



MAGAZINE

JUNE 2026

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Let's Show Some Love

Looking After Our Planet

The Middle East
Continues to Suffer

There Are Better
Alternatives



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- Rob Okun



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Title photo: Tina Modotti, Woman with Flag, 1928

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From Doom Scrolling to Civic Action

Saskia Karges

The modern world is grappling with a paradox of connectivity. The average person spends two to three hours every day scrolling through social media, we are linked by screens but still consumed by an epidemic of loneliness. We live in digital isolation inevitably comparing our ordinary lives to those of influencers in reels overloaded with filters. Psychological disorders are on the rise, with depression and anxiety disorders among children and teenagers being at an all time high.

At the same time, public spaces are increasingly marred by trash and vandalism, while local municipalities lack the funds to maintain the basics. Regardless of the massive revenues they absorb, our tax burden feels like an abstract punishment rather than a contribution to a better life. To break this cycle, we need to fundamentally rethink how we fund and maintain our communities—starting by turning our most wasted resource into local value.

The Time for Tax Exchange

Most of us already harbor a quiet resentment toward our own smartphones and our compulsion to scroll. So, what if we used this time for what we are missing out on through social media? Something as unheard of as actual social interaction. What if we reclaimed this wasted digital time, and turned it into tangible local value by investing it into our own neighborhoods while at the same time reducing our cost of living?

The concept is simple: Imagine a system where fifty hours of community service per year results in a full waiver of municipal waste fees. For a household in a typical town, this could save five hundred euros annually. Fifty hours might sound like a significant commitment at first, but it represents less than the time the average person spends on social media in just twenty-five days. When shared across a house-

hold, the burden vanishes, replaced by a direct financial benefit and a cleaner environment. For those already actively contributing, such as members of the volunteer fire department, the waiver would apply automatically.

By using the national digital identity or a local tax code as an anchor, every hour is logged and accounted for. This creates a transparent balance sheet for the town, showing exactly how collective effort has reduced the tax burden for the entire population.

A Digital Marketplace for Local Tasks

To make this actionable, municipalities need to move away from vague calls for volunteers and toward a transparent, task-based system. Every town could maintain a public homepage where specific, urgent needs are listed. The work is diverse and hits every corner of civic life. One Saturday might involve a collective effort to deep clean the local library or a group mission to remove invasive plant species along the riverbank. Other tasks focus on social infrastructure, such as accompanying senior citizens to medical appointments, providing babysitting for working parents, or offering homework support for struggling students. Even safety can become a community effort, with residents taking shifts at crosswalks during school hours to protect children.

Every community is home to a wealth of dormant expertise. There are retired electricians with decades of knowledge, hobbyist gardeners with professional-level skills, and tech-savvy students who can fix any software issue. A retired teacher might spend two hours a week on homework help, earning a tax credit while providing a vital service that the town could never afford to fund through traditional means.

Consider, for example, a park suffering from neglect and broken benches. Currently, a citizen pays taxes and hopes the city eventually hires a contractor to fix the damage. The process is slow and the resident remains a passive observer. In the new model, the task is posted online: repair of vandalized benches and seasonal tree pruning. When you are the one holding the tools to maintain the park, your relationship with that space changes instantly: It becomes “your” park. The psychological impact is profound. Vandalism and littering will drop because the residents now view the infrastructure as an investment of their own life force rather than a faceless government asset.

The Social Dynamics of Participation

The traditional measurement of economic success, such as gross domestic product, completely ignores the value of parents raising children or neighbors looking after the elderly. These activities are seen as economically invisible until someone is hired to do them. The community hour system partially repairs this flaw by making care work a valid way to pay local taxes. This creates a powerful multiplier effect. When someone provides two hours of tutoring, they save on their taxes. This in turn could give a single mother two extra hours of time, which she can then use to either perform her own service hours in the park or simply find relief from the relentless pressure of her daily routine.

Moving toward a community-based labor system will inevitably change social interactions. It will remove barriers. In a close knit setting, such as a village, a new form of social visibility emerges. People see who is rolling up their sleeves and who is choosing to pay the full tax rate to opt out. While this creates a form of group pressure, it also builds a new hierarchy based on contribution rather than just wealth. It fosters a culture where active engagement is the standard for being a good neighbor. This shift moves the focus from individual consumption toward collective maintenance, ensuring that the village does not need to grow larger to become more beautiful and functional.

The Expert as a Community Guide

A common concern regarding this model is that amateur work might lead to poor results. This is where the role of the professional evolves: instead of a local gardener or mason working alone, they become instructors for the community. The municipality pays the professional to oversee large projects, such as the restoration of a historic wall or a major landscaping effort. The expert provides the tools, the safety protocols, and the technical guidance, while a team of volunteers provides the labor. This makes the professional more productive and protects their physical health, while the quality of the work is guaranteed.

This master and apprentice model on a municipal scale acts as an organic recruitment tool for the trades. Many young people have lost touch with manual work and have no idea if they would enjoy it. By performing social hours under the guidance of a professional, they get a risk-free introduction to different crafts. A student might discover a talent for masonry while repairing a park wall, leading to a future career. At the same time, the office worker gains a new respect for manual labor after spending a day under the direction of a skilled carpenter. This breaks down social bubbles and restores the dignity of craftsmanship.

Critics will argue that this system is less efficient than the modern market. From a pure speed perspective, they are right; it takes longer to teach ten amateurs how to prune a tree than it does for a single professional to do it alone. But this institutional speed is a false metric. By distributing skills throughout the population, a community becomes truly resilient. People learn how to fix small problems before they turn into expensive disasters, developing the self-efficacy that comes from seeing the direct results of their work. By replacing passive scrolling with active collaboration, we repair the very social tissue we lost to pandemic isolation and algorithmic loneliness. Ultimately, our towns stop being a place where people merely live, and become a shared workshop where we actively create our own future.

Power, Men's Silence, and the Urgent Need to Overhaul Masculinity

Rob Okun

This is a call to action for men. How can so many of us stay silent in the face of an ongoing epidemic of men's sexual and domestic assaults against women—including rape?

Enough is enough. We have to do better.

In just the past month, the U.S. has seen a relentless drumbeat of male-perpetrated violence: mass shootings at social gatherings, a string of urban gun deaths, and one of the deadliest incidents in years—a Louisiana man who killed multiple family members, including children, in a domestic violence-driven attack. As of early May, the Gun Violence Archive reported nationwide more than 100 mass shootings. These are the incidents that make headlines. They don't include the largely unreported acts of domestic abuse and sexual violence crimes overwhelmingly committed by men.

Then there's the multiyear investigation into sexual assault allegations involving United Farm Workers cofounder César Chávez, along with the political fallout surrounding former congressmembers Rep. Tony Gonzales and Rep. Eric Swalwell, are among recent cases to surface. The list is long—and shows no sign of abating. The Guardian reports that over the past two decades at least 53 allegations of workplace sexual harassment have been made against more than 30 members of Congress.

Consider a small sampling of perpetrators from the early years of the #MeToo movement: Roger Ailes, Mario Batali, Louis C.K., Andrew Cuomo, Matt Gaetz, Matt Lauer, Conor McGregor, Bill O'Reilly, Charlie Rose, Russell Simmons, Kevin Spacey, Mike Tyson, Harvey Weinstein. Here's another sampling—from the Epstein files: Former Prince Andrew, Jean-Luc Brunel, Deepok Chopra, Alan Dershowitz,

Glenn Dubin, Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, Marvin Minsky, Les Wexner. The files reveal not simply individual depravity, but vast networks of male power, access, and protection.

Nearly a decade after #MeToo emerged, reports of abuse by powerful men continue to surface at alarming rates. Today, such cases are more likely to be documented—and sometimes prosecuted. Yet a deeper truth persists: the behavior has not fundamentally changed—only its visibility.

For decades, feminist thinkers have named exactly what we are witnessing. bell hooks described patriarchy as a system that trains men into dominance. Gloria Steinem linked personal violation to political power. Robin Morgan, Gail Dines, Jennifer Pozner, Liz Plank, and V (Eve Ensler) have each exposed how misogyny is normalized through culture and institutions.

These aren't isolated incidents. They are manifestations of a system.

One way to understand—and change—that system is to look at the often-overlooked work of profeminist men. For more than half a century, in the United States, Canada, and beyond, these men have challenged sexism and male violence, working to transform masculinity from dominance toward accountability and care.

Emerging after women's consciousness-raising movements of the 1970s, this work continues today through organizations such as MenEngage Alliance, Equimundo, MVP Strategies, Next Gen Men, and A Call to Men, among many others. Yet their efforts remain largely invisible in mainstream media, which prefers the spectacle of abuse over the substance of change.

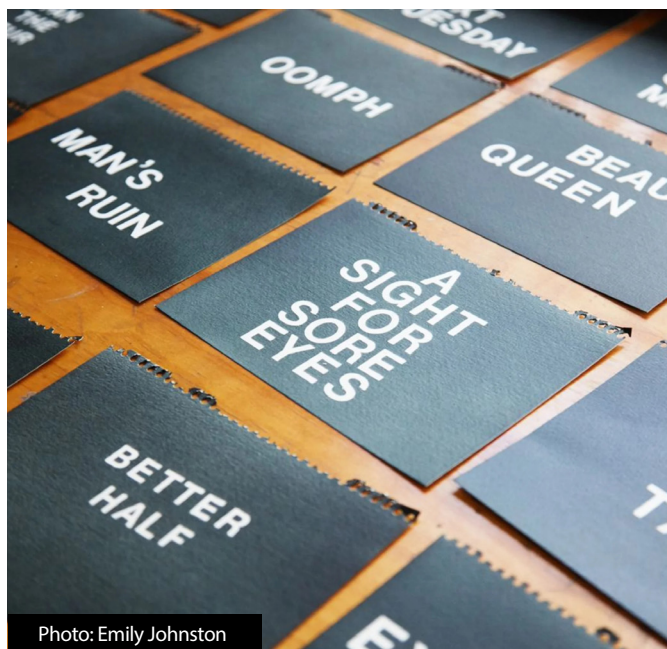


Photo: Emily Johnston

There's something deeply wrong with a media ecosystem that amplifies the "manosphere" while ignoring decades of profeminist, antisexist men's work. Why hasn't MS NOW's host Nicolle Wallace, who recently began regularly invoking the "manosphere", ever meaningfully covered men working for gender justice?

Since 2020, reports of sexual misconduct have surged again. Donald Trump has been found liable for sexual abuse. Sean "Diddy" Combs was also convicted and faces multiple lawsuits. NFL quarterback Deshaun Watson has been accused by more than 20 women. Actor Danny Masterson has been convicted of rape.

And still, too many men remain silent.

This is where educator-author Jackson Katz offers indispensable insight. In his Substack, *In the Arena*, reflecting on Swalwell, Katz argues that the issue is not only individual perpetrators, but the systems and peer cultures that enable them. The "bystander approach", he writes, is not about isolated acts of courage—it is about transforming the norms of entire communities.

Men often know, or suspect. Or, they hear rumors, but they don't act.

Katz, author of *Every Man: Why Violence Against Women Is a Men's Issue*, has long argued that true leadership requires men to challenge other men. Silence = complicity. Bystander intervention means interrupting harmful behavior early, questioning abusive dynamics, and refusing to normalize misogyny.

Which brings us to the "guy code": the unwritten rules of male culture—loyalty, silence, protecting status. Speaking out risks exclusion, backlash, even professional consequences. So men stay quiet.

Silence is also not passive; it's enforced.

Breaking that code is essential. It means men calling each other out—in locker rooms, workplaces, offices, and private conversations. It means redefining loyalty—not as protecting other men, but as protecting those harmed.

The DOJ is refusing to release two-and-a-half million Epstein files. Donald Trump's name appears more than anyone. What are they hiding? Reps. Ro Khanna and Thomas Massie cannot carry this burden alone.

Is it a pandemic without a vaccine? Katz says no. There is a vaccine: cultural transformation rooted in accountability. A long-term strategy involving education, peer leadership, institutional reform, and men willing to break ranks.

For years, profeminist men—myself included—have spoken of "redefining" masculinity. But this moment makes clear: masculinity, as currently constructed, is a system—of power, reinforcement, and silence. It cannot simply be rebranded. It must be overhauled.

And that overhaul begins with men: speaking up, intervening, refusing complicity, and standing with the women who have been naming this reality all along.

The question is no longer whether we understand the problem. The question is whether we men are finally willing to confront it in ourselves.

How a Different Kind of Education Built the World's Most Equal Democracies

Sandra Ericson

The United States is a nation of extraordinary wealth and extraordinary contradiction. Tens of millions of Americans live in material insecurity, while aggregate wealth continues to expand. Institutional trust remains fragile, and the systems meant to deliver stability—healthcare, housing, education—often do so unevenly. These are not random misfortunes. They are the predictable outcomes of a social order organized in particular ways, reflecting deeper assumptions about how individuals relate to one another and to the systems that govern their lives. The education system, in particular, can serve as a compass for shaping social systems.

Human ecology offers a way to understand these patterns and systems. It is the study of the relationship between human beings and the totality of their environment—biological, social, economic, and cultural. It asks not only what policies exist but also how entire systems of life are structured and how those structures shape human possibility over time. Culture does not merely influence human development abstractly—it shapes the brain at the neural level, organizing the architecture of attention, emotion regulation, moral reasoning, and social perception in patterns that persist into adulthood.

This perspective helps explain why Nordic societies have developed high levels of trust, equality, and social cohesion, while the United States continues to struggle with fragmentation and inequality. It also helps illuminate why new political movements in American cities are beginning to resonate with community-based ideas rooted in interdependence and shared well-being. The Global Bildung Network continues to connect educators, policymakers, and institutions work-

ing to integrate human development, civic participation, and social welfare into public life.

Human ecology and the foundations of social democracy

Nordic schools are not primarily understood as preparation for the labor market; they are understood as arenas for civic and human formation within the *Bildung* tradition of folk education. There, every student matters equally because society's interest in every child is equal. American schools, by contrast, have long carried the dual burden of democratic aspiration and industrial sorting—simultaneously promising equality of opportunity while structuring themselves to reproduce economic hierarchy. This duality has become increasingly visible over time and shapes how educational systems function today.

Human ecology makes the structure underlying these outcomes visible. It frames individuals not as isolated actors, but as participants embedded within multiple, interacting systems—families, schools, economies, and governments—that shape their development and their life chances. From this perspective, social outcomes are not incidental. They are produced by the alignment—or misalignment—of these systems. Human communities flourish or fail based on how equitably they distribute resources, opportunity, and care.

Human ecology is the study of the relationship between human beings and the totality of their environment—biological, social, economic, and cultural. When applied in educational settings, it integrates this understanding into lived learning, allowing students to see how individual choices



Outdoor classroom

and collective systems interact in real time. Critically, this learning is experiential—lessons are lived in classroom and lab settings, not merely memorized—allowing students to understand interdependence as a practical reality rather than an abstract principle.

It cultivates what might be called ecological citizenship: the understanding that personal well-being and collective well-being are not competing values, but deeply entwined.

The formative window

The single most well-established finding in the science of human development is that childhood,

from birth through adolescence, is the period during which the brain is most neuroplastic and most receptive to the values, habits of mind, and social identities that will define the person across a lifetime. Culture does not merely influence child development abstractly—it shapes the brain at the neural level, organizing the architecture of attention, emotion regulation, moral reasoning, and social perception in patterns that persist into adulthood.

These are not lessons that are easily replicated later in life. They gradually solidify into the cognitive and emotional infrastructure of the adult self, preparing it for independent living. This is one of the primary mechanisms by which cul-

tures are formed. In this sense, efforts to cultivate more humanistic, ecologically grounded, and democratically oriented cultures are shaped in early life, through the thousands of daily interactions in which a child learns what kind of world they inhabit and what kind of person they are expected to become.

The Nordic proof of concept

This educational concept has been tested and validated across more than 150 years of Nordic history. The Nordic countries today rank among the world's most equal, most trusting, and most consistently happy societies: Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway hold top spots in the 2025 World Happiness Report, and Denmark, Norway, and Finland rank first, fourth, and fifth, respectively, on the U.S. News Quality of Life Index. Citizens in Norway work an average of 27 hours per week and enjoy universal healthcare, free university tuition, and generous parental leave. These social outcomes were built over generations, beginning with a revolution in their education system. These developments also unfolded within relatively high-trust, socially cohesive societies, where shared norms and institutional continuity reinforced their effects over time. Norway's 1936 Folk School Reform reflects the revolution's long-term benefits for all the Nordic countries.

The 19th-century Danish theologian, poet, and philosopher Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig watched an uneducated peasantry enter the democratic era unprepared for self-governance and concluded that no amount of Latin grammar or classical instruction would equip ordinary people for citizenship. What they needed was *Bildung*—a living education grounded in history, culture, and civic life. In 1844, the first folkehøjskole (folk high school) opened in Denmark, embodying this vision: no grades, no degrees, no formal credentials, but open discussion and treating every student as a whole person capable of self-directed growth. The schools spread rapidly across Scandinavia, becoming vital nodes

in the labor movement, in cooperative economic organizing, and in the broad project of building participatory democracy from the ground up.

Bildung did not remain in the schools. Within five years of constitutional reforms in Norway, educational reforms followed, and when social democratic labor parties rose to power across Scandinavia in the 1930s, education reform was listed as a top priority alongside democratic rights and equal justice. Citizen-building didn't stay in the schools but also became part of "third spaces" across towns throughout the region. By 1974, Norway's curriculum had been reformed into an educational system designed for democracy. It imposed legal obligations on teachers to cultivate open-minded, participatory attitudes in their students. The result was not only a policy change but also a civilizational shift toward becoming a society that has learned, across generations, to govern itself from the inside out.

Finland today exemplifies this legacy in its educational outcomes. All Finnish teachers hold master's degrees and are selected from the top third of university graduates. Despite spending 23 percent less per student than the United States—\$11,212 annually versus \$14,321—Finland ranks 8th globally in education, while the United States ranks 31st. When Finland first led the international PISA assessments in 2000, it did so with a school-to-school variance of only 8 percent—meaning even its weakest schools produced capable, flourishing students. The United States, by contrast, exhibits severe achievement gaps stratified by race and socioeconomic status, firmly structured into the education system by its reliance on local property-tax funding that concentrates resources in wealthy communities and starves poor ones.

The roots of American educational failure

Understanding why American education has consistently failed to cultivate democratic, humanistic citizens in so many schools requires

excavating its historical foundations. Horace Mann, the “father of American public education,” built the public school system influenced by three powerful forces: the emerging industrial age needing to grow a disciplined workforce; Calvinist Protestant theology, which prioritized moral self-regulation and hard work, deferring the benefits until later; and liberalism, which believed that civic life required literate, law-abiding citizens. Mann drew his structural model directly from Prussian compulsory schooling—a system designed by the Prussian state to produce obedient, productive subjects for industrial and military order. He imported its logic to Massachusetts and centralized oversight, standardized the curriculum, made attendance compulsory, and instituted professional teacher training through what were called the ‘normal’ schools.

Crucially, Mann also saw the public school as a mechanism of social control—a means of absorbing waves of Catholic immigrants, suppressing labor radicalism, and instilling in working-class children values of deference and non-rebellion. His 1848 Annual Report explicitly argued that common schooling would protect property and social order by shaping children before they could develop dangerous political consciousness. This ideological heritage—a confluence of religious orthodoxy, industrial capitalist requirements, and social order management—has never been fully transcended in the American educational tradition. It explains the persistent emphasis on rote learning, standardized measurement, competitive individual performance, and workforce preparation that defines American schooling today, and its persistent failure to cultivate the cooperative, democratic, and holistic civic formation that Grundtvig’s *Bildung* offered the Nordic countries.

The contrast in governing philosophy is notable. Where the Nordic model asks whether a child is flourishing as a full human being, the American model predominantly asks whether a student is meeting government benchmarks—a question shaped more by industrial production logic than

by a broader philosophy of human development. The result is a society that produces workers and consumers far more reliably than it produces citizens engaged in shaping their own social and economic conditions.

The transformation only education can deliver

Human ecology programs in U.S. public K–12 schools could address several of these systemic gaps. Graduates of a human ecology curriculum would enter adulthood with the tools to understand and navigate the local, state, and national systems shaping their lives and to recognize inequality as structural rather than natural. The social democratic principles at the curriculum’s core—such as interdependence, shared responsibility, equitable resource distribution—would be taught not as an ideology but as lived experience, practiced daily from kindergarten through high school graduation.

This concept gained national attention in the 1970s when Urie Bronfenbrenner at Cornell University began formalizing his human ecological model and presented its fullest early statement in his 1979 book, *The Ecology of Human Development*, which quickly influenced thinking about how programs and policies shape children’s environments. His work on Head Start in the 1960s and his later ecological systems theory framed laws, institutions, and social programs as broad national systems that powerfully shaped everyday settings like families and schools. He set up a template through the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University to enable and support multi-level policy-thinking.

Bronfenbrenner’s model shifted thinking about both policy and human lives by showing how human development is shaped—from families and schools to workplaces, communities, and national culture. It contributed to ecological policy design by showing that laws, institutions, and social programs at the “outer” levels filter down into everyday settings, aligning across multiple

levels rather than focusing only on individuals. For understanding human life, his policy template reframes people not as isolated actors but as players embedded in many dynamic systems over time, highlighting how historical events, economic cycles, and long-term stress or support accumulate to influence people's life chances and well-being.

On the climate crisis, the case is especially compelling. Young people educated in place-based civic science, who learn to understand their local environment as a shared commons and connect it to global ecological challenges, develop what researchers identify as “a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves,” which buffers against despair and builds agency. Studies of adolescents engaged in environmental civic action confirm that collective, place-based learning builds young people's conviction that coordinated effort can actually address the climate emergency. This kind of psychological agency is a key precondition for the political will that meaningful climate action requires, and it tends to emerge through sustained, lived learning rather than short-term messaging. It must be cultivated in schools, in schools where Human Ecology programs are core.

Learning environments that help students trace violence and inequality to structural exclusion and systemic forces can equip them with deeper analytical tools. Children educated to think ecologically understand that their prosperity is not in competition with others'—that the degradation of any part of the human system weakens the whole. On health, the effects are generational: because lessons are lived daily in family and community practice, socially beneficial values and healthy habits compound across generations, reducing the staggering medical and social costs the United States pays for homelessness, incarceration, public assistance, and social and civic fragmentation. Preventing these outcomes upstream is often more effective than addressing them after they emerge.

The seed and the harvest

History suggests that cultures do not change in election cycles. The Nordic countries did not become the world's most equal and most genuinely democratic societies because of a single election or a single policy. They developed along this trajectory over generations, beginning with Grundtvig's folk high schools in the 1840s, which emphasized education oriented toward cooperation, participation, and shared civic life. These developments also unfolded within relatively high-trust, socially cohesive societies, where shared norms and institutional continuity reinforced their effects over time. That orientation was formalized in law, education, and in the habits of civic life for more than a century. Its results, in happiness, health, equality, and democratic vitality, are widely recognized.

Mayor Zohran Mamdani's New York is telling America that hunger for a better life exists in their city, too. Voters who turned out for free transit and rent freezes were not merely voting for policies; they were voting for a vision of life organized around human dignity and mutual responsibility. His election reflects a broader response to what American possibility might mean under changing conditions. But that vision cannot rest on a single gifted mayor. It requires a generation of citizens, educated to understand why it is right, why it works, and how to build it—not as followers of a charismatic leader, but as people who have known since childhood that they belong to one another.

The capacity to build such systems depends on how societies cultivate an understanding of interdependence, participation, and shared responsibility over time. These capacities are shaped across multiple domains—education, institutions, and civic life—rather than through any single reform. Planted early, these capacities can grow across generations. The children learning within these systems are not simply participants in the present—they are the conditions of the future. The question is not whether change is possible, but whether the systems that produce it are cultivated with intention.

Women Face the Greatest Climate Risks but are Critical to Climate Action

Ruhi Bhasin

The climate crisis is worsening many of the economic and social inequalities already faced by women and girls, making it harder to access health care, education, employment, and other necessities. Women in rural communities are especially vulnerable because many depend directly on agriculture and natural resources to support their families. As extreme weather events become more frequent and severe, these existing pressures are becoming harder to navigate.

As the United Nations has noted, the climate crisis is not “gender neutral.” Women, girls, and children are 14 times more likely to die during extreme weather disasters than men, facing higher rates of displacement and structural inequalities that limit their access to information, mobility, and resources. “An estimated 4 out of 5 people displaced by the impacts of climate change are women and girls. Acute disasters can also disrupt essential services, including sexual and reproductive health care, compounding the negative impacts for women and girls,” stated the United Nations.

How the Climate Crisis Is Affecting Women and Girls

Extreme weather disasters push many women and girls into increasingly precarious situations almost overnight. The torrential rains in Pakistan in 2022 claimed 1,700 lives and affected millions of people. This “extreme weather condition,” resulting from climate change, led to widespread damage and loss but affected women like Sajida severely, robbing many like her of their dreams and aspirations.

Recounting the ordeal she and her family went through, she told UNICEF, “We had nothing to eat for 15 days. My whole family got malaria, and we couldn’t access medicines or hospitals as Khairpur

was drowned.” Unable to keep up with her studies after returning to school, she did poorly in her exams and failed to advance to the next class. “Her parents did not have enough funds to help her repeat another school year. ... she wanted to grow up to be a doctor, but poverty and repetitive climate catastrophes have robbed her of these aspirations, turning her into a refugee seeking shelter from the battering rains,” stated the UNICEF blog.

In Pakistan, the floods didn’t just rob women and girls of education opportunities but also left almost 650,000 pregnant women without access to health care and forced them to give birth without any medical help. Moreover, research has shown that “extreme heat increases incidence of stillbirth, and warming global temperatures are helping to spread vector-borne illnesses such as malaria, dengue fever, and Zika virus,” stated a UN Women article.

Natural disasters resulting from climate change also lead to more child marriages as families seek to lessen the burden of having to provide for a girl child when resources are already scarce. Those already struggling face greater instability and debilitating poverty after a climate crisis, leading to more cases of conflict-related sexual violence and human trafficking.

“Humanitarian programmes tend to be heteronormative and can reinforce the patriarchal structure of society if they do not take into account sexual and gender diversity,” pointed out Matcha Phorn-in, a lesbian feminist human-rights defender.

Exacerbating the inequalities women and girls struggle to overcome, the climate crisis makes it even harder for them to access the support, stability, and resources needed to recover and adapt during weather catastrophes.

Gendered Perspectives Need to be Part of the Climate Solution

For climate policies to have an impact, women's equality and empowerment need to be integral to the policy consideration. This requires giving women a seat at the table when important decisions are taken about the climate crisis and ensuring that they have better access to resources.

“By integrating gender considerations into national climate plans, countries can address the distinct needs and adaptive capacities of women and men and ensure equitable access to and sharing of benefits,” stated the UNDP.

Women make up a significant share of the agricultural workforce in many developing countries and produce up to 80 percent of the food supply. Yet despite this central role, many women farmers still lack equal access to resources, technologies, services, and information about adaptation measures, cropping patterns, and weather events. According to the UNDP, these inequalities contribute to lower productivity and wages while leaving women more exposed to the impacts of climate change.

Providing greater access to agricultural resources and information for women can help build more resilient solutions to the climate crisis, especially at the community level. Ensuring that women, especially Indigenous women, are more involved in forest governance can result in more “effective and lasting solutions to deforestation and climate change impacts.”

Women Are Integral to Resolving the Climate Crisis

Any meaningful response to the climate crisis requires the equal participation of women, as they are not only the most affected by the issue but also have the tools and knowledge that hold the key to offering sustainable solutions. “Higher women's political participation has been shown to lead to improved environmental sustainability. ... Moreover, women's

local knowledge of sustainable resource management and their community leadership play a critical role in advancing climate change mitigation and adaptation. They are also important for recovery and resilience across sectors, from water management and food security to nature-based solutions and circular economy,” according to the UNDP.

For instance, Paran Women Group, an Indigenous women's organization that brings together members of the Maasai and Ogiek communities in Kenya, has cultivated dryland and generated livelihoods through sustainable agriculture, beekeeping, and Indigenous tree nurseries.

Women are also responsible for 70 to 80 percent of all purchasing decisions in wealthy countries and are more likely to recycle, minimize waste, and save water and energy at home. “By leading behavior change and consumer attitudes, women can drive change across sectors. At the political level, research shows clear linkages between women's leadership and action to tackle climate change. For example, studies have found that countries with higher proportions of women in parliament are more likely to ratify international environmental treaties and have stricter climate policies. ... It is time to invest in women as a strong force for change, leading the way to a more sustainable future,” stated the UN.

As climate instability worsens, women's involvement in environmental decision-making and local resilience efforts is becoming essential—not just for representation, but for building climate solutions that reflect the realities communities are actually facing.

Right from the rural women in the Himalayan region in India who participated in the Chipko movement or “tree-hugging” movement in the 1970s to prevent 2,000 trees from being felled to the Indigenous women activists and allies protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, women have been on the frontlines of protecting and nurturing the environment, being “deeply embedded in the history and practice of climate justice.”

The Long History of Controlling Water — and Why It No Longer Works

Jeremy Rifkin

The defining signature of the past 6,000 years of human civilization is the domestication of the hydrosphere—capturing, damming, canalizing, reorienting, propertizing, privatizing, consuming, profiting from, depleting, and poisoning it. From ancient hydraulic civilizations to the hydro-powered superdams, reservoirs, canals, and ports of the 21st century, water has been repurposed for humanity, often at the expense of millions of other species that depend on it.

Harnessing the hydrosphere has shaped societies and the distinctiveness of cultures across history. The design of hydraulic infrastructure has partially fated societies to the entropic costs that led to their demise—and sometimes collapse. Unlike in the past, the entropic consequences of water use during the fossil-fuel-based Industrial Revolution—the water-energy nexus—have eclipsed localities, regions, and continents, propelling Earth into the sixth extinction of life.

Now, the hydrosphere is freeing itself, spasming in ways unimaginable half a century ago. Waters are breaking loose as Earth warms, altering water cycles and producing effects humans can scarcely manage. A conversation is beginning about mobilizing collective efforts to free the waters and allow the hydrosphere to self-evolve. These responses are admirable and imperative, reflecting our learning to let go of infrastructural restraints imposed over centuries.

Roughly 70 percent of Earth's surface is water, but only 2.5 to 3 percent is fresh water, and only a fraction is readily accessible. A 2021 study found that less than 19 percent of land remains wilderness, as human development has diminished or eliminated ecosystems worldwide. Increasingly, the hydrological cycle is reshaping the planet—deconstructing

infrastructure and rewilding landscapes—leaving humanity to adapt to a new nature.

During the industrial era, urban and suburban communities were built over once-vibrant floodplains, which were drained, dammed, and diverted. In Great Britain, 90 percent of wetlands have disappeared, along with much native wildlife, as urban-industrial landscapes expanded. Efforts across the U.K. and elsewhere aim to free rivers, restore floodplains and habitats, and decommission dams, teaching us to adapt to water rather than force water to fit development. These efforts are urgent, as intensifying hydrological cycles threaten rural and urban infrastructure. Citizen scientists and volunteers, working with marine biologists and local governments, are rewilding fish nurseries and salt marshes and supporting projects that absorb carbon, reduce flooding, and restore native species.

While oceans were reduced to property and remain under severe strain, scarce freshwater has also been commodified and controlled in the global marketplace by a handful of corporations. Until the late 20th century, fresh water was largely administered publicly as a common resource. Over the past half-century, it has increasingly been seized by private companies and transformed into a tradable commodity. In practice, private companies often have little incentive to upgrade infrastructure or lower costs. Unlike public systems, market-based utilities must maintain revenue and profit margins even if populations remain stable, leading to the continuous extraction of value, especially in water and sanitation services, where communities have few choices.

Despite evidence of privatization's shortcomings, ten global companies dominate the water utility market. They profit from government incentives,

charge high water prices, and sometimes compromise service quality. In the United States, industry-owned utilities typically charge 59 percent more for water and 63 percent more for sewer service than local government utilities. Privatization can also increase financing costs for water projects by 50–150 percent, while municipalities that resumed public operations achieved average savings of 21 percent across water and sewer services.

A lingering misconception is that a warming climate means we are running out of water. While heavier rainstorms and floods are widely acknowledged, they are often treated separately from droughts. In reality, the planet is not running out of freshwater; a rewinding hydrosphere driven by climate change is altering the seasonal timing, intensity, and duration of precipitation. Global hydraulic civilization remains locked into a water cycle suited to a temperate climate that no longer exists, leaving humanity unable to reliably access water for consumption, industry, or agriculture when and where it is needed.

The long-term solution is to reset humanity's relationship with the hydrosphere—adapting to the waters rather than attempting to control them. A growing suite of initiatives, including “Slow Waters,” “Sponge Cities,” “Nature-Based Systems,” and “Green Infrastructure,” reflects this shift. These approaches move away from centralized, hyperefficient hydraulic systems designed for Holocene-era predictability and toward adaptive systems responsive to the rewinding hydrosphere of the Anthropocene. Philosophically, they shift the focus from managing water to stewarding it—going with the flow rather than attempting to direct it.

This distributed approach emphasizes hands-on engagement by local populations in their ecosystems, echoing commons governance while leveraging technologies. Movements like “slow water,” inspired by the “slow food” and “slow cities” movements, encourage communities to abandon hyperefficient extraction, commodification, and overconsumption, and instead adapt locally to natural rhythms and cycles.

Erica Gies, a journalist who writes on water issues and climate change and coined the term “slow water,” emphasizes that water in its natural state does not always rush across the land surface but also has “slow stages,” seeping into soil, settling in wetlands, or nestling into groundwater caverns. This, she says, is “where the magic happens,” providing habitat and food for many forms of life above and below ground. “[T]he key to greater resilience... is to find ways to let water be water, to reclaim space for it to interact with the land.”

The problem is that global hydraulic civilization is designed to sequester water quickly: storing it in artificial reservoirs, pumping it through pipes to irrigate crops, generate electricity, and supply homes and businesses, then rapidly recycling wastewater back into the system. Little room is left for natural absorption or ecosystem renewal.

Urban growth has compounded this dynamic. Dense urban and suburban communities are often built atop former wetlands, rivers, and streams, leaving rain with nowhere to go. Water instead floods impermeable asphalt and concrete, preventing infiltration and depriving soils and ecosystems of moisture. In China's urban sprawl, for example, less than 20 percent of precipitation running off buildings and pavement soaks into the soil, with most diverted into drains and pipes. In Beijing, where pumped groundwater long supplied the population, the water table has been dropping by roughly a meter per year, with largely ignored consequences. Allowing waters to follow their natural flow is essential to humanity's realignment with the planet.

Across the globe, experiments are underway to reintroduce ecosystem-friendly water management practices, though most remain pilot projects. Engineers, urban planners, and landscape architects are implementing bioswales, rain gardens, and permeable pavements to restore hydrological balance. Bioswales are shallow channels planted with native grasses, shrubs, and flowers, and layered with soil, mulch, and stones to slow rainwater and filter pollutants such as fertilizers, motor oil, and



Photo: Gregg M. Erickson/Wikimediacommons

litter. Rain gardens perform a similar function in a bowl-shaped design that “captures, stores, and infiltrates rainwater.” Permeable pavements—made from porous concrete, asphalt, interlocking pavers, or plastic grids—allow rain and melted snow to penetrate underlying soil rather than run off hardened surfaces.

Green rooftop gardens also slow runoff while moderating urban heat. As the Environmental Protection Agency notes, these elevated gardens “provide shade, remove heat from the air, and reduce temperatures of the roof surface.” If widely adopted, green roofs can reduce city-wide ambient temperatures by up to 5 degrees Fahrenheit, allow more water to sink into the soil, and reduce electricity demand.

More integrated strategies, such as “sponge cities,” reintroduce natural water flows into urban areas.

Developed by the late Chinese urbanist Kongjian Yu, sponge cities reduce flooding by slowing rainwater through natural landscapes, allowing it to seep into the ground or be stored underground for later use. Rapidly growing cities like Izmir, Turkey, are implementing site-specific models to capture water for dry seasons and reduce flood risk. Urban planners often cite targets such as 30 percent green or permeable surface coverage, as recommended in frameworks like the C40 Urban Nature Accelerator, as a baseline for stormwater absorption and flood mitigation.

As climate change intensifies the water cycle—bringing heavier snowfall, torrential floods, prolonged droughts, heatwaves, and hurricanes—harvesting rainwater has become a priority even in high-tech cities. Traditional cistern systems, from Jordan to Las Vegas, are being adapted and scaled, sometimes integrated with sensors and digital

networks, to store and distribute water locally and capture winter rains for dry seasons.

Between 2018 and 2020, the United States Agency for International Development Small Projects Assistance program supported Peace Corps volunteers and local communities across nine municipalities in four Mexican states in installing rainwater harvesting systems in 68 homes, 23 schools, and 23 community centers, capturing 1,633,330 liters of water. Local engineers, working with volunteers and neighborhood crews, installed 12,000-liter cisterns in homes and 50,000-liter cisterns in schools. Similar efforts are now being replicated worldwide, as communities increasingly collect seasonal rains to endure drought-prone periods.

Among the more ambitious efforts is the One Million Cisterns for the Sahel, sponsored by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Water harvesting and storage systems are being installed across seven Sahelian countries—Senegal, Gambia, Cabo Verde, the Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali. The initiative targets the most vulnerable rural communities in these arid and semi-arid regions, all of which experience massive floods followed by repeated droughts. These increasingly wild gyrations in the water cycle, the FAO notes, “are devastating for the poorest rural households, who struggle with these shocks and see their vulnerability worsen.” The program emphasizes training communities to construct, manage, and maintain cisterns, with particular attention to engaging women through “cash-for-work” activities to ensure equitable stewardship of water resources.

Even highly industrialized nations are adopting water harvesting. States such as Rhode Island, Texas, and Virginia offer tax credits for rainwater harvesting equipment, though restrictions remain on the amounts and uses eligible. Beyond climate adaptation, decentralized water systems also provide resilience against cyberattacks or sabotage of centralized infrastructure. Neighborhood water microgrids can maintain water flow even when main pipelines fail.

A “water internet,” embedded with IoT sensors, is increasingly deployed in reservoirs and pipelines to monitor pressure, equipment wear, leaks, and water quality, enabling predictive maintenance and more efficient management. In the United States alone, nearly 6 billion gallons of treated water are wasted daily due to leaking pipes, metering inaccuracies, and other system failures, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers. Other countries face similar losses. Studies increasingly recommend distributed water microgrids—analogue to decentralized energy systems—that enable local treatment, storage, and reuse.

The Omega Center for Sustainable Living pioneered on-site water purification systems that mimic natural processes. Water is drawn from an aquifer, pumped to cisterns, used in buildings, then treated through eco-machines and aerated lagoons before returning to the aquifer in a closed loop. Modern systems are scaling up in homes, hotels, and factories, using membrane filtration, ultraviolet light, and chlorine to treat gray and blackwater for reuse. Combined with local harvesting of sunlight and wind, decentralized water systems democratize access to a vital resource and could reduce water demand by up to 75 percent.

These distributed initiatives give cities resilience against floods, droughts, and heatwaves, but they also raise questions about whether megacities—built atop vast centralized hydraulic infrastructure—are suited to a rapidly warming planet. Dense urban hydraulic civilizations over the past 6,000 years have shaped the Earth for humans; the challenge now is adapting humans to the planet. These water initiatives are waystations on the path to rethinking our relationship with nature.

At a moment when the human family is despairing about the future, the Age of Resilience offers a new and powerful narrative, which, if widely embraced, could lay the foundation for a radically different future—bringing humanity back into nature’s fold and giving life a second chance to flourish on Earth.

Toxic Metals, Sulphur & Coal Dust: The Battle To Clean Up The Worst Air in South Africa

Adem Ay

When Mel Mandy gave birth to her first child twenty-five years ago, the doctor told her off for smoking while pregnant. Her boy had been born with underdeveloped lungs, a common condition in the newborns of smokers. But Mandy had never smoked a cigarette in her life. The problem was where she lived.

Mandy is one of the nearly two million people who live in South Africa's Vaal Triangle. The coal-rich region, 60km south of Johannesburg, encompasses three cities, wealthy suburbs, impoverished townships, and some of the most polluting industries in existence, including the largest steel plant in Africa, a petrochemical plant, and a coal-fired power station.

One of Vaal's cities, Vereeniging, is by some measures the most polluted city in the world. Its air regularly registers the highest recorded concentrations of toxic emissions known as PM2.5, microscopic particles which can penetrate lung tissue and cause cancers, cardiac problems, and other diseases.

Mandy lives in a town called Meyerton, just east of Vereeniging. Her house stands 6km from a manganese smelter, once the largest in the world, where giant coal-fed furnaces produced an alloy used to strengthen steel. Officially, the smelter was allowed to pump out emissions for one hour a day. According to Mandy, it belched out black smoke all night under the cover of darkness. "Some nights, the sulphur smell was so strong it would burn your nose," she recalled.

Her son suffered repeated lung infections, and her younger daughter developed severe asthma. Mandy emailed the government repeatedly for years about the emissions. Eventually the nation-

al environmental enforcement agency, known as the Green Scorpions, got in touch. The Green Scorpion was apologetic – the agency was too short-staffed to investigate. But if Mandy could source any data to back up her claims, they might be able to prosecute.

So Mandy met with an epidemiologist at Wits University in Johannesburg, who got in contact with a neurologist studying the health effects of manganese at Washington University, USA. It turned out that this manganese smelter was the only one in the world to operate right beside residential areas, and in 2013 the neurologist and the epidemiologist co-launched a study into the plant's manganese-laced pollution and its health impacts on nearby communities.

The study involved establishing air monitoring stations, and collecting toenail or hair clippings from locals. The focus was on Sicelo, an impoverished township that reached up to the very edge of the smelter. Mandy became a fieldworker, recruiting a growing pool of participants and ensuring tests went smoothly. The Green Scorpions were invited to look at the dataset, which was showing how proximity to the smelter increased rates of parkinsonsim, cognitive decline and depression – all symptoms of manganese poisoning. Two years later the agency prosecuted the smelter's owners, Samancor, for failing to monitor and manage its pollution.

The owners pled guilty, paid fines of around \$300,000, and promised to undertake costly upgrades to become compliant with environmental regulations. Within four years, the plant was mothballed due to unsustainable operational costs. Meanwhile, the health study expanded and still continues to this day, and Mandy's now adult



Mdu Tshabalala (3rd from left) and other Vaal residents protest outside Glubay Coal's offices in Johannesburg, July 2024. (Photo: Julia Evans)

children are thriving, albeit away from Meyerton. If this was a Hollywood film, the credits would start running now.

But the real story doesn't end there. Today, the manganese smelter has a new owner, who not only wants to restart operations by next year, but also turn 2,500 hectares of farmland directly behind it into two open-pit coal mines. And despite national air pollution laws clearly outlawing such a project, the government has just awarded the mines environmental authorisation.

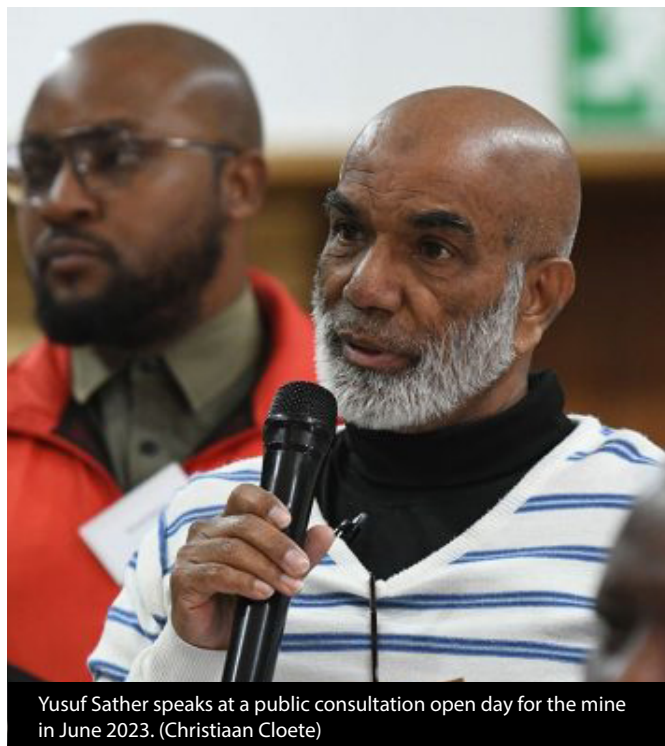
Mandy is now part of a coalition of residents, spread across dozens of affected communities, preparing to fight that authorisation in court and on the streets. At risk is not just the air they breathe, but the structural integrity of their

buildings, the toxicity of their drinking water, the value of their properties and businesses, and the very existence of their neighbourhoods.

The shit hit the fan

Initially, the proposal was for just one open-pit coal mine covering farmland between Vereeniging and Meyerton – farmland almost entirely surrounded by residential areas. The company managing the project, Glubay Coal, was legally required to engage in a public participation process, so in late 2019 it hired a consultancy firm to hold open meetings in four of the communities close to the proposed mine site.

One of those four chosen communities was Roshnee, a wealthy and predominantly Indian



Yusuf Sather speaks at a public consultation open day for the mine in June 2023. (Christiaan Cloete)

suburb north of Vereeniging. A consultant had turned up a ratepayers' association meeting there to see if a public gathering could be accommodated, and the five attendees listened as he made a short presentation about the mine, which would operate as close as 2km from their homes. One of those listening was Yusuf Sather, who had spent 25 years working in the mining industry.

Sather knew better than most what it actually meant to have an open-pit coal mine on your doorstep. Open-cast extraction involves large-scale surface blasting, which would either send huge plumes of black coal dust into the air, or use up billions of litres of water each month to smother it. The blasting would also threaten the structural integrity of buildings within a 4km radius. Two schools sat within 1km of the proposed mine site. Some homes were just 100m away.

Throughout its 30-year lifetime, the mine would pump out acidic wastewater to stop it flooding, and this would poison the groundwater in a region where many still drink from boreholes. The air and noise pollution would make houses impossible to sell, and drive away local business.

And a huge area of fertile farmland, supporting hundreds of workers and vegetable street-sellers, would be totally erased.

Sather and the other worried residents decided to hold their own community meeting about the mine, weeks before the official consultancy one. Eight days later, around 400 residents filled Roshnee's civic centre to hear about the mine's adverse impacts from medical and legal experts, as well as the local farmers facing ruin. A steering committee was established, and an online petition was started.

Supporters were encouraged to join a WhatsApp chat for further campaigning, and sign up as Interested and Affected Persons (IAPs) so they could receive official updates about the mine from the consultancy firm. Hundreds did so. The Coal-ition Committee was born, and the resistance had begun.

The four public meetings were poorly advertised. Notices appeared in unread local newspapers, or on roadside fences too small to read from a passing car. When the consultant eventually entered Roshnee's civic centre to do his own presentation, he wasn't ready for the levels of knowledge and opposition in the room. "It was a disaster," remembered Sather. "The guy couldn't answer any of the questions we put forward. He just kept saying he needed to go back and confer with Glubay Coal." The residents became increasingly exasperated, and the consultant left early.

As the Covid pandemic swept across the globe, Glubay Coal's venture went into hibernation. But when it reawakened in 2023, it had grown even larger. Now it encompassed two open-pit mines, with a smaller mine nestled beside the first, and a railway siding to link the coal to the wider rail network once used by the smelter. Despite also requiring surface blasting, the second mine was just 1km away from a hazardous landfill site full of toxic medical waste and chemicals.

This is when, as Sather puts it, "the shit hit the

fan.” Coal-ition members reached out to the local media, and set up stalls in regional malls, schools and community centres, encouraging people to sign up as IAPs, register their objections to the mines, and join the Coal-ition. By now membership of the group had spread well beyond Roshnee, and was close to one thousand strong.

Because the mine project had been expanded, the public participation process had to be restarted. Glubay Coal hired a new consultancy firm, which decided to replace large, potentially volatile meetings with open days, where residents would arrive in small scheduled groups to read brochures and ask questions. There would be just two of these days – in a small suburb dominated by a shopping centre, and Sicelo, the impoverished township of corrugated iron shacks right next to the smelter. Roshnee’s civic centre would no longer be part of the process.

The presentation now focused on how the mines would create five hundred and fifty jobs for the region – and for the poorest communities in the Vaal, the promise of jobs trumped all other concerns. One third of South Africans are unemployed – the second-highest rate in the world. But in the Vaal Triangle the rate is well over half. The region has endured two decades of economic decline, with once thriving steel plants and collieries slowing production or closing outright, and many thousands of jobs being shed.

This industrial retreat has been partly down to competition from China, and partly because of a domestic energy crisis that has seen electricity costs soar as supply has faltered. Mismanagement and corruption in the state-owned power company Eskom, whose coal-fired power plants generate 90% of the nation’s electricity, has meant power cuts and managed blackouts have become part of South African life.

An outgoing Eskom chief executive, brought in to clean up the company, publicly agreed that it was “a feeding trough” for the country’s governing party, the ANC, and claimed Eskom sus-

tained at least four organised crime networks. The next morning, his coffee was spiked with cyanide. He was lucky to survive.

For Sather and the members of the Coal-ition, the economic benefits of the mines were a mirage. “Coal mining is increasingly mechanised. You need to employ specialised people from outside to come in. Locals could do the more menial jobs, but that would only be two or three hundred. More jobs would be lost destroying all the farmland, which supports small entrepreneurs selling maize and vegetables,” he stressed. Another problem for the poorest job-seekers in the Vaal, is that they often live closest to the industrial sites and so suffer most from the pollution. They become too sick to work for the companies that were poisoning them.

Respiratory illness was everywhere

In 2007, Mdu Tshabalala applied for a factory worker job at the massive ArcelorMittal steel plant in Vereeniging. Tshabalala had studied business administration at college but, like so many young people in the Vaal, was struggling to find steady work. So he turned to the factory that loomed over Sebokeng, the township where he lived. He was sent to a doctor stationed by the steel plant and diagnosed with sinusitis. The doctor gave him a piece of paper telling him he was not fit to enter the factory.

Tshabalala has suffered from sinusitis for his whole life. As a child growing up in Sasolburg, the Vaal Triangle’s southernmost city, his nose became so blocked he couldn’t sleep, and he would use an asthma inhaler in the evenings. He also suffered regular nose bleeds, headaches and eye infections. The air would smell like rotten eggs thanks to the hydrogen sulphide emissions from a Sasol petrochemicals plant, and buildings were coated in black dust from a nearby open-pit colliery owned by the same company. “In Sasolburg, everyone was sick,” Tshabalala said. “My cousin was repeatedly hospitalised with breathing issues. Respiratory illness was everywhere.”

Despite his health problems, the teenage Tshabalala developed a love for breakdancing. When his family moved to Sebokeng, he befriended other performers and artists, and they formed an environmental group after clearing a rubbish-strewn local space for them all to use. This led to Tshabalala joining a youth climate forum in the run-up to COP17, which was hosted by South Africa. At the convention, he discovered the existence of a local organisation called the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA).

VEJA grew out of the efforts of black farmers, post-apartheid, to get compensation from a local steel plant for poisoning their farmland, as well as former steelworkers seeking fair dismissal. Today, VEJA advocates for townships across the Vaal Triangle, holding community workshops about the impacts of industrial pollution, tracking those impacts, and taking the companies responsible to court. Tshabalala is now a manager of the group, and his sinusitis is kept in check with herbs grown by his wife, who is also an environmental activist.

South Africa actually has robust air quality laws that should render most of VEJA's work unnecessary. In 2006, the government designated the Vaal Triangle as the country's first air quality priority area, meaning legal limits on emissions from heavy industry, mines, and waste burning (common in poorer communities where local services are absent). But the corporate polluters were granted exemptions by the government after complaining that compliance would be too costly and threaten yet more jobs. Recent legal amendments have set even tougher pollution limits, yet the air quality of the Vaal remains some of the world's worst.

Tshabalala and his wife ran a small but active Extinction Rebellion chapter in Sebokeng, and in July 2024, Tshabalala approached the Coal-ition Committee to propose a joint protest outside Glubay Coal's headquarters in Johannesburg. Time was short to prepare – Tshabalala had already applied for a police permit, which meant

the protest would need to happen within two weeks. And Coal-ition members would need to organise their own transport.

On the day, Extinction Rebellion Vaal activists staged a funeral for their land, air, and water outside the glistening corporate headquarters, and Tshabalala handed a memorandum of demands to a sheepish looking Glubay executive. From a media perspective, the action was a great success. Both Tshabalala and Sather had scoured their journalist contacts, and the protest was covered by the national press.

But from a community cohesion perspective, it was a disappointment. Only three members of the Coal-ition Committee attended. When Tshabalala organised another protest against the mine three months later, this time outside the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy in Pretoria, not one of the approximately one hundred Vaal residents who attended were from the Coal-ition. "They are scared," said Tshabalala when asked to explain the disparity. "Middle class people don't like protests. That is my observation."

Mandy, who is half-British, half-Afrikaner, had a different explanation: "I think a lot of white South Africans view that kind of protest as 'toyi-toying' and so not for them." Toyi-toyi is a fusion of dance, marching and chanting that became a regular feature of anti-apartheid street protests in the 1980s, and synonymous with black activism. When I ask Tshabalala if there were racial tensions at the initial meetings between township activists and Coal-lition members, he chuckles. "At the beginning, yes, there were tensions. But now we have got over each other, and I've made a lot of friends. We are united against a coal mine that will devastate our communities."

Despite the widespread resistance to the mine, Glubay submitted an environmental impacts assessment to the government last July, and in February of this year the government granted the mines environmental approval. Residents had

just twenty days to submit appeals, and Mandy, Sather, and Tshabalala were in regular communication as they hastily coordinated their efforts. Sather hired a lawyer to file an appeal on behalf of the now 9,000 registered IAPs, with legal funding coming from a group of Roshnee business owners.

For his appeal, Tshabalala approached lawyers at the Centre For Environmental Rights (CER), an organisation that has worked with VEJA on previous legal cases. He then visited townships and informal settlements to garner community support. Mandy has written her own appeal, focusing on the ties between the coal mines and the manganese smelter.

The activists found out by accident that Glubay Coal, the company behind the mine proposal, and Khwelamet, the company that bought the manganese smelter last June, are ultimately owned by the same private investment company, Menar. The two entities are symbiotic – the smelter will have a ready supply of coal, and the mines will have access to the smelter’s railway network. “The site’s one long mining belt with a smelter at the end. The three businesses should be treated as one,” said Mandy.

The full nine yards

Menar’s founder and managing director is Vuslat Bayoğlu. He moved from Turkey to South Africa in 2002, and quickly started buying up mining interests across the country. He has become a prominent voice in the sector, courting the South African media, writing op-eds, and making speeches that champion coal and competitively priced electricity to resurrect the nation’s mining sector. Asked to predict what 2026 would bring at a recent mining expo, Bayoğlu bullishly replied: “I think we’re going to bring all these smelters back, and we’re going to re-industrialise South Africa, which we need to do because that’s how we create jobs in this country.”

But Bayoğlu has also courted controversy. He was linked to South African arms companies bought by his brother, and accused by a former Turkish ambassador and a Turkish government official of being a member of FETO, a terrorist group implicated in a failed coup in Turkey in 2016. Since the coup attempt, thousands of suspected FETO members and hundreds of millions of dollars have moved from Turkey to South Africa.

Even if the Vaal resident’s appeals are dismissed, Bayoğlu will still have a number of hurdles to jump before his open-pit mines can begin operations. Environmental management licences for water, air quality, and waste will all need to be applied for. And should the government grant them, each licence will be appealed by Vaal’s residents. “We will oppose at each and every stage, go the full nine yards” said Sather, who expects the litigation process to last at least two years. The Roshnee residents currently paying the legal costs will not last that long though. “If we have to go to court, we’ll launch a fundraising campaign,” he added.

At a recent Coal-ition Committee group meeting, the first to be held since the mines received Environmental Authorisation, some hard truths were delivered by Sather and Tshabalala about the campaign. The two men stressed the need to increase media exposure now the appeal process has begun, and for Vaal’s activist residents to come together and embrace nonviolent protest to get their voices heard. A large march targeting the government institutions that are failing them received broad support from the attendees, and is being planned for the coming weeks.

To mark this new unified approach, the day after the meeting, Sather and a few other Coal-ition members joined Extinction Rebellion Vaal for a small but noisy rally along a busy main road that passes between the two proposed mines. Mandy, meanwhile, has promised to attend the coming march. After twenty-five years of environmental activism, it will be her first ever street protest.

Relearning Water

El Habib Ben Amara

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), water is far more than a resource. It is memory, territory, survival, identity, and dignity. In a region marked by aridity, accelerating climate instability, demographic pressure, and growing ecological stress, the water question can no longer be reduced to engineering alone. It has become civilizational.

For decades, many countries across the MENA region have invested massively in dams, ground-water extraction, inter-basin transfers, desalination plants, and large hydraulic infrastructures in order to secure water supply and sustain development. These investments have often been indispensable. Yet the region now faces a convergence of pressures: recurring droughts, extreme rainfall events, aquifer depletion, rising urban demand, salinization, ecosystem degradation, and significant losses within water distribution systems.

In this context, the challenge is no longer simply to mobilize more water. It is to rebuild a culture of water adapted to the ecological realities of the twenty-first century.

An emerging body of Australian academic research on water literacy offers an especially compelling framework for reflection. It proposes learning to “read” water differently—not merely as a technical input or economic commodity, but as an ecological, cultural, and relational system linking climate, landscapes, energy, agriculture, urban life, and collective memory.

This perspective, developed through dialogue between researchers, public institutions, and Indigenous communities in Australia, resonates deeply with the realities of the MENA region.

A New Grammar of Water

In many parts of the world facing similar ecological pressures, a quiet transformation is underway:

the goal is no longer only to manage water, but to relearn how to live with it.

In France, for example, “Oasis Schoolyard” programs are progressively transforming schoolyards—long dominated by asphalt and concrete—into permeable, vegetated, and climate-resilient spaces. These projects function as micro-laboratories of ecological transition embedded within daily urban life.

The principle is deceptively simple: replace impermeable surfaces with living soils capable of absorbing water, reducing heat, restoring biodiversity, and regenerating local hydrological cycles.

These transformations are based on several interconnected principles:

- revegetation through trees, gardens, and shaded areas;
- de-sealing urban soils to encourage infiltration;
- reduction of urban heat islands;
- creation of educational spaces connected to ecological awareness.
- In practice, this means removing portions of asphalt, introducing permeable materials, planting trees, creating school gardens, and transforming public spaces into places of learning, social interaction, and even climatic refuge.

Beyond architecture or urban design, these projects embody a deeper idea: water must return to the soil, slow down, infiltrate, and reactivate the living cycles of the territory.

This vision aligns with what I call fertile hydrology: an integrated understanding of water where every urban surface, every landscape, and every ecological process becomes an active component of the hydrological cycle rather than merely a system for rapid drainage and extraction.

Water Is Not Infinite

The global figures are stark: less than one percent of the planet's water is directly accessible for human consumption. Population growth, industrial agriculture, urban expansion, and pollution continue to intensify pressure on water resources worldwide. In arid regions such as the MENA region, these vulnerabilities are amplified.

Large-scale hydraulic infrastructures have undeniably improved access to drinking water and supported economic development across many countries in the region. Yet these same infrastructures also reveal the limits of a model centered primarily on extraction, transfer, and technological control.

The future increasingly requires a broader approach—one that combines infrastructure with ecosystem restoration, demand management, groundwater recharge, water reuse, rainwater harvesting, and public awareness.

From Water Management to Water Culture

The concept of water literacy seeks precisely to move beyond purely technical or economic approaches to water governance. It may be understood as the capacity of a society to perceive the invisible connections between climate, territory, consumption, agriculture, energy systems, and ecosystems.

This approach rests upon three complementary dimensions:

- Ecological: understanding hydrological cycles, aquifers, watersheds, soils, and climatic interactions;
- Cultural: recognizing traditional knowledge systems, local practices, and historical adaptations to aridity;
- Ethical and political: considering water not only as a resource, but as a shared responsibility and a common good.



Photo: Oluwaseyi Ale

Across the MENA region, such perspectives are not new. Traditional systems such as foggaras, khattaras, aflaj, oasis irrigation systems, terrace agriculture, and communal water-sharing institutions reveal centuries of sophisticated adaptation to scarcity.

These systems were never merely technical devices. They were social and ecological contracts rooted in cooperation, restraint, collective responsibility, and a profound understanding of limits.

Water as a Commons

Today, a growing global debate opposes two competing visions: water as a commodity versus water as a commons.

The progressive recognition of access to water as a human right by the United Nations reflects an important shift. Yet across many parts of the world, tensions surrounding privatization, inequality, depletion, and unequal access continue to intensify.

In the MENA region, states continue to play a central role in water planning and infrastructure development. However, future resilience will also depend on strengthening local participation and ecological governance involving municipalities, farmers, schools, civil society organizations, researchers, and citizens themselves.

Historically, many oasis societies managed water collectively through highly codified systems balancing equity, continuity, and solidarity. This memory still carries important lessons for contemporary ecological transitions.

In this sense, projects such as Oasis Schoolyards possess strong symbolic significance. They demonstrate that even at a small scale, it is possible to reconnect urban spaces to natural hydrological cycles, cool cities, restore permeability, and rebuild ecological relationships with water.

The Crisis of Imagination

The water crisis is also a crisis of imagination.

For decades, development models often equated progress with the capacity to mobilize ever larger volumes of water through increasingly powerful infrastructures and technologies. Today, however, the challenge is broader and more complex.

The future increasingly involves restoring watersheds, reducing network losses, recycling wastewater, harvesting rainwater, adapting agriculture to ecological limits, regenerating soils, and protecting ecosystems.

Yet technical solutions alone will not be sufficient. What is required is also a cultural transformation.

To “read” water means understanding that a faucet opened in Cairo, Casablanca, Algiers, Riyadh, or Amman is connected to distant aquifers, altered rainfall cycles, energy systems, agricultural choices, and fragile ecological balances.

This new hydrological consciousness could begin in schools, extend through media and public debate, and eventually permeate public policy itself.

Ecological education, urban greening projects, wastewater treatment awareness, oasis knowledge preservation, and youth participation in rainwater harvesting initiatives may all contribute to rebuilding a collective relationship with water.

Water, Dignity, and the Future

Water is inseparable from human dignity.

Supply interruptions, groundwater pollution, territorial inequalities, and ecological degradation directly affect daily life, social stability, food security, and public health across the region.

In a region where climate pressures are intensifying and populations remain young and urbanizing rapidly, water may become one of the defining political and ecological questions of the coming decades.

Thinking of water simultaneously as a right, a commons, and a shared responsibility could become one of the foundations of a new ecological transition for the MENA region.

This implies complementing the logic of resource mobilization with a logic of ecological sobriety, resilience, regeneration, and territorial balance.

The lesson emerging from both ancient hydraulic civilizations and contemporary ecological thought is ultimately simple: water is not merely a volume to distribute. It is a living relationship to understand, restore, and protect.

For the MENA region—a region of deserts, oases, ancient hydraulic intelligence, and growing climatic vulnerability—relearning water may become one of the keys to ecological survival and collective resilience in the twenty-first century.

Because ultimately, as ancient wisdom reminds us: caring for water means caring for ourselves.

Argentina's Fiscal Tightening Under the Milei Administration

Lucia Converti

Javier Milei's government took office in December 2023 with a strong rhetoric about the need to expand freedom. However, rather than expanding it, his economic policy reduces it. Neoliberal policy advocates a model of free enterprise, free trade, and free movement of capital that favors the extraction of national surplus toward core countries, limiting the possibilities for local development and reinforcing the conditions of societal impoverishment.

Tricontinental's Political Economy Substack, *The Financial Leash*, analyzes the mechanism by which the capitalist system deepens the dependence of peripheral countries through the global financial system, describing the channels through which a country's surplus is applied (productive investment) and through which it flows out of the country. The latest balance of payments report from the BCRA (March 2026) shows how this dynamic has intensified in Argentina under the current government.

Record Outflow of Profits and Dividends

One of the channels for surplus extraction is financial rent sent abroad: interest on external debt plus profits and dividends repatriated from foreign direct investment. In Argentina, this channel was partially closed for years due to exchange controls.

BCRA Communication A 8226, published in April 2025 as part of Phase 3 of the economic program, blew it wide open: it authorized access to the free exchange market for the payment of dividends to non-resident shareholders.

Data from the balance of payments clearly shows

the effect. Between December 2023 and December 2024, outflows for profits and dividends averaged just USD 24 million per month: a reflection of the fact that access to the foreign exchange market was restricted. In the first quarter of 2026, that average reached USD 333 million. And in March 2026, it was USD 882 million—the highest level recorded since 2010, equivalent to approximately 30 months' worth of profit and dividend outflows under the previous system.

During March, the Energy sector (primarily the oil industry) was the month's main beneficiary, with USD 460 million in profit outflows, followed by Base Metals and Manufacturing (USD 132 million) and Food, Beverages, and Tobacco (USD 106 million). These are not marginal companies: they are the most dynamic sectors of Argentina's real economy and the ones on which the current economic model relies exclusively. Liberalization opened the possibility for them to take out of the country the profits generated during years of controls, and they did so on a massive scale.

Interest payments on the debt, though less spectacular in relative terms, remain structurally enormous.

In the first quarter of 2026, they totaled USD 4.07 billion.

The Externalization of Savings

The third channel is the accumulation of foreign assets by the non-financial private sector: what the BCRA currently refers to as purchases of banknotes and foreign currency for non-specific purposes. The numbers tell a story of fluctuating



control policies. Between November 2019 and November 2023, following the reimposition of controls that the Mauricio Macri administration had previously liberalized, the non-financial private sector purchased a total of USD 5.5 billion. During 2024, however, with exchange controls in place and the adjustment underway, the sector was a net seller of dollars as a result of de-saving.

Following the lifting of foreign exchange restrictions for individuals and companies—with no limits on amount or destination—the flow reversed dramatically: between April and December 2025, foreign currency purchases reached USD 32.8 billion, with a sharp increase in September and October due to the approaching elections. In the first quarter of 2026, this amount reached USD 6.643 billion, surpassing the cumulative total for the entire previous administration.

The BCRA report estimates that in March, part of that demand went toward current consumption via credit cards and tourism, and about USD 600 million was deposited in local banks in foreign currency. But the scale of the phenomenon, and its abrupt surge following liberalization, is

difficult to attribute exclusively to consumption. What the data show is an accelerated dollarization of savings. With the Argentine peso at the bottom of the international monetary hierarchy, dollarization is not an anomaly: it is the most rational strategy for preserving value in a system that structures instability as a permanent condition.

Capital Flight: Export a Lot, Accumulate Little, and Borrow More

The central tension of the model is exposed in a single comparison: since December 2023, Argentina has generated a trade surplus of USD 47 billion, net investments of USD 650 million, and received external financing (IMF, international organizations, and private loans) totaling another USD 46 billion. However, the increase in reserves—that is, revenue from debt issuance and corresponding principal payments to the national government—amounted to only USD 14.7 billion. The difference, approximately USD 78 billion, was absorbed by net interest payments (USD 25.3 billion), the net outflow of profits and dividends (USD 1.6 billion), net foreign exchange purchases by the private sector (USD 36.3 billion), and other public and financial sector operations (USD 14.2 billion).

It is noteworthy that total foreign investment received during the period does not offset the remittance of profits and dividends.

As mentioned in the Tricontinental article, the mechanism is self-reinforcing: the country must maintain high interest rates and dollar reserves to sustain the confidence of financial markets, but that very position generates opportunity costs and structural outflows that prevent the real accumulation of reserves and investment in productive sectors and infrastructure. The visible result is a country risk rating of around 500 points—the lowest level since June 2018—achieved at a high cost: higher debt and a narrower margin for economic independence.

Gaza: A Meditation on Spirit and Survival

M. Reza Behnam

The images that have emerged from Gaza reveal the anatomy of a desolate landscape that defies human comprehension. Nothing can prepare the conscience for the sheer suffocating scale of a seemingly endless treeless terrain overwhelmed with millions of tons of concrete and rebar.

There is a distinct agonizing geometry to the destruction of buildings folded upon themselves. The angles, lines and shapes of neighborhoods have been completely warped, creating a jarring unnatural landscape of ruins, where once familiar streets, blocks and landmarks are now unrecognizable. The steel and mortar that once housed generations of families, communal memories, bustling markets, and schools full of children eager to learn, have been leveled into a desolate sea of gray.

The human spirit cannot comprehend the reality of tens of thousands of Palestinians entombed beneath mountains of pulverized concrete. The very air of Gaza carries the heavy toxic dust of war and of extinguished lives.

To gaze upon the ruins, is to confront not only its physical erasure, but the malign systematic campaign of the Israeli regime to wholly erase Palestinian ethnic, cultural and national identity—the very definition of genocide.

Systematic and indiscriminate aerial campaigns have decimated entire family units across multiple generations, erasing entire family lineages. These attacks not only erase collective histories, they inflict profound trauma and deep psychological scars upon survivors.

The level of death, destruction and scale of human suffering is unparalleled in modern history. Survivors of this holocaust must navigate a daily visceral reality. Each day is a battle for

survival against Israeli atrocities, extreme spatial restrictions and the distress of living among the collapsed skeletons of their destroyed homes and memories.

Because the oppressive realities of daily life rarely break through the filter of the legacy media, the public remains largely insulated from the true scale of the catastrophe. They are shielded from knowing, for example, that the widespread destruction of municipal water and sanitation infrastructure has resulted in raw untreated sewage flooding makeshift tents and displacement camps across Gaza. And that sweltering heat, piles of uncollected trash, and disease spread by rodents and insects have led to a public health crisis; made worse by Israel's blockade of crucial medical supplies and other crucial aid.

Tel Aviv's aim is to make life completely unlivable, to create unbearable conditions that do not allow for survival and dignity. Israeli defense minister, Israel Katz, said as much when he unveiled Israel's plan for the mass expulsion of Palestinians from Gaza; a forced deportation ethnic cleansing scheme he described, in true Orwellian manner, as "voluntary migration."

Since the so-called October 2025 ceasefire, violated by Israel 2,400 times, Gazans have been forced into an ever-shrinking sliver of their enclave. As Israel seeks to completely occupy Gaza, it has unilaterally expanded its concocted "yellow demarcation line," effectively bringing some 64 percent under its control.

Earthen barriers and military bases constructed along the shifting yellow line, have walled off Palestinians from accessing their land and most of the strip. Those Gazans who come near the Israeli designated "no-go" zones are killed.

Israel continues to push deeper into Gaza, corralling two million Palestinians into 56 square miles of makeshift camps along the coast. Recently, Israeli prime minister and war criminal, Benjamin Netanyahu, ordered the military to seize 70 percent of Gaza, with 100 percent as the final objective.

Faced with a ruined landscape and realities that defy comprehension, Palestinians continue to demonstrate a spirit of defiance and unwavering hope. Proving that the human spirit cannot be crushed, they are actively trying to rebuild their lives.

Although Israel has tightly restricted the entry of essential construction material and heavy equipment, Gazans are repurposing rubble, crushing concrete and scrap metal to clear routes and to pave areas for tents and community kitchens. They use whatever they can find (iron, window and door frames) to make partially damaged structures habitable.

While agencies such as the United Nations Development Program estimate that clearing the debris will take years, true reconstruction must also address the monumental task of rebuilding the human spirit.

However, extolling Palestinian strength in coping with incredible hardships should not overshadow the cruelty of the conditions Israel has forced them to navigate and the horrendous injustice of their circumstances. Exhausted and terrified, they have no other choice but to live through and resist Israeli violence. Endurance—the very act of surviving—becomes an act of fierce resistance.

To comprehend the enormity of this 21st century tragedy, it is important to look beyond today's stark ruins to the rich enduring legacy of Gaza's more than 5,000 year history.

Since antiquity, Gaza has been a vital Mediterranean coastal hub, a rich oasis and crucial political crossroads connecting Africa and West

Asia. This historical crossroads of civilization, positioned squarely on ancient trade routes, was repeatedly conquered and reshaped by successive empires, from the Romans, Persians to the Ottomans. To this day, it remains the key to war and peace in the region.

Gaza became part of the British empire, under the Mandate of Palestine, following World War I. Its administration passed to Egypt at the end of the Arab-Israel War in 1948.

Israel gained control over the strip as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, establishing civilian “settlements” in the territory. After 38 years of occupation, it ended its physical presence, evacuating settlements and withdrawing its military in 2005. However, by maintaining dominance over Gaza's airspace, coastline and borders, Tel Aviv continued de facto control. In 2021, the barrier, dubbed the “iron wall,” constructed to surround Gaza, was officially completed, converting the strip into an “open-air prison.”

Since declaring statehood in 1948, Israel has waged 15 wars against the Palestinians in Gaza. The current unprecedented bombardment and siege is by far the longest and deadliest.

In addition, for more than three months, Tel Aviv and Washington have been engaged in a war to silence the Islamic Republic of Iran, a nation that has consistently answered the Palestinian call for justice, freedom and self-determination.

Israel's prolonged relentless war on Gaza is a testament to the moral failure of the international community, and an indictment of the American-led global order.

Recovery transcends physical reconstruction. It insists upon restoring human agency, guaranteeing fundamental rights, and honoring the inherent dignity of the Palestinian people.

Do US War Crimes Doom the World to Endless War and Chaos?

Nicolas J.S. Davies

On May 24, Iran rejected President Trump's latest fake peace deal, confirming that he had misrepresented what Iran had agreed to and that the two sides are still very far apart, on nuclear enrichment, on control of the Strait of Hormuz, on peace in Palestine and Lebanon, and on lifting US sanctions, paying war reparations and Iran's \$100 billion in frozen assets.

Iran's conditions for a peace agreement are necessarily uncompromising, in response to the US record of using negotiations as cover for sneak attacks, and the charade of one-sided "ceasefires with Israeli characteristics," in which the US and Israel routinely ignore and violate every ceasefire they agree to, including the present ones in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran.

Since no agreement with the United States or Israel is worth the paper it's written on, it's hard to imagine an agreement that would really protect Iran from future attacks. Without a more radical change in US policy, the United States and Israel will keep attacking Iran, in open violation of the UN Charter, no matter what they all agree to.

The only effective ways Iran has found to protect its land and its people are to build strong military defenses, including the capacity for devastating retaliation, and to retain control of the Strait of Hormuz, regardless of the impact on the world's oil and gas supply and the global economy. By attacking Iran, the United States and Israel forced it to defend itself and triggered a war that is reshaping the Middle East and possibly the world.

Losing this war is forcing the United States to finally start reevaluating the neoconservative tactics it has blindly substituted for a rational US foreign and military policy since the 1990s: sanction; threaten; bomb; kill; destroy; occupy; escalate; leave coun-

tries mired in violence and chaos – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Palestine and Lebanon – never admit defeat; never question American exceptionalism or superiority.

The systematic US disdain for the rule of international law that undergirds this policy appears to make peace impossible in today's world. But the final sinking of the neocon dream in the troubled waters of the Persian Gulf provides the US and the world with a historic chance to recommit to a more peaceful and democratic international order.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has effectively exempted itself from the entire system of treaties, international laws and agreements that are supposed to govern international affairs, starting with the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force between countries, and the Geneva Conventions, which protect civilians, prisoners-of-war and wounded soldiers and sailors from the impacts of war.

These treaties were drawn up and universally adopted in the wake of the Second World War, to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," as the UN Charter says in its preamble. President Roosevelt returned from his Yalta conference with Churchill and Stalin in 1945 to tell a joint session of Congress that they were designing the United Nations as a "permanent structure of peace."

"It ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed," FDR told Congress. "We propose to substitute for all these, a universal organization in which all peace-loving Nations will finally have a chance to join."



The UN Charter codified and strengthened the age-old common law prohibition against international aggression, and the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy in the 1928 Kellogg Briand Pact, which German leaders tried at Nuremberg were sentenced to death for violating.

However, amid overblown Western triumphalism after the end of the Cold War, a new generation of US leaders, like Madeleine Albright and Dick Cheney, came to see the UN Charter and Geneva Conventions as obstacles to their ambitions to further expand US global power by more widespread and unrestricted use of military force.

Believing that the new imbalance in military power freed them from compliance with post-1945 treaties and conventions based on the hard-earned wisdom of past leaders in two world wars, the US and its allies unleashed their armed forces to attack and invade other countries, torture, rape and kill prisoners, and massacre civilians.

US officials assumed that the new military imbalance so greatly favored the United States that neither the UN, international courts, other powerful countries, nor even the entire people of the world could enforce the rules of international law and the laws of armed conflict on the United States if it chose to ignore them.

It is ironic, and deeply frustrating and confusing to US officials, to find out that what they hailed as a position of overwhelming power and impunity has led them to squander America's day in the sun and waste the chance that its great good fortune provided to improve the quality of life for Americans and their neighbors.

The supposedly unlimited freedom of action attained by disdaining and trampling international law and institutions has proved to be a double-edged sword. There is no such thing as unlimited military power, short of the mass suicide of nuclear war. The idea that America's virtually unlimited investment

in weapons and war would give it the final word in every dispute was a mirage, as even Trump is now finding out.

As Americans reexamine the state of the world and the conflicts by which warmongering US leaders have tried to define it, it is obvious that war and military power do not lead to peace or prosperity, for Americans or anyone else. The more countries the Pentagon and the CIA take aim at, the more people they kill, and the more resources our leaders throw at them, the more other people all over the world rightly come to see the United States as a threat to their own lives and futures.

Governments around the world face difficult choices between meeting the needs and aspirations of their own people or complying with the hegemonic and undemocratic demands of the United States.

After holding itself up as the champion of democracy and freedom for 250 years, the United States is only accelerating its own decline by wasting trillions of dollars, and what little is left of the world's good will, on this failed, ill-fated bid for global imperial power.

When the United States rose to great power in the first half of the 20th century, its leaders were wise enough to recognize that exercising naked imperial power would not succeed in a world still fighting to free itself from the ravages of European colonialism. So FDR and his colleagues based the UN system on sovereign equality between nations, and created a framework for international relations that the whole world could agree to.

Like all legal and political systems, the success or failure of the UN system rests on whether the most powerful countries will agree to live by the same rules as the others. The veto is a poison pill that corrupts the system, as Albert Camus predicted when it was unveiled in 1945.

"If this report is accurate, ... it would effectively put an end to any idea of international democracy," Camus wrote in *Combat*, the underground French

Resistance newspaper he edited. "The world would be ruled by a directorate of five powers... The Five would thus retain forever the freedom of maneuver that would be forever denied the others."

However, the UN has developed the "Uniting For Peace" process, which allows the General Assembly to hold Emergency Special Sessions (ESS) on international problems when a veto prevents the Security Council from acting to resolve them. The General Assembly used that process to resolve the Suez Crisis in 1956, and it has been using it, albeit intermittently and inadequately, to address the crisis in Palestine since 1997.

In response to a request from the General Assembly in its Emergency Special Session on Palestine, the International Court of Justice ruled that the Israeli occupation is illegal and must end without delay. And so, the General Assembly passed a resolution demanding that Israel must bring "to an end without delay its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories... and do so no later than" September 2025.

Israel did not comply, so the General Assembly must take further steps, such as an arms embargo and an economic boycott. But it does have the means to do so and just needs to muster the political will.

While the United States and Israel commit systematic and barbaric war crimes, presuming themselves immune from accountability, the world is slowly – too slowly – coming to grips with the international cooperation needed to enforce the "permanent structure of peace" that all countries have agreed to live by, and on which the lives of millions of vulnerable people and the future of humanity depend.

While US leaders are finally realizing that they do not have the power to intimidate and conquer the whole world, the American people are gradually understanding that we have an even greater power, the power to refuse to fight their criminal wars, and to insist on making peace and cooperating with all our neighbors on this small planet that we all share.

Developing a Model of Self-Managed Socialism: Lessons From the Spanish Revolution

Tom Wetzel

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the onset of the civil war and revolution in Spain. In this essay I suggest that the efforts of the Spanish working class in that epic conflict provide elements for building a model of socialism based on direct working-class control and participatory, democratic planning of a socialized economy. With statist and managerialist conceptions of socialism widespread today, I think it is especially important for us to revive the focus on worker-centered socialism based on coordinated worker self-management of production.

In the Spanish revolution of the 1930s, the key force in building towards socialism was the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) union — growing to 2.5 million members in the course of the revolutionary struggle. Although the CNT had a Leninist faction in the 1920s and early '30s, their expulsion left the various anarchist tendencies as the key internal influence by 1936-37.

The CNT unions gave Spanish anarchists a way to connect their radical ideas to the concerns and grievances of working-class people. Although anarchist worker-intellectuals believed the CNT must have a program that relates to “materialist reality,” social anarchist theory had a more flexible notion of oppression than Marxism of that era. Anarchists saw various structures of oppression in society such as the oppression of women and the way the state was not merely “superstructural” to capitalist economy but was a source of oppression itself. The CNT was central to a social movement that extended outward to the networks of anarchist groups and the publishing efforts of worker-intellectuals, the network of storefront worker schools, and organizing initiatives like the women’s liberation orga-

nization *Mujeres Libres*. In Barcelona the worker schools or *Ateneos* were independent dues-based organizations with an administrative committee elected at an annual assembly. The centers provided cultural events, study groups, and classes on public speaking. The anarchist movement operated with a concept of *capacitación* — building the capacity to act as an active participant in the movement. The *Mujeres Libres* organization used the storefront centers to build the confidence and organizing skills of women. *Mujeres Libres* emerged out of a women’s caucus in the CNT in Catalonia and grew to about 20,000 working class women. Their goal was to emancipate women from their dual oppression, as women and as workers.

The working-class seizure of the economy and construction of a “proletarian army” controlled by the CNT emerged in reaction to the attempt of the fascist generals to seize state power with the backing of the Castilian Catholic church and several political organizations with fascist politics.

For those of us interested in developing a model for how self-managed eco-socialism can be constructed, the impressive accomplishments of the Spanish working class of that era has a number of important lessons.

For CNT militants, socialization had two phases. First, all the workplaces in an industry would be grouped together into an industrial federation which would be responsible for over-all coordination and management of that industry. The actual takeovers of workplaces came from the union’s rank-and-file leadership — shop stewards (*delegados de taller*), union secretaries, and worker militia

groups. According to some estimates, 80 percent of the economy of Catalonia and 70 percent of the economy of Valencia were expropriated by the unions. In a typical scenario, the shop stewards council became the administrative council.

The second phase to socialization would be uniting these industry federations into a society-wide federation. These would be coordinated through national and regional meetings of delegates which advocates called “economic councils.” Joan Ferrer was the secretary of the Commercial Workers Union in Barcelona. In an interview for Ron Fraser’s *Blood of Spain*, this is how he described socialization:

It was our idea in the CNT that everything should start from the worker, not — as with the Communists — that everything should be run by the state. To this end we wanted to set up industrial federations — textiles, metal-working, department stores, etc. — which would be represented on an overall Economics Council which would direct the economy. Everything, including economic planning, would thus remain in the hands of the workers. (p 220)

The drive to socialize an industry — and thus achieve coordinated worker control over the industries they work in — had several sources in the CNT movement of the 1920s-30s. First, the project of taking over the workplaces had been discussed for decades in CNT circles and at congresses. This was viewed as a necessary initial action in a revolutionary situation. But the inter-war years brought a new emphasis on society-wide economic coordination and democratic economic planning.

A number of influential worker-intellectuals in the CNT drew lessons from the Russian revolution and examining the current efforts at economic planning such as Stalin’s Five-Year Plans and Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration. They were reacting to these developments by trying to work out a form of participatory, democratic planning that would be consistent with libertarian socialist principles. This effort includes writers like Joan Peiró, Diego Abad de Santillan, Higinio Noja Ruiz and Gaston Leval.

But I believe a more important influence on the socialization campaign was the CNT’s adoption of coordinated national industrial unions in the 1930s. Here we need to look at how the CNT was organized. The CNT was a class union. Direction for the CNT movement was developed through regional and national congresses or conferences that brought together delegates from all sectors. The basic units were the workplace “sections” run by member assemblies and a council of elected shop stewards (*delegados de taller*). The *delegados* were the organic worker leadership who kept the union in sync with the workers in the shop. The various shops in a local industry were united into a local industrial union. There was an elected committee of union secretaries (typically unpaid) for various tasks — such as support for imprisoned members and coordinating with local social movements. The local unions in a city or area were united into a local federation — a “one big union” — to facilitate class-wide mobilizations as in general strikes.

Although CNT had adopted industrial unionism for its local unions in 1919, anarchist fear of bureaucratic control was an initial speed bump against the formation of national industrial unions. Finally in 1931 the CNT approved national industrial federations where action and program could be coordinated through conventions and a national industry union committee. Joan Peiró emphasized the way these national industrial unions were prefigurative of coordinated worker self-management of an entire industry.

For the worker-intellectuals and militants of the CNT, social transformation required the organization and education of the working class, development of its skills and self-confidence, and working out a coherent revolutionary strategy — not a reliance on pure “spontaneity.” Self-taught worker theorist Joan Peiró, in his 1933 book *Sindicalismo*, put it this way:

For us the social revolution is not just a matter of rising violently against the organized forces of the state...[it] consists in taking over factories and mines, the land and the railways. It is not sufficient to take over social wealth, it is necessary to know how to use it — and to use it immediately, without any discontinuity.”



“Continuity” would be assured because the workers themselves, who have the skills to continue the running of industry, would carry out the transformation.

The need to take control of the workplaces as an initial step in a revolution had been discussed by union militants in Spain for decades. Thus the defeat of the army takeover attempt in Barcelona in July, 1936 sparked a mass movement of seizure of workplaces by the CNT unions. Often the shop stewards council converted itself into an administrative council with revocable delegates answerable to the workplace assembly. In many industries a technical advisory committee was eventually organized with engineers or others with special expertise.

In those industries where the CNT had organized a national federation of industry the national industrial union provided a framework to develop a coordinated takeover and planning for an entire industry. We can see this in the case of the tele-

phone, furniture manufacturing, and entertainment industries.

The CNT’s national industrial federation of telephone workers (FNITT) seized the assets of the Spanish National Telephone Company and ran the telephone system. The CNT wood workers federation seized the logging operations and sawmills in the Pyrenees mountains, furniture retail stores, large furniture factories and mom-and-pop cabinet making shops in Barcelona and Valencia. The CNT union shut down the small cabinet-making shops, where conditions were often cramped, inefficient and dangerous. These shops were replaced by a new factory in Barcelona, the Double X. The union imported French machinery with the latest safety devices. The union managed the entire industry from extracting the raw material to sale of the finished product in showrooms.

An anarchist group in the wood union opposed the drive to consolidate the entire industry into a single union-managed industrial operation. They advo-

cated the creation of small, autonomous production centers. Their critics described this as a throwback to the pre-capitalist era of self-employed artisans. Even so it could be argued that cabinet-making centers could be a way to develop design and wood-working skill in apprentices. But the anarchist proposal was defeated.

The union believed it should look after the overall well-being of its members. To this end, the union built a gym with an Olympic-size swimming pool at the Double X factory. In a mountain valley the union set up an agricultural operation to grow food for the families of union members. As a wood union member recalled: “The concept that prevailed was that the working class should have good furniture at cheap prices” (quoted in Ron Fraser, *Blood of Spain* p. 221).

The entertainment industry was another example of socialization by an industrial union. The CNT entertainment workers union (SIE) seized the entire industry — local movie houses, movie production, the Grand Opera, live theater. Often small hole-in-the-wall vaudevilles were shut down and assets concentrated in new facilities — such as a new movie palace in Barcelona. SIE ran the gamut from actors and filmmakers to film technicians, opera singers, and the ushers and cashiers at venues.

The CNT film production group (SIE Films) produced a stream of newsreels and documentaries to support the revolution and the anti-fascist war effort as well as a number of theatrical films. The union-run movie houses ran Hollywood films mixed with their political newsreels and documentaries. The CNT’s control of the entertainment industry supported its politics through popular education. Thus, the CNT control of cinemas and movie production was seen as a major threat by the communists. In 1938 the communist-controlled police attempted to nationalize this industry — provoking a strike by the workers.

In the railway, maritime transport and electric power industries the workforce was about evenly divided between the CNT and the General Workers

Union (UGT). The UGT was a more bureaucratic union created by the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) in 1888. While the Moscow-line PSUC (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia) had gained control of the union apparatus in Catalonia, there was also a struggle for control in various regions between the timid social-democrats and the more radical democratic Marxist wing of the PSOE.

Despite the internal division in the workforce the CNT national industrial unions on the railways and the power system pushed for socialization of their industries. The Madrid-Zaragoza-Alicante (MZA) was a large, privately owned railway that operated the mainlines from Madrid to Barcelona and Valencia, and the mainline along the Mediterranean coast. On July 20th, with street-fighting still going on in Barcelona, militants from the CNT railway industrial union told the management of the MZA they were fired. The workers were taking over. The electric commuter railway operating out of Barcelona was also seized.

The CNT union initiated this takeover but the UGT members soon came along and a joint CNT-UGT organization took over — the Revolutionary Railway Federation. This was coordinated by a 12-person “Revolutionary Committee” and a full-time executive director. Assemblies of the rank and file were held every two weeks in the railway terminals. The delegates gave reports, and could be removed by the assemblies. As women were by far the lowest paid workers on the railway system, they benefitted the most from the federation’s decision to equalize the wage rate for all workers. (But they had to agree to an exception when they hired civil engineers who were paid about two thirds more per month than other workers.)

The transport unions initiated a survey to examine efficiency in the transport sector. The coastal freight industry had a lot of duplication among motor freight, railway and coastal shipping firms. Worker militants viewed this as an inefficiency. The unions agreed to eliminate the competing coastal shipping line and create new truck and bus services for unserved rural areas. This is a good example of how

the CNT militants were working towards overall economic coordination and participatory planning.

The electric power industry was re-organized in a similar way with the utility federation headed by an eight-person workers council with equal number of delegates elected by CNT and UGT members. There were also “building committees” elected in the various facilities. During the civil war the worker-controlled power federation installed a number of new hydro power generators in the Pyrenees mountains such as a 50,000 kw generating station at Flix, built by a team of 700 workers. (Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, pp. 253-257 and 242-244.)

In some cases a new national industry union was created in the revolutionary process. Anarchist ideology had a long history of supporting reason and science and there were quite a few anarchist doctors in Spain. In 1936 a group of anarchist physicians in Catalonia initiated a new health workers industrial union. This union then expanded into a 40,000-member national health workers federation throughout the anti-fascist territory. The union managed hospitals and ran a new socialized health care system. The various professions (nurses, doctors, pharmacists) were organized as “sections” of the health union. The health union ran dental clinics and took over research and manufacture of pharmaceuticals. In the first year the health workers federation created six new hospitals. Homes of the rich were often converted into free clinics.

Before July, a senior physician would typically own a medical practice and hired younger doctors as assistants. Medical services were focused on wealthier neighborhoods. Poor villages often had no doctor. The new system tried to distribute resources more equitably. If a poor village didn’t have a doctor, the health union would find one.

The health union tried to do away with private practices but was not able to get the majority of doctors to agree to this. All of the doctors were required to work three hours a day for the health union, which left them time enough to see private patients. When working for the union-run health care system, all doctors were paid the same pay rate — but this was

quite a bit higher than a typical manual worker’s wage.

Funding came partly from the government and partly from the worker organizations that had taken over management of the various industries. Although visits to the new network of outpatient clinics were free, the health union charged fees for office visits to doctors and for surgery. As a result, many unions, collectivized industries and village collectives entered into special agreements with the health union to provide free health care for their members and their families.

Not all unions in the CNT had organized into national industrial federations by July of 1936. Thus many individual workplaces were being run as a stand-alone venture. In the textile industry, for example, the various textile mills competed for markets and resources. This situation of competing ventures was criticized by some leading anarchist militants as a form of “people’s capitalism.”

This situation is part of the background to the struggle between the CNT and the PSUC over a proposed “collectivization” law. In August, 1936 the CNT in Catalonia decided to join an “Economics Council” created by the government of the Generalitat — the autonomous regional state in Catalonia. The PSUC tried to curtail the CNT’s seizure of enterprises and its drive to construct a coordinated, socialized economy under union control. The PSUC’s goal was statist nationalization of the economy. With support from Andres Nin (representing the Workers Party of Marxist Unification — POUM), the CNT was able to force the government to pass a decree legalizing the expropriations of enterprises.

The economy of Catalonia faced many challenges — a brain drain as many educated professionals fled the country, international trade flows were disrupted, and industry lost a large part of its market due to fascist seizure of a third of the country. Although many enterprises decided on shorter hours rather than layoffs, the industries of Catalonia faced a major economic crisis. The CNT joined the Economics Council to use the state to assist in this situation. De Santillan

and other advocates of social planning expected that a successful Spanish revolution would be subject to embargo by major capitalist powers. For this reason their writings investigated ways to make the Iberian economy more self-sufficient.

Nonetheless, the anarchist representatives on this Council clashed repeatedly with representatives of the ERC (Left Republican Party of Catalonia) and PSUC over worker control of economic planning and control of industries. ERC was a Catalan nationalist party with a base among the professional and small business layers who generally opposed the expropriations of firms.

In a situation where many ventures taken in hand by the workers were not part of a national industry federation, the decree legalizing the expropriations required their conversion into stand-alone cooperatives, called “collectives.” In the wake of the collectivization decree, the CNT unions held a conference in Barcelona to work out a general solution for the expropriated workplaces. How far could the CNT proceed towards socialization? What should the CNT do with the expropriated firms? In many cases, unions managed expropriated facilities.

“Up to that moment,” recalled Joan Ferrer (in his interview for *Blood of Spain*, p. 212), “I had never heard of collectivization as a solution for industry — the department stores were being run by the union. What the new system meant was that each collectivized firm would retain its individual character, but with the ultimate objective of federating all enterprises within the same industry.”

At that conference, the more powerful unions — such as transportation, public utilities, woodworkers, and entertainment — had already proceeded to the first phase of socialization, consolidating an entire industry into an industrial federation. These unions wanted to continue on this path. The smaller, weaker unions felt they had no choice but to convert the expropriated enterprises into cooperatives.

Here we can see a motivation for the socialization campaign that got underway in late 1936 among CNT

militants. Merging the various facilities in an industry under a national industry federation would help to solve problems of particular ventures but would also build power to oppose the communists.

The May 1936 CNT “libertarian communist” program proposed a role in economic planning for assemblies and committees of neighborhood or village residents — called “free municipalities.” These bodies could have roles in food distribution, housing and environmental protection. In practice many neighborhood committees were created in the revolutionary process.

According to Diego Abad de Santillan (in *El organismo económico de la revolución*) the society-wide worker congresses would ensure social accountability of industry federations. But I think there needs to be accountability to residents in communities. Thus, assembly-based community governance could also help to keep industries accountable to the population, with powers to request products or ban pollutants.

An important factor in the defeat of the army takeover in Barcelona in July, 1936 was the CNT’s self-defense organization. This consisted of clandestine six-person armed cells, coordinated by the union’s regional defense committee (described by Agustín Guillamón in *Ready for Revolution*). To defeat the army in the two-day battle on July 19-20, the CNT committed about two thousand armed workers. The CNT defense organization then built a union militia, using weapons captured from the army.

Various CNT armed columns were organized with an internally democratic structure. The units might hold assemblies and elect a delegate to the column’s “war committee.” The whole column elected the “chief delegate” — the commanding officer. Sympathetic personnel from the army were taken on as technical advisors. Over a period of some weeks, the CNT built a “proletarian army” with about 100,000 members. The operation of this army was coordinated by the CNT’s National Defense Committee.

The CNT unions also seized more than 200 metal-working and chemical plants in the Barcelona

area to convert to the manufacture of weapons and supplies for the union's army. The CNT metal workers seized the Hispano-Suiza auto factory in and converted it to the manufacture of armored cars. The Hispano-Suiza plant had previously manufactured luxury automobiles in the same class as the Rolls Royce.

The idea of mass unions building a revolutionary army for defense of a revolution was not new to syndicalist thinking. The 1922 principles of the International Workers Association (the labor international to which the CNT was affiliated) said that "the defense of the revolution must be entrusted to the masses and their economic organizations." Thus the unions must control the dominant armed power in a revolutionary situation through their worker militia. In early 1936 activists with the CNT defense organization had already called for the building of a "proletarian army." Thus the dominant armed power must not be a conventional army run by the state.

But what about governance of the whole society? Building new structures for the over-all governance of the society is as important as building structures of worker self-management of the industries. The need for worker power to take on a society-wide dimension of political control follows logically from the revolutionary syndicalist aim of working-class liberation. From a libertarian socialist point of view, the aim should be to socialize political power. To the extent that power is rooted in the participatory democracy of the workplace and neighborhood assemblies, the power is not concentrated in some elite of party apparatchiks and state managers.

If the CNT could not come up with a practical program for a unified working-class political power, this would mean that the only alternative would be a top-down unity of leaders of the Popular Front parties through a rebuilt Republican state. No other option was realistic.

With the drive for rebuilding the Republican state, the communists and other Popular Front parties were pushing to rebuild top-down army and police forces.

This was a direct threat to the working-class power developed by the CNT movement.

This led to a push by a radical anarcho-syndicalist faction in the union to replace the central Republican government with a Defense Council controlled by the CNT and UGT — to run a unified People's Militia with a unified command. The Council would consist of seven CNT delegates and seven UGT delegates. The pro-capitalist Republican parties would be excluded. This was the alternative to the communist plan. This Defense Council would seize all the banks and mandate worker self-management of all industries but its role would be largely limited to social self-defense — courts, police, military, prisons. Workers would self-manage all the industries.

To try to get the UGT to go along with this, the CNT carried out a series of negotiations with Largo Caballero. By early September, 1936, Largo Caballero had been appointed prime minister of Spain, representing the PSOE. If they could have gotten his agreement to an alliance, his support would have added legitimacy to the drive for direct working-class political power. This was essentially an attempt to negotiate with the head of the section of the working-class movement that supported an electoral socialist strategy.

Marcel Rosenberg (the Soviet ambassador) warned Largo Caballero that the CNT proposal would destroy the "international legitimacy" of the Spanish Republic. Manuel Azaña, President of the Republic, threatened to resign. Largo Caballero vetoed the CNT proposal. He saw no reason to give the CNT the kind of power they were asking for.

During the negotiations with the UGT for a National Defense Council, Eduardo de Guzmán was editor of the daily CNT paper *Castilla Libre* in Madrid. In his view, the initiative to form a working-class government in Madrid was hindered by the CNT's failure to take power in Barcelona. Even if the complete implementation of "libertarian communism" was not possible at the moment, it was possible to create

a proletarian government — total working-class democracy in which all sectors of the proletariat — but

of the proletariat alone — would be represented.... To make a revolution, power must be seized. If the CNT had done so in Catalonia, it would have helped... our minority position in Madrid. But they believed that it was sufficient to have taken the streets, to have seized arms. They completely overlooked the importance of the state apparatus. (From an interview for Blood of Spain, pp. 335–336.)

According to de Guzmán, “the petty bourgeoisie was inevitably opposed to the proletariat. The Communists were recruiting in this class, and in alliance with the petty bourgeois Republicans were bound to gain strength if the Generalitat and the central government were reconstituted.” He believed that the CNT should have pushed for a working-class government at the very beginning when there was no effective government in Madrid at all. “A revolutionary moment of great promise had been lost,” in his opinion.

This proposal for a union governing council — a kind of worker’s government — would enable the unions to control the dominant armed force in society. In this way they could prevent the army and police from seizing the worker-managed industries. Abel Paz’s biography of Buenaventura Durruti has a quote from a letter in which he proposes a strategy to force Largo Caballero’s hand. He suggests that the union should directly take power in the regions of Catalonia and Valencia where it was the majority union and had the armed capacity to take over. The idea was to get Largo Caballero to agree to the union governing council proposal, and to use the country’s gold reserves to provide funds for the worker-controlled war industry.

With the rebuilding of Republican state authority, a new national police force and conventional army, the threat of state takeover of industries became real. In Revolution and the State Danny Evans describes the way anarchist militants by early 1937 had come to see the rebuilding of the Republican state as the “counter-revolution.” From April, 1937 on the communist-controlled police were used to seize and nationalize certain industries — such as the arms industry and the telephone system.

According to CNT journalist Jaime Balius, the mass general strike in Barcelona in May, 1937 showed:

the proletariat’s unshakeable determination to place a workers’ leadership in charge of the armed struggle, the economy and the entire existence of the country. Which is to say (for any anarchist not afraid of the words) that the proletariat was fighting for the taking of power which would have come to pass through the destruction of the old bourgeois instruments and erection in their place of a new structure... that surfaced in July [1936]. (Quoted by Agustín Guillaumón in The Friends of Durruti Group.)

At a meeting of the CNT delegates of the Barcelona local labor federation the night before a regional plenary in July, 1936, Garcia Oliver argued that “the (CNT) movement should take power.” In an oral history interview in the ‘70s, Garcia Oliver said this position derives from revolutionary syndicalism. The working class can’t end its subordination to a dominating, exploiting class without generalizing social power to the over-all society-wide (political) level, where the decisions are made about the making and enforcing of the society’s basic rules. In Towards a New Revolution Balius describes a concrete proposal to replace the Generalitat state with a Revolutionary Defense Council — with delegates elected directly from the workplace or union assemblies. With nearly half the union workers in Catalonia organized into the UGT, such a council would have been a united front of the two unions.

This idea of governance by a united front of democratic working-class mass organizations poses a democratic alternative to the communist idea of the seizure of state power by a Marxist party.

We can imagine an arrangement where governance includes both neighborhood assembly-based community governance and broader congresses of community delegates combined with industries controlled by industrial federations and society-wide worker congresses. This mix of institutions could provide a basis for a distributed, participatory and democratic form of social planning and social governance. The Spanish revolution of the 1930s provides historical backup for this program.

Refusing Non-Existence

Nyasha Karimakwenda

As an African feminist pushing against how systems of oppression endeavor to constrain and diminish, I am concerned with the functions of violence. Violence in its myriad forms serves to inscribe who is deemed human and who is not, who is considered deserving of dignity and who must be stripped of it. It is a language of demarcating society's status quo and the bounds of acceptable identities and behaviors. When understood this way, violence against queer African bodies is particularly insidious as it is designed to brutally mold queer people into heteronormativity—in life and sometimes in death.

African queers are often confronted by the claim that their existences are un-African; a detestable product of Western influence. And so African leaders and others expend considerable energy in attempting to do away with queerness through various tools of violence: rhetorical, legal, political, physical, religious, and sexual. At the same time that queer Africans are subjected to violence and live with the unrelenting spectre of it, they must also find ways to resist. It is a liminal existence, but one that demonstrates that queer Africans are permanently fixed within the continent's bounds despite concerted efforts to effect their erasure.

In the legal arena, African leaders and states untiringly expand the intended project of queer erasure through violent laws. In March, Senegal's President signed into law a bill that doubles prison terms for same-sex relations and criminalizes pro-queer advocacy. Recently, Ghana's parliament resurrected and subsequently passed the Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill, which intensifies the existing laws, including through criminalizing queer identity and advocacy. It awaits signing by President John Mahama. Despite legal efforts to undo it, the harsh 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act remains in force in Uganda. Through this law, people who engage in same-sex activities face the risk of life imprisonment

and the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality." Under President Ibrahim Traoré's bold and Pan-Africanist rule, Burkina Faso criminalized homosexuality in 2025.

The legal reforms are emboldened and accompanied by the fiery speeches of African leaders who return faithfully to the mantra that queerness is un-African. Defending Senegal's new anti-LGBTQ law, President Ousmane Sonko recently stated: "There is a kind of tyranny. There are eight billion human beings in the world, but there is a small nucleus called the West which, because it has resources and controls the media, wants to impose it [homosexuality] on the rest of the world." When Traoré's government criminalized homosexuality, Edasso Rodrigue Bayala, the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, explained that this development was "a historic reform" reflecting "respect for cultural values and the will to build a Burkinabé family." At the end of 2023, Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye commented that queer Burundians should be stoned, should go and live in Western countries because they choose "satan."

The African leaders are perhaps unconscious of the fact that they are building on and concretizing a particular brand of homophobia calcified through colonial rule when same-sex relations were criminalized. They perhaps do not know that they are leaning into and cementing the idea of a homogenous Africa, which again feeds into an earlier Western project of seeing Africa through simplified lenses. Moreover, they ignore the fact that modern-day anti-rights forces consist of networks between African politicians, religious leaders, Christian fundamentalist groups from the US, Europe, and elsewhere.

But this is the function of violence. It is an imprecise instrument that effects repression to sustain power structures. Anti-queerness especially reinforces



Participants carry rainbow flags and fabric banners during the Cape Town Pride march on 1 March 2025. Photo: Husskeyy/Wikimedia Commons

patriarchy. This is why, even in countries such as South Africa, where constitutional rights present the illusion of freedom for sexual orientation and gender identity minorities, there are special horrors reserved for Black queer women. They are raped, mutilated and murdered for daring to step outside of the patriarchal mould. Sometimes this violence is committed by friends or sanctioned by family members.

In juxtaposition to legitimized violence, queer Africans enact multifaceted forms of political resistance that cast queerness into registers of African humanity. In Uganda, Clare Byarugaba founded the first local chapter of Parents and Families of LGBTIQ children (P-FLAG). Though she constantly lives in a state of vigilance and risk as one of the few openly queer activists in the country, she maintains that “I fight because I want those who come after me to have a softer landing, to know a different Uganda.” In Botswana, a case initiated by 24-year-old Letsweletse Motshidiemang and supported by Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO), succeeded in decriminalizing homosexuality in 2019 by demonstrating to the court the very dire impacts of criminalization. In February this year, an array of queer people proudly paraded through Cape Town city to celebrate Pride, but also to call attention to

hate crimes and inequality experienced by Black queer people.

Activist scholarship forms another critical part of queer resistance. We see this through Stella Nyanzi’s ethnographic research contextualizing how Ugandans proudly claim being both African and same-sex loving by affirming their locally-cultivated identities and names, heeding ancestral callings, and recalling documented pre-colonial same-sex practices in the Buganda kingdom. This research is a vital counter-argument to claims that African queerness did not exist before colonialism and that the marker of African-ness is the heterosexual and patriarchal family unit.

I cite these examples not to make a happy check-list of queer African activism, but to demonstrate the slow, exhausting, and often unseen work of refusing violence that is taken as normal and viable. This unsettling of the status quo is a critical means of reclaiming African identities from within, debunking the distracting and illegitimate claims of Western origins and influence, and forging marginalized African solidarities. There is no neat conclusion, but only an incremental shuffling forward in resistance to imposed “non-existence.”