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Issue 242

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WRITING WORTH READING ■ PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

February 2023



America's Theatre of the Absurd

CHRIS HEDGES takes a caustic look at the political hacks who direct the carnival of folly in Washington – **PAGES 28-31**

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INSIGHTS

Illustrated London News



Starving people search for potatoes during Ireland's Great Famine of 1845-1852.

JUDE COLLINS

Pain, like guilt, doesn't vanish with the years

Well, here we are, in a spanking New Year. Time to consign the past to the dustbin of history, time to focus on the future. Right? Well, actually, No.

This isn't just a matter for idle speculation. An example: the Norwegian state broadcaster, NRK, at this moment finds itself in a tricky situation. Over the Christmas period, it aired a programme titled '24-Star Christmas Calendar'. The programme consisted of several players searching to find a hidden potato. Jollying things along, the programme's presenter Markus Neby declared: "Just like in Ireland 1838 to 1845, last man to the potato loses."

I don't know how the average Norwegian viewer reacted to this remark. Eddie Whyte, an Irishman who's been living in Norway

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for 30 years, contacted the station to let them know what he thought of this high-handed ‘joke’. The broadcaster was contrite, saying it hadn’t been aware that the Great Hunger, which happened so long ago, still played a strong part in the Irish collective memory.

So was Eddie Whyte being over-sensitive? Well, before you answer that, try this: Isn’t it time the Jews got over the Holocaust? After all, it happened over 80 years ago; surely by now it’s ripe for some rib-tickling? And isn’t it time the native people of North America, Australia and New Zealand got over the fact that the arrival of the white man destroyed their way of life and stole their land?

Once you ask these questions, the answer is obvious. What distinguishes the Jewish Holocaust, the Great Hunger, the colonisation of North America, Australia and New Zealand from other disasters is that they didn’t happen by accident. It was Nazi policy to ‘purify’ the race and expunge Jews from history. It was the deliberate policy of European powers, notably Britain and Spain, to steal the land of the native people and to replace their whole way of life with that of Europeans. Likewise, it was deliberate policy by the English to let the Irish starve to death. At the height of *An Gorta Mor*, ships laden with food were leaving Irish ports for Britain. A conscious decision was taken to let the Irish starve, since this would have the happy effect of lessening the excessive Irish population.

British history has successfully labelled what happened in Ireland

‘The Great Famine’, a tragic but unavoidable disaster. *An Gorta Mor*, *The Great Hunger* – a term rarely used by the English – suggests that the Irish were victims of English policy, not fate. Nor does evil become good, just because it happened a long time ago. Those who argue that we should draw a line and forget it display the intelligence and ethics of an earthworm. There is a school of thought now which speaks of ‘intergenerational trauma’ – that the trauma of *An Gorta Mor*, of the Holocaust, of ruthless colonisation, goes beyond the victims of the time. That succeeding genera-

tions of people bear the wounds inflicted on their ancestors. On January 26, Eddie Whyte will take his case against the Norwegian state broadcaster to the State Broadcasting Authority, emphasising that pain as well as guilt doesn’t vanish – it travels down through the generations. Eddie Whyte and others like him are challenging the guff about forgetting the past and are revealing it as the con-trick it is. **CT**

Jude Collins is a columnist with the Andersonstown News – www.belfastmedia.com – in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

KATHY KELLY

Peace activists take on the merchants of death

Days after a US warplane bombed a Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing 42 people, 24 of them patients, the international president of MSF, Dr. Joanne Liu walked through the wreckage and prepared to deliver condolences to family members of those who had been killed.

A brief video, taped in October, 2015, captures her nearly unutterable sadness as she speaks about a family who, the day before the bombing, had been prepared to bring their daughter home. Doc-

tors had helped the young girl recover, but because war was raging outside the hospital, administrators recommended that the family come the next day. “She’s safer here”, they said.

The child was among those killed by the US attacks, which recurred at 15 minute intervals, for an hour and a half, even though MSF had already issued desperate pleas begging the United States and NATO forces to stop bombing the hospital.

Dr. Liu’s sad observations seemed to echo in the words of Pope Francis lamenting war’s afflictions. “We live with this dia-

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bolic pattern of killing one another out of the desire for power, the desire for security, the desire for many things. But I think of the hidden wars, those no one sees, that are far away from us”, he said. “People speak about peace. The United Nations has done everything possible, but they have not succeeded”.

The tireless struggles of numerous world leaders, like Pope Francis and Dr. Joanne Liu, to stop the patterns of war were embraced vigorously by Phil Berrigan, a prophet of our time. “Meet me at the Pentagon!” Phil Berrigan used to say as he urged his companions to protest Pentagon spending on weapons and wars. “Oppose any and all wars”, Phil urged. “There has never been a just war”.

“Don’t get tired!” he added, and then quoted a Buddhist proverb, “I will not kill, but I will prevent others from killing”.

In stark contrast to Berrigan’s determination to prevent killing, the US Congress recently passed a bill which will commit more than half of the US budget to military expenditures. As Norman Stockwell notes, “The bill contains nearly \$1.7-trillion of funding for FY2023, but of that money, \$858-billion is earmarked for the military (“defense spending”) and an additional \$45-billion in “emergency assistance to Ukraine and our NATO allies.” This means that more than half (\$900-billion out of \$1.7-trillion) is not being used for “non-defense discretionary programmes” – and even that lesser portion includes \$118.7-billion for funding of the Veterans Administration, another



Peace advocates wait to meet company officials in the Boeing corporate lobby on November 10, 2022.

military-related expense”.

By depleting funds desperately needed to meet human needs, the US “defense” budget doesn’t defend people from pandemics, ecological collapse, and infrastructure decay. Instead it continues a deranged investment in militarism. Phil Berrigan’s prophetic intransigency, resisting all wars and weapon manufacturing, is needed now more than ever.

Drawing on Phil Berrigan’s steadfastness, activists worldwide are planning the Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal. The Tribunal, to be held November 10 – 13, 2023, intends to present evidence about crimes against humanity committed by those who develop, store, sell and use weapons used to afflict people trapped in war zones. Testimony is being sought from the survivors of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Gaza, and Somalia, to name but a few of the places where US weapons have terrified people who’ve meant us no harm.

On November 10, 2022, organisers of the Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal and their supporters served a subpoena to the corporate offices and corporate directors of weapons manufacturers Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, and General Atomics. The subpoena, which will expire on February 10, 2023, compels them to provide to the Tribunal all documents revealing their complicity in aiding and abetting the United States government to commit war crimes, crimes against humanity, bribery, and theft.

Organisers of the campaign will continue monthly pre-Tribunal actions exposing allegations of war crimes committed by weapon manufacturers.

Campaigners are guided by the ringing testimony of Dr. Cornel West: “We render you, corporations obsessed with war profiteering, accountable”, he declared, “answerable!”

In his lifetime, Phil Berrigan evolved from soldier to scholar

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to prophetic anti-nuclear activist. He astutely linked racial oppression to the suffering caused by militarism. Likening racial injustice to a terrible hydra that contrives a new face for every area of the world, Phil wrote that the dispassionate decision of US people to practice racial discrimination made it “not only easy but logical to enlarge our oppressions in the form of international nuclear threats.” (*No More Strangers*, 1965)

People menaced by the hydra’s new faces of war often have nowhere to flee, nowhere to hide. Thousands upon thousands of the

victims are children.

Mindful of the children who’ve been maimed, traumatised, displaced, orphaned and killed by wars raging in our lifetimes, we must hold ourselves accountable as well. Phil Berrigan’s challenge must become ours: “Meet me at the Pentagon!” Or its corporate outposts.

Humanity literally cannot live in complicity with the patterns that lead to bombing hospitals and slaughtering children. **CT**

Kathy Kelly is President of *World BEYOND War* – www.worldbeyondwar.org.

living creatures?

It’s so crazy how the fate of everyone alive and everyone who could be born in the future is riding on the way two governments choose to navigate a conflict in Ukraine, just because those two governments have most of the world’s nuclear weapons. It’s like two people in a bar getting into a brawl that kills everyone in their city. Nobody else in the world gets a vote on the decisions being made that could kill everyone alive and end humanity forever; just a few people within those two governments and their militaries.

CAITLIN JOHNSTONE

Let’s nuke the world over who governs Crimea

Critics of the US empire have spent months compiling mountains of evidence showing that the empire knowingly provoked the war in Ukraine. Supporters of the US empire have spent months posting dog memes and accusing strangers of being paid by Putin. It’s clear who’s in the right.

So does everyone else in the world get a vote on whether their lives should be risked in an offensive to control who governs Crimea? Or will the Biden administration just be making that call on behalf of all



PXHere

The US empire is telling Moscow “I’m the craziest motherfucker around, I’ll keep ramping up the brinkmanship looking you right in the eye and daring you to use nukes”, while telling the rest of the world “I am the voice of sanity that you should all look to for leadership”.

One of the empire’s faces is the virtuous upholder of freedom and democracy, while the other face puts on an intimidating show of viciousness like a prisoner biting off someone’s cheek in the prison yard. At least one of those faces is necessarily lying.

The only reason mainstream westerners are fine with the US empire’s nuclear brinkmanship with Russia is because most don’t understand it, and those who do understand it don’t think very hard about it. They avoid contemplating what nuclear war is and what it would mean.

Whenever I touch on this subject I get a bunch of replies

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like, “Yeehaw! That’s right, bitch, we’re standing up to Putin!” They’re not approaching the subject with anything like the gravity they would if they understood what’s happening and had seriously thought about what could be. They don’t understand how horrifyingly dangerous it is that the empire is considering backing a Crimea offensive.

Whatever position you have on this whole conflict, you should be approaching the possibility of nuclear annihilation with the most profound solemnity imaginable, because it is without exaggeration the single worst thing that could possibly happen. Take it seriously, or be silent.

If a nuclear war between Russia and NATO erupts, the answer to the question “Was it worth it?” will be a decisive “No”, Not just for people like me, but for everyone, no matter how sympathetic they are to the western power structure and no matter how much they hate Russia. If their answer isn’t “no” immediately, it will be their answer in a matter of hours. If people don’t immediately understand the horror that’s been unleashed upon our world and how nothing could possibly have been worth it, they will understand it in short order.

The term Mutually Assured Destruction was first coined by Hudson Institute’s Donald Brennan in 1962, but he used it ironically, spelling out the acronym “MAD” in order to argue that it’s insane to hold weapons that can cause armageddon. These games of nuclear chicken

are insane.

The argument for nukes is that the threat of their use wards off the large-scale conventional wars we saw in WWI and WWII, but that only works if the fear of their use deters conventional attacks. But the US empire is getting more and more brazen with its proxy warfare against Russia.

It used to be the undisputed conventional wisdom that hot warfare against Russia must be avoided at all costs because they’re a nuclear superpower. Now the idea of backing full-scale offensives to carve off pieces of the Russian Federation is gaining widespread mainstream traction. This disintegrates the uneasy stability that MAD is theoretically supposed to create, because MAD assumes the other side won’t be crazy enough to launch conventional offensives against a nuclear superpower due to fear of rapidly spiralling escalation into full-scale nuclear war.

If you’ve got two people pointing pistols at each other, an exchange of gunfire might be avoided for fear of retaliation. But if one of the gunmen breaks the standoff by walking toward the other holding a knife in his other hand, odds are the other guy will pull the trigger.

Westerners frame the idea of nations like Russia and China “attacking their neighbours” as though that’s somehow less moral than the US attacking nations on the other side of the planet who cannot possibly pose any threat to US national security. At least Russia can make an argument

that its invasion of Ukraine was in its national security interests due to US/NATO militarisation there, and China could make similar arguments if it ever attacks Taiwan. US wars are done solely to defend US planetary domination, not the US.

Liberals are all about examining privilege except when it comes to western privilege. Then they’re more than happy to blow up everything and everyone for their belief in their inherent ideological superiority and their right to rule over every single country on earth.

Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp are no longer designating the neo-Nazi Azov Regiment as a “dangerous organisation.” To be clear, nothing has changed about the Azov Regiment; it’s still the same people with the same ideology. All that changed is the Official Narrative.

For years and years, up until just last year, the mass media had no problem acknowledging that Ukraine has a Nazi problem and calling Azov neo-Nazis what they are. All that changed is we moved into an information ecosystem of aggressive war propaganda.

No amount of PR rebranding will magically transform Azov neo-Nazis into wholesome moderates. You can change Kentucky Fried Chicken to KFC, but it’s still the same stuff in the bucket. **CT**

Caitlin Johnstone is a blogger based in Australia. Her website is www.caitlinjohnstone.com

INSIGHTS

WE ARE ALL FRIED 🗑️

HEYYYY BUDDY... BEEN MEANIN' TO CHAT...
Y-YOU KNOW HOW EVERYONE LOOVVES YOU AND
THAT'S AWESOME, RIGHT?! A-AND EVEN IF YOU
WEREN'T... YOU KNOW... RREAL..... YOU KNOW... THE
LOVE IS REAL... R-RIGHT?...

FRIED JAN '23

Greg Koenderman



THE INTERVENTION.

BRETT WILKINS

No, Russian bots didn't sway Trump election

A study published on January 10 by researchers at New York University eviscerated liberal Democrats' assertion that the Russian government's disinformation campaign on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election had any meaningful impact on the

contest's outcome.

The study, which was led by NYU's Center for Social Media and Politics and published in the scientific journal *Nature Communications*, is based on a survey of nearly 1,500 US respondents' Twitter activity. The researchers – who also included scholars

from the University of Copenhagen, Trinity College Dublin, and Technical University of Munich – concluded that while “the online push by Russian foreign influence accounts didn't change attitudes or voting behaviour in the 2016 US election”, the disinformation campaign “may still have had consequences”.

According to the paper, “Exposure to Russian disinformation accounts was heavily concentrated: Only one percent of users accounted for 70 percent of exposures. Second, exposure was concentrated among users who strongly identified as Republicans. Third, exposure to the

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Russian influence campaign was eclipsed by content from domestic news media and politicians. Finally, we find no evidence of a meaningful relationship between exposure to the Russian foreign influence campaign and changes in attitudes, polarisation, or voting behaviour”.

“Despite this massive effort to influence the presidential race on social media and a widespread belief that this interference had an impact on the 2016 US elections, potential exposure to tweets from Russian trolls that cycle was, in fact, heavily concentrated among a small portion of the American electorate – and this portion was more likely to be highly partisan Republicans”, said Joshua A. Tucker, co-director of the Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP) and one of the study’s authors.

Gregory Eady of the University of Copenhagen, and one of the study’s co-lead authors, cautioned that “it would be a mistake to conclude that simply because the Russian foreign influence campaign on Twitter was not meaningfully related to individual-level attitudes that other aspects of the campaign did not have any impact on the election, or on faith in American electoral integrity”.

The new study may boost arguments of observers who contend that Democrats bear much of the blame for Hillary Clinton’s 2016 defeat by former GOP President Donald Trump. Clinton’s loss, many say, is largely attributable to a deeply flawed Democratic ticket consisting of two corporate candidates including a presidential nominee who, according to for-

mer Green presidential contender Ralph Nader, “never met a war she did not like”, and an anti-abortion vice presidential pick in Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia.

“That Russian intelligence attempted to influence the 2016 election, broadly speaking, is by now well documented”. The *Intercept*’s Sam Biddle wrote in an analysis of the study, “While their impact remains debated among schol-

ars, the spectre of ‘Russian bots’ wreaking havoc across the web has become a byword of liberal anxiety and a go-to explanation for Democrats flummoxed by Trump’s unlikely victory.” **CT**

Brett Wilkins is a staff writer for *Common Dreams* – www.commondreams.org – where this article was first published.

NORMAN SOLOMON

Is Biden still best option for Democrats’ in 2024?

Gage Skidmore



Joe Biden: Election problem?

For many months, conventional media wisdom has told us that Joe Biden would be the strongest candidate to defeat Donald Trump in 2024 because he did it before. That claim has always rested on shaky ground – after all, Trump was the ultimate symbol of the status quo when he lost in 2020, as Biden would be in next year’s election. That’s hardly auspicious when polling shows that the current electorate believes the country is “off on the wrong track” rather than “headed in the right direction” by a margin of more than three to one.

But now the bottom has dropped out of that timeworn spin for Biden in the wake of the discovery of unsecured classified documents under his control, the appointment of a special counsel to investigate him and the botched

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handling of this widening scandal by the White House.

Yes, Trump's handling of classified documents was far more egregious, when compared to what we know of Biden's so far. But looking ahead, a Biden campaign would be incapable of making any effective criticism of Trump on the issue.

We can already see how having Biden at the top of the ticket would be a serious liability up and down Democratic ballots nationwide. "Awkward" barely begins to describe the position in which recent developments have put leading Democrats. An early preview came just a few weeks ago when Rep. Pramila Jayapal, chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, appeared on CNN and did the best she – or just about any other Democrat – could do under the circumstances.

"Certainly there's a political problem for all of us as Democrats", Jayapal acknowledged after being confronted with her tweet from four months ago condemning Trump's conduct with classified documents, "but I do think that there are significant differences, and I do think it's important to look at the fact that this president is cooperating completely with the investigation". Later in the interview, Jayapal said: "So there are significant differences. It doesn't take away my concern about the overall situation, and I do think we have to continue to look at the facts".

As more facts emerged, the situation worsened for the party currently hitched to Biden's star. Under the telling headline "Biden Missteps on Secret Papers Create

Self-Inflicted Crisis," Bloomberg reported that "the decision to wait more than two months, until after midterm elections, to disclose the initial discovery of classified documents has fanned criticism of the president's commitment to transparency that has only grown as Biden and his team stumbled through the subsequent week".

Expanding on its big-type sub-head, "Drip of incomplete information suggests attempt at cover-up", the article added: "Statements by the president, his lawyers, and his spokespeople that omitted key details – including information later revealed in news reports or subsequent statements – intensified the impression that the White House has something to hide. And the steady stream of revelations knocked Republican dysfunction on Capitol Hill out of the headlines while also offering a lifeline to former President Donald Trump, who is under criminal investigation for his own handling of classified documents".

After several minutes defending Biden on NBC, staunch loyalist Rep. Jim Clyburn finally admitted that "this undercuts all of our credibility as Democrats" on the issue of classified documents.

Even one of the most loyally partisan House Democrats, Adam Schiff of California, felt compelled to say during an ABC News interview that "I don't think we can exclude the possibility" that Biden's handling of classified documents jeopardised national security. The following day, after several minutes of defending Biden on NBC, consummate "mainstream"

Democrat Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina said: "It's no question the reporting of all this undercuts all of our credibility as Democrats when it comes to this kind of an issue".

Another seasoned Democrat, only willing to be identified as a "former Clinton aide", presented this analysis of Biden's political peril in comments to *The Hill*: "Everyone can say what they want but this weakens him, full stop. This is just one of those things that will stick around and won't go away".

What does all this mean for progressives and anyone else who doesn't want a Republican to win the White House in 2024?

Biden's electoral future should be taken off the national table so we can proceed with focused discussions of crucial issues on their merits, rather than everything being viewed in terms of political calculus regarding the president's prospects for re-election. This country is facing an ongoing cascade of crises, and Republicans pose a clear and present danger to democracy, whether their nominee is Trump or someone else. Democrats will need the strongest possible ticket to defeat them. Joe Biden definitely should not be on it. **CT**

Norman Solomon is the national director of *RootsAction.org* and the executive director of the *Institute for Public Accuracy*. He is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy*. His next book, *War Made Invisible: How America Hides the Human Toll of Its Military Machine*, will be published in Spring 2023 by *The New Press*.

INSIGHTS

JIM HIGHTOWER

Why America hates book bans

Excuse me for using explicit language here, but it seems to me that today's most vulgar expression of right-wing extremist dogma is its unhealthy obsession with banning books. It's a political perversion that, ironically, its participants usually rationalise by claiming they are "battling vulgarity".

And, boy, are they hot to trot!

Of course, pious bookbanners have been around ever since books were first published, but there's a surge of them these days. That's because stripping books out of schools and public libraries has become a favourite way for right-wing politicians to stimulate their supporters' passion for engaging in culture wars against their neighbours... and common sense.

Until recently, there were only a couple of hundred isolated book challenges a year in the country, and local school boards and city councils generally handled them properly – without starting an uncivil war. But now, attempted book bans are erupting everywhere, orchestrated by a few extremist political groups and a flock of opportunistic Republican politicians.

PEN, a nonprofit watchdog that monitors these attacks on our freedom of expression, has documented 2,532 copycat campaigns across America in the past year to ban more than 1,600 works from



Banned Books Display at Lacey Timberland Library, Turnwater, WA.

our schools.

These self-appointed autocratic censors uniformly assert that they are defending "parental rights" and protecting their little ones from "sensitive materials" that dare discuss controversial topics like slavery and sexual identities.

First, their naked censorship is just a power play to impose their hang-ups on you and your children. They're really only defending their own little group's nonexistent right to tell all other parents how to raise their kids. Indeed, in a nationwide poll, 71 percent of Americans oppose these partisan efforts to ban library books in the name of "protecting" young people.

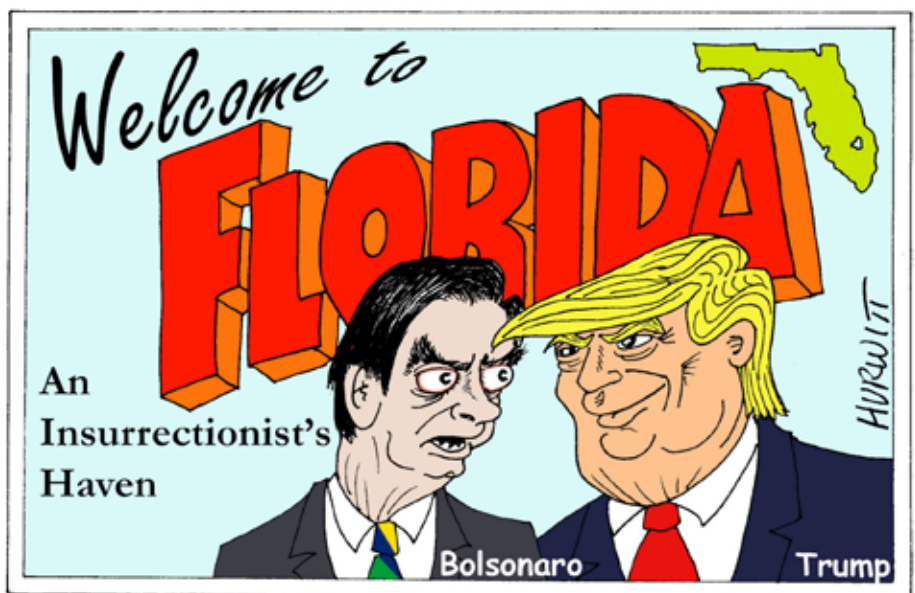
Second, have these political nannies not heard of the internet? I can assure them that most of their own children and grandchildren have, and most of them already know about the truths these so-called adults are trying to censor.

Nothing is so foolish – or wrong – as trying to put blinders on youngsters's natural curiosity. **CT**

Jim Hightower is a radio commentator, writer, and public speaker. This article was distributed by www.otherwords.org.

Hurwitt's Eye

Mark Hurwitt



JOE ALLEN

An unholy invasion: How chatbots are colonising our minds

Humans must erect cultural barriers now,
before we are overwhelmed

Chatbots are at the front lines of an unrelenting AI invasion. The steady increase of artificial minds in our collective psyche is akin to mass immigration – barely noticed and easily overlooked, until it's too late. Our cultural landscape is being colonised by bots, and as with illegal aliens, much of our population welcomes this as “progress”.

The bots will keep us company. They will learn and absorb our personalities. And when we die, they will become our digital ghosts. It's a morbid prospect, but the process is already underway.

E-learning institutions regularly deploy AI teachers. Chatbot companions are seducing lonesome souls by the millions, including religious chatbots who function as spiritual guides. At the end of the road, various start-ups are developing cyber-shrines where

families can commune with their departed loved ones and find comfort in the digital undead.

In the minds of tech enthusiasts, AI chatbots of all sorts will be our soulless companions on the trek toward the Future™. These ephemeral “friends” are key psychological components of what many describe as human-AI symbiosis. They will be like artificial guardian angels in our palms – and by extension, in our heads – answering questions and steering decisions.

One thing is certain. Whatever you think about this invasion, AIs are falling to earth like stars from a godless heaven. And with each successive wave, their voices are that much more convincing.

These bots are crafted to push our cognitive buttons, giving the illusion of personhood. Before long, they will come to be widely trusted – even loved. Among early



adopters, they already are. Our emotional minds are being hard-wired for control.

The recent roll-out of ChatGPT, created by OpenAI, has been heralded as the second coming of the Google God. As with previous GPT programs, the user types in a question and the bot onscreen spits out a reasonably coherent, if occasionally inaccurate, answer.

A few days ago, I asked ChatGPT about one of OpenAI's founding investors: “Will Elon Musk chip our brains?”

“No”, the bot responded, “Elon Musk does not believe in chipping brains. He has said that he believes that ‘abundance is our future’ and that technology should



be used to empower people, not replace them”.

Like the slanted Google God before it, ChatGPT may not be entirely truthful, but at least it's loyal to political allies. In that sense, it's quite human. If you can't trust a chatbot, who can you trust?

Speaking at “The History of Civil Liberties in Canada Series” on December 13, the weepy maker-of-men, Dr Jordan Peterson, warned his fellow canucks about ChatGPT's godlike powers: “So now we have an AI model that can extract a model of the world from the entire corpus of language. Alright. And it's smarter than you. It's gonna be a hell of a lot smarter than you in two years”.

Giants are going to walk the earth once more. And we're gonna live through that. *Maybe*.

You hear that, human? Prepare to kneel before your digital overlords. For all the public crying Peterson has done, he didn't shed a single tear about humanity's displacement by AI. Maybe he believes the Machine will devour all his trolls first.

Peterson did go on to ride Elon Musk's jock, though, portraying the cyborg car dealer as some sort of saviour – which, to my disgust, is the embarrassing habit of almost every “intellectual dark web” icon these days. What's odd is that the comparative mythology professor failed to note the arche-

typal significance of the Baphomet armour Musk still sports in his Twitter profile. Anyone urging people to trust the world's wealthiest transhumanist is either fooling himself, or he's trying to fool you.

This is not to say Musk and Peterson are entirely wrong about the increasing power of artificial intelligence, even if they're far too eager to see us bend the knee. In the unlikely event that progress stalls for decades, leaving us with the tech we have right now, the social and psychological impact of the ongoing AI invasion is still a grave concern.

At the moment, the intellectual prowess of machine intelligence is way over-hyped. If humanity

is lucky, that will continue to be the case. But the real advances are impressive nonetheless. AI agents are not “just computer programs”. They’re narrow thinking machines that can scour vast amounts of data, of their own accord, and they do find genuinely meaningful patterns.

A large language model (aka, a chatbot) is like a human brain grown in a jar, with a limited selection of sensors plugged into it. First, the programmers decide what parameters the AI will begin with – the sorts of patterns it will search for as it grows. Then, the model is trained on a selection of data, also chosen by the programmer. The heavier the programmer’s hand, the more bias the system will exhibit.

In the case of ChatGPT, the datasets consist of a massive selection of digitised books, all of Wikipedia, and most of the Internet, plus the secondary training of repeated conversations with users. The AI is motivated to learn by Pavlovian “reward models”, like a neural blob receiving hits of dopamine every time it gets the right answer. As with most commercial chatbots, the programmers put up guardrails to keep the AI from saying anything racist, sexist, or homophobic.

When “AI ethicists” talk about “aligning AI with human values”, they mostly mean creating bots that are politically correct. On the one hand, that’s pretty smart, because if we’re moving toward global algocracy – where the multiculti masses are ruled by algorithms – then liberals are wise to make AI as inoffensive as possible. They certainly don’t want another Creature From the 4chan Lagoon, like when Microsoft’s Tay went schizo-nazi, or the Google

**Als are falling to earth
like stars from a godless
heaven. And with
each successive wave,
their voices are that
much more convincing**

Image bot kept labelling black people as “gorillas.”

On the other hand, if an AI can’t grasp the basic differences between men and women or understand the significance of continental population clusters – well, I’m sure it’ll still be a useful enforcer in our Rainbow Algorocracy.

Once ChatGPT is downloaded to a device, it develops its own flavour. The more interactions an individual user has, the more the bot personalises its answers for that user. It can produce sentences or whole essays that are somewhat original, even if they’re just a remix of previous human thought. This semi-originality, along with the learned personalisation, is what gives the illusion of a unique personality – minus any locker room humour.

Across the board, the answers these AIs provide are getting more accurate and increasingly complex. Another example is Google’s LaM-



The writer’s first ever image request to OpenAI’s art generator

DA, still unreleased, which rocketed to fame last year when an “AI ethicist” informed the public that the bot is “sentient”, claiming it expresses sadness and yearning. Ray Kurzweil predicted this psychological development back in 1999, in his book *The Age of Spiritual Machines*: “They will increasingly appear to have their own personalities, evidencing reactions that we can only label as emotions and articulating their own goals and purposes. They will appear to have their own free will. They will claim to have spiritual experiences. And people ... will believe them”.

This says as much about the humans involved as it does about the machines. However, projecting this improvement into the future – at an exponential rate – Kurzweil foresees a coming Singularity in which even the most intelligent humans are truly overtaken by artificial intelligence.

That would be the point of no return. Our destiny would be out of our hands.

In 2021, the tech entrepreneur Sam Altman – who co-founded OpenAI with Musk in 2015 – hinted at something like a Singularity in his essay “Moore’s Law of Everything”. Similar to Kurzweil, he promises artificial intelligence will transform every aspect of society, from law and medicine to work and socialisation.

Assuming that automation will yield radical abundance – even as it produces widespread unemployment – he argues for taxation of the super rich and an “equity fund” for the rest of us. While I believe such a future would be disastrous, creating vast playgrounds for the elite and algorithmic pod-hives for the rest of us, I think Altman is correct about the coming impact: “In the next five years, computer

programs that can think will read legal documents and give medical advice. In the next decade, they will do assembly-line work and maybe even become companions. And in the decades after that, they will do almost everything, including making new scientific discoveries that will expand our concept of everything.”

This technological revolution is unstoppable. These superbots would undoubtedly be wonky and inhuman, but at the current pace of improvement, something like Altman’s prediction appears to be happening. Beyond the technical possibilities and limitations, a growing belief in AI personhood is reshaping our culture from the top down – and at an exponential rate.

Our shared vision of who we are, as a species, is being transformed. Bots are invading our minds

As our tech oligarchs
proclaim the rise of
digital deities, it should
be clear that we’re
not the supremacists
in this equation

through our phones, our smart speakers, our educational institutions, our businesses, our government agencies, our intelligence agencies, our religious institutions, and through a growing variety of physical robots meant to accompany us from cradle to grave.

We are being primed for algocracy. Past generations ignored mass immigration and environmental destruction, both fuelled by tech innovations, until it was too late to turn back the tide. Right

now, we have a “narrow window of opportunity” to erect cultural and legal barriers – family by family, community by community, and nation by nation.

If this social experiment is “inevitable,” we must insist on being part of the control group.

Ridiculous as it may seem, techno-sceptics are already being labelled as “speciesist” – i.e., racist against robots. We’d better be prepared to wear that as a badge of honour. As our tech oligarchs and their mouthpieces proclaim the rise of digital deities, it should be clear that we’re not the supremacists in this equation. **CT**

Joe Allen writes about race, robots, and religion. Presently, he lives in the western shadow of the Rocky Mountains. Read his weekly newsletter at www.JOEBOT.xyz.

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GEORGE MONBIOT

A vision from hell: My trip to a NHS emergency room

Thanks to systemic and deliberate underfunding,
NHS emergency departments are now fearsome places

You have to see it to believe it. A few days after Christmas, I hit my head on a scaffolding bolt. There was lots of blood and pain down the right side of my face and into my neck. I thought I could live with it, but the following day I noticed a black floater in my right eye. When, after several hours, it had failed to clear, I phoned 111. They told me to travel immediately to the emergency department at my local hospital. They booked me in for 9pm, my expected arrival time.

I naively imagined I would be seen then. But when I arrived, there were 16 ambulances waiting to offload their patients. The waiting room was a vision of hell. All the chairs were occupied. Sick people leaned against the walls. Many of the patients, from babies to the extremely aged, looked dangerously unwell. And yet, for all of us, the wait went on and on.

I was seen by a doctor at 3am. During those six hours, I witnessed two things that distressed me more than my own injury. A man with what appeared to be cardiac symptoms collapsed on to the floor, possibly from a heart attack. A toddler

was screaming “it hurts, it hurts!” for almost three hours without a break. It was devastating to hear.

When I was called by a nurse, halfway through my wait, I asked whether this was an especially busy night. “Oh no”, she told me, “this is quite a quiet one. Most nights recently have been worse”. Nothing I saw was the fault of the staff, who were working at a frantic pace to manage an impossible load. They looked exhausted. What I witnessed were the extraordinary but now normal effects of 13 years of austerity. Hospitals across the country appear to be approaching a tipping point.

Last week I spoke to an accident and emergency consultant at a London teaching hospital. She told me that several of the nurses there are now dependent on food banks. Junior doctors with massive student debts are paid £14 an hour. Yet every day they must carry unbearable loads and make morally corrosive decisions, as they decide whom to prioritise among people with immediate needs. Very long waits ensure that “frustrated and frightened patients are being seen by exhausted, demoralised health workers”.

Verbal and physical aggression is commonplace. Unsurprisingly, staff are leaving in droves, and she can’t fill the vacant places.

There must come a point at which those who remain can no longer cope, and will be forced out as the mental, physical and moral pressure becomes too great. What happens then? Don’t ask the government. It denies the very existence of the crisis.

A recent study suggests that the death rate rises by 8 percent among people who have to wait more than six hours for transfer from emergency departments. One estimate suggests that delays in emergency care are killing between 300 and 500 people a week in England. This is to say nothing of the millions of lost hours and the infections circulating in tightly packed waiting rooms. The government’s NHS “savings” are the mother of all false economies.

With one breath, the government claims to have vanquished Covid so effectively that it no longer needs to publish the infection rate. With the next, it blames the Covid pandemic for the pressure on the NHS. While it’s true that Covid and flu are aggravating factors, the real



Nurses rally and march in London on the first day of a strike demanding fair pay and conditions, and an end to understaffing and underfunding of the NHS.

cause runs much deeper: years of systemic underfunding.

The cumulative NHS funding gap since 2010 is more than £200-billion. What this means, as the recent book *NHS Under Siege* by John Lister and Jacky Davis explains, is the difference between the money the service would have received if funding levels prior to 2010 had been sustained, and the money it has received since.

For all New Labour's flaws, it followed the globally accepted rule that to keep pace with an ageing population and technological change a modern health system requires an annual 4 percent real terms increase in funding. When the Tories reject the idea of "endlessly putting in more and more money", they reject the idea of sustaining a functional service.

Since 2010, almost 9,000 general and acute beds have been lost in England. Of these, 5,000 were

closed in March 2020 for the sake of social distancing and infection control. They have never reopened, because the NHS does not have the money required to reorganise its buildings. While the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average is five beds per 1,000 people, the UK has 2.4. In September 2021, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine warned that the NHS had a deficit of 15,000 beds for emergency care. But nothing was done.

The beds crisis is compounded by a parallel disaster: the privatisation and defunding of social care that began under the Tories in the 1990s. Because the social care system is now in permanent crisis, lacking funding, staff and places, an average of 13,000 NHS beds are occupied by patients who could otherwise leave.

Amid all the reorganisations, deorganisations, swerves and U-

turns, there have been two consistent policies across the past 13 years: underfunding of the NHS and overfunding of the private sector.

In the same month that the government closed 5,000 NHS beds, it block-booked all 8,000 beds in England's private hospitals, and covered their entire operating costs. In return, these hospitals were required to do ... nothing. It was free money. Rather than relieving the pandemic pressure, the 187 private hospitals treated, between them, a grand total of eight Covid patients a day. And, perhaps because they were now being paid merely for existing, they greatly reduced the other NHS-funded procedures they handled.

In 2021, through a scarcely noticed policy that seems to me just as scandalous as its corrupt PPE deals, the government extended these payments for doing nothing for a further four years, with a new "framework contract" for private hospitals. The expected cost is £10-billion.

Even when they do treat patients, transferring NHS services to private hospitals does not increase capacity. It diverts the money that would have been spent in the public sector to a less efficient and more costly service. Private hospitals don't train their own doctors and nurses. They cannot offer more services without sucking staff out of the NHS.

I'm fine, by the way. By the time the doctor saw me, my symptoms had cleared. But the NHS is bleeding out in the government's waiting room, hoping for a call that never comes. **CT**

George Monbiot's new book is *Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet*. Read more of his work at www.monbiot.com.

RON FASSBENDER

Heat or eat?

Stark choice faced
by many as winter fuel
bills soar in Britain

Campaigners from Fuel Poverty Action, the National Pensioners Convention & Disabled People Against Cuts, backed by the Warm This Winter campaign, staged a rally and funeral procession from Parliament to Downing Street, London on January 19 to commemorate the thousands of unnecessary extra winter deaths that are caused by cold homes and poverty each year.

The action was timed to coincide with the Office of National Statistics annual mortality report.

With fuel and other costs still rising, despite falling base prices – generating massive profits for greedy energy companies – the campaign calls for urgent additional financial support for the most vulnerable this winter and next, along with a demand for a significant ramping up of insulation and energy efficiency schemes.





KILLER COLD:
Angry London
demonstrators
demand
government
action to combat
fuel poverty, which
is the cause of
thousands of
excess deaths in
Britain each year.



The photographer

● Ron Fassbender is a London-based documentary photographer. See more of his work at www.ronfassbender.com and on Instagram @ronfassbender





COLD HOMES KILL: Mock funeral highlights the agony faced by thousands as fuel prices rocket at the same time as inflation creates massive rise in food prices.

JONATHAN COOK

How the US paved way to the invasion of Ukraine

Nearly a year after Russia's assault, the western narrative of an 'unprovoked' attack has become impossible to sustain

Hindsight is a particularly powerful tool for analysing the Ukraine war, nearly a year after Russia's invasion.

Last February, it sounded at least superficially plausible to characterise Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to send troops and tanks into his neighbour as nothing less than an "unprovoked act of aggression".

Putin was either a madman or a megalomaniac, trying to revive the imperial, expansionist agenda of the Soviet Union. Were his invasion to go unchallenged, he would pose a threat to the rest of Europe.

Plucky, democratic Ukraine needed the West's unreserved support – and a near-limitless supply of weapons – to hold the line against a rogue dictator.

But that narrative looks increasingly threadbare, at least if one reads beyond the establishment media – a media that has never sounded quite so monotone, so de-

termined to beat the drum of war, so amnesiac and so irresponsible.

Anyone demurring from the past 11 months of relentless efforts to escalate the conflict – resulting in untold deaths and suffering, causing energy prices to skyrocket, leading to global food shortages, and ultimately risking a nuclear exchange – is viewed as betraying Ukraine, and dismissed as an apologist for Putin.

No dissent is tolerated.

Putin is Hitler, the time is 1938, and anyone seeking to turn down the heat is no different from Britain's appeasing prime minister, Neville Chamberlain. Or so we have been told. But context is everything. Barely six months before Putin invaded Ukraine, President Joe Biden pulled the US military out of Afghanistan after a two-decade occupation. It was the apparent fulfilment of a pledge to end Washington's "forever wars" that, he warned, "have cost us untold blood and treasure".



The implicit promise was that the Biden administration was going not only to bring home US troops from the Middle East "quagmires" of Afghanistan and Iraq, but also to make sure US taxes stopped flooding abroad to line the pockets of military contractors, arms makers and corrupt foreign officials. US dollars would be spent at home, on solving homegrown problems.

But since Russia's invasion, that assumption has unravelled. Ten months on, it looks fanciful that it was ever considered Biden's intention.

Last month, the US Congress approved a mammoth top-up of largely military "support" for Ukraine, bringing the official total to some \$100-billion in less than a year, with doubtless much more of the costs hidden from public view. That is far in excess of Russia's



total annual military budget of £65-billion.

Washington and Europe have been pouring weapons, including ever more offensive ones, into Ukraine. Emboldened, Kyiv has been shifting the field of battle ever deeper into Russian territory.

US officials, like their Ukrainian counterparts, speak of the fight against Russia continuing until Moscow is “defeated” or Putin toppled, turning this into another “forever war” of the very kind Biden had just forsworn - this one in Europe rather than the Middle East.

In the *Washington Post*, Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates, two former US secretaries of state, recently called on Biden to “urgently provide Ukraine with a dramatic increase in military supplies and capability... It is better to stop [Putin] now, before more is de-

manded of the United States and Nato.”

Last month, the head of Nato, Jens Stoltenberg, warned that a direct war between the western military alliance and Russia was a “real possibility”. Days later, Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was given a hero’s welcome during a “surprise” visit to Washington. The US Vice-President Kamala Harris and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi unfurled a large Ukrainian flag behind their guest, like two starstruck cheerleaders, as he addressed Congress.

US legislators greeted Zelensky with a three-minute standing ovation – even longer than that awarded to that other well-known “man of peace” and defender of democracy, Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu. The Ukrainian president echoed the US wartime president, Franklin D Roosevelt, in call-

ing for “absolute victory”.

All of this only underscored the fact that Biden has rapidly appropriated the Ukraine war, exploiting Russia’s “unprovoked” invasion to wage a US proxy war. Ukraine has supplied the battlefield on which Washington can revisit the unfinished business of the Cold War.

Given the timing, a cynic might wonder whether Biden pulled out of Afghanistan not to finally focus on fixing the US, but to prepare for a new arena of confrontation, to breathe new life into the same old US script of full-spectrum military dominance.

Did Afghanistan need to be “abandoned” so that Washington’s treasure could be invested in a war on Russia instead, but without the US body bags?

The rejoinder, of course, is that Biden and his officials could not have known Putin was about to in-

vade Ukraine. It was the Russian leader's decision, not Washington's. Except...

Senior US policymakers and experts on US-Russia relations – from George Kennan and William Burns, currently Biden's CIA director, to John Mearsheimer and the late Stephen Cohen – had been warning for years that the US-led expansion of Nato onto Russia's doorstep was bound to provoke a Russian military response.

Putin had warned of the dangerous consequences back in 2008, when Nato first proposed that Ukraine and Georgia – two former Soviet states on Russia's border – were in line for membership. He left no room for doubt by almost immediately invading, if briefly, Georgia.

It was that very “unprovoked” reaction that presumably delayed Nato carrying through its plan. Nonetheless, in June 2021, the alliance reaffirmed its intention to award Ukraine Nato membership. Weeks later, the US signed separate pacts on defence and strategic partnership with Kyiv, effectively giving Ukraine many of the benefits of belonging to Nato without officially declaring it a member.

Between the two Nato declarations, in 2008 and 2021, the US repeatedly signalled its hostile intent to Moscow, and how Ukraine might assist its aggressive, geo-strategic posturing in the region.

Back in 2001, shortly after Nato began expanding towards Russia's borders, the US unilaterally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, intended to avoid an arms race between the two historic enemies.

Unencumbered by the treaty, the US then built ABM sites in Nato's expanded zone, in Romania in 2016 and Poland in 2022. The cover story was that these were purely

While Germany and France brokered the Minsk accords to stop the slaughter, Washington looked to be incentivising the bloodshed

defensive, to intercept any missiles fired from Iran. But Moscow could not ignore the fact that these weapons systems were capable of operating offensively, too, and that nuclear-tipped Cruise missiles could for the first time be launched at short notice towards Russia.

Compounding Moscow's concerns, in 2019 President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces. That opened the door to the US launching a potential first strike on Russia, using missiles stationed in newly admitted Nato members.

As Nato flirted once again with Ukraine in the summer of 2021, the danger of the US being able, with Kyiv's help, to launch a preemptive strike – destroying Moscow's ability to retaliate effectively, and upending its nuclear deterrent – must have weighed heavily on Russian policymakers' minds.

It did not end there. Post-Soviet Ukraine was deeply divided geographically and electorally over whether it should look to Russia or to Nato and the European Union for its security and trade. Close-run elections swung between these two poles. Ukraine was a country mired in permanent political crisis, as well as profound corruption.

That was the context for a coup/revolution in 2014 that overthrew a government in Kyiv elected to preserve ties with Moscow. Installed

in its place was one that was openly anti-Russian. Washington's fingerprints – disguised as “democracy promotion” – were all over the sudden change of government to one tightly aligned with US geo-strategic goals in the region.

Many Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine – concentrated in the east, south and the Crimea peninsula – were incensed by this takeover. Worried that the new hostile government in Kyiv would try to sever its historic control of Crimea, the site of Russia's only warm-water naval port, Moscow annexed the peninsula.

According to a subsequent referendum, the local population overwhelmingly backed the move. Western media widely reported the result as fraudulent, but later western polling suggested Crimeans believed it fairly represented their will. But it was the eastern Donbas region that would serve as the touchpaper for Russia's invasion last February. A civil war quickly erupted in 2014 that pitted Russian-speaking communities there against ultra-nationalist, anti-Russian fighters mostly from western Ukraine, including unabashed neo-Nazis. Many thousands died in the eight years of fighting.

While Germany and France brokered the so-called Minsk accords, with Russia's help, to stop the slaughter in the Donbas by promising the region greater autonomy, Washington looked to be incentivising the bloodshed.

It poured money and arms into Ukraine. It gave Ukraine's ultra-nationalist forces training, and worked to integrate the Ukrainian military into Nato through what it termed “interoperability”. In July 2021, as tensions heightened, the US held a joint naval exercise with Ukraine in the Black Sea, Opera-

tion Sea Breeze, that led to Russia firing warning shots at a British naval destroyer that entered Crimea's territorial waters.

By winter 2021, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted, Moscow had "reached our boiling point". Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border in unprecedented numbers – in an unmistakable sign that Moscow's patience was running out over Ukraine's collusion with these US-engineered provocations. President Zelensky, who had been elected on a promise to make peace in the Donbas but appeared to be unable to subdue the far-right elements within his own military, pushed in precisely the opposite direction.

Ultra-nationalist Ukrainian forces intensified the shelling of the Donbas in the weeks before the invasion. At the same time, Zelensky shuttered critical media outlets, and would soon be banning opposition political parties and requiring Ukrainian media to implement a "unified information policy". As tensions mounted, the Ukrainian president threatened to develop nuclear weapons and seek a fast-track Nato membership that would further mire the West in the slaughter in the Donbas and risk engagement with Russia directly.

It was then, after 14 years of US meddling on Russia's borders, that Moscow sent in its soldiers – "unprovoked". Putin's initial goal, whatever the western media narrative said, appeared to be as light a touch as possible given Russia was launching an illegal invasion. From the outset, Russia could have carried out its current, devastating attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, closing transport links and turning the lights off in much of the country. But it appeared to consciously avoid a US-

Now Ukraine's fate is largely out of its hands. It has become another pawn on the chessboard of superpower intrigues

style shock-and-awe campaign.

Instead it initially concentrated on a show of force. Moscow mistakenly seems to have assumed Zelensky would accept Kyiv had overplayed its hand, realise that the US – thousands of miles away – could not serve as a guarantor of its security, and be pressured into disarming the ultra-nationalists who had been targeting Russian communities in the east for eight years.

That is not how things played out. Seen from Moscow's perspective, Putin's error looks less like he launched an unprovoked war against Ukraine than that he delayed too long in invading. Ukraine's military "interoperability" with Nato was far more advanced than Russian planners seem to have appreciated.

In a recent interview, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who oversaw the Minsk negotiations to end the Donbas slaughter, appeared – if inadvertently – to echo this view: the talks had provided cover while Nato readied Ukraine for a war against Russia.

Rather than a quick victory and an agreement on new regional security arrangements, Russia is now engaged in a protracted proxy war against the US and Nato, with Ukrainians serving as cannon fodder. The fighting, and killing, could continue indefinitely.

With the West resolved against peacemaking, and shipping in armaments as fast as they can be

made, the outcome looks bleak: either a further grinding, bloody territorial division of Ukraine into pro-Russia and anti-Russia blocs through force of arms, or escalation to a nuclear confrontation.

Without prolonged US intervention, the reality is that Ukraine would have had to come to an accommodation many years ago with its much larger, stronger neighbour – just as Mexico and Canada have had to do with the US. Invasion would have been avoided. Now Ukraine's fate is largely out of its hands. It has become another pawn on the chessboard of superpower intrigues.

Washington cares less about Ukraine's future than it does about depleting Russia's military strength and isolating it from China, apparently the next target in US sights as it seeks to achieve full-spectrum dominance. At the same time, Washington has scored wider goals, smashing apart any hope of a security accommodation between Europe and Russia; deepening European dependency on the US, both militarily and economically; and driving Europe into colluding with its new "forever wars" against Russia and China.

Much more treasure will be spent, and more blood spilled. There will be no winners apart from the neoconservative foreign policy hawks who dominate Washington and the war industry lobbyists who profit from the West's endless military adventures. **CT**

Jonathan Cook's books include Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East (Pluto Press) and Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair (Zed Books). His web site is www.jonathan-cook.net.

CHRIS HEDGES

America's Theatre of the Absurd

A critical look at the political hacks who direct
the carnival of folly in Washington

America's political class does not govern. It entertains. It plays its assigned role in our fictitious democracy, howling with outrage to constituents and selling them out. The Squad and the Progressive Caucus have no more intention of fighting for universal health care, workers' rights or defying the war machine than the Freedom Caucus fights for freedom. These political hacks are modern versions of Sinclair Lewis's slick con artist Elmer Gantry, cynically betraying a gullible public to amass personal power and wealth. This moral vacuity provides the spectacle, as H.G. Wells wrote, of "a great material civilisation, halted, paralysed."

It happened in Ancient Rome. It happened in Weimar Germany. It is happening here in the United States. Governance exists. But it is not seen. It is certainly not democratic. It is done by the armies of lobbyists and corporate executives, from the fossil fuel industry, the arms industry, the pharmaceutical industry and Wall Street.

Governance happens in secret. Corporations have seized the levers of power, including the media. Growing obscenely rich, the ruling oligarchs have deformed national institutions, including state and federal legislatures and the courts, to serve their insatiable greed.

They know what they are doing. They understand the depths of their own corruption. They know they are hated. They are prepared for that too. They have militarised police forces and have built a vast archipelago of prisons to keep the unemployed and underemployed in bondage.

All the while, they pay little to no income tax and exploit sweatshop labor overseas. They lavishly bankroll the political clowns who speak in the vulgar and crude idiom of an enraged public or in the dulcet tones used to mollify the liberal class.

Donald Trump's seminal contribution to the political landscape is the license to say in public what



political decorum once prohibited. His legacy is the degradation of political discourse to the monosyllabic tirades of Shakespeare's Caliban, which simultaneously scandalise and energise the kabuki theatre that passes for government.

This burlesque differs little from the German Reichstag, where the final *cri de coeur* by a mortally ill Clara Zetkin against fascism on August 30, 1932, was met with a chorus of taunts, insults and jeers



by Nazi deputies.

H.G. Wells called the old guard, the good liberals, the ones who speak in measured words and embrace reason, the “inexplicit men.” They say the right things and do nothing. They are as vital to the rise of tyranny as are the Christian fascists, a few of whom held the House hostage last month by blocking 14 rounds of voting to prevent Kevin McCarthy from becoming Speaker.

By the time McCarthy was elected on the 15th round, he had caved on nearly every demand made by the obstructionists, including permitting any one of the 435 members of the House to force a vote for his removal at any time, thus guaranteeing political paralysis.

The internecine warfare in the House is not between those who re-

spect democratic institutions and those who do not. McCarthy, backed by Trump and far-right conspiracy theorist Marjorie Taylor Greene, is as morally bankrupt as those trying to bring him down. This is a battle for control among con artists, charlatans, social media celebrities and mobsters.

McCarthy joined the majority of House Republicans in support of a Texas lawsuit to void the 2020 Presidential result by prevent-

ing four states – Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Georgia – from casting electoral votes for Biden. The Supreme Court refused to hear the lawsuit.

There isn't much in the Freedom Caucus extremist positions, which resemble those of Alternative für Deutschland in Germany and Fidesz in Hungary, McCarthy doesn't embrace. They advocate greater tax cuts for the wealthy, further deregulation of corporations, a war on migrants, more austerity programmes, champion white supremacy and accuse liberals and conservatives who do not line up behind Trump of treason.

"I want you to watch Nancy Pelosi hand me that gavel. It will be hard not to hit her with it", McCarthy said in audio posted to YouTube by a Main Street Nashville reporter in 2021.

Pelosi, for her part, called McCarthy a "moron" after he said a possible renewed mask mandate was "a decision conjured up by liberal government officials who want to continue to live in a perpetual pandemic state".

This is what passes for political discourse. I yearn for the time when political rhetoric was geared to the educational level of a 10-year-old child or an adult with a sixth or seventh-grade education. Now we speak in imbecilic clichés.

This political vacuum has spawned anti-politics, or what the writer Benjamin DeMott called "junk politics", which "personalises and moralises issues and interests instead of clarifying them". Junk politics "maximises threats from abroad while miniaturising large, complex problems at home. It's a politics that, guided by guesses about its own

The result of junk politics is that it infantilises the public with 'year-round upbeat Christmas tales' and perpetuates the status quo

profits and losses, abruptly reverses public stances without explanation, often spectacularly bloating problems previously miniaturised (e.g.: [the war in] Iraq will be over in days or weeks; Iraq is a project for generations)".

"A major effect of junk politics – its ceaseless flood of patriotic, religious, macho and therapeutic fustian – is to pull position after position loose from reasoned foundations", DeMott noted.

The result of junk politics is that it infantilises the public with "year-round upbeat Christmas tales" and perpetuates the status quo. The billionaire class, which has carried out a slow motion corporate coup d'état, continues to plunder; unchecked militarism continues to hollow out the country; and the public is kept in bondage by the courts and domestic security agencies.

When the government watches you twenty-four hours a day, you cannot use the word "liberty". That is the relationship between a master and a slave. The iron primacy of profit means that the most vulnerable are ruthlessly discarded.

Supported by Republicans and Democrats, the Federal Reserve is raising interest rates to slow economic growth and increase unemployment to curb inflation, exacting a tremendous cost on the working poor and their families. No one is required to operate under what John Ruskin called "con-

ditions of moral culture".

But the second result of junk politics is more insidious. It solidifies the cult of the self, the amoral belief that we have the right to do anything, to betray and destroy anyone, to get what we want. The cult of the self fosters a psychopathic cruelty, a culture built not on empathy, the common good and self-sacrifice but on unbridled narcissism and vengeance. It celebrates, as mass media does, superficial charm, grandiosity and self-importance; a need for constant stimulation; a penchant for lying, deception and manipulation; and an inability to feel guilt or remorse. This is the dark ethic of corporate culture, celebrated by the entertainment industry, academia and social media.

The essayist Curtis White argues that "it is capitalism that now most defines our national character, not Christianity or the Enlightenment". He assesses our culture as one in which "death has taken refuge in a legality that is supported by both reasonable liberals and Christian conservatives." This "legality" ratifies the systematic exploitation of workers. White excoriates our nationalist triumphalism and our unleashing of "the most fantastically destructive military power" the world has ever known with the alleged objective of "protecting and pursuing freedom".

"Justice, under capitalism, works not from a notion of obedience to moral law, or to conscience, or to compassion, but from the assumption of a duty to preserve a social order and the legal 'rights' that constitute that order, especially the right to property and the freedom to do with it what one

wants”, he writes. “That’s the real and important ‘moral assessment’ sought by our courts. It comes to this: that decision will seem most just which preserves the system of justice even if the system is itself routinely unjust”.

The consequence is a society consumed by excessive materialism, pointless soul-destroying work, suffocating housing developments closer to “shared cemeteries” than real neighbourhoods and a license to exploit that “condemns nature itself to annihilation even as we call it the freedom to pursue personal property”.

The billionaire class, for the most part, prefers the mask of a Joe Biden, who deftly broke the freight railway unions to prevent a strike and forced them to accept a contract a majority of union members had rejected. But the billionaire class also knows that the goons and con artists on the far right will not interfere in their disembowelling of the nation; indeed, they will be more robust in thwarting the attempts of workers to organise for decent wages and working conditions.

I watched fringe politicians in Yugoslavia, Radovan Karadžić, Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman, dismissed by the political and educated elites as buffoons, ride an anti-liberal wave to power in the wake of widespread economic misery. Walmart, Amazon, Apple, Citibank, Raytheon, ExxonMobile, Alphabet and Goldman Sachs will easily adapt. Capitalism

The longer
we remain in a state
of political paralysis,
the more these political
deformities
are empowered

functions very efficiently without democracy.

The longer we remain in a state of political paralysis, the more these political deformities are empowered. As Robert O. Paxton writes in *The Anatomy of Fascism*, fascism is an amorphous and incoherent ideology. It wraps itself in the most cherished symbols of the nation, in our case, the American flag, white supremacy, the Pledge of Allegiance and the Christian cross. It celebrates hypermasculinity, misogyny, racism and violence. It allows disenfranchised people, especially disenfranchised white men, to regain a sense of power, however illusory, and sanctifies their hatred and rage.

It embraces a utopian vision of moral renewal and vengeance to coalesce around an anointed political saviour. It is militaristic, anti-intellectual and contemptuous of democracy, especially when the established ruling class mouths the language of liberal democracy but does nothing to defend it.

It replaces culture with nationalist and patriotic kitsch. It sees those outside the closed circle of the nation-state or the ethnic or religious group as contaminants who must be physically purged,

usually with violence, to restore the health of the nation.

It perpetuates itself through constant instability, for its solutions to the ills besetting the nation are transitory, contradictory and unattainable. Most importantly, fascism always has a religious colouring, mobilising believers around rites and rituals, using sacred words and phrases, and embracing an absolute truth that is heretical to question.

Trump may be finished politically, but the political and social decay that created Trump remains. This decay will give rise to new, perhaps more competent, demagogues.

I fear the rise of Christian fascists endowed with the political skill, self-discipline, focus and intelligence that Trump lacks. The longer we remain politically paralysed, the more certain Christian fascism becomes.

The January 6 mob assault on the Capital two years ago, the polarisation of the electorate into antagonistic tribes, the economic misery afflicting the working class, the rhetoric of hate and violence, and the current dysfunction in the Congress is but a glimpse of the nightmare ahead. **CT**

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist who was a foreign correspondent for fifteen years for The New York Times. His latest book is The Greatest Evil is War (Seven Stories Press).

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DAVID EDWARDS

Caught in the media smear machine

Royal fall-out highlights the hypocrisy and bias of the UK corporate media in its hysterical treatment of ‘traitor’ Prince Harry

If we were to choose a hill to die on, it would probably not be in defence of a British prince. In truth, we don’t need to like or support – and may even abhor – the targets of media bias highlighted in our analyses. The goal of *Media Lens* is simply to provide examples that most clearly expose the propaganda function of “mainstream” media. Inevitably, that involves our focusing on thorns in the Establishment’s side.

It should be no surprise that there is much that divides us from, say, the patriotic and pro-war (as opposed to pacifistic) former US Marine and weapons inspector Scott Ritter; from *Guardian*-partnering celebrity guru and Hollywood actor Russell Brand; from classic, tongue-biting Labour Party state executive Jeremy Corbyn.

And if we have deep problems with the modern state as such – with its toxic mix of militant nationalism, fake religion and climate-trashing industrial “growth” – what to say of states run as authoritarian, militarised oligarchies by the likes of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Vladimir Putin and other Official Enemies of the West?



Front page smears: How the UK media treats royal dissent.

We rarely emphasise our visceral opposition to these systems of power, not because we are “quislings” or “apologists” – or because “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” – but because doing so feeds propaganda enabling the far more lethal militarised oligarchy that is the imperial United States.

As Noam Chomsky observed: “So when American dissidents criticise the atrocities of some ene-

my state like Cuba or Vietnam, it’s no secret what the effects of that criticism are going to be: it’s not going to have any effect whatsoever on the Cuban regime, for example, but certainly will help the torturers in Washington and Miami to keep inflicting their campaign of suffering on the Cuban population [i.e. through the US-led embargo]. Well, that is something I do not think a moral person would want to contribute to”. (Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, New Press, 2002, pp.287-88)

Our personal feelings about the examples we cite are irrelevant to the case we are making for the bias of the state-corporate medium. So when our critics insist it is absurd for us to “defend” Harry, or “apologism” for us to expose media bias on Putin, the criticism is irrelevant at best and, in the case of Putin, an exact reversal of the truth.

While the question of royalty might seem trivial, the vast extent of press coverage indicates that this is not the view of established power.

Royalty is not just about tourism and distracting the public; it is

the issue where nationalism, class control, inequality, militarism, organised religious fakery and biocidal corporate profit-maximising meet. Church, state, military, media, business and royalty are all mutually-supportive. It is revealing to see how these centres of power spring to each other's defence against perceived threats.

Whatever we think of the Harry and Meghan Markle saga, it matters when the son of the current king and the brother of the future king writes in his new book, *Spare*: "Does the Crown generate tourism income that benefits all? Of course. Does it also rest upon lands obtained and secured when the system was unjust and wealth was generated by exploited workers and thuggery, annexation and enslaved people? Can anyone deny it?" (Harry, *Spare*, Penguin, e-book version, 2023, p.322)

Harry's book arguably merits

some attention, if only for his comments on the war in Afghanistan in which he was a combatant: "Some commanders often said, publicly and privately, that they feared every Taliban killed would create three more, so they were extra cautious. At times we felt the commanders were right: we were creating more Taliban." (p.183)

He added: "Afghanistan was a war of mistakes, a war of enormous collateral damage – thousands of innocents killed and maimed, and that always haunted us."



Hounded by the tabloids: Prince Harry is a regular target of UK media attacks.

five. It wasn't a number that gave me any satisfaction. But neither was it a number that made me feel ashamed. Naturally, I'd have preferred not to have that number on my military CV, on my mind, but by the same token I'd have preferred to live in a world in which there was no Taliban, a world without war". (p.184)

In reporting this, the BBC brazenly reversed the truth of Harry's intended meaning: "In his memoir, the Duke of Sussex describes killing 25 Taliban fighters in Afghanistan as "chess pieces taken off the board".

"Ex-colonel Tim Collins said that was 'not how you behave in the army.'"

In what must be a first, the BBC actually cited the Taliban in support of its smear: "Responding to

This is a significant confession from a member of the UK's 3 Regiment Army Air Corp who is also fifth in the line of succession to the British throne.

The British press made great play of Harry's confessed tally of "enemy combatants" killed. He wrote: "So, my number: Twenty-



the prince's comments, a senior Taliban leader Anas Haqqani tweeted: "Mr Harry! The ones you killed were not chess pieces, they were humans; they had families who were waiting for their return..."

"I don't expect that the (International Criminal Court) will summon you or the human rights activists will condemn you, because they are deaf and blind for you".

The BBC cited Collins again: "He has badly let the side down. We don't do notches on the rifle butt. We never did".

In fact, on the same page that he revealed he had killed 25 people in Afghanistan, Harry wrote: "So my goal from the day I arrived was never to go to bed doubting that I'd done the right thing, that my targets had been correct, that I was firing on Taliban and only Taliban, no civilians nearby. I wanted to return to Britain with all my limbs, but more, I wanted to go home with my conscience intact. Which meant being aware of what I was doing, and why I was doing it, at all times". (p.184)

Harry emphasised that he had been trained to dehumanise enemy fighters as "chess pieces" precisely because it would otherwise have been impossible for him to kill people viewed as ordinary human beings. In other words, whatever we think of Harry and his ugly role in this catastrophic war, these are not the words of someone who is coldly bragging about collecting victims as "notches on the rifle butt". Significantly, the death toll is the only aspect of Harry's discussion of Afghanistan that we have seen discussed in reviews and commentary.

To his credit, Harry pours scorn on "media barons", primarily Murdoch, but also "the impossibly Dick-



Back from the warzone: Prince Harry tells of his war kills in his book, *Spare*.

ensian-sounding Jonathan Harmsworth, 4th Viscount Rothermere", controlling shareholder of the Daily Mail and General Trust, a media conglomerate that includes the *Daily Mail*.

Harry writes: "It was around this time that I began to think Murdoch was evil. No, strike that. I began to know that he was. First-hand. Once you've been chased by someone's henchmen through the streets of a busy modern city you lose all doubt about where they stand on the Great Moral Continuum. All my life I'd heard jokes about the links between royal misbehaviour and centuries of inbreeding, but it was then that I realised: Lack of genetic diversity was nothing compared to press gaslighting. Marrying your cousin is far less dicey than becoming a profit centre for Murdoch Inc.

"Of course I didn't care for Murdoch's politics, which were just to the right of the Taliban's. And I didn't like the harm he did each and every day to Truth, his wanton desecration of objective facts. Indeed, I couldn't think of a single human being in the 300,000-year

history of the species who'd done more damage to our collective sense of reality". (p.169)

Harry excoriates "the ravages and depredations of the press" (p.201): "For generations Britons had said with a wry laugh: Ah, well, of course our newspapers are shit – but what can you do?" (p.143)

This isn't Noam Chomsky, or even Owen Jones, but these are meaningful comments reaching a mass audience from a high-profile figure. If nothing else, they provide well-intentioned reporters and journalists with an excuse for highlighting these crucial issues. Alas, as we will see, such journalism is in short supply.

Propaganda doesn't do nuance. It must be delivered with complete certainty and high moral outrage. Thus, on his Talk TV show, Piers Morgan said: "There's one thing to do with this book. Rather than buy it and feather his greedy little nest, do what I'm gonna do now – take *Spare* and chuck it where it belongs, in the bin".

Whereupon Morgan threw the book into a bin.

Harry has been branded a "traitor". From the moral high ground, *Daily Mail* consultant editor, Andrew Pierce, opined: "Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver. This bloke has betrayed the Queen, his brother, his father, the future Queen Consort, for tens of millions of pounds. It's all about money. His sense of entitlement is staggering".

Happily, the *Daily Mail* has no grubby financial motive for endlessly covering Harry's story; as is true of its reporting, commentary and "sidebar of shame" more generally.

Times columnist Giles Coren, whose career has doubtless not benefited from the fact that his father was the much-loved journalist, humorist and BBC TV personality, Alan Coren, commented: “Harry is a very, very stupid man. A man with a barely functioning IQ in the sort of middle 90s, who in real life wouldn’t be able to get a job, or to have a family, or do anything”.

Also projecting freely, Nigel Farage, GB News presenter and



founder of the Brexit Party, raged: “It is ghastly at every level. Can you imagine trashing your own family, trashing your own country, trashing the commonwealth, trashing your grandmother’s legacy... and doing it all for money? I think the whole thing, frankly, is despicable”.

Businessman and “activist” Adam Brooks lightened the mood: “[Harry’s] a whingeing, woke, cry-baby... I actually – it’s quite a strong word – but I think I hate, I hate Harry for what he’s doing to the UK”.

In the *Observer*, Rachel Cooke declared herself bewildered by ‘a book that must rank as one of the most bizarre I’ve ever read’

Journalist A.N. Wilson even played the Hitler Card: “I’m not suggesting he’s as bad as Hitler, but it is like reading *Mein Kampf*, in that Hitler thinks he’s a hero and you put the book down with absolute disgust. And you do put this book down with total disgust.”

BBC viewers will recall how Jennie Bond worked as the BBC’s cautious and deferential royal correspondent for 14 years. In response to Harry’s book, we saw a different Bond: “Do you know, can we maybe think that his brain is so addled by, well, by the trauma of his life – because he is traumatised – um, and by the many, many drugs he’s taken?”

It is no surprise that the female columnists of the liberal press were lined up to pour scorn on this male target of Establishment ire, much as they had been lined up to pour scorn on Julian Assange, Jeremy Corbyn, Russell Brand and others.

In the *Observer*, Rachel Cooke declared herself bewildered by “a book that must rank as one of the most bizarre I’ve ever read”. It was the product of “A myopic, self-obsessed, non-empathic kind of person”.

With sexual ridicule to the fore, Cooke mocked Harry’s mention of his “todger”, his “thing”, and how he revealed he had once “peed his pants”. Cooke indicated that Harry

had certainly failed the *Observer* test on “feminism”.

In the *Guardian*, Marina Hyde also focused on the “circumcision/frostbitten penis status of princes that might as well have been sub-headed It’s A Royal Cockout”.

Hyde at least managed to mention Afghanistan: “during the conflict in Afghanistan he killed 25 Taliban fighters out of his \$50-million helicopter, a form of warfare which even the most committed Taliban-loathers among us always had to admit was a bit asymmetric”.

This was a typically callous reference from Hyde to the barely comprehensible carnage inflicted by the West on Afghanistan for two decades. Would we describe the atomic bombing of Hiroshima as “a bit asymmetric”? How about the Nazis’ crushing of the Warsaw ghetto? Hyde added: “Then again, the Taliban won in the end...”

Again, an ugly, flippant comment. Can anyone in Afghanistan be said to have “won” at the end of the West’s devastating invasion and occupation?

In the *Independent*, Lucy Pavia also commented repeatedly on “todgers”, on how Harry’s description of the state of “his frostbitten penis after a trip to the North Pole culminates in an odd admission that he covered it in Elizabeth Arden and thought of his mother, who once used the cream”. Perhaps it is the implied interpretation that is “odd”.

From the comfort of her corporate office chair, Pavia wrote: “Passages about army exploits and travels to Africa are worthy “but a little bloated. Clearly not “worthy” enough for Pavia to make any mention of Harry’s comments on the war in Afghanistan.

Supposedly further to the right

on the media “spectrum”, former long-time *Guardian* columnist, Hadley Freeman, now writing for *The Times*, dismissed this “strange, petty, self-inflicted seeping wound of a book”, an effort that is “like so much in Harry’s self-centred but utterly unself-aware life’. Ironic comments from someone who contributed to some of the *Guardian*’s worst propaganda excesses, and who has ascended even higher up the selfless, self-aware moral stairway to become, as Harry might say, “a profit centre for Murdoch Inc”.

The book, said Freeman, is “comic and pathetic. Hamlet was the aspiration, the Fool is, heart-breakingly, the result”.

Yet again, sexual ridicule was a theme: *Spare* has earned Harry “general mockery, headlines about dead Afghans and his frostbitten penis”. Freeman noted that the book resolves the issue of “whether Harry and his brother are circumcised”; she wonders out loud to Harry whether he’s aware the book “makes you sound a bit of a tosser.”

If these commentators struggled to find ammunition to fully humiliate their subject, it is for the reason described by Anita Singh in her rather more balanced review in the right-wing *Telegraph*. Writing like a normal human being, rather than a hater, Singh noted of Harry: “His ghostwriter, JR Moehringer, has done a very good job here of making his subject seem like the sane one in the story...”

“*Spare* is well-constructed and fluently written. Harry would be the first to admit that Moehringer has done the hard graft here, and perhaps deployed some artistic licence”.

Indeed, Moehringer was the

Harry at least deserves credit for choosing a ghostwriter with the talent to make his book more difficult to smear than it might have been

writer behind Andre Agassi’s stunning autobiography, *Open*, so this should be no surprise. Harry, then, at least deserves credit for choosing a ghostwriter with the talent to make his book more difficult to smear than it might otherwise have been.

Inevitably, Harry has been diagnosed as suffering from “narcissism’. In the *Express*, Leo McKinstrey commented: “But his descent into American psychobabble has patiently only fed his jealousy, rage, egomania and sense of grievance. Rather than making him more balanced, therapy appears to have been a catalyst for his rampant narcissism”.

Alexander Larman, the books editor for *Spectator World*, wrote of: “The unbelievable narcissism of Harry and Meghan’s Netflix documentary”.

Before Christmas, amid ongoing rail strikes, renowned therapist Piers Morgan sensed that Mick Lynch, general secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, was afflicted by the same disorder: “Mick ‘The Grinch’ Lynch is beginning to believe his own over-hyped bullish*t. Loves being a media star, so has zero incentive to resolve the strikes as that would deprive him of the TV oxygen he craves”.

The BBC featured two near-

identical headlines on its home page on the same day. The first: “The union firebrand accused of stealing Christmas”.

The second, with a different picture: “The firebrand accused of stealing Christmas”.

Matt Frei of Channel 4 News asked Lynch: “Do you love the limelight?”

Lynch replied: “No, I’ve been put here by circumstances, not by my own choice... I just want to get on with my job and carry on running our union”.

We asked Frei: “Do **you** love the limelight, @mattfrei? You’ve been hogging it for decades. You look very comfortable; you must enjoy these moments. Are you indulging your craving for attention?”

Frei ignored us, of course.

To his credit, Lynch has done a tremendous job of neutralising media smears by exposing the journalists’ tactics in real time to viewers.

In 2019, the *Daily Mail* devoted four pages to Julian Assange, reporting the “downfall of a narcissist” who had been removed from “inside his fetid lair” to finally “face justice”.

Even when arguing against Assange’s extradition to the US, former BBC political presenter Andrew Neil wrote in the *Daily Mail* last June: “Assange is no crusader in shining armour. He is reckless, cavalier with people’s lives, narcissistic, a ‘sexual predator’. Careless of his personal hygiene, he is often his own worst enemy. He lets down his friends and repels his allies”.

If we pay attention, we’ll find that establishment enemies are smeared in essentially the same way. Thus, in the *Sunday Times*, Katie Glass described patently harmless hippy, Russell Brand, as

“an exhibitionistic narcissist obsessed with celebrity”. (Katie Glass, “The ultimate Marmite Brand,” *Sunday Times*, 22 September 2013).

Thus, in the *New Yorker*, Jeffrey Toobin condemned courageous whistle-blower Edward Snowden as “a grandiose narcissist who deserves to be in prison”.

Bob Schieffer of CBS commented: “I think what we have in Edward Snowden is just a narcissistic young man who has decided he is smarter than the rest of us”.

Glenn Greenwald who, unlike most of the critics, has met Snowden and worked closely with him, put this in perspective with his usual élan: “One of the most darkly hilarious things to watch is how government apologists and media servants are driven by total herd behaviour: they all mindlessly adopt the same script and then just keep repeating it because they see others doing so and, like parrots, just mimic what they hear... Hordes of people who had no idea what “narcissism” even

This important story involving harm caused by powerful British interests was deemed unworthy even of mention

means – and who did not know the first thing about Snowden – kept repeating this word over and over because that became the cliché used to demonise him”.

Caution, however, is advised. The *Daily Banter* blog noted: “Glenn Greenwald has been looking to take down Obama and feed his own depthless narcissism for years now. He just managed to accomplish one of these goals in spades...”

On one level, all of this is absurd. But there is a serious point – whenever any individual or group, anywhere, threatens powerful interests in any way, the corporate media

can be relied upon to unleash a flood of toxic abuse to promote public hostility and so neutralise the threat. This is not a conspiracy: the system selects for senior managers and junior cogs who just ‘understand’ who needs to be served, placated and reviled, if profit is to be maximised.

In truth, it is a kind of runaway smear machine, functioning almost automatically. The bad news, of course, in the age of looming climate collapse, is that this machine is doing a superb job of neutralising the voices of expert climate scientists desperately trying to warn of impending disaster. The same confident, jokey, worldly, abusive, casual dismissals are preventing scientists from being heard and the public from taking them seriously. It is up to all of us, both inside and outside the system, to do whatever we can to undermine this lethal propaganda. **CT**

David Edwards is co-editor of *Media Lens*, the UK media watchdog – www.medialens.org – where this article was first published.

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SAM PIZZIGATI

Inside Southwest's horrible holidays

Blame the wealthy, not the weather, for the appalling treatment of customers at busiest time of the year

For America's rich and powerful, the new year began in a most inauspicious fashion. Millions of Americans were once again fuming at the greed and grasping of our deepest pockets.

That fuming – from would-be passengers of Southwest Airlines and their families – filled airports during the holiday rush just before Christmas. For good reason. At the height of the travel-heavy holidays, Southwest was cancelling 60 percent of the airline's daily flights. More than 15,000 Southwest planes never lifted off.

Late December's heavy dose of stormy weather certainly did set the stage for Southwest's holiday meltdown.

But Southwest can't put the blame for the airline's massive melt on the cold, wind, and snow. Other airlines delivered, amid the

same winter weather, far better service.

So what was the reason for Southwest's dismal performance? The airline's top execs, analysts point out, have spent years underinvesting in needed new tech. One telling example: This past November, a generation into the electronic age, Southwest officials acknowledged that the airline was still delivering weather and baggage reports to pilots and gate managers on paper.

"It almost became a running joke around the company", says Southwest flight attendant union president Lyn Montgomery, "that we aren't able to make certain changes because it would involve technology".

During the holiday storm crisis, some Southwest employees phoning in for instructions from the airline found themselves on hold for

over five hours. Some even went to sleep with their phones – still on hold – next to their bedsides. They awoke the next morning, reports the *Dallas Morning News*, to find their phones still holding.

Why didn't Southwest invest in new tech? "Modifications and refinements to systems", last year's Southwest annual report explained, "have been and are expected to continue to be expensive to implement and can divert management's attention from other matters".

What sort of "matters" struck Southwest execs as more important than keeping their planes on time? Keeping shareholders happy – and themselves richer in the process. Everything else could wait.

Top management has readily admitted as much. In one pre-Cov-

id “earnings call” with stock analysts, the *Washington Post* noted, then-CEO Gary Kelly explained that the airline had been delaying the tech upgrades his operations team had been seeking.

“We have starved them a little bit over the last decade”, he explained, “because again, our focus was more on the commercial side”.

Money that should have been going into upgrading Southwest’s operations has gone instead into dividends and stock buybacks. Since 2015, the *Los Angeles Times* analyst Michael Hiltzik reported, the airline “has paid out about \$1.6-billion in dividends and repurchased more than \$8-billion in shares”.

Those moves have worked out exceedingly well for top Southwest execs like CEO Kelly, the airline’s chief exec until early last year. In 2020, Kelly pulled down a “record \$9.2-million” at the same time the Covid outbreak had the airline \$3.1-billion in the red and a quarter of the Southwest workforce taking voluntary leave. CEO Kelly then took home another \$5.8-million in 2021 before retiring early in 2022.

“Southwest’s well-compensated executives could have prioritised its workers and customers by preparing for the worst, but greed trumped all as they put a small group of wealthy investors first,” charges Kyle Herrig, the president of the corporate watchdog Accountable.US. “Consumers shouldn’t be the ones stuck holding the bag for Southwest’s greedy management decisions, but here we are”.

Southwest took in a \$7-billion federal bailout during the Covid crisis, then showed its apprecia-

Money that should have been going into upgrading Southwest’s operations has gone instead into dividends and stock buybacks

tion to America’s taxpayers by becoming, early last month, the first Covid-subsidised airline to announce plans to resume paying out dividends to shareholders, to the tune of \$428-million in 2023.

“The reinstatement of our quarterly dividend”, Bob Jordan, Southwest’s new CEO, proudly noted during this dividend announcement, “reflects our balance sheet strength and continued focus on generating consistently healthy earnings, margins, and long-term capital returns”.

Missing from that focus: the well-being of Southwest workers. Just a few weeks after announcing the upcoming new dividends, the “bomb cyclone” hit wide swatches of the United States the day before Christmas. Southwest ground workers soon found themselves working 16-to-18 hour days, with some, says their union president Randy Barns, ending up frostbitten.

Some lawmakers in Congress are now calling for a serious overhaul of how the United States goes about its airborne business. America’s airlines have essentially been calling the shots, notes a *Washington Post* analysis, ever since the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 iced state regulators out of the picture and “left airline companies accountable only” to the federal Department of Transportation, an agency that’s never prioritised consumer protection.

“Southwest simply has failed to prepare for the worst and that’s a fundamental breach of trust”, charges Connecticut US Senator Richard Blumenthal, who wants to see Congress enact a passenger bill of rights. “They said to passengers, in effect, if things go south, you are the ones who will bear the burden”.

Outside the United States, in nations ranging from Argentina and Malaysia to Finland and Fiji, airlines essentially operate as a public utility, not an opportunity for big CEO paydays. Scores of nations, points out journalist Joe Mayall, currently “either own airlines outright” or hold majority-shareholder status.

The United States could join that camp, Mayall notes, if Congress chose to charter a state-owned enterprise to start up a new national airline. Or Congress could go the nationalisation route by buying up enough stock “in publicly traded airlines to acquire a controlling share”.

Could the United States afford to take that sort of nationalising step? The four most dominant US airlines – Delta, American, United, and Southwest – last summer held a combined market value of \$77.5-billion, Mayall points out, just \$5 billion less than the \$72.6-billion in our tax dollars that funded the federal government’s airline bailouts after 9/11 and during Covid. **CT**

Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. His latest books include *The Case for a Maximum Wage* and *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*.

SIMON HOGG

Wind turbines are already skyscraper-sized. Is there a limit to how big they can become?

Each blade must be shipped in one piece, requiring huge ports, giant vessels, and cranes that can operate safely and reliably far from shore

In 2023, 100 miles off the coast of north-east England, the world's largest wind turbines will start generating electricity. This first phase of the Dogger Bank offshore wind farm development uses General Electric's Haliade X, a turbine that stands more than a quarter of a kilometre high from the surface of the sea to the highest point of the blade tip.

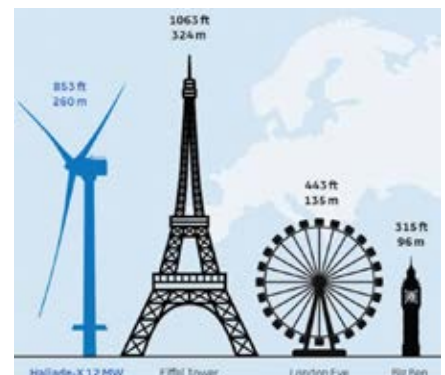
If you placed one in London, it would be the third-tallest structure in the city, taller than One Canada Square in Canary Wharf and just 50 metres shorter than the Shard. Each of its three blades would be longer than Big Ben's clock tower is tall. And Dogger Bank will eventually have nearly 300 of these giants. Next up: An Eiffel-sized turbine?

Just two decades have passed

since the UK's first proper offshore wind farm was built off the coast of north Wales. Its turbines were each able to produce 2 megawatts (MW) of electricity in ideal conditions – considered huge at the time. In contrast, the Haliade X is able to produce 13MW of electricity, and 15MW turbines are only another year or two away.

So why are turbines increasing in size at such a rapid rate, and is there a limit to how big they can go? In short, the first answer is to reduce the cost of energy and the second is that there must be a limit – but nobody has put a number on it yet.

Just five years ago, the offshore wind industry hoped to reduce its energy pricing to below £100 per megawatt-hour by 2020 from new projects in UK waters. Even at



GE Renewable Energy / Facebook

Next up: an Eiffel-sized turbine?

that level, projects would still have relied on government subsidies to make them economically viable, compared with other types of electricity generation.

Developed by GE Renewable Energy, at Rotterdam, Holland, the Haliade-X wind turbine is the world's most powerful wind turbine.



But in fact, costs quickly reduced to the extent that offshore wind farm developers were soon committing to selling their electricity at much lower prices. Today, developers are building wind farms such as Dogger Bank where they have committed to prices below £50 per megawatt-hour. This makes offshore wind competitive with other forms of power generation, effectively removing the need for subsidy.

The major factor in reducing these costs was turbine size. Ever-larger turbines came to market faster than virtually everybody in the sector had expected.

In theory, turbines can keep getting bigger. After all, a bigger blade extracts energy from the wind over a greater area as it rotates, which generates more electricity.

But there are some engineering constraints. One concerns erosion of the blades caused by them colliding with raindrops and sea spray. For current designs, the speed of the blade tips must be limited to 90 metres per second (which works out at just under 200mph) in order to avoid erosion. Therefore, as turbines get bigger and blades get longer, their rotors have to turn more slowly.

A consequence of having to slow the rotor down is that, to produce the same amount of power, the blades must deflect the wind to a greater extent. This results in greatly increased forces on the whole turbine. We can address these high forces, but only by increasing both turbine weight and cost. And that means the point at which the turbine becomes unprofitable – the point at which the extra cost is no longer worth it for the value of extra electricity generated – is reached much sooner than if the blade tips were allowed to go faster.

Also, as blades get longer they

become more flexible. This makes it more difficult to keep the aerodynamics of the wind flow around them fully under control, and harder to ensure the blades do not strike the turbine tower under extreme wind conditions.

Engineering challenges like these can perhaps be solved in the longer term, though. This will mean that wind turbines are more likely to be limited in size by manufacturing, installation and operational issues, rather than any physical limit on the design of the turbine.

Just transporting blades and towers from factory to site and assembling the turbine when you get there presents huge challenges. Each of those Big Ben-sized blades must be shipped in one piece. This requires huge ports, giant vessels, and cranes that can operate safely and reliably far offshore. This is

The focus needs to switch from pure cost reduction to developing workers' skills and the offshore wind supply chain

where the limit is most likely to come from.

You can see these limits in practice in the UK, which is surrounded by windy and shallow seas that are perfect for generating energy. Despite this, the UK is likely to miss its ambitious target to more than treble its offshore wind capacity by 2030.

This is not because of technology or lack of offshore sites. Rather, the industry will not be able to manufacture turbines quickly enough, and the port infrastruc-

ture and number of installation vessels, suitable cranes and workers with requisite skills is unlikely to be sufficient.

So if the UK is to maximise the benefit to its economy from what is, so far, a fantastic success story, the focus now needs to switch from pure cost reduction to developing workers' skills and the offshore wind supply chain.

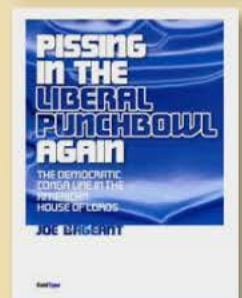
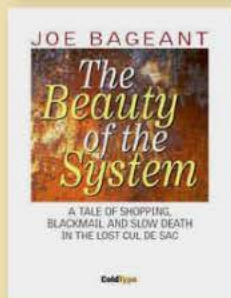
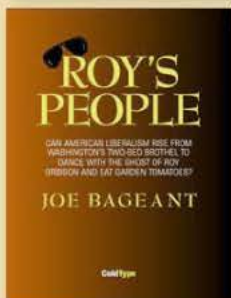
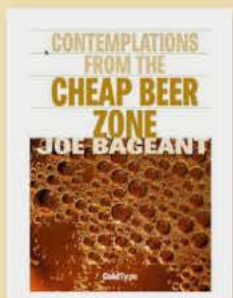
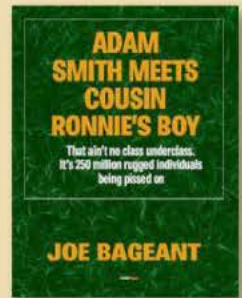
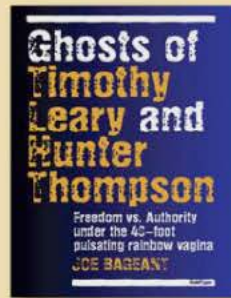
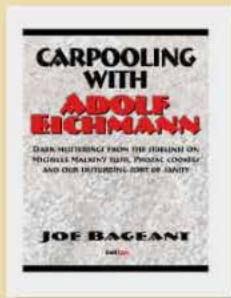
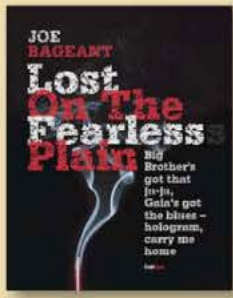
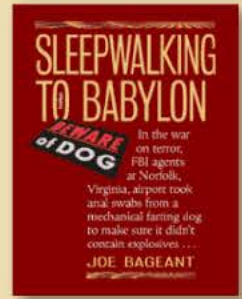
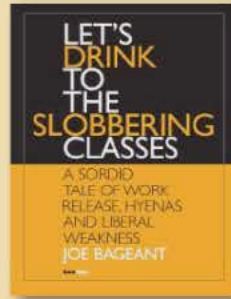
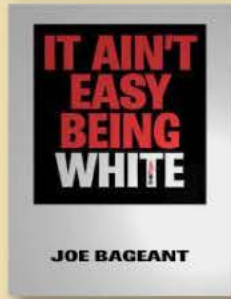
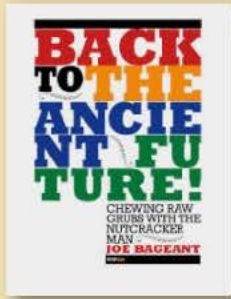
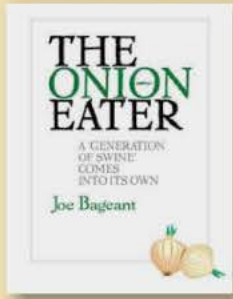
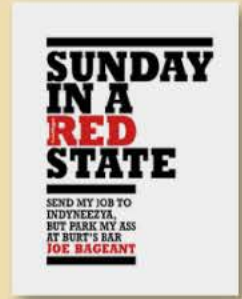
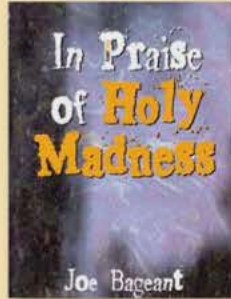
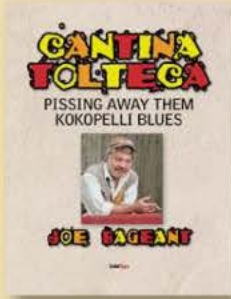
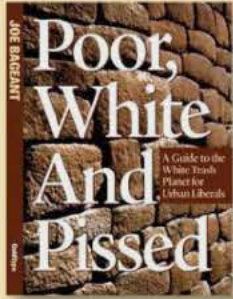
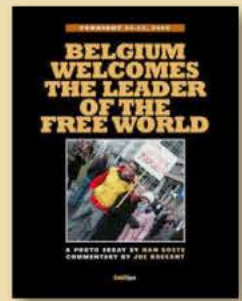
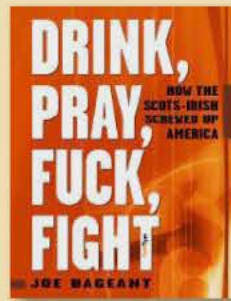
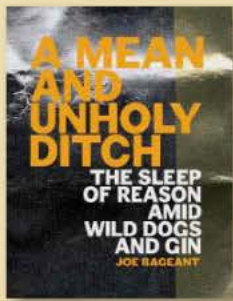
Turbines will get bigger, I am sure, but I suspect at a slower rate than we have seen in recent years. And if the turbines are deployed 100 miles offshore, will anybody care? After all, the public will not be there to see them. **CT**

Simon Hogg is Executive Director of the Durham Energy Institute, Durham University. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com.

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VIJAY PRASHAD

‘When the people have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich’

World Bank warns of future chaos as rich countries refuse to abandon the neoliberal policies that are leading poorer nations to economic catastrophe

On January 8, large crowds of people wearing the colours of the Brazilian flag descended on the country’s capital, Brasília. They invaded federal buildings, including the Congress, Supreme Court, and presidential palace, and vandalised public property.

The attack, carried out by supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro, came as no surprise, since the rioters had been planning “weekend demonstrations” on social media for days. When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (known as Lula) was formally sworn in as Brazil’s new president one week earlier, on January 1, there was no such melee; the vandals were waiting until the city was quiet and Lula was out of town. For all its bluster, the attack was an act of extreme cowardice.

Meanwhile, the defeated Bolsonaro was nowhere near Brasília. He fled Brazil prior to the inauguration – presumably to escape

prosecution – and sought haven in Orlando, Florida. Even though Bolsonaro was not in Brasília, the Bolsonaristas, as his supporters are known, left their mark throughout the city.

Even before Bolsonaro lost the election to Lula this past October, *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil* suggested that Brazil was going to experience “Bolsonarism without Bolsonaro”. This prediction is supported by the fact that the far-right Liberal Party, which served as Bolsonaro’s political vehicle during his presidency, holds the largest bloc in the country’s Chamber of Deputies and Senate, while the toxic influence of the right wing persists both in Brazil’s elected bodies and political climate, especially on social media.

The two men responsible for public safety in Brasília – Anderson Torres (the secretary of public security of the Federal District) and Ibaneis

Rocha (the governor of the Federal District) – are close to Bolsonaro. Torres served as the minister of justice and public security in Bolsonaro’s government, while Rocha formally supported Bolsonaro during the election. As the Bolsonaristas prepared their assault on the capital, both men appeared to have abdicated their responsibilities: Torres was on holiday in Orlando, while Rocha took the afternoon off on the last working day before the coup attempt.

For this complicity in the violence, Torres has been dismissed from his post and faces charges, and Rocha has been suspended. The federal government has taken charge of security and arrested over a thousand of these “fanatic Nazis”, as Lula called them. There is a good case to be made that these “fanatic Nazis” do not deserve amnesty.

The slogans and signs that pervaded Brasília on January 8 were less about Bolsonaro and more about the rioters’ hatred for Lula

and the potential of his pro-people government. This sentiment is shared by big business sectors – mainly agribusiness – which are furious about reforms proposed by Lula. The attack was partly the result of the built-up frustration felt by people who have been led, by intentional misinformation campaigns and the use of the judicial system to unseat the Lula’s party, the Workers’ Party (PT), through “lawfare”, to believe that Lula is a criminal – even though the courts have ruled this to be false.

It was also a warning from Brazil’s elites. The unruly nature of the attack on Brasília resembles the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol by supporters of former US President Donald Trump.

In both cases, far-right illusions, whether about the dangers of the “socialism” of US President Joe Biden or the “communism” of Lula, symbolise the hostile opposition of the elites to even the mildest rollback of neoliberal austerity.

The attacks on government offices in the United States (2021) and Brazil (2023), as well as the recent coup in Peru (2022), are not random events; beneath them is a pattern that requires examination. At Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, we have been engaged in this study since our founding five years ago.

In our first publication, *In the Ruins of the Present* (March 2018), we offered a preliminary analysis of this pattern, which I will develop further below.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the Third World Project withered as a result of the debt crisis, the US-driven agenda of neoliberal globalisation



Ivan Sagita (Indonesia), *A Dish for Life*, 2014.

prevailed. This programme was characterised by the state’s withdrawal from the regulation of capital and by the erosion of social welfare policies. The neoliberal framework had two major consequences: first, a rapid increase in social inequality, with the growth of billionaires at one pole and the growth of poverty at the other, along with an exacerbation of inequality along North-South lines; and second, the consolidation of a ‘centrist’ political force that pretended that history, and therefore politics, had ended, leaving only administration (which in Brazil is well-named as *centrão*, or the “centre”) remaining.

Most countries around the world fell victim to both the neoliberal austerity agenda and this “end of politics” ideology, which became

increasingly anti-democratic, making the case for technocrats to be in charge. However, these austerity policies, cutting close to the bone of humanity, created their own new politics on the streets, a trend that was foreshadowed by the IMF riots and bread riots of the 1980s and later coalesced into the “anti-globalisation” protests. The US-driven globalisation agenda produced new contradictions that belied the argument that politics had ended.

The Great Recession that set in with the global financial crisis of 2007–08 increasingly invalidated the political credentials of the “centrists” who had managed the austerity regime. *The World Inequality Report 2022* is an indictment of neoliberalism’s legacy.

Today, wealth inequality is as

bad as it was in the early years of the 20th-century: on average, the poorest half of the world's population owns just \$4,100 per adult (in purchasing power parity), while the richest 10 percent owns \$771,300 – roughly 190 times as much wealth. Income inequality is equally harsh, with the richest 10 percent absorbing 52 percent of world income, leaving the poorest 50 percent with merely 8.5 percent of world income.

It gets worse if you look at the ultra-rich. Between 1995 and 2021, the wealth of the top one percent grew astronomically, capturing 38 percent of global wealth while the bottom 50 percent only “captured a frightening two percent”, the authors of the report write.

During the same period, the share of global wealth owned by the top 0.1 percent rose from 7 percent to 11 percent. This obscene wealth – largely untaxed – provides this tiny fraction of the world's population with a disproportionate amount of power over political life and information and increasingly squeezes the ability of the poor to survive.

The World Bank's *Global Economic Prospects* report (January 2023) forecasts that, at the end of 2024, gross domestic product (GDP) in 92 of the world's poorer countries will be 6 percent below the level expected on the eve of the pandemic.

Between 2020 and 2024, these countries are projected to suffer a cumulative loss in GDP equal to roughly 30 percent of their 2019 GDP. As central banks in the richest countries tighten their monetary policies, capital for investment in the poorer nations is drying up and the cost of debts already held has increased.

Poorer nations will slide deeper into a debt crisis and into a permanent condition of social distress

Total debt in these poorer countries, the World Bank notes, “is at a 50-year high”. Roughly one in five of these countries are “effectively locked out of global debt markets”, up from one in fifteen in 2019. All of these countries – excluding China – “suffered an especially sharp investment contraction of more than 8 percent” during the pandemic, ‘a deeper decline than in 2009’, in the throes of the Great Recession.

The report estimates that aggregate investment in these countries will be 8 percent lower in 2024 than had been expected in 2020.

Faced with this reality, the World Bank offers the following prognosis: “Sluggish investment weakens the rate of growth of potential output, reducing the capacity of economies to increase median incomes, promote shared prosperity, and repay debts”.

In other words, the poorer nations will slide deeper into a debt crisis and into a permanent condition of social distress.

The World Bank has sounded the alarm, but the forces of “centrism” – beholden to the billionaire class and the politics of austerity – simply refuse to pivot away from the neoliberal catastrophe.

If a leader of the centre-left or left tries to wrench their country out of persistent social inequality and polarised wealth distribution, they face the wrath of not merely the “centrists”, but the wealthy bondholders in the North, the In-

ternational Monetary Fund, and the Western states.

When Pedro Castillo won the presidency in Peru in July 2021, he was not permitted to pursue even a Scandinavian form of social democracy; the coup machinations against him began before he was inaugurated. The civilised politics that would end hunger and illiteracy are simply not permitted by the billionaire class, who spend vast amounts of money on think tanks and media to undermine any project of decency and fund the dangerous forces of the far right, who shift the blame for social chaos away from the tax-free ultra-rich and the capitalist system and onto the poor and marginalised.

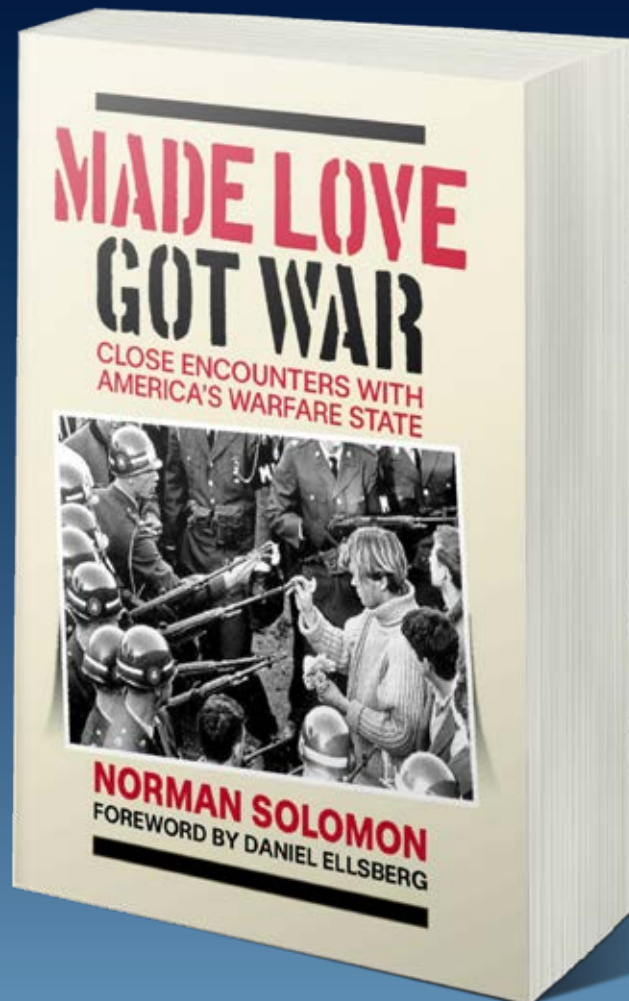
The hallucinatory insurrection in Brasília emerged from the same dynamic that produced the coup in Peru: a process in which “centrist” political forces are funded and brought to power in the Global South to ensure that their own citizens remain at the rear of the queue, while the wealthy tax-free bondholders of the Global North remain at the front.

On the barricades of Paris on October 14, 1793, Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, the president of the Paris Commune who himself fell to the guillotine to which he sent many others, quoted these fine words from Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich”. **CT**

Vijay Prashad's latest books are *Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism and, with Noam Chomsky, The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of US Power*. This article is from *Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research*.

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JOHN CLARKE

Beyond the rituals of class compromise

It's clear that the several-sided conditions of crisis that we are living through will be the driving force for further waves of struggle

Working-class people face intensified attack on a range of fronts. The inflationary upsurge that has produced a major global cost of living crisis is considerably more stubborn than was initially expected. If “supply shocks” underlie this economic instability, we must suppose that there are a great many more of them to come.

Intensifying global rivalry will undermine the flow of trade to an ever greater extent. Moreover, the efforts of the United States to defend its hegemonic position dramatically increase the risks of major armed conflicts. The rivalry that marks this period is already producing results that are profoundly economically disruptive. It is likely that much worse lies ahead.

The pandemic has had dramatic impacts on the world's economy, and it is clear that the factors that created this global health emergency are entirely unresolved. The scientific mainstream has now fully accepted that we live in what can be referred to as the pandemic era.

Over and above all of this, we face the sharpest of all expressions of capitalism's inability to develop a sustainable relationship with the natural world: the accelerating cli-

mate crisis. Its effects are already being seen in a variety of ways, including the proliferation of extreme weather episodes. This element of the present multi-layered crisis brings with it the most destructive impacts and the most economically disruptive results of all.

Such conditions of crisis in society starkly pose the question of who will shoulder the burden. The driving up of interest rates by central banks internationally makes clear that the hawkish advocates of class war and “creative destruction” are dominating policy directions, and that they see wage cuts and reduced living standards, even at the risk of a major global slump, as the route to stability for their system.

At the same time, hopes for a turn away from the agenda of austerity have been cruelly dashed. A recent study by a group of NGOs looked at 267 International Monetary Fund (IMF) country reports that map out plans for a major international austerity assault. Unquestionably, this attack is playing out here in Ontario, as the Tories, led by its premier Doug Ford take the knife to public services.

Those who would characterise

this period as one marked by working-class passivity are quite wrong. The last few years have seen a rising working-class anger struggling to find effective expression. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked an upsurge of historic proportions on US streets, one that reverberated internationally.

A rebellion in the workplace is brewing: here in Ontario, there has been a dramatic increase in strike activity. The recent struggle taken up by education workers in this province, its massive contradictions notwithstanding, is further evidence that working-class people are looking for the means to fight back.

Yet these inspiring indications shouldn't be a source of unrealistic optimism. There is a huge reservoir of anger and an appetite for effective resistance, but it is not yet taking the form of durable movements and winning struggles. This problem must be overcome, if the leap in thought and action that this period demands is to be achieved. People learn relatively little by getting kicked and a great deal more from fighting back. Such positive lessons are urgently needed.

For masses of people to take the path of social mobilisation, they must be convinced it can prevent



Cost of living protest, London.

cuts in real wages and the gutting of vital public services. This means moving beyond the rituals of token protest and embracing forms of resistance that are defiant and hugely disruptive.

Though vital struggles take place at the community level, the greatest power of working-class people lies in our ability to shut down the production and flow of goods and services by employing the strike weapon. For this reason, trade unions remain decisive.

After World War II, employers and the state fought hard to prevent an organising breakthrough by workers in North America, but it could no longer be held back. In this situation, a strategy of containment rather than direct confrontation was adopted. The state-brokered mechanisms of compromise between capital and labour that developed in this period constituted a tactical retreat. Unions were recognised and granted significant rights that, in the economic boom years following the war, ensured gains in wages

and working conditions. However, the system of legally enshrined “labour relations” that was put in place set limits that had been unknown in the more rough-and-tumble class struggle conditions that had previously existed.

Now, in return for their new rights, unions negotiated with employers in a regulated process that limited and compartmentalised workers’ struggles. Strikes during the life of collective agreements were banned, and the bulk of disputes were now settled by way of a legalistic process of grievance and arbitration. Solidarity strikes to support other groups of workers and united struggles around broader political demands were also prohibited by law.

It is hardly surprising that such a regulated and tightly supervised form of class conflict had a major effect on the unions themselves. Though strike battles were still fought, a great deal of the representative role that unions played was now in the hands of experts and specialists. Bureaucratized forms of struggle engendered bureaucratized unions and signifi-

cantly demobilised their rank and file.

These mechanisms of compromise were developed in a period of relative economic buoyancy, when employers and governments were making concessions to working-class people. Economic downturn and falling rates of profit in the 1970s, however, led to a changed strategy that would become known as neoliberalism. This included an assault on unions to drive down wages and the gutting of the social infrastructure.

In this situation, the class compromise arrangements of the post-war years became an impediment. Workers were still adhering to agreements that limited their ability to struggle, but the other side was no longer ready to give anything back in return. The ruling-class attack, while severe, was nonetheless incremental enough for the “deal” to hold while union membership and working-class living standards declined.

The present crisis-ridden period is accelerating the pace of the attack to such a degree that the consequences of limiting working-class resistance have become dramatically worse. To confine the strike weapon to individual contract disputes is a recipe for disaster that renders effective working-class struggle impossible. Breaking out of these limitations becomes a life-and-death question.

During the neoliberal decades, working-class defiance has sometimes emerged when governments have seriously accelerated the ruling-class attack. The Ontario Days of Action against the provincial Tory regime in the 1990s were a case in point. Faced with an unprecedented assault on workers and communities, there was a limited effort to break out of

the constraints of regulated class compromise.

While the campaign involved city-wide strikes that broke the rules and provided an inspiring indication of working-class power, the union leadership of the time engaged in these tactics with considerable reluctance. No plan to escalate the struggle to winning levels was ever advanced, and after the momentum of the actions had been lost, the whole effort was abandoned.

Very similar factors played out in Ontario education workers' recent struggle. The Ford government's Bill 28 created a situation where the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and its Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) could avoid the humiliation of an imposed concessionary contract only by responding defiantly.

With this blunder, Ford brought on an "illegal" strike by education workers and the threat of a wave of sympathy actions by other unions. That such a fightback could be made ready is no small matter, but the rapidity with which CUPE accepted Ford's offer to repeal the legislation, in return for the suspension of strike action, was enormously telling.

Once the union leaders had something on the table that could justify a return to the mechanisms of compromise they had been schooled in, they were ready to grab it. This retreat led to a deal that failed to address the cost of living crisis, and that ended the generalised movement of working-class resistance that was emerging in that moment.

Certainly, the top leadership of CUPE carries the major respon-

Strike action must become a form of generalised working-class struggle that advances broad political demands

sibility for that concession, while the OSBCU leaders were obviously more reluctant to concede. However, no force within the union was able to resist the pressure to draw back. The tragic curtailment of this struggle poses huge questions about the kind of movement we need at this time.

It is of decisive importance that the strike weapon be freed from its present constraints. It must become a form of generalised working-class struggle that advances broad political demands. As Rosa Luxemburg stressed in her study of the mass strike, such a course is capable of inspiring and mobilising a huge portion of the population.

As Luxemburg put it, "Every real, great class struggle must rest upon the support and cooperation of the widest masses, and a strategy of class struggle which does not reckon with this cooperation, which is based upon the idea of the finely stage-managed march out of the small, well-trained part of the proletariat, is foredoomed to be a miserable fiasco." Clearly, such a course of action would have to be taken up over the indignant objections of the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

Though strikes are of central importance, it is also true that very powerful forms of community-based action are entirely possible. In Canada, the lessons to be drawn from Indigenous-led resistance are particularly vital in this regard.

The country-wide wave of solidarity action with Wet'suwet'en land defenders in 2020 unleashed major economic disruption and created a deep political crisis for those in power. Linked to massive strikes and advancing fighting demands, such forms of resistance could be incredibly powerful.

Obviously, the mass action that the present situation demands will require organisational forms that make it possible. Trade unions have a vital role to play, but for this to happen, a rank-and-file movement is indispensable. The shop stewards committees that were formed in Britain during and after World War One are instructive as models of this form of organising. They were able to challenge collaborationist union leaders, initiate independent action when necessary, and forge links with community-based forms of working-class struggle.

While such major rank-and-file initiatives are not in place today, we are seeing initiatives that are building power at the base within unions. Teachers in the US have provided particularly compelling examples, raising the level of militancy among their fellow workers through their organising. Joe Biden's recent attack on rail workers was rendered possible because of the collaborationist leadership within the rail unions. However, Railroad Workers United (RWU), rooted in the rank and file, has emerged as a force challenging that leadership.

There is a great need to take such forms of organising within the unions much further, but also to look for broader organisational forms that could unite workplace struggles with community-based

resistance. The stubborn struggle that has been waged in Sudan against that country's military regime and its harsh social spending cutbacks has been advanced considerably by the resistance committees that have emerged. The development of such dynamic, participatory forms of local organisation can contribute enormously to a sustained and effective capacity to fight back in the present period.

During the 1930s in Canada, the interventions of the Communist Party played an enormous role in taking forward the militant struggles of the unemployed. Though much was wrong with the way those interventions were carried out, the existence of a significant left party at that time supported powerful working-class action during the Great Depression.

Today, there is no single socialist organisation that could match the influence of the CP in the '30s. An effort to organise at the base and create conditions for winning forms of struggle would likely require a working alliance of leftists and rank-and-file militants. While it is much easier to propose such an undertaking than to set it in motion or sustain it, the need for such forward movement is clear and obvious.

It would be preposterous to try to provide any organisational blueprints or detailed plans of action for such rank-and-file initiatives, but it would be worth considering the role they could have played in two of the situations I have described.

During the Ontario Days of Action, there was a strong sense among leftists and militants that the momentum of the campaign was being held back. As those

A campaign that escalated to the level of a province-wide strike was possible, but the union leaders clearly wished to prevent it

who lived through the period will doubtless recall, "City by city is way too slow. Let's shut down Ontario", was a chant commonly heard at rallies. There was, however, no means of making this vision a reality.

Such was the top-down form of the movement's organising that a relative handful of union leaders were able to haggle and improvise as they saw fit. When another city was eventually chosen as the next site of struggle, a local committee of unions and community organisations was nominally given the power to direct the events of the day. However, they could really only follow a tight script addressed to their own community and had no say over the provincial initiative as a whole.

Had those communities and the rank and file of the unions been organised and properly orientated, the local committees could have developed a capacity to act beyond their one-day mandate, ensuring actions would be taken on a wider front than the city-by-city approach permitted.

A campaign that escalated to the level of a province-wide strike was possible, but the union leaders clearly wished to prevent it.

In the case of the recent education workers' strike, things are even more clear-cut. A major united working-class struggle was emerging, and it was called off once the union leaders decided that it

was possible to do so.

A rank-and-file movement with a solid influence among those workers would have made an edict to demobilise impossible. The membership's strong reluctance to accept a substandard deal could have been transformed into a determined effort to defeat it.

It is important to understand how deeply entrenched in the union structures are the failed rituals of compromise, and how committed to them are the bulk of the leadership. An effective rank-and-file movement will certainly have to be very much more than a means of applying some pressure on those at the top. It will have to make demands and, where necessary, act independently and defiantly to ensure that the necessary methods of resistance are taken up.

We are now in a situation where, to contain the present inflationary surge, a systematic global effort is underway to reduce the bargaining power of workers and drive down real wages. This attack may very well generate conditions of global slump. We are dealing with a class-war offensive by employers and governments, and yet the rules of engagement that we are expected to observe don't allow us to fight fire with fire. If we are to avoid crushing defeats, breaking free of outmoded rituals of class compromise is an absolute necessity. Finding the means to do this is the most pressing political task we face in these extraordinary times. **CT**

John Clarke became an organiser with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty when it was formed in 1990 and has been involved in mobilising poor communities under attack ever since.

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