many Jewish immigrants were fleeing pogroms, while other immigrants, particularly German, were driven out by political repression and brought with them strong organizational experience that was socialistically inclined. The immigrant-driven workers' movements forced the reformulation of industrial capitalism, but their status as immigrants made them vulnerable to political deportation in the early twentieth century. During that period, Italian immigrants arrived, mostly from southern Italy. Suffering the stigma of being Catholic and also dark complected, they were subjected to extreme discrimination. Italians and other Catholic immigrants became Americanized and accepted as white through the Roman Catholic Church and a process rooted in the myth of Columbus, especially with the 1882 founding of the Knights of Columbus and the subsequent four-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus's first landing in the Caribbean. This, too, was another self-indigenizing process, with the Catholic Columbus being positioned as the original founding father of the United States.

The origins and staying power of the Western panic against Asian immigrants moved from medieval Europe to the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act of May 6, 1882, and into the twenty-first century. All European U.S. trade unions were corrupted and weakened by their anti-Chinese bigotry and support for barring Chinese workers, which accelerated the spread of yellow peril racism. In Oakland, California, socialist, union activist, and celebrity writer Jack London was among the loudest voices spewing hatred. Yellow peril suspicions also led to the internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent under the liberal Franklin Roosevelt administration. Fear of Asians in general and of the Chinese in particular persists today with the U.S. reaction to China's economic development.

Since the early twentieth century, immigrant hating in the United States is primarily about Mexicans (not Latinos in general) and is direct-

ly related to the unsettled border established in 1848 when the U.S. annexed half of México. The fact that a third of the continental territory of the United States today was brutally annexed through a war of conquest is inscribed on that international border. The cold war against México has never ended, and the border is an open wound. There is a history of U.S. aggression against México and Mexicans, militarily and economically as well as ideologically, from Walt Whitman to Patrick Buchanan and Trump. In fact, the United States is responsible for the waves of refugees from Latin American countries, due to imperialism, who are then criminalized and their children deported, dispersed, and even lost in the ongoing situation at the US-México border.

What, then, is the position of immigrants in a settler state? One of the unspoken requirements for immigrants and their descendants to become fully “American” has been to participate in anti-Black racism and to aspire to “whiteness.” With the post-Second World War work of civil rights, Black Power, and other antiracist movements, whiteness lost much of its desirability for several generations. This process coincided with and influenced the 1965 immigration reform law that removed restrictions on immigration that had been in effect since the 1924 immigration law, which limited immigration to Western Europeans. Thereby, since the late 1960s, greater numbers of immigrants have come from the Global South, mostly from formerly colonized countries, and many of them refugees from civil wars or U.S.-instigated wars in their countries. The “new” immigrants are more likely than past immigrants to be college graduates or professionals. They often experience racism and “othering” in their daily lives, and for Muslims in particular, virulent hostility, which for some leads to solidarity with antiracist movements. How they as immigrants experience and react to settler colonialism varies, with some becoming dedicated to solidarity with Native peoples’ resistance while most remain indifferent or even negate the demands of Indigenous communities and the reality of settler colonialism. Although immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean are not pressured to become “white,” as immigrants were in the past, they do automatically become settlers unless they resist that default. Antiracism and diversity are widely accepted, but the problem is the general denial or refusal to acknowledge settler colonialism. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, “the thrust of American struggles has been to deracialize but not to decolonize. A deracialized America still remains a settler society and a settler state.”²⁰

Notes

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The word *primitive* is here used in the sense of “belonging to the first age, period, or stage,” i.e., of being “the original rather than derivative,” and not in the sense of “simple, rude, or rough.” Marx’s original term was “ursprüngliche akkumulation,” and as Paul Sweezy suggests, it would have been better translated as “original” or “primary” accumulation. But it is too late to change current usage, and the word *primitive* should be interpreted in a technical sense, as in mathematics, where a *primitive* line or figure is a line or figure “from which some construction or reckoning begins.” In economics primitive accumulation refers to the period from which capitalist accumulation springs. It was not simple, though it was rude and rough.

—STEPHEN HYMER, “Robinson Crusoe and the Secret of Primitive Accumulation,” *Monthly Review*, September 1971.

COVID-19 in the Two Koreas

HOWARD WAITZKIN

Capitalist health care systems do not do well in epidemics compared to health care systems not organized around capitalist principles, and COVID-19 is no exception. As Paul Sweezy once pointed out (as relayed by Barbara Ehrenreich), if health care is the purpose of the U.S. system, it fails miserably. But, in reality, the system is successful, because the goal is something else: profit making and the accumulation of capital.¹ With its corporate dominance, horrendous problems of access, high costs, lack of overall coordination, and deprioritization of public health services, the United States has confronted the pandemic with chaos. In general, government agencies and corporations have struggled to protect the previous profitable, though ineffective, arrangements, with deadly consequences.

A few countries have done relatively well in responding to COVID-19, and they all approach health care and public health very differently from the United States, even if their economies are capitalist. I focus now on one of those countries that I know best: South Korea. I then move the focus to that other mysterious, noncapitalist country on the same peninsula: North Korea. Although I explain these countries' initiatives to control the downstream effects of COVID-19 in sickness, suffering, and death, I also report what if anything the two Koreas have done about the upstream causes of the pandemic in the industrial production of food and the destruction of natural habitat.² This work is part of an effort to understand the ways that countries with different political-economic systems have approached COVID-19, and how they are likely to approach future pandemics that may be even worse.

Contradictions of Success in South Korea

I have experienced the pandemic both in the United States and South Korea. My partner and comrade, Mira Lee, is a doctor from South Korea, and I worked there during 2019 as a Fulbright senior fellow, teaching public health at Seoul National University.³ I also have continued to work part-time at community health centers in the United States, most recent-

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ly in February 2020, as South Korea already had seen improvements in the pandemic and the U.S. encounter with the virus was rapidly worsening. In South Korea, I gathered information from publicly available bibliographic and media sources, interviews with colleagues and community residents, emergency cell phone messages, and unobtrusive observations at hospitals and community health centers.

Officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), South Korea is a capitalist country whose policies link closely to those of the United States. Some activists and scholars consider South Korea as a U.S. “neocolony.” Korea’s adoption of Western medicine started in the late nineteenth century, due to efforts of U.S. missionary doctors and nurses. Yet it is hard to imagine COVID-19 policies that differ more than those of these two countries.

The capitalist state in the ROK contains a welfare-state component with a single-payer national health program. In its relatively well-organized and funded public health infrastructure, personnel work in the public sector without apparent organizational motives to enhance corporate profitability. The organized medical profession, especially through the Korean Medical Association, usually leans toward the right, but several groups of doctors and public health professionals oppose the association and support progressive policies.

Some political, economic, and cultural features provide a context for the pandemic.⁴ In the military realm, South Korea continues its interlocking relationship with the U.S. military-industrial complex. The ROK’s military expenditures have increased in a linear pattern since 2010. Although less unequal than the United States, South Korea’s social inequality has, during recent years, worsened to the highest level among East Asian nations. The impact of inequality on daily life is substantial, as depicted in the prize-winning film *Parasite*. Competitive values within South Korean society affect mental health and well-being, especially among young people who must fiercely compete for university placements and jobs. The suicide rate is the highest among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries. Although South Korea’s cultural productivity has achieved global impact – for instance through K-pop with its frequent messages of love, respect, and mutual aid – multiple young stars have committed suicide.

Often described as a homogeneous society, South Korea’s diversity expresses itself partly through geographic marginalization. The population has become concentrated in a small number of urban centers as the countryside has become depopulated. This trend has created health care access problems even within the single-payer national health program, especially in the rural south and southwest, as well as problems of isolation and loneliness for the elderly population.

Some historical experiences influenced South Korea's response to COVID-19. During the epidemic of Middle East respiratory syndrome in 2015, the government of president Park Geun-hye received harsh criticism for its disorganized and secretive approach to case finding and treatment, which the government later claimed was intended to prevent anxiety and panic. A similar lack of transparency caused distress throughout the country earlier in 2014, when Park and her colleagues did not communicate honestly and supportively during a disaster in which a ferry boat, the MV Sewol, sank and 304 people died, mostly high school students. These events, plus scandals around corruption, led to Park's impeachment in March 2017 after months of protests, comprising the so-called Candlelight Demonstrations. After Moon Jae-in's more progressive presidency began in May 2017, the Ministry of Health and Welfare initiated multiple reforms and new programs, including a sophisticated plan for responses to future epidemics.

The South Korean government reacted quickly and decisively when the seriousness of the COVID epidemic in China became clear in January 2020. South Korea implemented several distinctive policies and practices:

- No travel ban: South Korea has not prohibited travelers from any country. Even during the early phase of the pandemic, when it reported the second-highest number of cases after China, it did not ban travelers from China. This policy has led to strange situations like Korean airlines ending up the only ones operating international flights during certain time periods at some international airports such as Los Angeles.⁵
- Aggressive, mandatory diagnostic testing for travelers and residents at high risk of infection, with mandatory contact tracing, quarantine, and treatment if needed: At certain times, all travelers to South Korea from some countries, including the United States, have had to accept a mandatory two-week period of supervised quarantine. To reduce financial insecurity and inconvenience for people in quarantine, the government has provided subsidized housing and food at rented facilities including luxury hotels with otherwise low occupancy during the pandemic. High-technology approaches including required GPS cell phone apps have assisted with contact tracing and quarantine procedures. To protect privacy, the government has identified places rather than individual people to help in tracing contacts. A well-organized and financed system of public health clinics at the county level has implemented these epidemiological procedures, coordinated from the national and provincial levels of government. These techniques have led to remarkable successes in containing transmission, for instance from churches, enclosed workplaces like call centers, nursing homes, and even community kimchi-making festivals.⁶ In short, South Korea has applied all the straightforward procedures taught in Epidemiology 101, while the United States and multiple other capitalist countries have not been able to implement anything similar.

- Medical, financial, nutritional, and social support from government and public health agencies and community health centers at the local level: Everybody can receive free or very low-cost medical care through the single-payer national health program. Coordinated at the national, provincial, and county levels, public health agencies also provide other needed services for people in quarantine and for individuals, families, businesses, and other organizations experiencing adverse financial impacts. Through a simple application, all Korean citizens and permanent residents periodically can apply for grants through debit cards that they can use only for purchases from local merchants. Rather than means testing for grants according to income or wealth, the government encourages people not to apply if they felt they did not need the assistance.
- No general lockdown and limited overall economic impact of the pandemic: Most businesses have stayed open. These include businesses serving the public such as restaurants, bars, gyms, singing rooms, and so forth, although periodic restrictions have limited numbers of customers and hours of operation. Messages from government agencies encourage people to practice social distancing and avoid such businesses, as well as religious and cultural organizations, until notified that the locations have been decontaminated and safety improved due to decline in new cases. The government requires all organizations to comply with epidemiological procedures such as contact tracing and decontamination if a case is diagnosed.
- With rare exceptions, no coercive command techniques by government: The government has made recommendations but has issued very few orders. One such order involved school closures for several months, for which the government provided an explanation regarding increased risk of contagion that actually was not clearly supported by epidemiological research (a South Korean study showed the importance of contact tracing when schools do reopen).⁷ In general, the government encouraged voluntary adherence with recommendations rather than using coercion.
- Procedures to strengthen transparent communication with the general population: The national government has operated twice-daily news conferences, extensive media broadcasts, and cell phone-based messaging. The cell phone messages, labeled “emergency disaster alerts,” are distributed by the Ministry of the Interior, which translates them automatically into English and Chinese. The messages convey sensitivity to people’s feelings, needs, cultural traditions, and security. On a single day, an individual may receive around one hundred messages from different levels of government at the federal, provincial, county, and municipal levels.

The cell phone disaster alerts reveal a great deal about South Korea’s decentralized, participatory processes during the pandemic. During spring 2020, the alerts emphasized the sad necessity of not going in groups to view the beautiful cherry blossoms. As the seasons passed, the messages acknowledged disappointment about missing other cultural traditions

that became problematic during the pandemic: folks enjoying the beach in summertime; families returning from cities to their ancestral villages on *chuseok* (roughly similar to Thanksgiving) to cut weeds around their ancestors' graves and celebrate their memory; group excursions to see the colors of autumn leaves; organized efforts to support high school students' tense experiences with the national university qualifying exams; and then the winter holidays leading to lunar new year.

Cell phone messages, which arrive at almost any time of day or night, vary in content and usually pertain to the local level. The impact of the messages on people's attitudes and behaviors is unclear. At the least, the messages communicate that many people at all levels of public health and government are working hard to provide information that will help themselves and others cope with the pandemic.

Here are some simple categories and examples from messages that I gathered, using a computerized random sampling method.

- Concrete information about local COVID-19 spread. This information comes mainly from local levels of government, based on communication between public health personnel and government officials responsible for the emergency notifications. The information includes statements assuring the safety of visiting locations after decontamination, such as small businesses. For example:
 - “[Yeongdong County Office] 7.9 (Thu), if you have visited ‘Jjampongui Daega (Chinese Restaurant)’ between 11:30~12:30 in Yangsan-myeon, Yeongdong-gun, please contact Yeongdong-gun Public Health Center (043-740-5611~2). 2020-07-17 12:52”
 - “[Gwangju Metropolitan City] Since we have completed the disinfection and sterilization of the facilities visited by confirmed case: Hwangtaemyeonga Yongdaeri Deokjang, Yege Chamchi, Maewol Heukyeomso Garden, you can visit there without worries. 2020-07-17 17:13”
- Specific information about the travel history of new cases, and what to do if people have visited those places at those times. For example:
 - “[Gwangju Metropolitan City] The confirmed case Jeonnam no. 9 (M, 20s) The travel history in Gwangju 1 3.26 (Thu) 09:25 Arrive at Incheon International Airport (Entry from Thailand) 14:30 Youth Square 15:05 Shinsegae Department Store (Gucci Store). Wore a mask. 2020-03-29 10:18”
 - “[Gangjin County Office] If you have visited places where Mokpo City's Patient No. 3 went- Mokpo Laito PC Room North Port Branch (3/27 19:26 ~ Dawn 01:05), should report to Gangjin County Public Health Center (061-430-3592). 2020-03-29 10:17”
- General recommendations about prevention, tailored to local conditions and cultural traditions, such as:

- “[Cheongju City Hall] To overcome COVID-19, let’s actively practice in social distancing. In particular, please be patient with cherry blossom viewings this year. 2020-03-29 10:00”
- “[Jeonnam Provincial Government] When using swimming pool, bathing beaches, valleys and rivers in summer season, be sure to wear a mask outside of the water, and ‘keep distance’ between people even in the water. 2020-07-18 09:00”
- “[Gangjin gun Office] Today, confirmed cases 7.18. (Sun), it is announced that the child of the patient’s child became self-isolating confirmed. 2021-07-22 20:59”
- “[Gangjin-gun Office] One confirmed case occurred during self-isolation (no movement). It is filial piety and love of hometown for children who live in large cities to postpone their visit to their hometown for a while during the holiday season. 2021-07-22 20:22”
- Each message has different text, indicating that separate people are writing messages at each governmental level, with some similarity of content based on current national and provincial policies. The inclusion of local writers producing locality-specific messaging resonates with prior findings about the importance of community participation rather than top-down messaging in public health responses, such as Ebola and COVID-19 in Africa.⁸

Efforts to control the epidemic and also to prevent economic collapse became notable public health accomplishments. To consider just one point in time: as of Christmas 2020, South Korea experienced its third wave of the pandemic, with increases in numbers of new cases to the level of about 1,000 daily in a population of about 52 million people.⁹ If South Korea had a similar population to the United States, about 330 million, this rate of new cases would amount to about 6,300 per day, rather than the roughly 200,000 that the United States was experiencing, or even higher considering the obvious problems of underdiagnosis and under-reporting. At the same time, South Korea’s deaths from COVID-19 totaled about 800; if adjusted to the size of the U.S. population, the deaths would total about 5,000, compared to actual U.S. deaths of 322,000.

Moving ahead to mid-July 2021, South Korea experienced a troubling fourth wave, with about 1,200 new cases daily and total pandemic deaths climbing to just over 2,000. If adjusted to the U.S. population, new cases would have numbered about 7,600 daily and total deaths about 12,600. In contrast, during the same period, the number of new cases daily in the United States vastly improved to about 30,000 (still more than four times South Korea’s rate, adjusted to the U.S. population) and total deaths increased to just over 600,000 (forty-eight times higher than South Korea’s total, adjusted to the U.S. population).¹⁰

Although South Korea quickly obtained supplies of the vaccines, there was no immediate plan to deliver the vaccines through a population-based program, but rather a longer-term plan to begin later in the winter and spring 2021. By mid-July 2021, over a quarter of the population had received at least one dose. Plans were on schedule to achieve 70 percent vaccination with the first dose by the end of September 2021, with herd immunity predicted during the following winter. Strict public health surveillance continued, as distancing procedures tightened with the increase of new cases during the fourth wave. As well as some concerns about efficacy, safety, and costs, the reasons for not emphasizing vaccine mostly have to do with the relative success of standard epidemiological methods to control infectious outbreaks, especially social distancing and wearing masks.

Some controversies and criticisms have arisen. The Korean Medical Association resists any policy of the Moon government that interferes with private practitioners' ability to work without obstruction. Thus, strengthening the country's public health infrastructure in response to the pandemic has led to protests by the Korean Medical Association against further regulatory controls and opposition to policies like not closing the borders to travelers from China and starting new medical schools in rural areas to improve primary care services.

Left-leaning critics in South Korea, while expressing general support for the government's policies, have called attention to some fundamental problems.¹¹ The private sector continues to provide most medical services, with socialized funding under the single-payer national health program. Partly due to the predominance of private services, South Korea lacks an organized approach to primary care. People tend to seek specialty rather than primary care, especially from elite medical institutions in Seoul. The contradiction between private and public sectors has created inefficiencies and challenges for public health coordination during the pandemic.

Social and economic inequalities rooted in class structure have impeded public health initiatives. For instance, during the pandemic, working-class employees at call centers and delivery services have faced higher risks of infection, adverse health effects of overwork, and some difficulties in obtaining needed care. Multiple people employed as outsourced couriers for logistics companies, unprotected by labor laws, reportedly have died from *gwarosa*, a Korean term referring to death from overwork.¹² From the perspective of gender inequality, critics also have called attention to the predominance of men at most levels of government and public health decision-making, as well as the disproportionate caretaking role of women during school and work closures.¹³

During the pandemic, South Korea has not addressed or even called attention to the upstream causes of COVID-19 and similar epidemics through capitalist industrial agriculture, mining, development projects, and other processes that lead to the destruction of natural habitat. Processes aiming to accumulate capital through habitat destruction have grown more pervasive, even though historically such habitats have protected against pandemics. Although South Korea reversed the earlier severe deforestation brought about mainly through exploitation of wood products by the Japanese empire during the first part of the twentieth century, there are important exceptions, such as the destruction of ancient forests to build skiing facilities for the 2018 Olympics. South Korean corporations such as POSCO have devastated natural habitats in other countries, as in the construction of palm oil plantations. Under international pressure, POSCO recently promised to stop these efforts and even to provide compensation that can be used for habitat restoration.¹⁴

Meat consumption has increased markedly in South Korea, along with production of pork and chicken products through large industrial farming enterprises. South Korean animals raised for meat suffer from periodic viral epidemics, including African swine fever and swine acute diarrhea syndrome, the latter caused by a coronavirus that reportedly has not yet been documented to cause significant human infections. South Korea's lack of expressed concern about industrial meat production as an upstream cause of pandemics remains a contradiction of public health policies.¹⁵

However, as in multiple other countries, a network of farmers has been studying and trying to implement a return to peasant agriculture. For instance, in the rural southwest, farmers held a study group reading a Korean translation of an important book showing the advantages of peasant agriculture in terms of costs and efficiency, in comparison to capitalist agriculture.¹⁶ These farmers aim to transform industrial monoculture crop production as well as meat production processes that foster viral epidemics due to unsanitary practices. Resistance to expansion of factory farms for pork and chicken production has been growing. In general, these efforts remain separated from public policies to address agricultural practices that increase the likelihood of pandemics.

Ambiguous Realities of Success in North Korea

The Korean peninsula also contains a country with a noncapitalist political-economic system. An assumption in the dominant media, including the dominant public health media and even some left-wing media, is that any data from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are unavailable, inaccurate, or untrue. Horror stories about North Korea

based on limited information about throughout the world, so, in asking the question about the pandemic's impact there, I expected to find either completely inadequate information or a very adverse situation. However, the hegemonic portrayal of North Korea may not be fully accurate, as reported in a comradely though somewhat critical account in 2008, based on in-person observations, by an astute social historian: Fidel Castro.¹⁷

Thus, last year I decided to study the DPRK's health care system in the public health courses I coordinated in Seoul. Reportedly, this was the first such attempt at teaching about North Korea at the ROK's leading School of Public Health. Trying to keep an open mind about North Korea can become a surprising experience. As with my observations about South Korea, what I am reporting here came from publicly available sources, plus interviews with South Korean colleagues who have visited the DPRK for public health collaborations. Going there myself as a U.S. citizen was difficult before the pandemic and essentially impossible during it. I do not intend the following account as "truth," but rather as an effort to make sense of some surprising information.

We were able to find much more information than expected. The World Health Organization (WHO) maintains a country office in Pyongyang and issues regular reports about the DPRK. As one example, a collaborative report by WHO and the DPRK's Ministry of Health, published by WHO in 2016, presented an apparently honest account of the country's major public health challenges, including a high rate of smoking (the report emphasized a smoking rate of 54.5 percent of the adult male population), nutritional difficulties, outbreaks of infectious diseases, inadequate services with disappointing outcomes in maternal and child health, respiratory disease from indoor air pollution, and thyroid disease from insufficient iodized salt.¹⁸

The collaborative report, *Message from Honourable [DPRK] Vice Minister of Health and WHO Representative to DPR Korea*, emphasized that "in DPR Korea, health policies are being made and implemented based on the great people-centered *Juche* idea and on the principle of serving the best interests and health promotion of the people." *Juche* refers to a reinterpretation of Marxism-Leninism by Kim Il-sung, North Korea's revolutionary commander during the struggle against Japan and the DPRK's supreme leader beginning with independence from Japan after the Second World War. Kim presented this reinterpretation respectfully, praising Marxism-Leninism while arguing that the Korean context required modifications through a less "dogmatic" approach.¹⁹ Through *Juche*, Kim tried to resolve the continuing challenges of building "socialism in one country," as opposed to a worldwide revolutionary struggle in which international solidarity could facilitate revolutions in multiple countries. These con-

trusting strategies preoccupied V. I. Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsky, and many others, generating fierce and sometimes deadly conflict.

Focusing on revolutionary struggle in Korea, Kim argued for the importance of analyzing Korea's unique history, strengths, and needs, rather than applying a more general model based on the Soviet Union or China. He emphasized that a Korea-centered strategy also fostered and benefited from international solidarity. From this viewpoint, Korea's future depended on sustainability through agricultural self-sufficiency and a lack of dependency on other nations, including socialist nations. Because historical and material conditions differed across nations, Kim argued, Korea must advance its own revolutionary policies. Although historical and material conditions were important, according to Kim, they were not determinate in shaping human history. Instead, Kim focused on the human "subject" and especially the importance of leadership by individuals like himself. As the 2016 WHO-DPRK report points out, *Juche* clearly serves as a conceptual basis for the DPRK's public health policies. In particular, an emphasis on North Korea's unique historical and material conditions, self-sufficiency and independence, and the key roles of the human subject and leader figure prominently in the DPRK's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the rare instances that Western media report on public health initiatives in North Korea, the reports usually question the veracity of the DPRK government's claims or otherwise diminish the importance of the accomplishments. For example, on November 5, 2020, during the pandemic, the *New York Times* reported on the DPRK's public acknowledgment that smoking, which affected 46 percent of the country's adult men as of 2017 according to WHO (somewhat lower than in the 2016 report mentioned earlier), had become a major public health problem.²⁰ As in China and some other countries, public health approaches to reducing smoking are weakened by the contradiction that a state-owned and -operated tobacco industry has relied on smokers' cigarette purchases to generate a substantial part of the government's revenues. The *New York Times* article also belittled the initiative by emphasizing that Kim Jong-un was continuing to smoke, just as U.S. media belittled Cuba's mostly successful anti-smoking campaign by emphasizing Castro's continued smoking of cigars, until he eventually quit.

North Korea suffers from serious shortages of medications and equipment, partly due to the extensive economic sanctions imposed and enforced by the United States and the United Nations. At the United Nations and other diplomatic venues, the United States leads efforts to punish the DPRK for developing nuclear weapons and related policies as methods to protect its survival and sovereignty in the context of more than seventy years of hostility since the beginning of the Korean War. The Carnegie Endowment for

International Peace has documented the extensive scope of these sanctions, the goal of which is to damage the DPRK's economy by restricting its ability to export and import key products, participate in trade with other countries, and conduct international financial transactions. In January 2021, at a congress of the DPRK's Workers' Party, Kim Jong-un officially acknowledged that his five-year economic plan had mostly failed to achieve its goals.²¹

Despite these problems and others, including periods of droughts, floods, and other natural disasters leading to famine and economic crises, the DPRK's health indicators are more favorable than usually recognized. Health personnel like doctors and nurses per population and health outcomes like infant mortality and life expectancy are generally better than other countries in East and Southeast Asia at similar levels of economic development. For instance, a study using data from WHO and other sources, published in the generally conservative *Journal of the Korean Medical Association*, showed that the DPRK's life expectancy, age-standardized mortality, underweight among children under 5 years old, infant mortality rate, mortality rate among children under 5 years old, and maternal mortality rate were worse than more economically developed South Korea, but comparable or substantially better than those of Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, the Southeast Asian region as a whole, and global averages. As in China, traditional Korean medicine is integrated into the medical education as well as primary care in health centers.²²

The DPRK has cooperated with WHO and other international health organizations, including the Gates Foundation, in strengthening its childhood immunization programs. As a UN agency, WHO does a balancing act in the context of the severe UN sanctions against the DPRK. WHO's work with the DPRK officially falls under the categories of collaboration that the UN promotes despite the sanctions: "Food and Nutrition Security, Social Development Services, Resilience and Sustainability, and Data and Development Management." In 2016, WHO presented its annual award for the Southeast Asian region to Sri Lanka and the DPRK "for their remarkable and sustained role in the public health gains of their countries."²³

WHO recognized the DPRK again in 2018 for eliminating measles, as evidenced by "interrupted transmission of indigenous measles for more than three years" through its vaccination programs – an accomplishment the United States and multiple other rich capitalist countries have not yet achieved. WHO's Regional Office for Southeast Asia released a detailed report, *Eliminating Measles: A Look at How Democratic People's Republic of Korea Did It*, which documents the collaborative procedures used and the verification processes coordinated between WHO and the DPRK. In the report, WHO's regional director wrote, "DPR Korea's example is a shining example to other nations struggling to control infectious diseases, and WHO

very much looks forward to its continued partnership with DPR Korea as it continues to provide assistance and support in the control and elimination of other vaccine-preventable diseases.” Through their websites, WHO and the United Nations explain their goals and activities in the DPRK, refer to recent planning documents, and provide further information about WHO’s country office in Pyongyang.²⁴

The DPRK’s dramatic actions to address COVID-19 seemed to aim toward a single goal: protecting the North Korean population from the pandemic, despite predictably detrimental economic effects. This apparent goal appeared unexpected and counterintuitive, based on mainstream, hegemonic views about the government’s despotic purposes. But these policies also resembled those of several other countries or states with noncapitalist political economies.

To combat COVID-19, the DPRK government quickly initiated drastic policies. On January 21, 2020, it closed its borders for all international travelers, apparently the first country in the world to do so. Foreigners and North Korean nationals with possible exposures experienced mandatory quarantine of up to one month in government-provided residential facilities. Sharing a border and maintaining extensive economic interactions with China, its main trading partner, North Korea through these measures greatly reduced the entry of people from China who might have harbored the virus. Testing people at risk for infection was done through kits provided mainly through donations from other countries, especially Russia. During the pandemic, the DPRK quickly constructed a large new general hospital in Pyongyang. North Korean state media, especially Korean Central Television and several state radio stations, have provided information about the pandemic for the population, almost all of whom own televisions or radios.²⁵

During the early months of the pandemic, the DPRK curtailed nearly all trade with China, including the imports of essential Chinese products and exports of North Korean raw materials and consumer products that had generated rare sources of needed currencies. Over time, the government allowed the resumption of some imports, especially by train, but publicized an elaborate process of sterilization and multiple weeks of quarantine for these products. North Korea had developed several tourist resorts in the mountains near the Chinese border, and these facilities generated increasing earnings mainly from Chinese tourists; during the pandemic the border remained closed to tourism.

The DPRK did not lock down any cities until late July 2020, when the government declared an emergency because a defector from North Korea secretly came back from South Korea, where he had been reported as possibly infected with coronavirus. Kaisong, a city near the border to which

the defector returned, was locked down until mid-August, as he and numerous contacts were quarantined and reportedly tested negative.²⁶ While Kaisong was locked down, the government was also working to reduce the effects of flooding on food supplies and housing.

Throughout the pandemic, the government generally tried to assure that people's jobs would continue and that the economic impact on individuals and families would be limited. The absence of private corporations needing to pay both workers and shareholders enhanced the government's ability to continue employment in public-sector jobs. Greater tolerance and even encouragement of informal markets, especially for selling food products produced on small farms, have been reported during the pandemic.

By closing its borders and continuing a nearly complete ban on travel to the country, the DPRK has taken a very different direction from South Korea, and the rationale is not fully clear. Speculation focuses on the deficiencies in health care infrastructure for treating COVID-19, largely due to the impact of economic sanctions on the availability of hospital facilities, needed medications and equipment, lab capabilities to perform extensive testing, and public health personnel to trace contacts and manage quarantines. However, the government has not explained specifically why it decided to implement the drastic measures that it did, much earlier than most other countries.

WHO's staff members have participated actively in the DPRK's efforts to address COVID-19. These staff members are responsible for obtaining and reporting accurate health statistics from North Korea, as similar staff do in other countries. The accuracy of this information depends on local public health officials who gather the primary data in the many countries where WHO maintains "country offices," which WHO established in Pyongyang during 2001. In countries where WHO does not maintain a formal office, WHO staff members still communicate with officials in the countries when compiling public health statistics. Questions about the accuracy of public health statistics arise throughout the world regarding not only COVID-19 but also other indicators, such as infant and maternal mortality. In its reports, WHO and other organizations like the World Bank provide estimates of statistical error and range of data accuracy.

The WHO country office in Pyongyang assumed responsibility for verifying reports about COVID-19 in the DPRK. According to WHO's website, personnel in this office include the WHO representative, an administrative officer, and four "technical staff" members. Consultants and other outside experts travel to the country office each year for "training, capacity building and technical assessments, and program review."²⁷

Since November 2019, including the entire COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Edwin Salvador has served as the WHO representative for the DPRK. In that

role, he assumed responsibility for confirming WHO's data about the pandemic. He personally has communicated with the media on multiple occasions about coordination between WHO and the DPRK government, as well as details of the DPRK's initiatives and policies during the pandemic.²⁸ Dr. Salvador is a native of the Philippines, where he received his medical degree. For postgraduate training, he studied at the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom. Early in his career, he worked for ten years with Doctors Without Borders and the International Medical Corps, addressing public health challenges in multiple countries of Africa and Asia. He joined WHO in 2006 as a public health officer in Sudan. Later, he served at WHO country offices in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, receiving WHO's 2016 Award for Excellence for his contributions after the catastrophic 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Before coming to the DPRK, Dr. Salvador held a position as WHO's Deputy Representative in Bangladesh, where he coordinated WHO's response to the crisis of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

Throughout the pandemic and until mid-July 2021, WHO's COVID-19 scoreboard for the DPRK has shown zero confirmed cases and zero deaths.²⁹ *The New York Times* tracking project also reports zero cases.³⁰ Other prominent tracking venues – for instance, Johns Hopkins University, the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, University College London, Oxford University, the *Washington Post*, and the *Guardian* – do not report any data for the DPRK. Despite skepticism expressed in the dominant media by public health commentators, specific reasons for the skepticism remain vague.

At the end of June 2021, the government's KCNA news agency reported that, during a politburo meeting of the ruling Workers' Party, Kim Jong-un announced a "grave" COVID-19 incident that had threatened public safety. The report noted that members of the politburo were recalled and replaced due to the health "crisis" generated by the incident, which apparently referred to a breakdown in rules and procedures for controlling the pandemic. Although the KCNA report did not provide details about the breakdown and did not mention any active COVID-19 cases that resulted from the incident, pundits in South Korea and elsewhere speculated that confirmed cases had occurred. Three weeks later, the WHO and *New York Times* scoreboards still reported no confirmed cases or deaths.³¹

An unexpected conclusion for me and my colleagues, after studying documents from WHO and other sources, including the reports concerning the crisis during late June 2021, is that the report of zero cases and zero deaths is plausible. This conclusion has resulted from the observations in multiple publications from WHO and the DPRK that provide frank and detailed information about the country's public health prob-

lems and accomplishments, including major achievements in addressing infectious diseases. The track record of Dr. Salvador and other staff members at WHO's country office and elsewhere also gives no reason to doubt WHO's reports about COVID-19 in the DPRK. In short, the DPRK may lead the world in the fight against COVID-19.

But as in most other countries, addressing the upstream causes of pandemics like COVID-19 has not made it into the DPRK's publicly announced priorities. During the Japanese imperial period terminating at the end of the Second World War and then during the Korean War, the Korean peninsula experienced massive deforestation. As noted already, the ROK recently has made some progress in reforestation. Under Kim Jong-un, the DPRK officially has embarked on reforestation efforts, but progress has been slow, partly due to the continuing use of wood as fuel for heating and cooking, especially in rural areas.³² Industrial production of meat has not advanced to nearly the level in the ROK, let alone China, although the government has set goals to increase meat supplies to address the chronic problem of nutritional deficiencies. Unlike China and South Korea, the DPRK's unique approach to socialist policy-making has not provided an opening for multinational capitalist agricultural corporations, so the march toward factory farms that breed pathogens causing pandemics has not occurred, at least not yet. Nevertheless, like the ROK and most other countries, capitalist or not, the DPRK's approach to controlling the COVID-19 pandemic has not explicitly addressed its upstream causes in habitat destruction and industrial agriculture.

The Undiscovered Holy Grail of COVID-19

The two Koreas—sharing a language, cultural traditions, history of imperial conquest and war, and interrupted family connections—both have mostly succeeded in controlling the pandemic, within different political-economic systems and with markedly different methods. South Korea has used sophisticated technology, a disciplined public health labor force, efforts to prevent economic collapse by avoiding lockdowns, and financial help with social support services. Its approach to communication emphasizes transparency and helpfulness through messages from government and public health officials at the federal, provincial, county, and municipal levels. The economy remains capitalist, but the welfare state includes a health care system that fosters universal access, minimal financial barriers, and little capitalist orientation to corporate profit making.

North Korea, with a unique approach to socialism rooted in the Juche principle of self-sufficiency and strong leadership, has cut off transmission of infection from other countries by closing its borders very early and im-

posing strict quarantine procedures. While the country has suffered some economic decline due to lost trade relationships coupled with continuing financial sanctions by the United States and United Nations, a lockdown has occurred only briefly, affecting a single city. Public-sector employment has continued, preventing additional financial crises affecting the population. Private profit-making corporations do not take part in its economy or health care system, a system that has achieved higher numbers of health professionals and better health outcomes than many countries of Asia. Among North Korea's openly acknowledged public health problems, hospitals and clinics remain underfinanced and undersupplied, largely due to external economic sanctions. Probably recognizing its inability to provide adequate clinical services during a pandemic, the government has acted aggressively to prevent cases leading to wider transmission.

Despite success in controlling the pandemic's downstream effects in illness and death, the countries have taken no actions to address the root causes of emerging pandemics in habitat destruction and production of meat. Partly as a result, they, like most other countries, remain vulnerable to future pandemics that may be worse than this one.

Clarifying the best ways that countries can prevent both the downstream effects and upstream causes remains an undiscovered holy grail of COVID-19. The successes of the two Koreas and the different methods underlying these successes may offer some clues. Avoiding the destructive effects of capitalist structures and processes within health care and public health systems is one. Leadership that focuses on how to provide economic protection and adherence to public health interventions is another. Then there is the subtle impact of respect for cultural traditions like Juche in the north and, in the south, looking at cherry blossoms in springtime.

Notes

1. Editors, "Happy Birthday, Paul!" *Monthly Review* 51, no. 11 (April 2000).

2. Howard Waitzkin, "Confronting the Upstream Causes of COVID-19 and Other Epidemics to Follow," *International Journal of Health Services* 51, no. 1 (2021); Rob Wallace, Alex Liebman, Luis Fernando Chaves, and Rodrick Wallace, "COVID-19 and Circuits of Capital," *Monthly Review* 72, no. 12 (May 2020): 1-15; Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

3. For this and other Fulbright fellowships, I have wondered how I could have gotten selected, given my constant criticisms of U.S. foreign policies. I can

imagine the vetting of my application in a meeting between an assistant of my recent boss, Mike Pompeo, and the CIA agent who vets Fulbright applicants:

- Pompeo's assistant: "I don't think we should accept this guy. He's opposed basically every U.S. foreign policy since he was a teenager."

- CIA agent: "No, I disagree with you. I think we should select him. He'll give people an impression that U.S. encourages freedom of speech and a range of opinions, and obviously he's completely harmless."

4. "South Korea Military Expenditure," *Trading Economics*, January 2021; Kim Jae-won, "Korea Worst in Income

Inequality in Asia-Pacific," *Korea Times*, March 16, 2016; Justin McCurry, "South Korea's Inequality Paradox: Long Life, Good Health and Poverty," *Guardian*, August 2, 2017; Steven Denney, "Piketty in Seoul: Rising Income Inequality in South Korea," *Diplomat*, November 4, 2014; "State of Income Inequality in South Korea," Borgen Project, March 3, 2020; "Shocking Results Show South Korea Has the Highest Suicide Rate Among the OECD Countries," *Allkpop*, September 21, 2020; "Suicide Rates," OECD Data, 2019.

5. Erica Wertheim Zohar, "Quarantining in Korea: One Young American's Unique Travel Adventure During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Forbes*, July 10, 2020.

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Most Anglo radicals simply do not understand why it is offensive to call the United States "America." Giving the name of the whole hemisphere to a single nation legitimizes Manifest Destiny.

— ELIZABETH (BETITA) MARTÍNEZ,
"Telling the Story of Our America," *Monthly Review*, June 2001

Cooperation Has a Meaning

François Maspero and Monthly Review

ANDY MERRIFIELD

In 1970, the French left-wing filmmaker Chris Marker made a twenty-minute documentary about the French left-wing publisher François Maspero. Shot in grainy black and white and interspersed with images of words torn from a dictionary, *Les mots ont un sens* (Words Have a Meaning) has a raw *nouvelle vague* feel to it. Marker's hand-held camera follows a thirty-something Maspero pacing Paris's Latin Quarter streets, darting through its crowds, headed toward La joie de lire (The Joy of Reading), his bookstore along Rue Saint-Séverin, seat of Éditions Maspero. Sporting glasses and a neat tweed jacket, Maspero looks every inch the serious intellectual he was, a man with a radical mission. His deadpan demeanor lightens only for a brief instant when he stops, stares directly into Marker's camera, and gives it a big Cheshire Cat grin. (Later in life, Maspero would appear more proletarian, dressing in denim work shirts and doffing a trademark seaman's cap.)

Maspero launched his bookstore in 1955, at the tender age of 23. Four years on, as anticolonial struggles raged in Algeria, he founded his press. Still, Maspero tells Marker how he hates adjectives like *engaged*, *courageous*, even *revolutionary*, because he knows that books and a press alone don't make a revolution. But they do offer curious people the chance to read material and hear opinions they probably never would have otherwise. La joie de lire was important as a site of physical encounter: kindred mingled there, discovered dissident ideas, heard *counter*-information. Bookstore and press corrected implicit bourgeois bias, stocked and published literature at once anticolonialist and anti-Stalinist, militantly *gauchiste* and independent, poetical as well as political. Rosa Luxemburg shared shelf-space with Charles Baudelaire, Che with Marguerite Duras, Fidel Castro with Georges Perec, Frantz Fanon with Boris Vian, and Louis Althusser with Julio Cortázar.

Between June 1959 and May 1982, Éditions Maspero published around 1,300 titles across thirty collections. Yet it faced a constant barrage of state

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ensorship (book confiscation and fines) and fascist violence. In the early 1960s, the bookstore was repeatedly bombed by the Organisation Armée Secrète, a secret far-right paramilitary organization, and Maspero was shot in the back, in broad daylight, in a cowardly act that seriously injured him. (He recovered.) Maybe for good reason did Marker's film flag, at the beginning, Antonio Gramsci's famous citation: "pessimism of the intellect obliges an optimism of the will." Maspero seems instinctively to internalize Gramsci's maxim, telling Marker: "I'm happy to see these piles of books published, because if I didn't exist many of them wouldn't exist."

Revolutionary struggles across the globe – in Cuba and Algeria, Congo and Angola, French factories and U.S. inner cities – figure every day in national newspapers; but their story, Maspero says, gets told from the standpoint of nonrevolutionaries, is seen exclusively through the colonizer's eyes. Here, at his bookstore, he says, you learn things "from inside the head of a Cuban revolutionary or militant Black American." Maspero is proud to have published Fanon, both *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) and *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (*A Dying Colonialism*, 1959), the latter having the greatest honor at the house: it was the first Maspero book to be banned.

As we listen to Maspero's voiceover, Marker's lens focuses on browsers at La joie de lire, homing in on what pages they're turning over, what they're tuning into. Then it zooms out, scanning the stacks. Fleeting, we catch a glimpse of two publications pinned side by side on one wall, seemingly granted special placement: a copy of *The Black Panther* newspaper and a *Monthly Review*. We can't see the date of the latter but its leader stands out: "THE OLD LEFT AND THE NEW." Hardly surprising is this prominence: Maspero's relationship with *Monthly Review* was always fraternal, both interfaced with one another, shared lists. *Monthly Review* Press lost as little time as possible getting Éditions Maspero into English, and vice versa. Together, they helped define what that *New* in the Left would mean.

Early hits in both camps were Régis Debray's *Révolution dans la révolution?* (*Revolution in the Revolution?*) – from 1967, featured in its entirety as a special issue of *Monthly Review* (July–August 1967), with the book following hot on its heels – Charles Bettelheim's *Transition vers l'économie socialiste* (Maspero, 1968), appearing as *On the Transition to Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1971); and Arghiri Emmanuel's *L'Échange inégal* (1969), which became *Monthly Review* Press's *Unequal Exchange* in 1972. On the other flank, Paul Baran's pioneering *Political Economy of Growth* (Monthly Review Press, 1957) moved into Éditions Maspero in 1967; Baran and Paul Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1966) did likewise in 1970; André Gunder Frank's "The Development of Underdevelopment" (*Monthly Review*, September 1966) and

Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America (Monthly Review Press, 1967) found themselves chez Maspero in 1969 and 1972 respectively; and, a little later, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1974) entered Maspero's list in 1976, as did Harry Magdoff's *The Age of Imperialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1969) in 1979, in its "Cahiers Libres" series.

Monthly Review's "The Old Left and the New" was Sweezy and Magdoff's Review of the Month for May 1969. (The issue also contained several informative pieces on Fanon's "evolution as a revolutionary.") The Sweezy and Magdoff piece likely caught Maspero's eye because it was pinpointing an important interregnum in left politics, not only an emerging generational rift, but also one responding to a mutation within postwar capitalism. Both rift and mutation ushered in radical opportunities as well as daunting threats. Gramsci anticipated these threats with another famous observation: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old world is dying and the new cannot be born; and in this interregnum monsters surge." Sweezy and Magdoff were afraid of monsters, as we should be. In 1969, though, there were glimmers of light, too, as a New Left struggled to impose its own hegemony.

Things might not have been ideal then, but they were better, Sweezy and Magdoff say, than the previous two decades when *Monthly Review* started out. In those days, redbaiting was just about to set off on its long crusade. During the 1950s, hammer blows rained on the popular movement: left unions were expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations, Communist Party leaders convicted under the Smith Act (1940), the Rosenbergs executed, and Joseph McCarthy unleashed fire and brimstone on liberals everywhere. Meantime, U.S. capitalism was changing its economic and ideological spots, developing its manipulative armory, promising workers and unions the good life if only they played the game. Wages rose and full-employment policies didn't appear the red herrings they'd become. The Cold War became a handy political tool for ensuing compliance at home while preserving U.S. military investments abroad.

And yet, for all that, say Sweezy and Magdoff, "to understand the transformation which took place during the 1960s one must stress not the manipulative ability of the ruling class but the limits of that manipulative ability." Spending billions of dollars on armaments staved off economic stagnation and extended the nonsocialist reach of the United States across the globe, but it couldn't control the consequences of such a Cold War. Neither could it prevent capital accumulation from exercising its "normal polarizing effect," producing ever-increasing wealth at the top with grinding poverty at the bottom. And last but not least, "the manipulation and systematic efforts at debasement of the public mind" tend

“sooner or later to generate a revolt among those who become conscious of their cultural and spiritual deprivation.” Thus, capitalism in the 1950s had, by the 1960s, engineered its own negation. And as part of this negation, a “New Left” was busy being born, “wholly different from that Old Left which was shattered two decades ago.”

Many of this New Left stood browsing at Maspero’s bookstore. They’d become conscious of global inequities as well as their own cultural and spiritual deprivation, revolting in their heads and out on the streets. They were discovering new heroes and heroines in far-off lands, with different skin colors. The Old Left was reformist by comparison, Sweezy and Magdoff say, more willing to achieve its aims *within* the framework of existing capitalist society. Not so with the New Left, which better understood the necessity of revolution, knowing that, for the foreseeable future, “whites and blacks must organize separately while struggling together.” It’s a powerful insight, even today – especially today – when a loosely affiliated Black Lives Matter movement struggles to find its collective voice.

But Sweezy and Magdoff think it an error to overstate what is significantly new here. After all, like its “Old” counterpart, the New Left is rather *small*, “hardly touching the masses of blue- and white-collar workers, and where it has, the reaction tends to be negative rather than positive.” And despite all the clamor of revolt, “many people have no clear idea of what a revolution implies and no one knows how a revolution is going to be made in a country like ours.” “As the magazine enters its third decade,” Sweezy and Magdoff sign off, “the editors re-dedicate themselves to this task, asking as they have many times before for the aid and advice and cooperation of our readers.”



The central theme of this commentary is *cooperation*, already witnessed in *Monthly Review*’s own relationship with Maspero, already implicit in much of the communal impulse of the New Left, whose grievances with capitalist society, remember, lay precisely in the latter’s competitive monomania, in its running roughshod over any selfless collective life – pitting nation against nation, rich against poor, white against Black, colonizer against colonized. Contest and self-interest underwrite capitalism’s long-wave meta-narrative; its history is branded with blood and fury. In 1969, Sweezy and Magdoff sought to problematize “cooperation on the Left,” using, as their platform, a *Monthly Review* article from almost twenty years prior: “Better Smaller but Better” by *Historicus*.

Throughout the McCarthy era, *Historicus* was Paul Baran’s protective pen name, and what Baran lamented in July 1950 was a lack of political

cooperation on the left, simply because, he said, “there is no politics on the Left.” Only a stark void prevailed, made less stark by “clarity, courage, patience, and faith in the spontaneity of rational and socialist tendencies in society.” Baran himself was responding to a *Monthly Review* editorial from the previous March, “Cooperation on the Left,” penned by Leo Huberman and Sweezy. Reading this editorial today, seventy odd years down the line, its message still sounds incredibly smart, is still full of remarkable insights about the principle and tactics of left cooperation. Its tone, too, is a good deal more upbeat than *Historicus*’s. Indeed, at a time when the U.S. left was in bad shape, in worse shape than it is now, cooperation, Huberman and Sweezy insist, has to have a meaning.

Monthly Review’s establishment, the duo say, is rooted in left setback and stagnation. Despair isn’t unfamiliar to leftists. Yet the magazine intended to engage with setback and despair, was there to take stock, is still there taking stock, trying to overcome splintering and factional bitterness within the left, still wrestling with a ruling class as it wrestles with itself. How to consolidate the flimsy terrain on which the left seems permanently to stand? How to move forward? One answer, Huberman and Sweezy suggest, is “cooperation on a dozen fronts at once...bringing the whole Left into a unified and disciplined struggle for a better world.” “How to achieve such cooperation, therefore, seems to us to be the most important question facing the Left today.” Perhaps it still is.

A prerequisite for radical cooperation is for broad and open public discussion, about past failings and present undertakings, about how to build bridges into the future. “There are enormous stores of energy and creative ability in the American people,” Huberman and Sweezy say. “Capitalist society is crushing them or diverting them into purely destructive channels. This is the Left’s reason for being and also its greatest opportunity, and to this end nothing is more important at the present time than the organization and promotion of public discussion on the widest possible scale.”

Another prerequisite is “a measure of humility all around.” “There must be at least a certain minimum willingness to face facts, to accept criticism, to admit mistakes, and to try new methods. Otherwise, there is no vitality, no capacity for adaptation, no power to grow.” What is worth remembering is that “cooperation and unity are entirely different things.” Unity implies holding political ends in common; cooperation implies “the holding of diverse as well as common ends and a willingness to work together for those which are held in common.” Unity, we might say, is a thing; cooperation a process, a dialogue.

Unity operates around sameness and exists *within* groups; cooperation upholds difference because it takes place *between* groups. Karl Marx af-

firms cooperation as core to his vision of democracy. Even when he writes about it in *Capital*, in the rather odd chapter 13 of volume one, speaking about how capitalism abuses cooperating workers, he knows that cooperation never implies everyone doing the same activity, never meant thinking the same thing, never necessitated homogeneity. Rather, cooperation meant discovering commonality as a route toward expanding individual difference. This, says Marx, is the means through which people “have hands and eyes both in the front and behind, and can be said to be a certain extent omnipresent.” When we cooperate in a planned way with others, Marx says, “we develop the capabilities of our species.”

The United States is characterized by an infinite number of progressive groups and organizations, say Huberman and Sweezy, varying in size, ranging in efficacy. “The most that can be done – though, of course, it is a lot – is to organize an ever-increasing degree of cooperation for common ends – especially for the preservation of peace and the defense of civil liberties. In the process, the number and scope of common ends can be expected to grow until eventually organizational unity becomes a realistic goal.” Cooperation, from this standpoint, requires that each group respects the right of others to exist and manage their own affairs. Of course, any group may and should try to win over other groups to its principles, yet “only through open and above-board discussion.” To that degree, cooperation “presupposes decent manners among cooperators.” “It is impossible to cooperate with a person and at the same time vilify them.”

Cooperation hinges not only on groups reaching agreement, but also on a readiness to find agreement in a spirit of meeting each other halfway. One group can’t dominate all others. If cooperative rules break down, antagonism or mistrust ensues. Sometimes antagonism can’t be avoided. Sometimes it shouldn’t be avoided. Nevertheless, conflict isn’t the same as cooperation, Huberman and Sweezy argue, and collective ventures tend to work best when antagonism is worked through, engaged with before it festers. Neither does cooperation mean socialists must shelve socialist ideals. Quite the contrary: “it is fatal for them to do so,” Huberman and Sweezy warn. “Serious socialists believe that in the long run the only possible way out of the present muddle lies in the attainment of world socialism. Believing this, they can be politically principled and effective only to the extent that they relate their activities to the realization of the socialist goal.”



If the New Left failed to realize such a socialist goal, it succeeded admirably in transforming and enriching the culture of radicalism, enlarging the whole repertoire of progressive agendas, developing a new panoply of

identity politics and concerns around lifestyle and ecology. The array of progressive causes that Huberman and Sweezy identified in 1950 expanded and diversified dramatically throughout the 1960s; and ever since has expanded and diversified into something vaster again – into an infinite number of groups united only by their relative marginalization from the mainstream, and by their frequent separation from one another. Though we shouldn't forget their other point of convergence: all encounter tremendous onslaught from the reactionary right.

At the same time, these groups face obstacles within and between themselves, divided often by those whose causes can be affected inside capitalism, and those who can find resolution only outside it, beyond capitalism. Yet, as Huberman and Sweezy put it long ago, these groups “have plenty in common – especially in the fight for civil liberties and peace, both of which are in deadly danger from American reaction – and it is obviously as much in the interest of one as of the other to work together for aims which they both approve.” The sentence could have been written yesterday, or else be our thought for the day, tomorrow.

Watching Marker's *Les mots ont un sens* in 2021, it's hard not to feel a tinge of nostalgia for those yesteryears, when *Monthly Review* was pinned so vividly on Maspero's wall, and when everything seemed fresher – the progressive ideas, the newness of the books, hot off the press, the vitality of the kids reading them, their hopes, their passionate embrace of the future, their innocence. Even Marker's New Wave moviemaking seemed fresh and radical, something that not only documented the changing times but itself helped shape those changing times.

This may be a nostalgia for Maspero's vocation as a publisher and bookstore owner, knowing that rents were cheaper then, that bottom-line commerce hadn't yet invaded all aspects of life – that all was permissible whereas today it would be impossible, unaffordable, inconceivable. But then again, Maspero, who passed away in 2015, always mistrusted nostalgia, as we should mistrust it, and warned that his venture was never really possible, even then. You had to struggle to make it work, that there were always obstacles to overcome; you were forever on the brink of economic collapse, in danger of being blown up or shot in the back. Why believe it was any easier in those days than it would be now, in our own desperate times? Times have always been desperate for the left!

Running a bookstore and becoming a militant is a “continual contradiction,” Maspero says in *Les mots ont un sens*, a continual contradiction like left struggle itself, within and against capitalism. You're always trying to push through bourgeois society, always trying to betray it, he says, always trying to perfect this act of betrayal. Publishing books is unavoidably im-

perfect: no sooner is a book off the press than you notice the first *coquille*, Maspero says, the first misprint. Ditto with left politics: always imperfect, always unfinished, even if that striving for perfection, that desire for the flawless book, for some beautiful collective cooperation, remains a valid yearning, a fantasy worthy of any dream-image.

Half a century ago, in “The Old Left and the New,” the “New” was still sprightly if rather battle worn from 1968. Nowadays, the “New Left” has a lot of gray and white hairs, has become, as Marshall Berman liked to joke, the “Used Left,” and we await what a cooperating New, New Left might look like, a global movement taking to heart Huberman and Sweezy’s old adage: that unity and cooperation aren’t necessarily the same thing, that cooperation doesn’t imply complete agreement, and that it is possible to achieve real practical ends through incomplete means. Much like old times, the left is now confronted with a familiar problem: How do we overcome another generational rift at another interregnum, at a moment when we’ve just gotten rid of one monster? How do we act when the old world hasn’t died off and a new era has yet to be born?

One of Maspero’s favorite images for radicals comes from one of his finest published works, a book he wrote himself: *Les abeilles et la guêpe* (*The Bees and the Wasp*)—a memoir from 2002.¹ As its epigraph, it takes Jean Paulhan’s 1944 evocation of the Resistance movement: “You can squeeze a bee in your hand until it suffocates. But before it suffocates it will sting you. That’s not a big thing, you say. Yes, it’s not much. But if it didn’t sting, soon enough there wouldn’t be anymore bees.” Defiance, in other words, always has to renew itself, always has to reinvent itself through ongoing struggle, through new means of defiance, regardless of whether this defiance battles for a lost cause. It’s to hope against hope that later generations of bees continue to cooperate together, continue to rebuild their collective hives—continue to sting all those who try to suffocate them.

Notes

1. After Maspero’s bookstore closed in 1974 and his press morphed into Éditions La découverte in 1982, he began work as a translator (especially from Spanish), taking to the pen himself, even while he voyaged throughout the globe, writing acclaimed novels *Le sourire du chat* (1984), *Le figuier* (1988), and *La plage noire* (1995), as well as offbeat travelogues, homages to hidden minority worlds in *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990) and *Balkans-Transit* (1997). When Éditions Maspero passed the baton over to La découverte, they retained Maspero’s house emblem: *un crieur de journaux*—a newspaper boy on a street corner, crying out the daily news; only in this case, it is news seldom reported in the standard press. When the independent online newspaper *Mediapart* went live in 2008, under ex-*Le monde* editor Édwy Plenel’s watch, they too adopted Maspero’s *crieur* as their logo, keeping a Maspero-inspired left voice circulating across the airwaves.

Building a Vision of the Good Life

JORDAN FOX BESEK

Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020), 225 pages, \$26.95, hardcover.

The crux of Kate Soper's *Post-Growth Living* is simple: we need to redefine "the good life." We need to move away from a culture that equates the good life with endless consumption and toward one that equates it with experiences that are not defined by the market. Not only is this transition ecologically necessary, but it will also lead to fairer, and far more pleasurable, experiences, such as Soper's desired "alternative hedonism." I am confident that this singular plea is both fecund and needed, even if, after reading, I am still not sure exactly what "alternative hedonism" actually is.

For decades, Soper has written elegantly and persuasively on feminism, continental philosophy, environmental ethics, and other topics, never ceding to a position without first interrogating it for herself. In what is likely her most well-known work, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*, Soper genuinely absorbs arguments from what she terms "nature-endorsing" approaches, typical of natural scientists who invoke the intrinsic value of "nature," and "nature-skeptical" approaches, characteristic of poststructuralist scholars who draw attention to the cultural, discursive construction of "nature," synthesizing the best of each through critique. What emerges is an understanding of socioecological relationships that is at once realist and humanist, and, most importantly, immensely useful.

What Is Nature? lingers throughout *Post-Growth Living*, particularly its refusal to accept wholesale anyone else's position on "nature." Soper opens the book through a critique of contemporary ecological Marxist scholarship, in particular Jason Moore and Alf Hornborg. Soper has discussed Moore's "lack of cultural vision" more thoroughly elsewhere, though here she accuses him of "a hypostatization of the system, as if capital itself were responsible and acting autonomously."¹ Soper has kinder words for Hornborg, although she does propose that we move on from some of his analytical framing, which she criticizes as forwarding the idea that "ecological debt...can be understood in monetary terms."² Nevertheless, she applauds how these two, Andreas Malm, and other thinkers (noting the variation among them) have appropriately redirected our attention

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to the history of industrial capitalism. No good deed goes unpunished, however, for these thinkers have so thoroughly focused our attention on industry that a central impulse of Karl Marx's work is being "overlooked" – namely, that the production of material wealth is not the point of life.³ To render it so is perverse. Putting forward a critique of the way capitalist economies reduce human beings to simplistic means of production therefore necessitates, by Marx's own program, building a vision that breaks from these confines. *Post-Growth Living* is largely a plea to better construct such an alternative vision.

Post-Growth Living is a book that expects its readership to be quite comfortable with the fact that we share much more with other beings than previously thought, that we should move far away from nonhuman relations built on cold calculations, and that there is a relationality of all beings. Yet it is also a book that expects its readership to recognize that relationality between things does not imply that they are one in the same. On these grounds, Soper has no truck with posthumanism. She contends that the attempt of practitioners of posthumanism to "collapse...what they see as misguided or arrogantly humanist distinctions between ourselves and other animals" should be "resisted as unhelpful to environmental argument."⁴ This is because, she argues, nonhumans are not absolutely inseparable from us, nor do they have powers and forms of agency that uniquely define the human. To pretend we can fully absorb them into our worlds is then to deny the specificity of their own worlds. This particular point might not convince posthumanists, who, much like ecological Marxists, have a diverse set of positions. (Indeed, many scholars draw from both ecological Marxism and posthumanism.) And some posthumanists would likely reply to Soper that acknowledging the specificity of other unique worlds and their distinct histories remains very much the point. Her next critique, however, is a bit more robust. The responsibility for ecological crises is profoundly human. Against posthumanist impulses, then, addressing ecological crises necessitates focusing on the ways we, as humans, live.

So, what does this alternative mode of human living look like? It begins with a rejection of the type of consumption on which current ideals of the good life are built, which problematically are today lodestars in the Global South as much as in the Global North. The majority of the world aspires to consume more – more cars, more fashion, more electronics, more everything – and these *prima facie* unsustainable aspirations are rooted in the everyday life of most of humanity, across class lines, dialectically wedding consumption to processes of production. To reify them as simply the "choices" or "desires" imposed by an all-powerful capital

is to reproduce the idea that people exist only as workers or as capitalist consumers, and this is the idea that Soper is begging us to escape.

After this theoretical positioning, the bulk of the book works toward developing a vision of this alternative hedonism. The day-to-day aspects of her vision are not particularly radical, but this is likely the point. Soper's alternative world is not a profound change from our own, it is simply one in which we develop ways to better reflect on and incorporate the environmental consequences of our consumption, and, in doing so, consume far less. This means less flying, less building, less stress, less needless work, less demand for technological "progress," and more biking, more rehabbing, more walking, more creativity, and more time for conversation. The "hedonism" in Soper's vision refers to the sheer pleasure to be gained by adopting such a slower-paced, less carbon-intensive life. For the ugliness of contemporary high-speed, consumption-oriented living, even if it were sustainable, claims Soper, is, anyway, simply not worth it. A counter-consumerist ethic thus contains the twin benefits of developing less environmentally intensive relationships while also building more gratifying, more cooperative societies.

Soper is well aware that her call to liberate ourselves from wonton consumption toward the gratifications of a slower pace will sound to many like an ad campaign for a new glamping app or crystal-laden luxury mindfulness retreat. And she is right in telling us that we should get over it. Just because someone has found ways to make money off a polluted form of environmentalism does not render all attempts to consume environmentally rotten. The whole point, of course, is for us to not let capitalist actors define our visions of our lives and communities. An ethical consumption, perhaps reminiscent of your local cooperative grocery store, is therefore a part of Soper's alternative vision, though hers is a form of consumption that is quite aware of the dangers of greenwashing, false authenticity, and similar means of co-opting environmental ethics for private gain. The rise in organic produce, a desire to ethically source clothing, the development of green building rehabilitation, and more should be cautiously welcomed because they reflect a popular connection between consumption and its impacts. Our work should not be in rejecting these deeply imperfect developments in consumptive behavior, but in placing them within a broader post-growth vision and, as part of the effort, fully defetishizing them while making them more accessible. Swallowing our pride and working with the world we have is a thread that runs through *Post-Growth Living*.

Soper's alternative hedonism may not seem culturally revolutionary, for the bones of cultural shift she is advocating for already exist in many

places across the world (if often co-opted for capital gain). It is, nevertheless, politically revolutionary, as any even remotely convincing plea that we consume less must be. Throughout, Soper stresses the importance of connecting consumption to the structural role of capitalist economies and their imperatives that we must all shop until we drop, and it is clear that this stress is what drove the Marxist theoretical positioning of earlier chapters. Again, she is worried that our dialectical foci are overly concerned with production at the expense of consumption. To be clear, production does matter, but it is also important to consider consumption as a part, however limited, of a greater whole. The humility to take on this maligned aspect of ecological Marxism is in part what makes this book refreshing. Soper is very clear that she is not putting forth a complete path toward some defined socioecological future. She is rather disjunctively rounding out our socioecological present, highlighting some things that can currently be done to make it better. Politically, this includes moving on from the naive “old left” jobs-through-growth platforms pursued by Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Our well-being, in terms of our environmental relationships as well as our own day-to-day lives, can no longer depend on programs that equate health with continuous economic growth.

What realistically successful political program can such change depend on? Soper is circumspect, though she insists that a successful politics involves transitioning our focus from worker militancy, with its predefined goals of more production, to questioning why and what we are even producing and consuming. This means emphasizing how everyday acts of consumption have political dimensions that should be up for debate, how a good life can be lived at a slower pace, reclaiming public space, and embracing a (less technology-dependent) Green New Deal that emphasizes rewarding work as opposed to just work. “Marxists,” she insists, “must press for a debate on the good life,” developing new forms of desire as opposed to thinking about ecological collapse.⁵ Still, in the face of such an uncertain environmental future, is this choice so clear cut? Soper is correct that Marxists and those influenced by Marx can do a better job of reaching out to wider audiences. In this ever-dynamic project, however, there is room for multiple emphases. The sheer weight of our contemporary environmental predicaments today motivates a great deal of people. An alternative hedonism can and should be part of the effort to address contemporary environmental problems, though not necessarily by itself.

It is this lack of a thorough connection to other traditions, past and present, that renders the concept of alternative hedonism a little blurry. Part of Soper’s appeal is indeed her uniqueness, though, here, perhaps, her individuality gets in the way of possible connections. For instance,

Soper is not the first to argue that ethical consumption not only leads to better environmental relationships, but a better life. Indeed, I was shocked to see that this book was published by Verso and not Kelmscott Press. William Morris looms large in *Post-Growth Living*, but largely in silence. Much of Morris's life was spent arguing for a similar position to Soper's – that labor should be by definition creative, time should not be defined by the production of goods one does not care about, and social and ecological health are understood as twin benefits of a very possible alternative way of life. "The lack of this pleasure in daily work," Morris wrote in 1885, "has made our towns and habitations sordid and hideous insults to the beauty of the earth which they disfigure, and all the accessories of life mean, trivial, ugly."⁶ Like Soper over a century later, Morris defined his view against those on the left who, like Edward Bellamy, advocated for mechanizing labor in order to free us from the daily drudge, in favor of the opposite position, one in which work itself is an art.

Soper's perspective is of course not identical to Morris's, if only because it benefits from over a century of additional thinking. But how, exactly, might these positions align? Should a push for an alternative hedonism draw from the established, popular notoriety of Morris and other Romantics? If so, how much? If not, why not exactly? Morris is mentioned but once in *Post-Growth Living*, paired with his contemporary utopian socialist Edward Carpenter, both brushed aside as simplistic paragons of a dated Romantic age, if still "important resources."⁷ Important how? Later in the book Soper does call for an "avant-garde nostalgia" in which a critique of the past is developed, serving as the basis to draw useful insights for the present. Unfortunately, Soper does not engage in this process in regard to Morris, though my guess is that she did not want to incorporate Romantic thinkers for fear of coming across as too, well, romantic. This fear, however, is likely founded on later uncharitable or misinformed distillations of Morris's work, not Morris's work itself, which is quite clearly part of the tangled roots of Soper's own program. If Soper has something more complex in mind than a back-to-nature romance, and she very much does, then a demonstration of how her thought draws and does not draw from Morris and his ilk would have been welcome. Moreover, the examples that Soper does provide, mostly anticolonial imageries, seem rushed. "Avant-garde nostalgia" is a potentially useful frame, though without a thorough application (Romantic or not), it washes away in ambiguity.

Questions regarding tradition aside, this is a brave and needed work. If at times hasty, it is an erudite challenge to many of us to think more holistically about what sort of world we are working for and why. Critically wading through the mire of green consumption, defending it in small

part while exposing its foundational inadequacies, is no easy tension to illuminate and Soper does it well. *Post-Growth Living* demands that we explicitly think about how we can build a world that is more enjoyable, one that finds deep comfort in the limits of life. It is a task that demands, as Soper clearly understands, some deeply uncomfortable conversations.

Notes

1. Kate Soper, "Capitalocene," *Radical Philosophy* 197 (2016); Kate Soper, *Post-Growth Living: For an Alternative Hedonism* (London: Verso, 2020), 29.
2. Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 17
3. Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 14.
4. Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 20.
5. Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 184.
6. William Morris, *Signs of Change* (London: Longmans, Green, 1896), 119.
7. Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 49.



Another trend that has grown strong today is *indigenismo*, embraced by those who identify with the cultures and struggles of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Its adherents emphasize indigenous expressions of spirituality and respect for all living creatures. At best, they uphold indigenous concepts of communal interdependence and collectivity rather than private property, commodification, and individualism. Philosophically, this puts *indigenismo* a short distance from communism.

— ELIZABETH (BETITA) MARTÍNEZ,
 "A View from New Mexico: Recollections from the *Movimiento Left*,"
Monthly Review, July–August 2002

terminated to continue to use this weapon to the fullest in a desperate attempt to maintain the U.S. imperium. In the process, the population of the world is held hostage, with hundreds of millions suffering daily from the arrogance of U.S. financial power.



Richard Lewontin, the world-famous geneticist and evolutionary theorist, and longtime *Monthly Review* and Monthly Review Press author, supporter, and close friend, died on July 4, 2021, at age 92. Lewontin was a foundational figure in modern biology, bringing together statistics, molecular biology, and evolutionary biology to create a more unified field. Studying the genetic variation of the human population, he demonstrated definitively that the division of humanity into biological races lacked any scientific basis. Biological race, he concluded, was only skin deep.

Like his Harvard colleagues Richard Levins and Stephen Jay Gould, Lewontin was influenced by earlier British pioneers in dialectical-materialist science, including J. B. S. Haldane, J. D. Bernal, Joseph Needham, Lancelot Hogben, and Hyman Levy, carrying forward the traditions of dialectical biology. In the 1970s, Lewontin, together with Levins and Gould, was a core figure in *Science for the People*—both the movement and magazine. Lewontin and Levins published numerous articles in *Monthly Review*, including their coauthored eulogy to Gould, “Stephen Jay Gould—What Does It Mean to Be a Radical?” (*MR*, 2002), and coauthored two major works on dialectical ecology: *The Dialectical Biologist* (1985) and *Biology Under the Influence* (2007).

An article addressing his contributions to radical science, materialist dialectics, and socialist praxis will appear in a future issue of *Monthly Review*.



Elizabeth (Betita) Martínez, a leading organizer in the Chicx movement in the United States and *MR* author, died on June 29, 2021, at age 95. A teacher, historian, and movement activist, Martínez published six books on movement struggles in the Americas, including *500 Years of Chicano History* (1991), *De Colores Means All of Us* (1998), and *500 Years of Chicana Women’s History* (2008). She was also a major Marxist theorist of intersectionality. As noted in the *New York Times* (June 29, 2021), “she was among the first to explore how issues of race, class, poverty, gender, and sexuality could be connected under overlapping systems of oppression, making her a foundational voice for the concept of intersectionality long before the term came into vogue.” In “A View from New Mexico: Recollections of the *Movimiento* Left” in the July–August 2002 issue of *Monthly Review*, she concluded:

The idea that Marxism is a white philosophy—which somehow prevailed through the years of adoration for Cuba and Che, China and Mao, Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh, and Guinea-Bissau and Cabral, to mention only a few folks of color who found Marxist theory relevant—is not dead. In insisting on an ideology that incorporates a critique of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, as it should, some Latinos reject Marxism because it “ignored” those other isms. Or, perhaps more often, because of “all those crazies”—sectarian left formations that claim to speak in its name.

Radical Chicano youth today may not embrace the centrality of class or use what they call “old” words like *socialism* to define the new society. But they still want to go to Cuba, and they do go. They are far less sexist than their predecessors. Their anger is more profound than that of youth forty years ago, their grasp of the fundamental politics of the United States does not take as long to develop. Their rage comes more quickly; it goes from hip to hop.

Let’s just call this a period of transition. (86)

(continued from inside back cover)

Juan C. Zarate, former deputy undersecretary in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and one of the chief architects of the new system of financial warfare, explains in his 2013 book *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare*, "a series of designations was designed to build like a financial crescendo, creating an international financial environment that would begin to reject, for its own sake, the risks of doing business with Iran [or any other 'rogue state']... U.S. executive orders would identify and target finance that supported terror... which would be matched by designations at the United Nations. Then Iran's banks were exposed and targeted – one at a time" (303). On September 7, 2006, the U.S. Treasury severed the Iranian Bank Saderat from the international financial system. The next day, the bank was officially designated as a terrorist financing institution under presidential Executive Order 13224. In 2019, the U.S. financial war on Iran climaxed with the U.S. Treasury's designation of the Central Bank of Iran, Bank Markazi, as a terrorist financing organization ("U.S. Sanctions Iran's Central Bank," Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, September 20, 2019; Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 303, 332).

As early as 2005, the Treasury Department had designated Banco Delta Asia, a small bank in Macau (China), as a "bad bank" in its attempt to isolate North Korea financially and commercially, setting off an electric charge in the banking community internationally, threatening Chinese banks in particular. Instantaneously, Banco Delta Asia was converted into a financial pariah. North Korean accounts were closed down all over Asia. All other banks worldwide began to restructure their finances to ensure compliance with U.S. directives. CIA director Michael Hayden called the action "a twenty-first-century precision-guided munition," spreading fear throughout global finance (Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 244).

In recent years, the Treasury Department, the Justice Department, and other U.S. regulatory agencies have fined such key Western financial firms as BNP Paribas, HSBC, Credit Suisse, Barclays, Standard Chartered, and others over \$11 billion in final plea or settlement deals for not fully complying with U.S. rules with respect to U.S. designated targets (Elizabeth Rosenberg et al., "The New Tools of Economic Warfare," Center for New American Security, 2016, 11). In 2017, Washington imposed a \$1.19 billion penalty on the Chinese telecom manufacturer ZTE for evading U.S. sanctions on Iran and North Korea, causing its stocks to plummet (Alex Capri, "Why US Sanctions Are So Lethal," *Diplomat*, February 23, 2018).

The United States, directly and through its allies, has proceeded to confiscate and freeze billions – in some cases tens of billions – in dollars of assets of targeted countries, including those of Iran, Libya, and Venezuela. This has included U.S. seizure of the Venezuelan oil distribution company CITGO in the United States and (with United Kingdom support) the Venezuelan gold reserves held in London. On April 17, 2019, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned the Central Bank of Venezuela, Banco Central de Venezuela, placing it on its Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, justifying this on the basis of Banco Central de Venezuela's support of Venezuela's elected government under Nicolás Maduro, which Washington has pronounced to be "illegitimate" ("Treasury Sanctions Central Bank of Venezuela and Director of the Central Bank of Venezuela," U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 17, 2021). According to Ashi Moshiri, Chevron's former top executive in Venezuela, "this sanction is saying: 'You deal with the Venezuelan Central Bank, we [the United States Treasury] are going to come after you'" ("New U.S. Sanctions on Venezuela to Choke Off Government Finances," *New York Times*, April 17, 2019).

Zarate warns in the closing pages of *Treasury's War* that as U.S. economic dominance fades, so will its dollar hegemony. At some point in the future, other powers, notably China, may be compelled to reply in kind, generating a Financial World War. Nevertheless, it is clear that the current bipartisan financial war regime in Washington is de-

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as complicit with terrorism. Section 311 of the U.S. Patriot Act, passed by the U.S. Congress, gives the U.S. Treasury the authority to designate any bank throughout the globe as a “bad bank,” subject to U.S. financial and legal sanctions. Since 2016, the Global Magnitsky Act has authorized Washington to sanction all individuals in any country in the world that it stipulates as human rights offenders, freezing their assets. The U.S. Treasury has obtained complete access to the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Transactions) system that facilitates international transactions in U.S. dollars, thereby enabling U.S. surveillance of most international dollar exchanges. Close to a hundred executive orders have been issued to target various countries with financial sanctions. As a result, the United States has issued more economic sanctions on more occasions than have all other countries in the world put together (Jesse Van Genugten, “Conscripting the Global Banking Sector,” *Berkeley Business Law Journal*, 2019, 156).

As part of its imperial strategy, the U.S. Treasury has currently designated as its principal nation-state targets around forty countries/regions included on its Sanctions Programs and Country Information List that have in various ways resisted or failed to comply with U.S. power. The U.S. Treasury’s Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, which is more than 1,500 pages long, includes all of those economic entities and persons linked to targeted countries that Washington has designated for scarlet-letter treatment. This list now extends to approximately 6,300 official targets, with additions to the list in 2018 around eight times those of 2002 (“2019 Year-End Sanctions Update,” Gibson Dunn, January 23, 2020; Lauren Smith, “United States Imposed Economic Sanctions,” *MR Essays*, March 10, 2020).

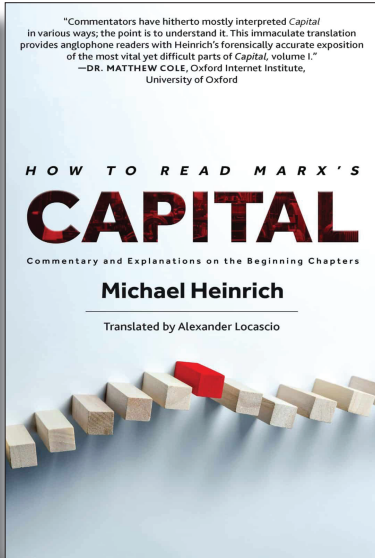
Under this system, every financial institution in the world is now compelled to adhere to the restrictions that the Treasury Department in Washington has instituted on pain of being themselves classified as complicit with money laundering and terrorist actions, and heavily fined (or targeted) by the United States. In practice, this means that the world’s major financial institutions such as banks and insurance companies are now forced to police their own transactions and the world financial system on a daily basis in order to protect their assets from U.S. sanctions. Hence, almost all of the major banks have been dragooned into supporting Washington’s financial war on its target countries. In this way, Cuba’s tourist industry, its access to foreign exchange, and its ability to purchase syringes in a pandemic have now been largely shut down. Venezuela, meanwhile, is cut off from the shipping companies necessary to move its oil due to the U.S. financial sanctions imposed both on the shipping companies themselves and on the insurance companies that insure the cargo. It is unable to receive the needed technology, services, and commodities to maintain its oil production, along with being deprived of the essential food and medical imports for its population. Similar constrictions on economic circulation are being experienced by all the other countries the United States is targeting.

Examples abound of the U.S. weaponization of finance in this new form of siege warfare directed at various nations in the Global South. Around 2006, U.S. Undersecretary of the Treasury for the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey met hundreds of times with bank officials throughout the world to get the entire global banking system to isolate Iran and other countries outlawed by the United States. As

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