



MAGAZINE

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Considering Degrowth

War is a System

Democracy & Activism

Rethinking 'Fake News'



*"It behooves us all to
expand the definition
of 'fake news' beyond
the US-western-
centric purely political
definitions ..."*

-Ramzy Baroud



APRIL 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Degrowth: The Wrong Word for the Right Idea by Gregory Wilpert	3
Degrowth? A Succinct Reaction by Michael Albert	5
Daniel Ellsberg Has Foiled Those Who Want Him Confined to the Past by Norman Solomon	9
Profits of Doom: Military Contractors Rob Us Daily by Tom H. Hastings	11
The Tragic U.S. Choice to Prioritize War Over Peacemaking by Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J. S. Davies	13
Democracy or Apartheid: You Can't Have Both by Nour	16
How Union Workers Are Fighting to Save America's Beleaguered Health Care System by Tom Conway	18
Recent Strikes in Germany (a bit) and France (a lot) by Thomas Kilbauer	21
Transcending Frogs by Michael Albert	26
Lying About Lying: Why We Must Revisit the Definition of 'Fake News' by Ramzy Baroud	28

Degrowth: The Wrong Word for the Right Idea

Gregory Wilpert

As we hurtle towards an increasingly uncertain future because of the climate crisis that we humans have caused, a debate is intensifying about whether this climate crisis can best be averted via degrowth, green growth, or eco-socialism. Note, these concepts are not necessarily mutually incompatible, which makes the debate between them a bit incoherent at times, since there could be far more overlap among these concepts than there are real differences. Just pointing out this overlap and that, despite this, a debate keeps raging on, suggests that perhaps much of this debate is rooted a lot more in misunderstandings than in substantive differences. I would even go so far as to suggest that the root of the misunderstandings in this debate can be found in the word “degrowth” and that we all would be a lot better off if we found a better name for the movement that it claims to represent.

To figure out the usefulness of the word degrowth, as it is applied to the degrowth movement, we should first look at what is meant by the term. According to one of the movement’s main websites, degrowth.info,

“Degrowth is an idea that critiques the global capitalist system which pursues growth at all costs, causing human exploitation and environmental destruction. The degrowth movement of activists and researchers advocates for societies that prioritize social and ecological well-being instead of corporate profits, over-production and excess consumption. This requires radical redistribution, reduction in the material size of the global economy, and a shift in common values towards care, solidarity and autonomy. Degrowth means transforming societies to ensure environmental justice and a good life for all within planetary boundaries.”

The first thing to note is that this description of degrowth does not advocate for the degrowth of the economy, which is what the term would logically imply for those unfamiliar with the movement. Rather, it states that it is a critique of – presumably economic – “growth at all costs.” This is not the same as being in favor of economic degrowth. The rest of the explanation goes on to outline what it is for, emphasizing ecological well-being, redistribution, and shifting towards care, solidarity, and autonomy. The one point where reduction/degrowth comes up is in connection with the “reduction of the material size of the economy,” which is perhaps the main reason for using the term, but even that does not necessarily mean a reduction of the overall size of the economy, as the word degrowth implies. That is, it is conceivable that an economy could grow immaterially, in terms of its cultural output, which, thanks to digital technology, is practically infinitely reproducible with near-zero additional material resources.

One of the degrowth movement’s main proponents, Jason Hickel, writes, “What degrowth scholarship adds [to the need to transition to renewable energy] is simply to observe that if we want to reduce emissions fast enough to stay under 1.5C or 2C, high-income nations cannot continue to pursue growth.” Clearly, this formulation could be interpreted not as an argument for degrowth, but for a steady-state economy. He then goes on to suggest that the term is actually in reference to energy throughput: “this is precisely what degrowth calls for: a reduction of excess energy and material throughput.”

Another major contribution to the degrowth movement is a book by Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future*

is Degrowth, who write that degrowth aims to be controversial, “a provocation.” Given that they then go on to dispel at least six common misconceptions about degrowth, it is clearly a concept that lends itself to misconceptions. The most common misconception is that degrowth aims to reduce economic activity, via austerity, as an end itself. Instead, they clarify, degrowth is a critique of the growth paradigm in economics. “Degrowth also takes aim at policies promoting GDP growth precisely because growth does not differentiate between useful and destructive, essential and superfluous,” write Schmelzer et al. (p.24) Instead, what degrowth stands for is:

1. Democratizing the economy
2. Redistribution and social security
3. Democratizing technology
4. Revaluation of labor
5. Democratization of social metabolism [reorienting production and consumption towards more ecological outcomes]
6. International solidarity

None of these aims implies the degrowth of anything other than of harmful and unecological activities. Surely, if that is the only kind of degrowth that the movement means when referring to the term degrowth, then all ecologically minded individuals, including those in the green growth camp, would be in favor of degrowth.

In short, the problem with degrowth is really with the word, and not with what degrowth movement supporters say it stands for. It is an ambiguous word because, on the one hand, it argues against the economic growth compulsion of conventional capitalist economics, but when one takes a closer look at it, it says that it is not really in favor of economic degrowth, but mainly in favor of degrowing ecologically harmful activities. Not only that, but the degrowth movement also usually clarifies that its main target audience is the Global North and not the economies and societies of the Global South.

An additional problem with using “degrowth” for the movement is that unless one is well-versed in the movement’s proposed program(s) (which is difficult to do, since there are so many varieties), ordinary citizens who hear it for the first time are likely to be turned off by the term, since it does connote austerity and belt-tightening for everyone, not just for the top 10% or for those in the Global North.

Degrowth as a concept is not only easily misunderstood, but the very use of this word frames the issue in precisely the way that it says it does not want to frame it. Jason Hickel’s response to Robert Pollin’s criticism of degrowth makes exactly this point when he challenges Pollin’s commitment to economic growth: “We cannot let ourselves be dragged into framing our aspirations for a better world in the language of growth...” But using the word “degrowth” just reinforces that growth framing as well, even if the word is meant to imply a completely different vision. If the concept of growth is the main reference point, then turning it into its negative means that the framing remains, where growth = ecological destruction and negative growth (degrowth) = ecological sustainability. The degrowth movement can deny that this is what it means as much as it wants, but this is the clear implication.

There is an alternative, though, where we can frame the movement for ecological sustainability as a critique of the economic growth framework, without succumbing to the misunderstandings to which the word degrowth leads. Many in the environmental movement have thus taken up the term “post-growth” as being a far better alternative descriptor for the movement. Post-growth implies that we need to get beyond the GDP growth imperative while remaining agnostic as to whether economic growth is implied in a transition toward ecological sustainability. Post-growth also suggests a future in which the quality of economic activity is more important than its sheer quantity.

Degrowth? A Succinct Reaction

Michael Albert

Degrowth is a vague term. On the one hand, Degrowth arouses fear of personal impoverishment. On the other hand, Degrowth encompasses a wide array of policies that seek social enrichment. While Degrowth emerged from many sources and while it features many facets, it has few if any positive institutional commitments. Instead, Degrowth mainly features a thematic commitment. To avoid ecological disaster and even total ecological collapse, society needs to substantially cut production and consumption. Some Degrowthers say we must cut by as much as 90 percent. Other Degrowthers have in mind an unspecified but much lower reduction

In most accounts, the origin of Degrowth traces back to the 1970s and particularly, though not exclusively, to the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. A survey undertaken in 2014 found 220 Degrowth-focused texts. A similar survey in late 2020 found 1166 such texts. Other accounts now report upwards of 3,000 or more. So Degrowth is a rapidly growing focus in academia, but it also stretches beyond campuses, particularly in Europe (especially Spain) and to a lesser degree in North America.

One theme common to virtually all variants of the Degrowth school, movement, or perspective, (which of these you call Degrowth depends on how you assess it), is the observation that infinite growth on a finite planet must result in escalating ecological crises and eventual collapse. This observation owes first to Roegen who derivatively felt that even no growth, often called a steady state economy, wasn't viable. Roegen argued that society instead needed (and now needs) serious cutbacks. Regarding Degrowth writ large, it is often overlooked that the basic theme that you can't build infinitely on a finite foundation is trivially true. It is also often

overlooked that to use this truism to argue for Degrowth would by the same logic motivate that there should have always been Degrowth on our always finite planet. Roegen wanted major cutbacks in the 1970s. Were he alive at the time, he could with the same logic have called for them in 1790. Of course, he could reply now, but not then, yes but now we are hitting a wall. Now disaster looms. True, but unless elaborated, the finite planet argument doesn't say why particular outputs are bad. It doesn't say how to determine the worthiness or badness of production choices. It doesn't tell us under what conditions production we deem bad should be reduced or eliminated. It doesn't tell us what areas of growth are not only not damaging but even beneficial and sometimes absolutely essential.

What then, we might reasonably ask, is likable about Degrowth? If you seek to transcend gender, sexual, race, religious, ethnic, class, and political hierarchies of income, wealth, circumstance, and power, if you seek to attain a society that delivers diversity, solidarity, equity, self management, internationalism, and ecological sustainability/reciprocity, what should you like about Degrowth

It turns out, you should like quite a lot. Degrowth seeks decline of environmental pressures and avoidance of ecological crises and collapse. It seeks emancipation from certain ideologies deemed undesirable. It calls for sufficiency and care. It seeks to diminish gaps in income, wealth, knowledge, infrastructure, resources, and time within and between countries. It seeks to guarantee universal provision of fundamental human needs. It seeks to decentralize decision-making and to defend and reclaim the commons. Likewise, Degrowth frequently recognizes and rejects diverse social ills and

often quite explicitly rejects colonialism, capitalism, and markets. Also likable are many of Degrowth's specific proposals for ecological improvements like developing public transport, promoting collective rather than private goods, cutting luxury production, and (surprisingly not so often mentioned) cutting military production.

Okay, but then what, we might reasonably ask, might people who seek to transcend gender, sexual, race, religious, ethnic, class, and political hierarchies of income, wealth, circumstances, and power dislike about Degrowth? What might put off people who seek to attain a society that delivers diversity, solidarity, equity, self management, internationalism, and ecological sustainability/reciprocity?

First off, the name "Degrowth" is dislikable. To many people, it quite understandably connotes impoverishment. Likewise Degrowth's absence of positive institutional commitments even while calling itself a societal vision is dislikable by those who think a societal vision has to address not just values but also institutions. So too is Degrowth's tendency to go from observing that we live in a finite world to rejecting infinite growth which later no one proposes and which, more importantly, tends to direct attention only to amounts of stuff. Degrowth sometimes comes across as context and need independent. That is, Degrowth sometimes treats all outputs as, well, generic outputs, with little attention to differences in kind, value, and even impact. It tends to dismiss people's desires for "stuff" as nearly universally wrong-headed or greedy and thus as part of the problem. And not uniquely, Degrowth also often ignores the attractive or repelling effects of its words on certain wide audiences.

It should be noted, however, that Degrowth likability and Degrowth dislikability come in many and often entangled packages. The most dislikable Degrowthers make little mention of its worthy aspects while they call for essentially

genocidal cutbacks and castigate all but survival consumption. The most likable Degrowthers successfully avoid Degrowth's problematic aspects and put forth only its worthy proposals and sentiments. But most Degrowthers, I think it is fair to say, offer some from "column likable" and some from "column dislikable." When described in terms of its half full likable aspects, the Degrowth school, movement, or perspective has many virtues and someone like myself might even see it as consistent with a campaign aimed toward achieving a participatory economy and participatory society. But the same school, movement, or perspective, Degrowth, when described in terms of its half empty aspects, has many debits and someone like myself could even see it as seriously detrimental to outreach due to its off-putting aspects. One might see half empty dislikable Degrowth as an obstacle to clear economic thought due to it often lumping everything into one category called "too much output" which obscures important distinctions between different outputs—as well as due to its implicit denigration of advocating institutional alternatives due to its not advocating any.

So now what? Should we advocate for or should we denigrate Degrowth?

This is actually a question with wider applicability. Many schools of thought, movements, or perspectives have half full and half empty versions. In such cases, should we celebrate what we like and ignore what we dislike so as to fully positively advocate the orientation? Or should we instead castigate what we dislike and ignore what we like so as to fully reject the orientation? Be positive or be critical, that is the question.

A friend once told me of instructing his young child, "you can do x or you can do y, but you have to choose." And the little fella replied, "but daddy I don't like x and I don't like y." While sometimes "binaries" are real and we must choose one over the other, other times "binaries" are false and to choose either is senseless. Support or reject Degrowth? Which will it be?



THE ONLY
SUSTAINABLE
GROWTH IS
DEGROWTH

What if you feel that your whole-hearted support would give unwarranted credibility to the harmful aspects? Or, what if you feel that your whole-hearted rejection would rob warranted credibility from the helpful aspects? What if for either or both of those reasons you don't like whole-hearted support or whole-hearted rejection? What if you want to favor the good in hopes you can help enlarge the good and what if you want to simultaneously critique the bad in hopes you can help transcend the bad?

Conclusion: One should not be chased away from criticizing Degrowth by Degrowth advocates who say, "come on, stop nit-picking. Look at all the good stuff. Get on board. This train has traction." Well, maybe it does, but identifying serious problems is not nitpicking, and a train with serious flaws may be moving but it is unlikely to arrive where you want to go.

Similarly, one shouldn't be chased away from delivering compliments by Degrowth opponents

saying "are you kidding me? Lay waste to it, and in any case, certainly don't praise it. This train misleads, it distracts. The flaws are the heart of it." Well, maybe so, but trying to retain the positive is not alibiing the negative. It is trying to ensure that the train does good.

The point is, regarding Degrowth, we shouldn't be entirely rejectionist or entirely celebratory. We should support the likable elements and simultaneously reject the dislikable elements.

Consider an analogy. Many and arguably most critics of injustice see positive and negative aspects in the school, movement, or perspective called Marxism Leninism. But a great many let what they find positive about Marxism Leninism (for example support for struggle and rejection of private ownership, exploitation, and capitalist economic rule) close their eyes to what they would otherwise find negative. Many others let their sensitivity to what they find negative about Marxism Leninism (for example

authoritarianism, economism, support for the corporate division of labor, and enabling coordinator class economic rule) close their eyes to what they would otherwise find positive. Eyes wide in every direction is most often better than eyes closed in all but one direction.

Okay, but having gotten this far, suppose someone who has been a long-time progressive, radical, or revolutionary and who has therefore always believed in equality, environmental sustainability, a vastly reduced military, etc., were to ask me, “what does Degrowth add to my politics? Don’t what you call the good parts of Degrowth overlap with other left ideologies,

offering nothing new, and the parts that don’t overlap, those are the parts you reject as bad?”

I would have to answer that “yes, I think what you say is fair,” but then I would add that “not all of society is as progressive, radical, or revolutionary as you are. The Degrowth train, spurred by highly aroused ecological concern, is taking on passengers and also taking on lots of familiar movement insights. It also has some serious problems. So shouldn’t we seek to have it jettison its bad aspects and enlarge its allegiance to the good aspects, as well as add more of the latter?”



Photo: Hinweise zur Weiternutzung

Daniel Ellsberg Has Foiled Those Who Want Him Confined to the Past

Norman Solomon

In just a few words — “those who control the present, control the past and those who control the past control the future” — George Orwell summed up why narratives about history can be crucial. And so, ever since the final helicopter liftoff from the U.S. Embassy’s roof in Saigon on April 30, 1975, the retrospective meaning of the Vietnam War has been a matter of intense dispute.

The dominant spin has been dismal and bipartisan. “We went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or to impose American will on other people,” Jimmy Carter declared soon after entering the White House in early 1977. “We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese.” During the next decade, presidents ordered direct American military interventions on a much smaller scale, while the rationales were equally mendacious. Ronald Reagan ordered the 1983 invasion of Grenada, and George H.W. Bush ordered the 1989 invasion of Panama.

In early 1991, President Bush triumphantly proclaimed that reluctance to use U.S. military might after the Vietnam War had at last been vanquished. His exultation came after a five-week air war that enabled the Pentagon to kill upwards of 100,000 Iraqi civilians. “It’s a proud day for America,” Bush said. “And, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

Two decades later — delivering what the White House titled “Remarks by the President at the Commemoration Ceremony of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War” — Barack Obama did not even hint that the U.S. war in Vietnam was based on deception. Speaking in May 2012, after he had more than tripled the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Obama said: “Let us

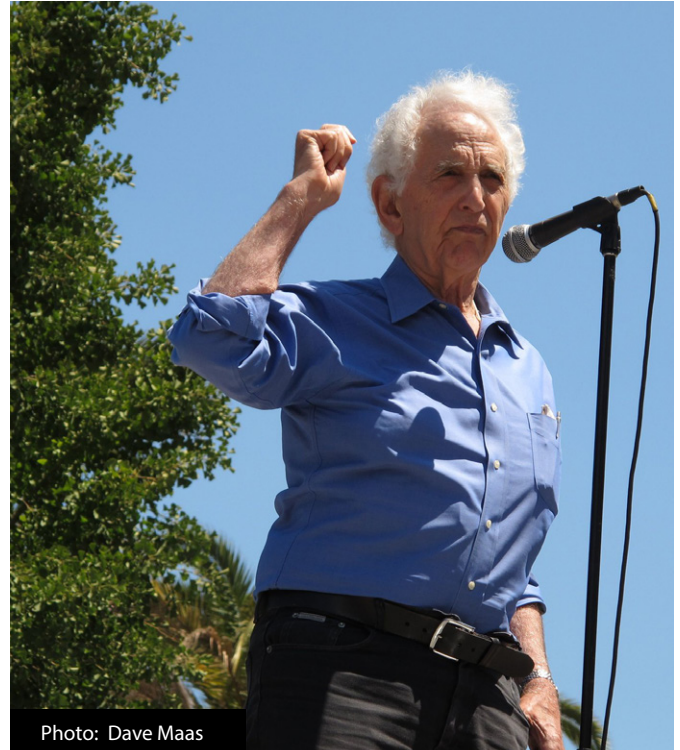


Photo: Dave Maas

resolve to never forget the costs of war, including the terrible loss of innocent civilians — not just in Vietnam, but in all wars.”

Moments later, Obama flatly claimed: “When we fight, we do so to protect ourselves because it’s necessary.”

Such lies are the opposite of what Daniel Ellsberg has been illuminating for more than five decades. He says about the Vietnam War: “It wasn’t that we were on the wrong side; we were the wrong side.”

Outlooks like that are rarely heard or read in U.S. mass media. And overall, news outlets have much preferred to make only sanitized references to Ellsberg as a historic figure. Much less acceptable is the Daniel Ellsberg who, since the end of the Viet-

nam War, was arrested nearly a hundred times for engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience against nuclear weapons and other aspects of the warfare industry.

After working inside the U.S. war machinery, Ellsberg became its highest-ranking operative to opt out — bravely throwing sand in its gears by revealing the top-secret Pentagon Papers, at the risk of spending the rest of his life in prison. The 7,000-page study exposed lies about U.S. policies in Vietnam told by four successive presidents. During the 52 years since then, Ellsberg has continually provided key information and cogent analysis of pretexts for U.S. wars. And he has focused on what they’ve actually meant in human terms.

Ellsberg has explained, most comprehensively in his 2017 landmark book *The Doomsday Machine*, what is worst of all: The nation’s military-industrial-media establishment refuses to acknowledge, let alone mitigate, the insanity of the militarism that is logically headed toward nuclear war.

Helping to prevent nuclear war has been an overriding preoccupation of Ellsberg’s adult life. In *The Doomsday Machine* — subtitled “Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner” — he shares exceptional insights from working for the doomsday system as an insider and then working to defuse the doomsday system as an outsider.

An upsurge of media attention to Ellsberg resulted from the emergence of other heroic whistleblowers. In 2010, U.S. Army private Chelsea Manning was arrested for leaking a vast quantity of documents that exposed countless lies and war crimes. Three years later, a former employee of a National Security Agency contractor, Edward Snowden, went public with proof of mass surveillance by a digital Big Brother with mind-boggling reach.

By then, Ellsberg’s stature as the Pentagon Papers whistleblower had risen to near-veneration among many liberals in media and others happy to consign the virtues of such whistleblowing to

the Vietnam War era. But Ellsberg emphatically rejected the “Ellsberg good, Snowden bad” paradigm, which appealed to some eminent apologists for the status quo (such as Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote a specious *New Yorker* piece contrasting the two). Ellsberg has always vigorously supported Snowden, Manning and other “national security” whistleblowers at every turn.

Ellsberg disclosed in a public letter in early March that he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, with a prognosis of three to six months to live. Now, in the closing time of his life, he continues to speak out with urgency, in particular about the need for genuine diplomacy between the U.S. and Russia, as well as the U.S. and China, to avert nuclear war.

Many recent interviews are posted on the Ellsberg website. Ellsberg remains busy talking with journalists as well as activist groups. Last Sunday, vibrant and eloquent as ever, he spoke on a livestream video sponsored by Progressive Democrats of America.

Grassroots activists are organizing for the national Daniel Ellsberg Week, April 24-30, “a week of education and action,” which the Ellsberg Initiative for Peace and Democracy, based at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, is co-sponsoring with the RootsAction Education Fund (where I’m national director). A central theme is “to celebrate the life’s work of Daniel Ellsberg, to take action in support of whistleblowers and peacemakers, and to call on state and local governments around the country to honor the spirit of difficult truth-telling with a commemorative week.”

No matter how much the defenders of the militaristic status quo have tried to relegate Daniel Ellsberg to the past, he has insisted on being present — with a vast reservoir of knowledge, an awesome intellect, deep compassion and commitment to nonviolent resistance — challenging systems of mass murder that go by other names.

Profits of Doom: Military Contractors Rob Us Daily

Tom H. Hastings

It's Budget Season in DC and the swamp is in full bloom.

Republicans refuse to offer a budget. Why is that? After all, they are demanding that Biden and his Democrats promise to make major cuts because Republicans are sooooo concerned about the debt ceiling, even though they are largely responsible for much of the massive national debt.

What the Republicans don't want to reveal is that their budget won't cut the huge items that do nothing for our communities. What the Rs want to cut are relatively small budgets that actually help working Americans.

But again and again they vow to "stay strong" on "national defense," and will vote to increase the DoD budget, already the largest in the world by far, eclipsing the combined total of all our adversaries plus a few of our allies.

Naturally, Kevin McCarthy is pronouncing on the Biden budget as DOA and on what great things his Republican budget will do, like cut Pentagon spending by...some amount that changes every time he makes another hollow promise. Other Rs have given him dire warnings against such pork trimming. McCarthy himself says that the areas to cut in the DoD budget are anything that has any whiff of "wokeism," including all efforts to make the military, for once, a bit less of an environmental polluter and consumer.

Meanwhile, the rightwing media, including nouveau conservative Politico, frames this debate as a country that should cut Social Security and Medicare but leave the Pentagon budget alone. Indeed, they refer to those trust budgets as "drivers" of the

debt and the smaller food and housing assistance budgets as "entrenched," as though sensible working Americans would like to see them cut but the darn libs won't yield.

Meanwhile, the war profiteers are gobbling up big bites from your paychecks.

Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing, General Dynamics, and other Pentagon contractors make outrageous levels of profits, due to a number of corrupt practices that riddle the military procurement practices, Congress, and the corporate benefactors. One hundred percent of their profits are paid for with the taxes removed from your pay, usually before you ever see it. Look at your pay information and you'll see why the Pentagon budget is a key factor in naming it a pay "stub."

I mean, we are still in a great deal of federal debt just for the illegal Iraq invasion and occupation, accounting for some nine percent of the debt. That was a Republican war, voted for and then voted for again and again with "budget supplementals," but those prudent Rs somehow overlook that.

Looking at my most recent stub, I see the amount withheld for federal taxes is approximately double than the total withheld for Social Security plus Medicare. Since about half of the fed taxes withheld will go to the Pentagon, that means that the Pentagon gets as much each paycheck of mine as Social Security and Medicare combined.

Those trust funds are crucial to more than 70 million Americans who receive these benefits, not to mention millions more who in turn rely on them.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program



(SNAP) is critical to some 41 million poor Americans. Of course that is on the Republican cut list. Saving a little money on the backs of poor Americans while lavishly bestowing military corporations is criminally callous, which is looking like a Republican value.

The combination DoD contracts with just two DoD contractors—Lockheed Martin and Raytheon—total several \$billion more than the SNAP budget. The thousands of other military contractors, in turn, receive far more funding than any of the special programs that help low-income Americans simply survive.

Even as they want to cut the small budgets that really help struggling Americans, the Pentagon maintains some 5,000 installations, big and small, around the world.

It seems that, according to the Republicans, it is your human right to pay for 14 Ohio-class nuclear submarines that carry 20 ballistic missiles with multiple thermonuclear warheads each and could literally kill most life on Earth. That fleet was ungodly expensive and now the Pentagon plans to decommission them all so they can purchase a new fleet, the Columbia-class. While the estimates are about \$128 billion for that outlay, the histo-

ry of submarine estimates vs actual costs would probably suggest multiplying that estimate by three or four.

But your health care, your higher education, and, for that matter, your access to housing or food is a privilege.

I mean, one looks at the daily Pentagon contracts and it's a giant fiscal farrowing house, with megatons of pork awarded every day. Many of the contracts exceed \$50 million, some exceed a \$billion, and quite a few are no-bid, cost-plus contracts that would never be acceptable in a legitimate contracting process.

By the time you add in the nuclear weapons budget (which is bizarrely in the Dept of Energy budget), Veterans benefits (in the Veterans Affairs budget), and something like 80 percent of the NASA budget—all of which are real military costs that need to be thought of like that—we are looking at the US military spending approximately \$5 billion each workday.

We either hold our lawmakers accountable or they will continue to fail us and reward war profiteers. It really is that simple.

The Tragic U.S. Choice to Prioritize War Over Peacemaking

Medea Benjamin, Nicolas J. S. Davies

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God. – Matthew 5:9

In a brilliant Op-Ed published in the New York Times, the Quincy Institute's Trita Parsi explained how China, with help from Iraq, was able to mediate and resolve the deeply-rooted conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whereas the United States was in no position to do so after siding with the Saudi kingdom against Iran for decades.

The title of Parsi's article, "The U.S. Is Not an Indispensable Peacemaker," refers to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's use of the term "indispensable nation" to describe the U.S. role in the post-Cold War world. The irony in Parsi's use of Albright's term is that she generally used it to refer to U.S. war-making, not peacemaking.

In 1998, Albright toured the Middle East and then the United States to rally support for President Clinton's threat to bomb Iraq. After failing to win support in the Middle East, she was confronted by heckling and critical questions during a televised event at Ohio State University, and she appeared on the Today Show the next morning to respond to public opposition in a more controlled setting.

Albright claimed, "...if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see here the danger to all of us. I know that the American men and women in uniform are always prepared to sacrifice for freedom, democracy and the American way of life."

Albright's readiness to take the sacrifices of American troops for granted had already got her into trouble when she famously asked General Colin Powell, "What's the use of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Powell wrote in his memoirs, "I thought I would have an aneurysm."

But Powell himself later caved to the neocons, or the "fucking crazies" as he called them in private, and dutifully read the lies they made up to try to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq to the UN Security Council in February 2003.

For the past 25 years, administrations of both parties have caved to the "crazies" at every turn. Albright and the neocons' exceptionalist rhetoric, now standard fare across the U.S. political spectrum, leads the United States into conflicts all over the world, in an unequivocal, Manichean way that defines the side it supports as the side of good and the other side as evil, foreclosing any chance that the United States can later play the role of an impartial or credible mediator.

Today, this is true in the war in Yemen, where the U.S. chose to join a Saudi-led alliance that committed systematic war crimes, instead of remaining neutral and preserving its credibility as a potential mediator. It also applies, most notoriously, to the U.S. blank check for endless Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, which doom its mediation efforts to failure.

For China, however, it is precisely its policy of neutrality that has enabled it to mediate a peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the same applies to the African Union's successful peace negotiations in Ethiopia, and to Tur-

key's promising mediation between Russia and Ukraine, which might have ended the slaughter in Ukraine in its first two months but for American and British determination to keep trying to pressure and weaken Russia.

But neutrality has become anathema to U.S. policymakers. George W. Bush's threat, "You are either with us or against us," has become an established, if unspoken, core assumption of 21st century U.S. foreign policy.

The response of the American public to the cognitive dissonance between our wrong assumptions about the world and the real world they keep colliding with has been to turn inward and embrace an ethos of individualism. This can range from New Age spiritual disengagement to a chauvinistic America First attitude. Whatever form it takes for each of us, it allows us to persuade ourselves that the distant rumble of bombs, albeit mostly American ones, is not our problem.

The U.S. corporate media has validated and increased our ignorance by drastically reducing

foreign news coverage and turning TV news into a profit-driven echo chamber peopled by pundits in studios who seem to know even less about the world than the rest of us.

Most U.S. politicians now rise through the legal bribery system from local to state to national politics, and arrive in Washington knowing next to nothing about foreign policy. This leaves them as vulnerable as the public to neocon clichés like the ten or twelve packed into Albright's vague justification for bombing Iraq: freedom, democracy, the American way of life, stand tall, the danger to all of us, we are America, indispensable nation, sacrifice, American men and women in uniform, and "we have to use force."

Faced with such a solid wall of nationalistic drivel, Republicans and Democrats alike have left foreign policy firmly in the experienced but deadly hands of the neocons, who have brought the world only chaos and violence for 25 years.

All but the most principled progressive or libertarian members of Congress go along to get along with policies so at odds with the real



world that they risk destroying it, whether by ever-escalating warfare or by suicidal inaction on the climate crisis and other real-world problems that we must cooperate with other countries to solve if we are to survive.

It is no wonder that Americans think the world's problems are insoluble and that peace is unattainable, because our country has so totally abused its unipolar moment of global dominance to persuade us that that is the case. But these policies are choices, and there are alternatives, as China and other countries are dramatically demonstrating. President Lula da Silva of Brazil is proposing to form a "peace club" of peacemaking nations to mediate an end to the war in Ukraine, and this offers new hope for peace.

During his election campaign and his first year in office, President Biden repeatedly promised to usher in a new era of American diplomacy, after decades of war and record military spending. Zach Vertin, now a senior adviser to UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, wrote in 2020 that Biden's effort to "rebuild a decimated State Department" should include setting up a "mediation support unit... staffed by experts whose sole mandate is to ensure our diplomats have the tools they need to succeed in waging peace."

Biden's meager response to this call from Vertin and others was finally unveiled in March 2022, after he dismissed Russia's diplomatic initiatives and Russia invaded Ukraine. The State Department's new Negotiations Support Unit consists of three junior staffers quartered within the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. This is the extent of Biden's token commitment to peacemaking, as the barn door swings in the wind and the four horsemen of the apocalypse – War, Famine, Conquest and Death – run wild across the Earth.

As Zach Vertin wrote, "It is often assumed that mediation and negotiation are skills readily available to anyone engaged in politics or diplo-

macy, especially veteran diplomats and senior government appointees. But that is not the case: Professional mediation is a specialized, often highly technical, tradecraft in its own right."

The mass destruction of war is also specialized and technical, and the United States now invests close to a trillion dollars per year in it. The appointment of three junior State Department staffers to try to make peace in a world threatened and intimidated by their own country's trillion dollar war machine only reaffirms that peace is not a priority for the U.S. government.

By contrast, the European Union created its Mediation Support Team in 2009 and now has 20 team members working with other teams from individual EU countries. The UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs has a staff of 4,500, spread all across the world.

The tragedy of American diplomacy today is that it is diplomacy for war, not for peace. The State Department's top priorities are not to make peace, nor even to actually win wars, which the United States has failed to do since 1945, apart from the reconquest of small neo-colonial outposts in Grenada, Panama and Kuwait. Its actual priorities are to bully other countries to join U.S.-led war coalitions and buy U.S. weapons, to mute calls for peace in international fora, to enforce illegal and deadly coercive sanctions, and to manipulate other countries into sacrificing their people in U.S. proxy wars.

The result is to keep spreading violence and chaos across the world. If we want to stop our rulers from marching us toward nuclear war, climate catastrophe and mass extinction, we had better take off our blinders and start insisting on policies that reflect our best instincts and our common interests, instead of the interests of the warmongers and merchants of death who profit from war.

Democracy or Apartheid: You Can't Have Both

Nour

For two consecutive nights this week, during the holy month of Ramadan, the Israeli military stormed Al-Aqsa mosque. They entered the mosque before prayer was over, firing rubber bullets, stun grenades, and tear gas at Palestinian worshippers. These events left at least 12 Palestinians injured, and over 400 were arrested on the first night. Following the raid, Israeli violence spread across the west bank. Dozens have been hurt by inhaling poisonous gas fired by Israeli forces, and a settler in occupied East Jerusalem shot a Palestinian child.

Following the raid on Al-Aqsa on Wednesday night, Israeli settlers were escorted to Al-Aqsa by Israeli forces on Thursday morning. Prior to their arrival, Palestinian worshippers were forced out so that it could be secured for the settlers for the first day of the Jewish Passover holiday. This double standard is not uncommon for Israel as it is inherent to the structure of the settler-colonial state. Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem (80% of the Palestinian population) under Israeli control are not citizens and cannot become citizens of the state in which they live, nor can they vote for the government which controls their lives. The other 20% of Palestinians, who have Israeli citizenship, have a 2nd class status.

Recently the world has witnessed Israeli settlers come together in an ongoing protest to protect their “democracy.” Since January 7, a crowd of over 100,000 have protested every Saturday in response to a judicial overhaul that was proposed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s far-right government. The protestors consider the reform plan, which has now been suspended, a threat to democracy.



But we must ask ourselves, what are these protestors really fighting to maintain? How can there be democracy in an apartheid state? Whose democracy is this?

The idea that Israeli “democracy” can be protected by blocking the judicial overhaul is a myth. Any plans Israel had for democracy were destroyed when they began the Nakba in 1948. In fact, the reform plan is a product of the settler colonial state, as it would allow the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes even more efficiently than before, a fundamental goal of the Zionist movement.

This is a fight to maintain and protect the status quo for Israelis, not Palestinians who have been denied all basic democratic rights under Israel since 1948. For Palestinians, there is no democracy.

Despite these blatant acts of unjustified violence committed by Israel, there is no outrage among Israelis. The tens of thousands of people who showed up just last week to protect democracy are suddenly silent. Moreover, Palestinian worshippers are beaten by Israel all the time, this violence is routine during Ramadan. In 2021, Israel unleashed an 11-day bombardment on Gaza during Ramadan and there has been no outcry by Israelis to prevent that from happening. This is evidence that the movement for democracy in Israel is not about democracy at all, but about maintaining the apartheid state of Israel as it has existed for the past 75 years – at the expense of Palestinians.

It is insulting for Israelis to launch this “democracy” movement when Palestinians have been ignored for decades. Meanwhile in the the United States, our government is the #1 foreign funder of Israel, which means we have a responsibility to hold them accountable. Yet, year after year a majority of Americans sit silent while our government aids and abets in Israel’s extremely undemocratic apartheid of Palstinians.

If the United States truly wants to spread democracy around the world, we must stop funding such blatant violence and human rights violations. You simply cannot have it both ways.



How Union Workers Are Fighting to Save America's Beleaguered Health Care System

Tom Conway

Among the handful of neurologically impaired patients in Judy Danella's care one day in March 2023 were three so ill that they struggled just to swallow.

She fed each of them in turn, delivering spoonful after spoonful of pureed food, patiently nourishing them toward better health even as she herself was stretched thinner by the minute in a facility that's chronically shorthanded.

Danella and her union coworkers at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey, wrestle every day with the understaffing crisis straining America's health care system to the breaking point.

Health care employers across the country long refused to hire adequate numbers of nurses, certified nursing assistants, dietary workers, and other essential staff, preferring to push skeleton crews to the bone and put profits over patients.

But now, the same health care workers who battled COVID-19 are fighting for the safe staffing levels needed to protect their communities on a daily basis and prevent the already-fragile care system from collapsing in the next pandemic.

U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois introduced legislation in Congress on March 30 to establish mandatory minimum staffing levels for nurses at hospitals nationwide. But in the meantime, citing the ever-greater urgency, union workers continue advocating for similar measures on a state-by-state basis.

Danella and fellow members of the United Steelworkers (USW), for example, will rally with workers from other unions at the New Jersey statehouse May 11 to demand passage of bills establishing minimum staffing levels for registered nurses in hospitals, ambulatory surgery centers, and state psychiatric facilities.

"You want to give the patient the best care you can," explained Danella, a registered nurse and president of USW Local 4-200, which represents about 1,650 registered nurses at the Robert Wood Johnson facility, a Level 1 trauma center.

The legislation, already introduced in the state Senate and General Assembly, would require one registered nurse for every four patients in an emergency department, one for every two patients in intensive care, and one for every five patients in a medical/surgical unit, among other provisions.

The bills also would give the nurses a voice in designing and implementing staffing systems that model future needs, deploy "floaters" to cover gaps, and provide further adjustments to better serve patients needing extra attention.

That's the kind of flexibility and forward thinking essential to providing proper care for all patients, especially on days when Danella needs up to 90 minutes just to feed three people.

"You prioritize your work," said Danella, explaining how she handles the constant stream of text messages alerting her to more tasks



assigned to her throughout her shift. “You just somehow get through the day, and you manage.”

Although Danella relies on her experience to handle whatever the hospital throws at her, industry-wide understaffing puts patients around the country at risk.

In Washington, for example, another state where union members are fighting for safe staffing levels, 48 percent of health care workers in a recent survey cited incidents of patient harm or deaths due to understaffing.

And in Michigan, where union workers have spent years fighting for minimum staffing ratios, 42 percent of nurses recently reported knowing of patients who died because of short-staffing. In 2020, nurses at a Detroit hospital filed a lawsuit claiming they were illegally fired for pointing out that short-staffing contributed to dozens of unnecessary deaths in the emergency department.

The Safe Patient Care Act, legislation that would have required hospitals to meet minimum staffing levels for registered nurses, died in Michigan’s Republican-controlled legislature during the 2022 session. Now, Jackie Anklam, president of USW Local 9899, hopes the Democratic majorities that took control of both chambers in January will enact minimum ratios for nurses and other groups of health care workers as well.

“It should be for all,” stressed Anklam, whose local represents hundreds of workers at Ascension St. Mary’s Hospital in Saginaw, noting union members in every department contribute to a collective lifesaving mission.

Anklam said current shortages force pharmacy technicians into brutally long days. Short-staffing also traps certified nursing assistants with high caseloads. And instead of hiring more environmental services workers, she said, the hospital increases workloads.

The staffing crisis affects not only hospitals but

facilities across the continuum of care.

The USW and other unions want the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to establish minimum staffing levels at nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, funded largely with federal dollars, that serve growing numbers of aging Americans.

The ratios would not only save lives but also decrease the amount of time residents wait for therapy as well as help dressing, bathing, and using the restroom.

In addition, Chris Sova, a registered nurse and president of USW Local 15301, said minimum staffing would help to address the stress that workers experience as they race to answer one call bell after another.

“In the background, it’s a constant dinging,”

said Sova, whose members at Bay County Medical Care Facility in Essexville, Michigan, take pride—despite their own staffing challenges—in answering call bells at high speed.

“It’s like the water dripping in the middle of the night,” Sova said. “It’s just one of the many things wearing on you.”

While workers receive extra pay because of short staffing, he added, “they just want more help.”

Danella knows that the hospital industry will continue to oppose staffing minimums and cut corners to fatten their bottom lines. But she said union workers refuse to back down because continuing shortages will only exacerbate staff turnover and put even more lives at risk.

“It’s just a domino effect,” she said.



Recent Strikes in Germany (a bit) and France (a lot)

Thomas Kilkauer

In recent months, we have seen workers who went on strike in Germany and France. Might this be a prelude to overturning capitalism, or are those strikes a sign that capitalism is actually functioning rather well? Whether the end of capitalism is in sight or not, these strikes have made news headlines in Germany, as in France.

Perhaps the recent strikes in both countries are a sign of no more than a “tradition”, a routine, a signifier of the function of trade unions inside capitalism. Yet, the goals of French and German workers could hardly be more different. Unlike in Germany, there is a revolutionary spirit on strikes in France.

Since the beginning of March, the streets in several French cities have been littered with garbage. Actually, mountains of garbage bags have been piling up – including the stench that comes with it.

Paris’s city administration has been discussing the almost 10,000 tons of uncollected rubbish in France’s capital. Almost self-evidently, corporate mass-media prefer to focus on the impact of the strike rather than the reason for a strike.

The strike by garbage collection workers has been part of the current protests against Macron’s so-called pension “reform” – an Orwellian euphemism. As so often, France has a head start in social protests. And the spirit of revolution still prevails in France.

Perhaps this might be a myth. In order to understand why “some” strikes and demonstrations in France do not really follow a revolutionary spirit, one might like to look at how trade unions work

in France. And one can contrast this to Germany’s.

Secondly, most people might find it interesting to follow how the presidential-parliamentary system of government in France governs labor relations and society. At times, France’s institutional setup seems to resemble more of a presidential monarchy than democracy – a rather telling assessment.

Undoubtedly – in Germany and in France – trade unions are legitimate bodies that represent the interests of employees. Yet, trade unions work rather differently in these two countries in terms of the way they are set up, their organizational forms, their goals, and procedures.

Historically, the formation and methods of trade unions on both sides of the Rhine have not been the same. Actually, the contrast has been so great that in many ways one could say that these are actually two opposing models of trade unionism.

Since its historical origins, both versions of trade unions separated even more. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, the French trade union movement has been characterized by what might be called political pluralism.

There are typical forms of French union organizations. On the one hand, this includes syndicalism. On the other, there are the accompanying political philosophies, and this includes anarchism, Marxism, socialism, and even Christian ideologies.

The discord among these political groups has resulted into something that might be called as numerically weak organizational structures. Ac-

According to a recent study published by the French Ministry of Labor, the overall level of trade union organization – in the public and private sectors combined – was just 10.3% in 2019.

It got as low as 8% in 2023 with a stark imbalance between private and public sector: 15% in the public sector and 5% in the private sector. Yet, real union power comes from collective bargaining and workers' readiness to go on strike. France's trade unions do not depend on the number of members they have.

Viewed simply in terms of numbers, French trade unions – on the surface – appear to be a minority movement. In addition to the trap of only looking at numbers, there is perhaps the most important point: syndicalism in France is strongly influenced by a long and successful tradition

of protests against the capitalist order. French unionism has never been about static organizations with registered members.

Basically, French trade unions are not just a means of defending the interests of the workers. Instead, they see themselves as an instrument for the transformation of the capitalist system. Although many trade unions in France would no longer invoke the revolutionary syndicalism's idea of direct action, they do participate in economic and social life in a variety of ways. Simultaneously, French trade unions remain suspicious of what became known as social dialogue as this incorporates trade unions into the structure of capitalism.

Instead of being incorporated, French trade unions favor confrontation, rather than engage-



ment, participation, and being built into capitalism. Many trade unions view the ideology of social dialogue as a severe limitation to their autonomy.

In particular, they reject any form of cooperation with employers and the state. This is seen as co-optation, pacification, and ultimately the corruption of trade unions. In short, French trade unions reject their incorporation into the apparatus of capitalism even when such a “cooperation” could be constructive.

This is also reflected in the fact that in France, most of the civil servants are allowed to strike. Meanwhile in Germany, because of a very long history that was shaped by Germany’s highly accommodating social democracy, German trade unions have developed more, as what might be described as a “homogeneous” mass movement. This means that party-political and philosophical differences have been moved onto the political sphere and away from trade unions and industrial relations.

After the lifting of Bismarck’s ban on trade unions in 1890 and as a result of the late industrialization of Germany, a different form of industrial unionism emerged. From 1914, powerful and efficient organizations were founded.

This leads to one of the most important points: at the end of the Weimar Republic and during the great economic crisis of the 1930s, conflicts between Social Democrats and Communists, as well as rivalries with the Christian trade unions, led to a weakening of the trade union movement.

By 1933, this led to the capitulation to Nazism with all the bitter consequences that followed. Luckily, German trade unions learned some lessons from history. In post-Nazi Germany, trade unions are convinced that never again should there be weak and divided trade unions. In short, German trade unions should never – again – capitulate to the state.

In post-Nazi period, Germany’s trade union movement was rebuilt based on party-political neutrality – the very opposite in France. Back in Germany, a quasi-unified trade union movement emerged after World War II.

The almost logical outcome was that there will be only one large union association: the DGB. The DGB is Germany’s peak body unifying several individual trade unions. While the DGB unites almost 6 million members, it is not divided among political or philosophical lines.

Overall, the level of trade union membership remains significantly higher in Germany than in France. This is mainly because German trade unions try to improve the immediate situation for workers through highly organized, ritualized, and regulated collective bargaining. This means working within the framework of existing capitalism.

Meanwhile, French trade unions are rejecting compromises, sells out, and sought mini gains that only strengthen capitalism, for the sake of a better future.

Nowadays, one can still feel the revolutionary spirit of France’s working class. From a German perspective however, this is seen as being rather counterproductive. At the same time, the weakness of French trade unions and their unwillingness to compromise demands the acceptance of certain obligations that come with such a rejection. This prevents French trade unions from taking on tasks that would render them being mere ornamentations to capitalism.

Averse to the incorporating ideology of social dialogue, French trade unions put conflict in the foreground. This means rallies, demonstrations, protests, strikes at individual companies, and even a general strike by almost all workers throughout France. Based on this tradition, some seek to overturn capitalism. By contrast, German trade unions are more confined about all this while existing within the imperatives of capitalism.

On the surface, it is no coincidence that the economic and industrial situation in France is often presented as “miserable” by corporate mass media even though France’s HDI ranking remains high with a health system far above Germany.

While the German economy bases its growth on the competitiveness of companies and aggressive exports, economic policy in France focuses on household consumption and purchasing power. Yet, when it comes to pension “reforms”, Germans have been made to accept the worsening of their system.

Germany’s economy also remains based on the reduction of wage costs. For German capitalism, these are more important than maintaining the purchasing power of its people, specifically the pensioners. In France, the opposite is the case.

Meanwhile, in France, many remember the Yellow Vest movement that seems to have remained active. Three years after its so-called “demise”, the Yellow Vests are back again. Once again, the much sought after “law and order” in France is being threatened by those unruly protesters nationwide. By early 2023, the issue was still on Macron’s neoliberal pension policy.

As a response to Macron’s neoliberal ideology, the closure of France’s most important refineries occurred – among them is the oil giant TotalEnergies, a refinery in Donges.

Meanwhile, there were also a garbage collection strike, disruption to train and air traffic, and a strike at schools was organized. Meanwhile, French demonstrators clashed with the police. These semi-militarized police force was sent to protect companies and, ultimately, capitalism from striking workers.

In some cases, bus stops were damaged, and garbage cans lit up. The flip side of the coin is that French trade unionists actually had very little room to maneuver when defending pensions.

Meanwhile in neighboring Germany, strikes are seen as a last resort. In France, strikes are – to a certain extent – a preliminary stage signifying the start of negotiations. Beyond all that, the French aversion to social dialogue emerged not only because of trade unions. Instead, it is shared by a not insignificant number of employers, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises.

This is not without consequences. For one, it requires the constant intervention of the state, which, in fact, is the real regulator and arbiter of France’s industrial relations. Unlike in Germany, where the state limits itself to setting minimum working conditions, in France however, the state intervenes in contractual relations in a variety of ways. It has passed many laws on all essential areas of working life.

Ironically, the so-called revolutionary spirit in France leads to the fact that trade unions and companies are dependent on the state to ensure social progress. Finally, there is at least one more important point to be made. The French government can easily pass rafts of legislative rules.

If a government does not have an absolute majority in the National Assembly (France’s parliament), the government can extract paragraph 49.3 of the Constitution in order to pass a bill “without” a parliamentary vote. In short, the state bypasses democracy.

This is exactly what Emmanuel Macron has been doing to push through his neoliberal pension “reform”. Interestingly, for the term “reform”, the Oxford Thesaurus suggest “improvement”. Yet, Macron’s pension “reform” is not an improvement. It makes life in France worse, not better.

If the head of the government initiates this procedure, France’s members of parliament will only have the opportunity to apply for a vote of no confidence within 24 hours. Such an initiative by France’s right-wing National Rally (RN) narrowly failed in the National Assembly, recently.

Article 49.3 has already been used eleven times in Élisabeth Borne's cabinet. And a hundred times since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Besides all the politicking, some sarcastically say, in Marseille the garbage cans overflow even without a strike.

In reality, the recent protests in France are more than just a revolutionary form of democratic participation. They are also and above all, a form of a popular revolt not just because of French trade unionism's tradition of protesting against the capitalist order. It is also against the current system of government that stabilizes capitalism.

In the midst of all this, the 39th congress of the French Communist Party – held in Marseille in early April 2023 – was largely dominated by the current struggle against Macron's neoliberal pension changes. Yet, current resistance is not limited to those plans which, after all, are rejected by two-thirds of the French population.

It is also about much broader issues and they are directed above all against social injustices. These had been on a sharp increase of inequality because of the neoliberal policies of President Emmanuel Macron and his government.

Even today, many argue that the French communists remain indispensable in the fight against Macron's neoliberalism. It still has an important role to play. Those who predicted the end of history and the disappearance of French's Communist Party 30 years ago, were seriously mistaken.

Although the ideals of communism are burdened by the negative experiences with Stalinist attempts to implement some of communism's ideas during the 20th century, French communists are convinced that the basics of communism are still valid today. Even today, communists agree, that the unbridled rule of capitalism is doomed for failure.

The Communists even see their ideals confirmed by a recent survey in the French newspaper *L'Humanité*. According to the survey:

- 83% of French people still consider class struggle to be important;
- 73% of supporters of France's right-wing Republican party also hold this opinion;
- 80% of respondents believe that areas such as health, education, and housing should be protected from competition in the interests of all citizens;
- 72% of the respondents consider it extremely important that employees should have a greater say in the companies;
- 64% are convinced that it is possible to create a society based on cooperation and power sharing; and,
- 56% believe that the capitalist system is the main culprit of global warming.

All this comes as a no surprise. Meanwhile, France has just invested €413 billion (\$450bn) in arms and weapons – allegedly to prepare for war. On the other hand, about €7 billion (\$7.7bn) will be missing from France's pensions in five or six years – a comparatively meager sum.

Worse, the state has recently given €150 billion (\$164bn) of public money to 40 of France's largest companies which just made a net profit of €80 billion – a record amount!

At the same time, France has 43 billionaires who collectively own €500 billion (\$545bn). Simultaneously, there is tax fraud and tax evasion. This alone amounts to a loss for the state of €100 (\$109bn) to €140 billion (\$152bn), annually.

Worst of all, now the French are being asked to tighten their belts and work two more years just because a few billion euros could be missing from pension payments. Perhaps capitalism and neoliberalism aren't the solution but the problem that evil heretics might claim.

Transcending Frogs

Michael Albert

Put a match directly under a frog and the frog will seek escape. Slow boil a frog in a pot and the frog will passively boil to death. All frogs fail this “frog test.” Can all people, or many people, or even just some people handle our desperate social circumstances better than frogs handle theirs?

I viscerally hate being apocalyptic, but the simple truth is we are all taking this test. We are all boiling above escalating fascism, nuclear incineration, ecological disintegration, and perhaps AI domination. These four fires heat the social pot we swim in. So we simultaneously face four frog tests. And it is final exam time. And our preparedness, our performance, and thus our prospects look piss poor. Why is that? Why might we fail the frog test?

I think most people who consider this question might suggest that to keep our approach manageable we should consider one potential apocalypse at a time. It is good advice if we want to understand each apocalyptic threat. But for understanding peoples’ responses, highlighting the details of four barbaric variants on one recurring “people in a pot” situation might miss important human factors. It’s better to skip a detailed look at the four dangers and start from the observation that while frogs are frogs and are all alike so that they all fail, people are people and each one often hugely differs from the other one. Again, however, to try to address how all our many personal differences impact a full answer would likely miss the forest for the trees. So, I here consider only one main human difference. Regarding the four phenomena that threaten to boil our bodies into annihilation, only a few of the people in the social pot rule. The rest are ruled.

Those who rule don’t just accept suicidal policies. They pull levers and turn dials to pursue them.



Those who are ruled are the rest of us. We resist or die.

The rulers typically live way above the social pot’s bottom. Their riches and handlers cool their slowly over-heating asses. But ultimately, they are in the pot too. Collectively they have access to means to curb the boiling, and even, if they joined with the ruled in the endeavor, to end the boiling. Why don’t they turn the burn dial to off for those already suffering most, for those nearest the flames? Or callous to the poor, why don’t they turn the burn dial at least low enough so they themselves don’t burn? And if not for us all, or not for themselves, then why don’t they do it for their kids and their kid’s kids?

Imagine all the rulers having dinner in their big houses. Imagine a thug breaks in and enters their dining room and declares that he is going to kill the kids, then the adults. Do Mr. Ruler, Mrs. Ruler, and teenage and baby Ruler just sit there passively? Do they calmly await their proclaimed fate? Do they even invite the thug to have some dinner with them before their executions and provide the thug kitchen knives? I suppose maybe in a few houses they do. Maybe those few hope for a last-minute reprieve or intervention. But I bet not many aid their own murder. Nope. The adults try to save their kids. Indeed, all try to save all, with few exceptions.

So why don't our rulers see/hear/feel our fascist, nuclear, ecological, and AI threats and defend against them? Remember, at this point, we are only talking about billionaire rulers and their multi-millionaire sidekicks. We are not yet talking about you and yours.

I suspect a frequent reason the rulers ignore the dangers is that during their passage to power, their faculties have become so attenuated that they literally can't see or hear the threats. Another reason is likely that they consider themselves immune. Third, perhaps they see the threats, but they reason, "If I acknowledge and try to address the threats, I will be demoted from ruler to ruled and whoever replaces me will be worse than me, so I need to hang on to my credibility and power on behalf of justice and good." And perhaps some are just plain pathological and don't give a damn about anything other than their own wealth and power. They want what they can take and all else be damned, right down to the final curtain. Judge them? Not much point. They are who they are. You might even be able to enjoy some of them as clever conversationalists at a dinner partner. Others you might want to quick freeze or slow fry to oblivion. But the replacement dynamic, about which they are quite right, makes such approaches dubious for the social pot's future.

So what about the ruled? What about everyone who might read this short rumination on survival modes for facing the frog test? Our temperature is steadily rising. What works to prevent our reacting as vigorously as needed? Media-fueled confusion? Fear of repression? Magical thinking that this too will pass? The belief that there is no better world to win? Doubt we can win? Or all of the above?

It seems evident that all the above play a role, but as the temperature climbs and it becomes ever clearer that we are on the verge of suffering the fate of slowly cremated frogs, doesn't the importance of confusion, repression, and wishful thinking decline? Don't the importance of doubt that there is a way to permanently turn off the burners, and doubt about our capacity to implement it grow in importance?

So, if true, what does all this say to a person in the social pot who sees the dangers and who wants to enlist and join with others to ward them off and then eliminate their causes?

1. Correct confusions? Yes.
2. Reduce and overcome repression? Yes.
3. Deny magical, wishful thinking? Yes.
4. Explain how vastly better results are possible? Yes.
5. Demonstrate how individual choices can implement a winning collective strategy? Yes.

We are in a frog pot. It is sitting over serious flames. We must act. But it won't be enough to prioritize tasks 1, 2, and 3, but ignore tasks 4 and 5. That approach would deliver an incomplete recruitment message. It would make our situation evident, but it would not cause enough of us to act to remedy it. We would become smart but cynical frogs who boil unto doom.

We need to understand our plight. We need to be brave. We need to set aside wishful, magical thinking. But don't we also need to develop and share vision and strategy that is able to inspire, sustain, and guide successful activism?

Lying About Lying: Why We Must Revisit the Definition of ‘Fake News’

Ramzy Baroud

The phrase ‘fake news’ continues to be deployed routinely in US politics. In a polarized political atmosphere, both Republicans and Democrats distrust media organizations affiliated with opposing parties. This means that most of what is uttered or written by CNN is ‘fake news’ for Republicans, and much of what appears in Republicans-affiliated media is ‘fake news’ for Democrats.

The phrase is now so prevalent and has multiple meanings to the point that it is impossible to agree on a common definition. Even ‘fact checking’ organizations or news desks contribute to the troubling phenomenon of ‘fake news’ by selectively fact-checking news and information affiliated with one side of the political aisle, while ignoring the other.

Some traced the ‘fake news’ story to a small Eastern European town called Veles, in Macedonia. This particular claim is associated with Craig Silverman, a media editor at BuzzFeed. “We ended up finding a small cluster of news websites all registered in the same town,” Silverman was quoted by the BBC. The objective of these websites seemed mostly financial, ‘clickbait’ as they are called, to lure in unsuspecting users to seemingly unlikely headlines.

Later, the term became very political. It was former US President Donald Trump who publicized the term, making it the major phenomenon seen today. Mike Wendling of the BBC, however, claimed that it was Trump’s staunch rival in the 2016 US Presidential elections, Hillary Clinton, who first used the term in a speech in December of the same year.

Actually, ‘fake news’ predates both Clinton and Trump. When I first moved to the US over two

decades ago, I recall my total shock at seeing the headlines of print tabloids, always positioned at the center of major US grocery stores: From unsubstantiated celebrity scandals, to ‘breaking news’ about aliens impregnating human females before returning to their home planet. Even as a newcomer to the country, it was obvious to me that such rubbish was also ‘fake news’. Sadly, these tabloids were often sold faster than legitimate newspapers, which suggests that the biggest challenge posed by ‘fake news’ is our gullibility and willingness to engage with it.

In the modern definition, ‘fake news’ has grown to also include people with opposing opinions, whether these opinions are based on facts, selective facts or utter fiction. Many of us, as journalists, are caught in this impossible labyrinth. No matter what we do to demonstrate the authenticity of our sources, we continue to be haunted by ‘fake news’ allegations.

The generational struggle for independent media organizations and journalists has been the constant push to create as much space as possible between them and the whims of politics and politicians. Recently, however, such a distance has shrunk significantly to the point that once-respected news organizations in the US have turned into the equivalent of political party pamphlets of old.

In 2018, Trump announced his “Fake News Awards”, to be ‘granted’ to journalists in liberal media organizations that opposed him. Fact-checkers of these organizations have dogged him, ever since. His ‘information’ and often exaggerated statements made him the perfect target. Joe Biden is hardly held to the same standards, not only for allegedly making false statements but,

sometimes, for what appears to be more gibberish than proper English. Though Biden's funny memes, based on declarations made in various public appearances, are stable on social media, they are rarely examined by respected news outlets.

But can we trust mainstream media in their application of the phrase 'fake news'?

Noam Chomsky, one of the most articulate critics of mainstream US media and the author of 'Manufacturing Consent,' defined mainstream media as "corporations (which) are basically tyrannies, hierarchic, controlled from above. If you don't like what they are doing you get out. The major media are just part of that system."

Chomsky's analysis suggests that those who make accusations of 'fake news' can themselves be the purveyors of 'fake news,' if such information con-

veniently serves those who control these organizations "from above", especially as "most of them are either linked to, or outright owned by, much bigger corporations".

For us in the Global South, falsified information did not originate from the small town of Veles in Macedonia, or with Clinton's speech or Trump's 'awards.' 'Fake news' has been part and parcel of western colonialism, from its onset centuries ago, to neocolonialism of recent times.

Back then, the lies that often led to wars, invasions and military occupations were not called 'fake news' but 'false flag' operations. Many historians now understand that the casus belli behind the Spanish-American war in 1898 – the explosion of the US battleship, USS Maine – was based on a lie, or 'fake news'. Iraq's non-existent so-called weapons of mass destruction, which led to the invasion of the once-powerful Arab country in 2003 was also fake news, involving made-up stories of uranium yellowcake from Niger and the dodgy 'secret British dossier', and other fibs.

Palestine was invaded by Zionists based entirely on 'fake news', claiming that the land – historic Palestine – had no inhabitants – "Land without a people ...". The Palestine-linked 'fake news' is arguably the most powerful of any colonial lie. CNN fact-checkers hardly bother to prove that God did not 'promise' Palestine to the Zionists and that Palestinians are not the aggressors, but the victims of Zionist-western settler-colonialism.

It behooves us all to expand the definition of 'fake news' beyond the US-western-centric purely political definitions waged by Republicans against Democrats and vice-versa. Lies, deceit, half-truths, misinformation and outright 'fake news' have been the driving force behind corporate media reporting for many years. It is now becoming more obvious simply because those manipulating the media discourse "from above" are losing control over their own narratives.

