

The Utopian

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Crisis in Public Education—

Lessons From the Past, Context for LA and Oakland Conflicts



On January 5, 2019 approximately 50 people attended a forum on the crisis in public education. The forum, held in Oakland, CA and sponsored by the Peace and Freedom Party, took place nine days before Los Angeles teachers began a citywide strike. The Oakland forum aimed at providing background for a likely teacher strike by the Oakland teacher union (OEA – Oakland Education Association).

Four panelists participated in the forum:

- *Keith Brown, OEA President*
- *Michael Shane, Oakland teacher and member of a caucus in OEA*
- *Bob Mandel, former OEA exec board member and veteran of the 27-day 1996 OEA strike*
- *Jack Gerson, former OEA exec board and bargaining team member.*

The forum may be viewed in its entirety via the following video link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHYee0-el4A&feature=youtu.be>

Below is a transcript of the remarks made at the forum by Utopian supporter Jack Gerson. Gerson's comments on the impending strike are placed in the context of a broader discussion of the state, corporations, and teacher unions in the current period.

JG: Folks can probably see by now that there wouldn't be enough time to go over what's been done to Oakland, even if we had 24 hours. I'm going to try to amplify some of the things that Bob talked about, and Keith and Shane also [*the previous speakers*], and I'm going to talk a bit about bargaining.



Bob talked about what happened with CTA [*California Teachers Association, the state's National Education Association affiliate*] around Proposition 13 [*in 2004, CTA pulled the plug on their petition to amend California Proposition 13 to increase corporate property tax and close corporate loopholes*]. You won't hear that from CTA, but I can verify it because we found out about that at a meeting at CTA State Council in, I believe, 2010 [*actually, 2009*] of two committees: the Financing Public Education committee, which I was on, and the Political Involvement Committee. There were about 150 to 200 people in the room, including top CTA staff [*and officers*]. I asked them why they had backed out [*of their Prop 13 initiative*] six years earlier. And at first, they responded with the line that they had used up until then: "Well, we only had 40 to 45 percent support in preliminary polling." They hadn't even begun to campaign, and they had 40 to 45 percent support. [*I responded*]

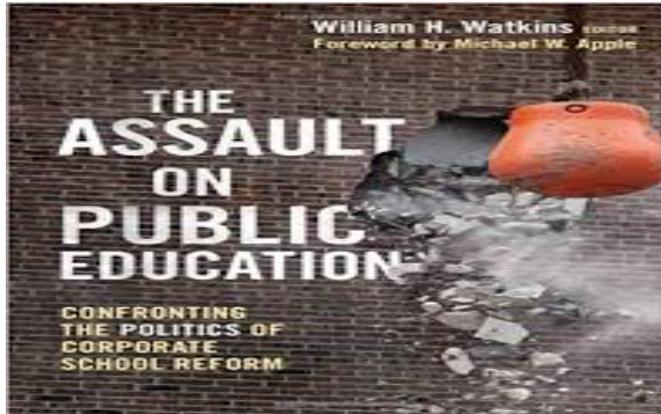
"That's a reason to pursue it and win, not to pull out." Then one of the top staffers spoke and said that the Chamber of Commerce had approached us and told us that if we didn't pull Prop. 13, they would go after the agency shop (dues checkoff). And so, the CTA staffers said, we had to pull it. Well [*by that logic*] you have to lose every fight that means anything. Because they always [*will threaten to*] do that. So that to me was a graphic lesson in how CTA backs off. And on how CTA won't fight forward. We need the resources that CTA can provide, but we can't have confidence in how they're going to proceed.



I recall walking into the [*California Public Employee Relations Board*] Fact-finding Panel on the OEA / OUSD [*Oakland Education Association / Oakland Unified School District*] contract dispute in January 2010. I walked in with Bob [*Mandel, another panelist*]. And Bob said to me, "You know, it looks like there are three sides here: the district, the state, and the union. But really, there's only one side." CTA staff made the presentation for us. The school district administration co-opted some of the largest private contractors to the state education department to be part of the district's bargaining team and to serve as the district's representative on the Factfinding Panel. These people [*CTA staff, private consultants, state bureaucrats*] traveled around the state together, holding Factfinding Panels into local disputes in community after community. It was one big happy family. They were there to get to "yes", not to fight. We won't get what we need unless we fight.

Yesterday, one of the teachers involved in the recent Oakland High wildcat (or sickout) asked if there really is a conspiracy to destroy public education in Oakland, or whether it's just incompetence. I

gave the answer that I usually give: "Well, it's hard to tell how much is ineptness and how much is malevolence." But then, after I thought about it for a second, I said, "Well, there's been an assault on public education and on the public sector that's been going on for half a century." Whether or not we call it a conspiracy, it's a planned assault that's been going on for decades. I first came



across this in 1972, when I was in my mid-twenties and teaching in New York City. At the time, there was something called the Economic Development Council of New York. It was essentially a sitting committee of the CEOs of the largest corporations in the New York area, which at that time meant some of the largest corporations in the world. It included the head of Mobil and the head of Esso (that was before they merged to form Exxon). The heads of Metropolitan Life and New York Life. The head of AT&T [*actually, of New York Telephone*]. And others. I still remember some of their names – William Ellinghaus; George Shinn. They put out big, glossy brochures and lobbied the New York daily newspapers' editorial writers to say that the cost of public services was strangling the private sector, and that something had to be done. We had to bell the cat. We had to cut public services, and we had to go after those public sector unions. There was a transit strike. They blamed that on that less than one-tenth of one percent that were inconveniencing the other more than 99.9% by demanding decent pay and decent services for transit.

In 1972 the Economic Development Council, working through the Ford Foundation, with Ford Foundation educational director Mario Fantini as point person, sent teams into junior high schools in Manhattan to "prove" that class size doesn't matter – that smaller class size doesn't help student achievement – and that teacher

preparation doesn't matter. They asserted that we could cut teacher preparation time in half and increase class size and students would do as well or better. Well, their plan didn't succeed at that point in time. But that was the opening attack. What came next, three years later, as people may remember, was the New York fiscal crisis of 1975 – Big Mac [*the Municipal Assistance Corporation*] and the Emergency Financial Control Board, run directly by the bankers. The bankers – the David Rockefellers, the Walter Wristons, and so on – stepped out from behind their desks and took control of New York. And William Simon, Gerald Ford's secretary of the treasury, said "We're going to teach this city a lesson so that no city again tries to go where this one did." That is, to try to provide some public services. To try to provide something to public service unions. This was a concerted effort and war, and things proceeded from there.



In 1982, the Reagan administration came out with the "A Nation at Risk" report [*claiming that failing public education was putting the U.S. at a competitive disadvantage economically and even militarily.*] Shane [*Michael Shane, another panelist*] discussed what happened next – the Business Roundtable heavily funded a campaign to impose high stakes testing based on rigid standards. It's important to recognize that this was a bipartisan attack. When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001 [*actually, January 2002*], the strongest proponents of No Child Left Behind were Democrats. And very liberal Democrats. Senator Ted Kennedy. And Representative George Miller (from the Bay Area, from Martinez), who to this day is probably still demanding that teacher evaluations be based on student scores on high stakes tests. So, let's be clear: that's what the liberal wing – indeed, the left liberal wing – of the Democratic Party has long stood for. It has stood, in particular, for pumping wealth from the public to private

corporations and billionaires. That's what neoliberalism is. It's the commodification and recommodification of everything that can be commodified. Privatize everything, and pump wealth to the private sector. And deregulate capital and corporations, and regulate people. Especially workers. Especially students. Especially unions.



I'm running short on time, so I'm going to have to jump to the 2003 state takeover of the Oakland Unified School District. In 2003, the state of California took over the Oakland school district, ostensibly because there was a \$37 million deficit. When they left six or seven years later, the deficit was \$111 million. They exactly tripled the deficit – they're good mathematicians. Background: In 2002, someone named Jack O'Connell, who had been a Democratic Party state legislator, ran for and won the post of state superintendent of public instruction. In prior elections, the total spent on campaigns for that position ran in the neighborhood of \$50,000. But in 2002, Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad and his allies, John Doerr (Mr. Silicon Valley venture capital – he provided initial funding for Google and Amazon, among others, and was the main venture capitalist in the New Schools Venture Fund that Shane mentioned), and Reed Hastings (the CEO of Netflix; before that the CEO of Pure Software; and at the time the president of the state board of education) gave a combined \$500,000 to Jack O'Connell's campaign. He got another \$100,000 from someplace else: CTA. So, O'Connell, with \$500,000 from the billionaires and \$100,000 from CTA, became superintendent of public instruction. Democratic state senator Don Perata of Oakland, the president pro tem of the state senate, wrote and pushed through SB 39, which put OUSD into state receivership. Oakland's Democratic Party mayor, Jerry Brown, and Jack O'Connell asked Eli Broad to name the first state administrator for OUSD. Broad named Randolph Ward, who just

happened to be enrolled in Eli Broad's Urban Superintendents Academy.

Randolph Ward ran the Oakland school district with a crew of Eli Broad trainees who took over administration. Ward / Broad collaborated with the Gates Foundation, which in Oakland worked through BAYCES (Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools – it now calls itself the National Equity Project). BAYCES / Gates handled academics (including testing and instruction), Broad handled administration. The Broad philosophy was that school districts were like big corporations and should be run as such, with schools as profit centers and students as revenue sources. Eli Broad said it was insane to run a big corporation from the bottom up, so school districts had to be run from the top down. And Broad / Ward proceeded to try to extract a profit from the student revenue sources, by severe downsizing [*to "cut costs"*]: By shutting down the libraries in almost every middle school and in most high schools; by laying off scores of custodians; by almost eliminating the maintenance department (Gerald [*panel chair*], who was a school electrician, can testify to that); and so on. Adult education, where Bob worked, which had over 30,000 students in 2003, was gutted to the core. In 2003, there was a 4% across the board cut in the pay of all OUSD employees, and this pay cut was supported at the time by CTA and by then-OEA president Sheila Quintana. And those are only a few of the cuts that were enacted.

In 2006, OEA prepared to strike against this. We had labor council sanction; we were supported by the other school worker unions who pledged to honor the lines. But at literally the eleventh hour, with most teachers asleep, preparing to get to their lines by 6am, then-OEA president Ben Visnick unilaterally called the strike off – without consulting with or even informing executive board members, as he had promised to do in the (we thought) unlikely event that he wanted to accept a new district offer. State administrator Ward showed up at bargaining and made a few concessions, and Ben Visnick said, "We'll take it." I remember this clearly, because we had to get out to school sites early to tell people that we weren't striking. People were shocked: "What? What do you mean there's no strike?"

So, what was given away by Visnick? Well, previously, OEA had fully employer paid health care. That was given up, and to this day we haven't gotten it back.

In the next round of bargaining, starting in 2007, we sunshined three main demands. One was for restoring fully employer paid health care. Another was for a maximum class size of 15 in all decile one and two schools (that is, the lowest achieving schools – nearly all the schools in the flatlands of Oakland) and a maximum class size of 20 in all other schools. And the third demand was for a 20% across the board pay increase. When we made those demands, Ward Rountree, the CTA executive director for Oakland, scoffed at us. He said we were out of our minds. The scoffing from Ward Rountree and others lasted until OEA members heard what the demands were. There was an overwhelming response in favor of them. And in fact, when teachers in other school districts heard, they had the same positive response. And so, from being scoffed at, we became celebrities, with our “great bargaining demands” featured in CTA’s newsletter for Alameda and Contra Costa counties.



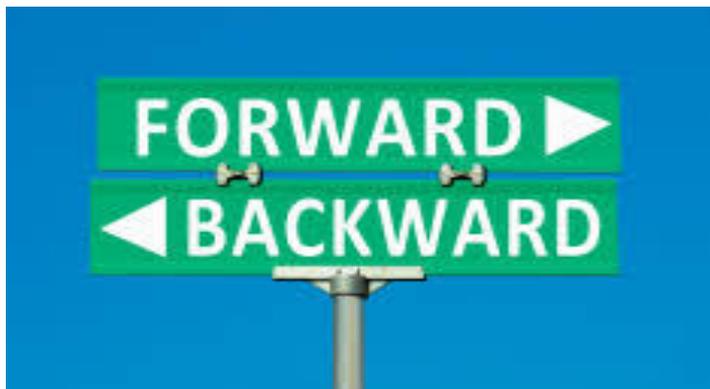
But almost immediately, CTA staff began a war of attrition to grind the demands down. They told us that we have to be realistic. “What’s the real bottom line? Come on. Sure, we’re glad that people like your demands, but what are you really going to settle for?” Now, if you go for their approach, if you establish that bottom line, then you’re throwing out your sunshined demands. First of all, CTA will let the district know what the “real” demands are. Secondly, the district will have people who will find out anyway. So, don’t go there. Instead, we called for complete transparency. We put out

bulletins to the members after every negotiation and whenever any substantive proposals were put forward in bargaining. (CTA lectured us about doing that – they scolded us for it.)

When we went into the Factfinding Panel, I was taken aside by a senior staffer from CTA state headquarters who grilled me on what I planned to say. He wanted to make sure that I was “safe” to allow into the room. I told him that I just planned to talk about how to get to “yes”. And then I walked into the room.

Gerald [*the chair*] says “take your time”, but I want to only say one more thing, because I think that there needs to be time for comments so people can ask what they want to ask. OK.

Bob stressed that it’s really important to fight for the money. We need to fight for it in three ways. One way is to cut the tremendous amount of waste. But that’s not enough to restore everything that’s been cut, leave aside to provide what’s really needed. Because, as Shane said, the status quo is unacceptable. We don’t want to go back to the way things were in 1954, or in 1964. We want to fight forward for what’s really needed, so that public education isn’t susceptible to the kind of attacks we’ve been describing.



Second, we need to stop the flow of money out, the outrageous outsourcing. Oakland is now outsourcing 3.5 times per student what the average school district does in California – and the average school district outsources way too much. If we did that, we could recover close to \$70 million per year. That would be a huge start.

Third, we need to go after the banks and corporations to provide what’s needed. Bob didn’t mention that he and I, along with five other Oakland teachers, were arrested in Wells Fargo Bank’s downtown Oakland branch in May 2011. Following that, we actually

got a sit-down meeting: OEA and a few other school worker unions met with Wells Fargo Bank's top Bay Area executives. They did not give us the \$100 million we were asking for.

And one final place to go after money is the state, which tripled our deficit. Which sued the district for having excess administrators during the state takeover – when the state was administering the district. They sued Oakland for their own malfeasance. We still owe the state on the \$100 million loan made when the state took over the district. And recall, they tripled the district's debt. We're still paying interest on that loan every year, making annual payments of \$6 million or so. That should be repudiated. Not only should there be a moratorium on the interest payments, the entire loan should be forgiven. If these politicians in Sacramento are real, then they'll do that. They're not, so they won't, but that's what we have to fight for. Thank you.

[Following public comments, each speaker made brief concluding remarks. Here are Jack Gerson's]

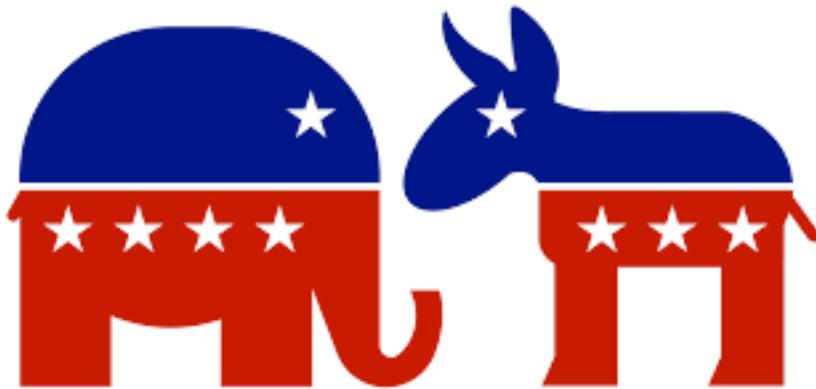
JG: People will remember the 2012 strike by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which got national attention. Following the strike, CTU leaders went around the country claiming that they'd won a great victory. But six months after the strike ended, the Chicago school administration closed over 50 schools. In fact, the Chicago school administration, and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, had warned before, during and after the strike that they planned to close at least 50 schools. The CTU bargaining team did put opposition to school closures on the bargaining table, but the district said sorry we're not going to bargain it, and the CTU leadership dropped the demands against school closures (that is, it was not one of their strike demands). I expect that in Oakland (and in Los Angeles), if the union demands no school closures, the school board and superintendent will say that school closures fall outside of the contract and will refuse to bargain it. But nevertheless, even if it isn't a formal demand at the bargaining table, a demand for no school closures can be a central demand of the strike. You can strike and say that the demand for no school closures is as important, or maybe even more important, than the formal bargaining demands.

Second, every spring there's a parade of private contractors into the school board meetings. They were all given multi-million-dollar contracts for the whole school year, but these contractors almost invariably claim that all of the contract money has been used up midway through the school year while the work they contracted to do is incomplete. And the school board almost always gives them more money to finish the work that they originally contracted to complete. Sometimes they receive nearly double the amount that was originally agreed upon. There needs to be a moratorium on that. No more pass-throughs. Every contract up for renewal has to be very carefully examined. It may be, unfortunately, that for this school year a few contracts need to be extended because they're providing things that students need. But most of the contracts don't need to be renewed. And we should shut those down. There's over \$80 million that goes out every year in contracts. That money should be reclaimed.



One more thing [*in response to a comment*]. It's absolutely true that the driving force in low student achievement, its highest correlate, is inequality – poverty – and that's a function of race and class. So, it's not going to be eliminated under capitalism. But how do we make the fight for better education part of, and connected to, a fight against capitalism? Right now, we have a fight on our hands against the destruction of public education nationwide. We have to take that defensive struggle and turn it into an offensive struggle. But we don't do that by starting with simply revolution. We have to do both.

Thoughts on the Democratic Party –A Personal Statement



By Ron Tabor
December 11, 2018

At our meeting in August (*a meeting of supporters of The Utopian—Ed.*), Jack and I were asked to prepare a draft of a document outlining and motivating our group’s position of opposition to voting for and otherwise supporting the Democratic Party. However, before attending to that task, I thought (with Jack’s OK) that it might be appropriate for me to write up something of a more personal nature to indicate my current thinking on the issue. (It should go without saying that while I primarily discuss my opposition to the Democratic Party, this does not mean that I in any way support the Republicans.)

While the fundamentals of my position on the Democratic Party have remained the same, how I think about it and describe it have evolved over the years. I used to conceive it in terms of social class and the other categories of Marxism. Thus, I described our long-term strategic goal to be a proletarian socialist revolution through which the working class would lead all oppressed people in the

overthrow of our current social system, capitalism, and replace it with a cooperative and democratic socialist society. To achieve this, we wanted both to unite the working class (or as much of it as possible) and simultaneously to inculcate in the workers revolutionary socialist consciousness, aka class-consciousness. This meant getting the workers to recognize that they constitute a distinct social class that stands in opposition to the capitalist class, the class that owns the means of production, the factories, mines, mills, and other workplaces of our society, which they use to exploit and oppress the working class and the other oppressed layers of society. Crucial to this was to explain to the workers the class nature of the capitalist state, particularly to rid them of the illusion that the state is a socially neutral institution which workers and other oppressed people might use to better their conditions or even to bring about socialism. Instead, we sought to demonstrate that the state is controlled by the capitalist class, that it is by nature a capitalist institution through which the capitalists maintain the workers and other oppressed people in conditions of subservience and as material for exploitation.



In bourgeois democracies, the capitalist nature of the state is in part obscured by the fact that the political arena is occupied by distinct political parties that are often in considerable conflict with each other. A particularly effective variant of this setup exists in the United States, where the political system is dominated by two such organizations. One of these, the Democratic Party, has, for much of its history, pretended to represent and fight for the working class and other oppressed people, while the other, the Republican, has openly promoted the interests of the capitalists, the owners of small

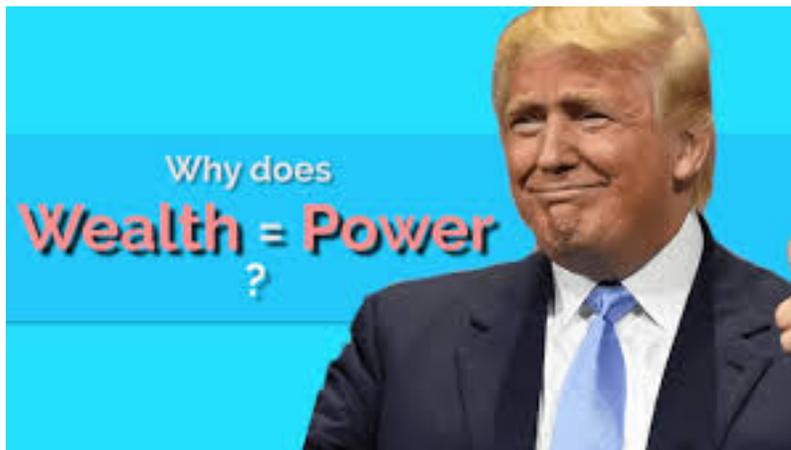
businesses, and the better-off layers of the middle class, while contending that this would ultimately help all members of society, including those at the bottom. So, to get the workers to understand the class nature of the state, we thought it was necessary to expose the Democratic Party (as well as, of course, the Republicans) for what it is. We saw it as essential, in other words, to explain that the Democratic Party, despite the fact that it utilizes progressive-sounding rhetoric, that it is (generally) supported by the labor unions, and that, when pushed, it promotes progressive legislation, is, in fact, a capitalist party. The party is financed by powerful



sectors of the capitalist class and works to defend the interests of the entire capitalist class and the system as a whole. As part of this project, we advocated that the workers, the unions, and other working-class organizations not vote for, donate to, or otherwise support the Democratic Party. Instead, we insisted that they break with the Democrats and build their own independent party (which we variously called a labor party or a workers' party). To urge the workers and other oppressed people to vote for and continue to support the Democratic Party means to tie them to the liberal wing of the capitalist class (or in Leninist terms, to turn them into a "tail" of the liberal capitalists) and thus to prevent them from establishing themselves as a class independent of, and opposed to, the capitalist class as a whole. It also means preventing the workers from going beyond the limits of the capitalist system and attempting to overthrow it and replace it with their own class rule. (This was what we meant when we insisted that we were for the "united front" of working-class organizations and opposed to the "Popular Front", a bloc of all supposedly "progressive" forces, including the capitalist liberals.)

When I decided I was an anarchist (sometime in the mid-1980s), I began to think about the issue of the Democratic Party somewhat

differently, although without changing my underlying attitude. I then saw capitalism more broadly as a specific form of hierarchical society, a social system built on domination and subordination, in which some people have power over others. Modern society can be seen as an interlocking web of hierarchies, including those based on economics (class), ethnicity, gender and gender-identity, and differing physical and intellectual abilities. I believe that in our current, commercialized, system, the fundamental determinant of power, that is, the ability to dominate and exploit others, is money or wealth. (One's position in the other hierarchies greatly influences



one's position in the economic hierarchy, in that it helps or hinders one's ability to accrue wealth and hence gain power.) Moreover, wealth and political power are interchangeable; if one has wealth, one has, or can readily acquire, power, while if one gains power by, for example, getting elected to a political office, one can readily acquire wealth. (Barack Obama became a millionaire through the sale of his books, which, I think it is reasonable to say, few people would have read had he not been president of the United States. Michelle Obama may well accomplish the same thing with her recently published memoir.)

Whereas Marxism tends to view the state as distinct from the economic system and to conceive of it as an instrument of the capitalist class, as an anarchist, I see the state as a, if not the, central component of the interlocking hierarchical structures that make up the system. In effect, it's the lynchpin that holds the structure together. The state serves the interests of and defends the system because it is integral to the entire hierarchical set-up. As a result, it does not need to be directly controlled by the

Although all components of the elite are militant defenders of the social system (as the source of their wealth and power), they have different, often competing, interests, along with differing views about how the system should evolve, about which economic, political, and social issues need to be addressed, and about how this ought to be done. The result is a struggle among these elements that is fought out in various spheres, such as the market/the economy, the political arena, and the intellectual/ideological realm. As the recent developments in the United States reveal, these conflicts can become quite intense and may result in serious crises.



Looked at this way, both of the main political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, are integral parts of the system. It is their very nature to serve the interests of the elite and to defend the system as a whole. They are central components of the political arena and key props of the state. Historically evolved, the parties represent competing and shifting coalitions of different social layers, from the top strata down through the middle classes and including sectors of the working class. (It is worth remembering that over 40% of the potential electorate does not vote, even in presidential elections.)

Beyond defending the system and propping up the state, the two parties and the political system as a whole offer the elite a number of advantages. Among them are:

1. They provide a flexible but relatively contained arena in which the various sectors of the elite can fight for their specific interests, policies, and ideologies without threatening the existence of the system as a whole.
2. They provide a means for economic and social groups below the elite, such as the owners of medium-sized and small businesses and other middle-class people, to fight for their interests.
3. They appeal to and mobilize broader social layers, thus creating mass bases for the specific policies that are ultimately chosen through the political process.
4. They provide a vehicle for individuals from various social layers who demonstrate political talent to rise through system, and through that, into the elite.
5. They provide an effective feedback mechanism through which the elite can ascertain the thoughts, feelings, and complaints of broader groups and layers in society.
6. They promote the illusion that the political system, and indeed the entire hierarchical structure, is "open", that is, that it provides a means, even for people from the lowest ranks of society, to increase their wealth and position in the hierarchy of power.
7. By mobilizing the middle and lower layers of society around two competing parties, their ideologies, and specific policies, the political system divides these strata into two contesting sectors and prevents them from uniting their forces and organizing a joint struggle against the entire elite and the system as a whole.
8. It provides an effective way for the elite to co-opt, contain, and eventually destroy radical movements of both the left and the right that might seriously threaten the system.

It is worth spending some time on these last two points.

The Romans had an adage – "divide and conquer" or "divide and rule" – a technique they consciously deployed to establish and maintain their vast and long-lived empire. Unlike the US constitution, which was explicitly devised to sustain the rule of an

elite, the two-party system was not consciously developed to achieve this end. Despite this, it has certainly functioned this way over the course of its more than two centuries of existence. In fact, it is hard to conceive how an arrangement of political parties that was consciously designed to “divide and rule” could have achieved that result any better than the current, spontaneously evolved, one. In the United States today, a large percentage of the population is divided into two extremely antagonistic camps, each of which is led by one of the two competing sections of the political elite. On one side are those mobilized behind Donald Trump and the Republican Party, which he essentially hijacked by winning the Republican primaries and then getting elected president. On the other are those mobilized behind the Democratic Party, whose candidate, Hillary Clinton, won the popular vote by a considerable margin but failed to win a majority in the Electoral College. While this extreme polarization is not without risks to the ruling elite as a whole, the resultant division of the population has effectively prevented the emergence of a united popular movement that might direct its ire against the rule of the elite as a whole and thus against the entire hierarchical system. This is rather striking.



Also striking has been the ability of the two-party system to co-opt, contain, and eventually destroy radical mass movements. From the late 19th century, through the 1930s and the 1960s, and to the present, the two-party system, usually working in cooperation with the state’s repressive apparatus, has carried out this task extremely effectively. The Occupy Movement is a prime example. It was first co-opted by the trade union bureaucrats and then repressed by the police, after which remnants of the movement got swallowed up in Barack Obama’s 2012 re-election campaign. It should be obvious

that the task of dividing the populace into competing political camps requires a party like that of the Democrats, that is, one which, while being financed and controlled by sectors of the elite, can make a credible case that it represents and fights on behalf of ordinary people. Meanwhile, the Republican Party has played a comparable role on the other side of the political spectrum, which is one of the reasons why, unlike in the parliamentary systems of continental Europe, a distinct, explicitly right-wing, authoritarian party has never emerged in this country.

Despite the changes in how I analyze our social order, I still conceive of our strategic political goals much as I did before. If there is any chance to overthrow our current (hierarchical, bureaucratic, competitive, unjust, and brutal) society and replace it with an entirely different one (one based on equality, cooperation, and justice), it is essential that the overwhelming majority of people (including middle-class individuals and owners of small and medium-sized businesses) unite into one mass movement that is consciously directed against the entire elite, the state, and the political and economic system as a whole. And this will be possible, if it is possible at all, only if the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and the entire state apparatus are exposed for what they are and then destroyed. How can we (and other groups and individuals who agree with us) facilitate this process if we vote for and otherwise support the Democrats? We can claim that we are really for overthrowing the entire system, but we would, in fact, be preventing the emergence of a movement against the Democratic Party and hence of the entire elite. How can we help to unite the broad mass of the population around our vision if we write off all who do not now vote for, or whom we cannot hope to convince to vote for, the Democrats? More concretely, how can we think of building a mass popular movement, one that involves the overwhelming majority of the people, if we simply give up on the Trump/Republican supporters and write them all off as irredeemable racists, misogynists, and xenophobic reactionaries, a "basket of deplorables", as Hillary Clinton so snootily described them? How can we even begin to talk to them, let alone convince them of our views, if we fail to clearly distinguish ourselves from the Democrats? And how can we do that if we vote for or in any other way support the Democratic Party? Many of the people who voted for Donald Trump saw him, and still see him, as an outsider, a rebel, who opposes the entire political "establishment" (both

Democratic and Republican) and the government bureaucracy (the so-called "deep state"). How can we (and the libertarian left as a whole) make any inroads into Trump's base if we put ourselves in a bloc with part of that very "establishment"?

In fact, large numbers of people have good reasons to despise the Democrats. This is the party of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, dishonest and corrupt politicians who made a boatload of promises to millions of working-class and lower middle-class people and then abandoned them to the march of capitalism without even offering them a scintilla of hope. As the industrial heartland of the country got destroyed as the business elite shifted production overseas in search of cheaper labor and access to foreign markets while automating those facilities that remained, thousands of the rural and semi-rural communities that depended on the jobs those factories used to provide got destroyed. What was the response of the Democrats? Stooges of Wall Street, they threw billions of dollars at the banks, the insurance companies, the hedge fund managers, and the auto companies, and refused to punish anyone for their



malfeasance, while doing nothing to help struggling homeowners keep up on their mortgages and save their homes or to assist any of the other people who got clobbered by the Great Recession. These so-called "friends of labor", who for years relied on the union bureaucrats to mobilize their members to vote for their candidates and work on their campaigns, didn't lift a finger to protect those organizations from the combined onslaught of an eroding industrial base and a coordinated political attack by the Republicans. These are the people who make so much noise about their support for ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity, but omit any consideration of

the millions of lower middle-class and working-class white people who are edited out of the "identity politics" narrative, while doing precious little for the millions of lower-class Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ people, and members of the other oppressed groups the party claims to champion. (Barack Obama deported more people than any other president, before or since.) The Democratic Party is financed, supported, and ultimately controlled by some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the country: Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg, Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Tim Cook, Larry Page, George Soros, Eli Broad, Haim Saban, Richard Blum (Dianne Feinstein's husband), the Pritzkers, Michael Bloomberg, and scores of other billionaires and multi-millionaires. All these people make much of their oh-so-liberal values and their oh-so-deeply-felt humanitarian virtues as long as these don't affect their wealth and their power. Their strategy is to appear to want to



reform the system in the interests of the common people, while never supporting any measure that would seriously threaten the elite and the hierarchical structure of which they are part and to which they are loyal. They make nice-sounding promises, in the form of rhetoric, policies, and programs, to the majority of people suffering from the ravages of our system which, even if they were entirely implemented, would do very little to improve their lives. Yet these elite liberals know that, in fact, these policies and programs will never be fully implemented, because: (1) they are too expensive; and (2) they will never get passed by Congress (and they can always blame the Republicans for this). In short, the Democrats play the role of the "good cop" against the "bad cop", the Republicans. And you need both partners if this ruse is to work.

To the uninitiated (and, unfortunately, to many who ought to know better), the Democrats always look better when they are out of power. Then, the rhetoric becomes particularly flowery and the promises flow forth most abundantly. It is easy to forget the details of what they did when they were in office. During his first election campaign, Barack Obama promised to get the country out of Iraq. (The war in Afghanistan was the one worth fighting, he insisted.) But did he pull US troops out of Iraq and end the war? No. People also forget that the first thing Obama did after his first election was to select a cabinet and a set of advisers made up of bankers and Wall Street executives. (I remember how stunned and utterly devastated many liberals and progressives, those who were inspired by the soaring rhetoric he uttered during the election campaign, were.) Bill Clinton launched the War on Drugs, which has resulted in the incarceration of millions of people, mostly Black and Latino, the explosion of the size and strength of the criminal gangs, and the virtual destruction of many countries in Central and South America. It was his administration that promoted "mandatory minimum sentencing" and "three strikes you're out" (under pressure from



sections of the Black communities, which were being destroyed by the drug trade), but which today many people believe to have been the policies of the Republicans. He was also instrumental in convincing the bankers, individual investors, and hedge-fund managers of Wall Street that he could govern in their interests even better than the Republicans. And then there was Hillary Clinton, who made it clear, in both word and deed, that she and the Democratic Party as a whole neither needed nor wanted the support

of white working-class people in the middle-sized and small towns throughout the country who had traditionally supported the Democrats and who now, because they got nothing in return for their loyalty, were responding to Donald Trump's phony promises to rebuild their devastated communities. She didn't even bother to visit Wisconsin, only went to Michigan once, and on a trip to Appalachia essentially told the laid-off coal miners and their families that she had no intention of doing anything for them and that, instead, they should "get with the program" of phasing out coal. When she received \$300,000 for speaking to a gathering of Wall Street big-shots, do you really believe she was being paid that much because she's a good speaker? The fee was a bribe, a payment to guarantee access and consideration of their concerns, if/when she was elected, which they all expected would occur. And what do you imagine she said in this speech (which she refused to make public) except that she would do all in her power to protect Wall Street's interests? Thus, in thinking about our attitude toward the Democratic Party, it is crucial to remember its role in, and responsibility for, making Donald Trump's victory possible.



Despite this, I understand why people who see themselves as liberals, "progressives", and even radicals want to vote for and perhaps otherwise support the Democrats. I also get why people who are so petrified of Donald Trump that they would do anything to get him out of office would do so. But I don't see how people who seriously consider themselves to be revolutionaries can think this way. Aside from the fact that when one votes for the Democrats one is in fact voting for the system, voting for the Democratic Party is a very slippery slope. Because if one thinks it's important to vote

for the Democrats, why isn't it important to try to convince other people to vote for the Democrats? And if one thinks it's important for other people to vote for the Democrats, why not donate to the party, why not volunteer to work on its campaigns, why not actually join the party? In short, if one thinks it's important enough to vote for the Democrats, why stop there? Isn't it inconsistent (and at least a bit hypocritical) merely to vote for the Democrats and leave it at that? This political logic is not merely a rhetorical trick. It's been played out an infinite number of times over the decades and is being played out once again, as the vast majority of the left, in their panic over Donald Trump and the Trump-led Republican Party, has collapsed into the Democratic Party and has effectively given up the fight for whatever revolutionary goals those organizations and individuals ever claimed to believe in.



This is where the so-called "insurgent" Democrats, some of whom, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, call themselves "democratic socialists", come in. Bernie Sanders claims to be an opponent of capitalism and an advocate of "socialism", but the "socialism" he promotes today is little more than a watered-down version of the liberal welfare state, which was only viable, to the degree it was, when the United States was the overwhelmingly dominant global hegemon, which is no longer the case. Sanders calls for a revolution, but he is very careful to insist that this revolution is to be a "political" one (whatever that means), not a social one. This is rhetoric designed to mislead the ignorant and the naïve, among them, the thousands of young people who have become politically active in the last few years. Like the other "insurgent" Democrats, Sanders claims to be a militant opponent of the Democratic "establishment", but throughout his career in Congress, he has consistently caucused with them, allied with them,

and supported their program. Do we need to be reminded of the sorry role he played at the end of the 2016 Democratic primary campaign? After having denounced Hillary Clinton as a tool of the "billionaire class", Wall Street, and the Democratic Party "establishment", he completely capitulated to her well before the Democratic Convention and then had his operatives (aka goons) work in collaboration with hers to prevent those of his supporters who had not enthusiastically climbed on the Clinton bandwagon from making their discontent known at the convention itself. Whatever Sanders and the other "insurgents", "progressives", and "democratic socialists" think they are doing, they are just putting lipstick on a pig. At best, they will get the Democratic Party to adopt a somewhat more "progressive" program. But this will add up



to little more than a marketing device to convince people that "this time, things will be different", that this time, as opposed to the last time (Barack Obama) and the time before that (Bill Clinton), the Democratic Party really will fight for the interests of the people, instead of for those of the Wall Street bankers and hedge fund managers, the CEO's of Silicon Valley, the big shots of Hollywood, the real estate developers, the liberal media moguls, and the other members of the elite who finance and ultimately control the party. In sum, the role of the "insurgent" Democrats, "progressives", and "democratic socialists" will be to help the Democratic Party perform its historic role once again, that is, to head off militant mass movements on the left and herd them into the morass of the bourgeois political arena, where they are denatured and ultimately killed. It is understandable why inexperienced and idealistic young people might fall for this. It is astounding that older radicals, let alone revolutionaries, with decades of experience behind them,

cannot recognize the scam for what it is. "This time is different"? Don't bet the farm on it!



Of course, people can say that since the libertarian socialist revolution seems to be nowhere on the horizon, since there exists no serious revolutionary movement, and since there is not even a hint of sympathy for our program among the broader layers of the US population, we should stop being revolutionaries and, as part of this, cease our efforts (as feeble as they are) to propagate our (absurd, even ridiculous) vision of a truly free and liberated - a democratic, cooperative, and egalitarian - society. But then, they should come out openly and say this. And they should honestly admit that they are really liberals and "progressives" and should support the Democratic Party with a clear conscience.

Perhaps some people believe we can do both, that is, propagate our program while supporting the Democratic Party. But, as I've said before, you are what you do. The history of the left since the 1930s shows this. When you vote for, organize for, or donate money to the Democratic Party, you become, in fact, a Democrat, even if you think you are a progressive, a radical, a socialist, or even an anarchist.

Beyond these political concerns, I believe there is a moral issue involved. This is something that those of us who once considered ourselves to be Marxists rarely talked about. This is because Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in their polemics with the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and elsewhere, insisted that they never based their arguments on moral considerations but instead on their view, which they believed to be scientifically demonstrated, that

socialism would be the inevitable outcome of the internal logic, the "laws of motion", of capitalism. We can now see, or should be able to see, that Marx' and Engels' claim to have put socialism on a scientific basis is false, and that, in reality, the real grounds of our advocacy of a liberated society are moral. We believe the existing social system is evil: unjust, undemocratic, wasteful, hypocritical, cynical, dishonest, and brutal - in a word, obscene. And we claim to want to convince the vast majority of the people to replace it with one that is better, specifically, one that is the opposite of the current system in all these respects. This involves a lot more than proposing simply a change of the structure of society (the "property forms"). In fact, we are trying to convince people to relate to other people in a completely different way than they do now. As our Who

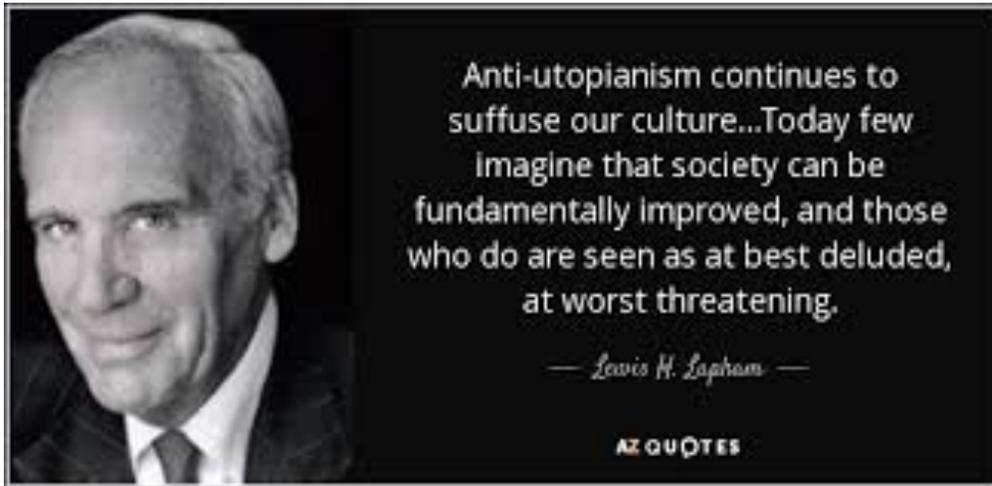


We Are statement says: while (some, perhaps most) people know how to cooperate (and to treat each other in a sensitive, kind, and caring manner) in small ways, we have not figured out how to do so on a society-wide, let alone international, basis. But how can we fight for a truly free, humane, and moral society if we utilize bureaucratic, corrupt, and dishonest methods to do so? (This was something the Bolsheviks, assuming they were, in fact, interested in building a humane society, never figured out.) How can we build a non-hierarchical society, if we utilize hierarchical methods and support hierarchical organizations in our efforts to do so? Specifically, how can we convince people of our program if we vote for and otherwise support something as vile and disgusting - as dishonest, bureaucratic, corrupt, cynical, and hypocritical - in short, as immoral - as the Democratic Party?

This brings me to another, more personal, consideration, one that might be termed "aesthetic." For me to vote for and in any other way support the Democratic Party would be to offend my self-image, my self-respect. It would represent a devastating blow to my conception of who I am and what I have done with my life. It would be an attack on everything I have stood for. I have spent my entire politically conscious life fighting to overthrow this rotten system. This has meant, along with many others, hours of organizing and speaking, hours in uncountable meetings, and hours of reading and thinking about how to do this, what to replace this society with, and whether it's even possible. I refuse to accept that everything we've done has been a wasted effort and that we should now change our course, alter our program, and after all these years (decades!), cave in to the Democrats, to the arrogant, cynical, and hypocritical "titans of industry" who finance and control it, and to the dishonest liberal, "progressive", "socialist", and (even) Stalinist politicians who manage its machinery. This is why I hold to the historic position of the anarchist movement: to refuse to participate in any way in traditional - bourgeois, bureaucratic, hierarchical - politics.

In sum, I am a political maximalist, one who focuses on the ultimate goal, even if this may seem ridiculous (utopian?) to some. Others might choose to be more "realistic", to make compromises in the interests of being more "effective." This is, in fact, a personal choice, one that every politically active person has to make, and one that, ultimately, is not subject to argument or debate. In this light (militant atheists, please forgive me), I occasionally think of what Yoshua (Jesus the man, the historical figure, who I believe was an anarchist, a Jewish anarchist) would say if he returned to our contemporary world. Would he urge his followers to vote for or otherwise support the Democratic Party as the supposed "lesser evil"? Or would he say, "FUCK ALL THIS SHIT!?" (That's my translation of, "My kingdom is not of this world") I think the answer is obvious. In this sense, I am a follower of Jesus.

I don't wish to tell anyone, let alone order anyone, to do or not do anything. The Utopian milieu is not a Leninist party, there is no discipline; people can, and should, do what they wish, vote if and for whom they please. But I will not hide the fact that I am looking to find, and if possible unite with, those who think, and above all feel, as I do.



At this point, I think of what we are currently doing as elaborating and defending our maximal program, our vision, at a time when the overwhelming majority of the people of the world have either abandoned it, forgotten it, or never shared it. This means keeping the dream of a truly liberated - a truly humane - society alive, while refusing to sully it in any way.

Today, there are very few of us, and at least for the foreseeable future, it seems very unlikely that what we do will have much of an impact beyond ourselves and our immediate friends and acquaintances. But, one thing we can do, and I think should do, is: to keep the flag of the libertarian revolution flying. Or, to paraphrase another tradition, keep the "light shining in the darkness."

Fighting Climate Change ***—What is to be done?***



The Utopian publishes the following proposal from Jack Gerson, together with suggestions from Eric Chester and Jon M. about important measures /social reorganization to reduce the effects of climate change. We hope that this is the beginning of a much-needed conversation, and that others will contribute to this discussion.

Proposal from Jack:

I think that there are meaningful measures that can be done to reduce the effects of climate change. Here are measures that come immediately to mind. I am sure that others have other good ideas.

1. An end to the clear-cutting of forests. Unfortunately, Bolsonaro in Brazil seems to be ready to facilitate more destruction of the Amazon rain forest.
2. Massive planting of more trees -- double or more the existing growth.
3. Reorganization of where people live and work. (Or, alternatively, create the opportunity for people to reorganize where they live and work.) Massive increase in decent housing and services in urban areas, allowing people to live closer to their jobs and thus reducing the need to drive distances to work.

4. Massive increase in mass transit, similarly reducing dependence on gas burning vehicles.
5. Phase-out vehicles powered by internal combustion engines.
6. Decrease consumption of meat and dairy products over time.

I think that these measures will require considerable reorganizing of society. I am skeptical that capitalism will do what's needed until the situation becomes much graver. And it would very likely try to do so by top down, autarchic means. And even those will surely be too late to avert much suffering.

So I think that we need to both work for measures like those that I mentioned, and for the revolutionary reorganization of society.

Reply from Eric:

The earth is headed toward a catastrophic crisis within a very few decades and all that is on offer is business as usual.

I think that Jack has the beginning of a real program but it is too limited. Free mass transit, a banning of cars in cities, a planned development of housing around mass transit, a fast railroad system across the country and a ban on short-haul flights, an immediate end to fracking, immediately phasing out plastics and substantially reducing the production of cattle and pigs, a drastic reduction in the military budget and the shifting of scientists from building new bomb and weapons to developing methods of mitigating the oncoming disaster. Even with such a program we are due for a very rough period with hurricanes, droughts and volatile weather patterns.

The idea that capitalism can deal with climate change seems to me to be fantasy. The question then arises in the absence of a revolutionary movement to replace it what can we expect. For sure it will not be good.

Reply from Jon:

While I agree with Jack's 12/28 list of "meaningful measures to reduce climate change", I think that it is crucial to add something about the need for the radical dismantling and reorganizing of

industrial agriculture in this country and around the world. Industrial agriculture, if I am not misinformed, is currently responsible for about one third of the greenhouse gas emissions in this country -- or, at least, is easily the third largest contributor, behind energy and transport. That's not just from cows farting in confined animal feeding operations. In relying on modern industrial agriculture, as Vandana Shiva has said, we are basically eating oil. The machinery, the fertilizer and pesticides, the processing, storing and shipping, even the packaging of the products, are all oil-dependent and, therefore, heavily carbon-emitting. What is now being called regenerative agriculture seems to offer a more sustainable, and even a carbon sequestering, approach to food production. It is also much more conducive to small and moderate-sized operations which, it seems clear, are equally as productive as their agri-giant counterparts, and far less destructive of their soils and ecosystems.

And then there's the part about moving to a far less meat-based diet (especially less beef). It's not just the methane from the resulting farts that's the problem. The amount of water and grain—and therefore, oil—needed to produce meat (especially, but not only, beef) food calories is grotesquely extravagant given the current environmental trajectory. Michael Pollen's dictum ('Eat food, not too much, mostly plants') is on point, not only for human health, but also for the health of the climate.

Long statement -- forgive me! -- requesting the addition to Jack's list of "Rapid conversion of industrial agriculture away from reliance on fossil fuel inputs and ever-larger holdings, and toward small and moderate-sized farms moving toward sustainable farming practices"... or some such.

Book Review

James Baldwin

and the

Heavenly City

—Prophecy, Apocalypse, and Doubt

By Christopher Z. Hobson

Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 2018

Review by Ron Tabor



Our comrade, Chris Hobson, has written a wonderful book about the great African-American and gay writer, James Baldwin. Although the volume is primarily addressed to scholars of Baldwin, it can be read with profit by all those who have enjoyed reading any of Baldwin's writings.

In the context of Baldwin's overall concern to depict and analyze the concrete experience of being Black and gay in the viciously

racist and homophobic society that was the post-World War II United States (and to a lesser extent, Western Europe), Chris has constructed his exposition around several discussions/controversies that have characterized past and present Baldwin scholarship. These are:

1. Many, perhaps most, commentators consider Baldwin's legacy to rest primarily on his essays (such as those in the collections, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, and *The Fire Next Time*) rather than his novels. Against this, Chris argues that Baldwin's novels are at least as important as the essays; in fact, the novels are, in Chris's words, the "core of his legacy."
2. Among those Baldwin scholars who share Chris's belief in the centrality of the novels, most give greater weight to the early books - *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, *Giovanni's Room*, and *Another Country* - than to the later ones. In contrast, Chris contends that the later works - *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just Above My Head* - are as significant as the earlier ones.
3. Many students of Baldwin have stressed the role of the uniquely African-American musical genre, the blues, in Baldwin's work, along with the corresponding religious/philosophic outlook that it represents. While not denying the importance of the blues in Baldwin's vision, Chris insists on the significance of the Black gospel tradition, and the contrasting religious/philosophical standpoint that it embodies. (As far as I can tell, Chris is the first, or one of the first, to make this case.) This requires some explanation.

As one might expect in any realistic portrayal of African-American life, music, especially Black genres such as the blues and (African-American) gospel, plays a major role in Baldwin's novels. To Baldwin, these musical forms represent distinct, and contrasting, attitudes toward life and society, differing stances toward the oppressive social circumstances that Black people faced in 1950s, 60s, and 70s America (and still face

today). The attitude represented by the blues might be described as "grin and bear it", that is, the view that the world, especially the cruel racist reality that Black people suffer in this country (what Amiri Baraka in his book, *Blues People*, calls "dis mess", as in "Ah'm so tired o' dis mess"), is never going to change significantly. As a result, all one can do is grit one's teeth, try to get as much enjoyment and fulfillment out of life as you can wring from it, and endure it as long as you can.

In contrast to the outlook represented by the blues, gospel music envisions the spiritual transformation of society and, in fact, the entire world. Gospel, to put this in traditional religious terms, looks toward the establishment, through the second coming of Jesus, of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth, and the spiritual redemption of the universe. Moreover, as Chris demonstrates, these contrasting musical forms and spiritual outlooks are the contemporary embodiments of two distinct modes or traditions of religious thought that appear in different parts of the Bible and which Baldwin references in his novels. To put this briefly, Chris argues that Baldwin portrays Black life as embodying the dialectical interplay of these two different, and very distinct, attitudes and outlooks toward life.

More narrowly, Chris argues that, through his references to gospel music, Baldwin presents, and argues for, a modern, partially secularized and socially informed, version of the traditional apocalyptic vision, specifically, a vision of an economically, socially, politically, racially, and sexually liberated society. Moreover, this vision is not to be fulfilled through the work of God alone; it requires the active participation of humanity.

Although I am no expert on Baldwin, as far as I can see, Chris has established an extremely strong, and perhaps definitive, case for his position on the three controversies listed above. After studying Chris' intricate and thoughtful analyses of Baldwin's novels, particularly the later three, I do not see how anyone can seriously challenge his position, except perhaps over nuances.

Beyond this, Chris's book is extraordinarily well written. Although he often utilizes long, complex sentences, I found his exposition to be extremely clear. There were only two or three sentences in the entire volume that I felt I needed to re-read in order to understand Chris's point. In addition, Chris demonstrates supreme mastery over all aspects of his material – the specifics of Baldwin's life and career; his writing, especially the plots, characters, and the settings of his novels; the social, political, and cultural context of the time; the details of the musical traditions Baldwin references; the biblical passages Baldwin cites and the religious traditions they represent.

I only have two areas of possible disagreement with Chris's presentation. The first is really a quibble; the second is more substantial.

In contrast to gospel music, which is collective in nature (think of a church choir and the vocal participation of the congregation), Chris describes the blues as individualistic. While this description is certainly true of (most) blues performance, it is questionable when it comes to audience participation. One has only to imagine what the "juke joints" in small towns and cities in the South in the 1930s, 40s and later, or the blues clubs on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s and early 60s, must have looked and felt like on a Saturday night, to call Chris's characterization into question.

More important, Chris makes a two-fold argument about Baldwin's ultimate message. First, he argues that Baldwin is asking his readers to decide between the two competing musical and religio-philosophic outlooks that Baldwin presents in his novels, that is, between the blues and the "grin and bear it" attitude that it represents, on the one hand, and gospel music and the (as Baldwin interprets it) apocalyptic, socially and sexually liberating, vision that it embodies, on the other. Second, Chris contends that, of these two contrasting world-views, Baldwin wants us to choose the second and to actively work for it. Despite his impressive efforts, Chris has not managed to completely convince me of his position. Based on the material that he presents, I can make a case that what Baldwin might be saying is that life - Black life, gay life, the life of all of us - is actually the interaction, the oscillation, between the two points of view. Sometimes, we listen to, and feel, the blues. Other times, we hear, and are inspired by, gospel. I suspect that

throughout his life, Baldwin himself moved back and forth between these two positions.

Despite my question on this point, let me conclude by saying that, in my opinion, Chris has written a brilliant book, which all who have a serious interest in Baldwin ought to read. Of particular note, is the beautiful dust jacket, based on a painting by the now-deceased African-American artist, Aaron Douglas.

‘Who We Are’

—Draft Statement

Below is a revised version of the ‘Who We Are’ statement that appears at the end of each issue of The Utopian. The decision to revise the statement was made at the group’s August meeting. Subsequently, a revised draft was written, and amendments submitted, discussed and voted on. The amended draft printed here includes a paragraph on climate change that has not been separately approved. Supporters of The Utopian are asked to indicate approval of the entire statement or not. If there are any areas of serious political disagreement that have not previously been discussed and voted on, please indicate these, including specifics.

To look for Utopia means providing a vision for the future — of a world worth living in, of a life beyond what people settle for as experience clouds their hopes. It means insisting that hope is real, counting on human potential and dreams.

Utopians do not accept “what is” as “what must be.” We see potential for freedom even in the hardest of apparent reality. Within our oppressive society are forces for hope, freedom, and human solidarity, possibilities pressing toward a self-managed, cooperative commonwealth. We don’t know if these forces will win out; we see them as hopes, as moral norms by which to judge society today, as challenges to all of us to act in such a way as to realize a fully human community.

We can describe some of these possibilities: worldwide opposition to the imperialist domination of the global economy; struggles against dictatorship in China, Syria, Egypt, and Venezuela; fights for national liberation in Ukraine, Kurdistan, Palestine, and China (including those by Uighurs and by Tibetans); cultural movements for the defense and recovery of indigenous languages and histories; struggles throughout the world to guarantee women full sovereignty as a right, not a privilege, dismantling the patriarchal systems that institutionalize the domination and devaluation of women by men; changes in society’s acceptance of LGBTQ people and people with disabilities; and struggles against

racism, for the rights of people of color, and for the rights of immigrants. There will — we hope — be similar utopian phases ahead in mass movements in the U.S.

But beyond these specifics, we are talking about something familiar to everyone, although difficult to get a handle on. In small ways, every day, people live by cooperation, not competition. Filling in for a co-worker, caring for an old woman upstairs, helping out at AA meetings, donating and working for disaster relief — people know how to live cooperatively on a small scale. What we don't know, and what no one has found a blueprint for, is how to live cooperatively on a national and international scale, or even on the scale of a mass political movement. Nobody has described how the society we want will look, or how to get it, though we know what it will be: a society where people are free to be good, a society based on cooperation and peace, not dominance and aggression.

This is a good time to be publishing a journal dedicated to Utopianism, revolutionary socialism, and anarchism. Struggles of the red state teachers; activism in the Black and Latinx communities, and of women, lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, and queer people, indigenous people, environmentalists, and people with disabilities — these, we think, are all harbingers of another upsurge coming.

But these are perilous times as well. Destructive effects of climate change are already being felt. They will get far worse. They demonstrate capitalism's disregard for life — human and otherwise — and for the ecosystem. It is a graphic illustration of the need to reorganize the way in which we (human beings) relate to and organize the world around us, as well as our relations with one another, with other species, and with the entire ecosystem.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the fact that China's Communist political dictatorship is state-controlled capitalism (with gross inequality) have done more than just discredit authoritarian Marxism. They have also discredited, for many, the very idea of changing society fundamentally. Instead, we see many turning in desperation to the demagogues of the right, while others look to the statist reformists of the social democratic left.

Meanwhile, the fabric of the post-World War II world system, already fraying, is unraveling at its core, the U.S. and Europe. Rising anger at the gross inequality and assault on living standards of the majority has resulted in the rise of right-wing movements throughout Europe and the U.S. Racist, anti-immigrant authoritarians have ridden this anger to electoral victory in the U.S., Italy, Hungary, Austria, and Turkey, to name a few.

In the U.S. and the UK, social democrats have also gained adherents (Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the U.S.; Jeremy Corbyn in the UK). But these “democratic socialists” and “progressives” think that capitalism can be reformed, its rough edges smoothed. Their prescription to cure the predations of neoliberal privatization is to increase the scope and authority of the state, with their ideal being something resembling Scandinavian “socialism” (contemporary Denmark; Sweden of the 1960s) and/or FDR’s New Deal. So in the U.S. the leading demand is “single payer health care” — with no discussion of how this would not be a top-down, bureaucratic monstrosity, or how it would not come at the expense of another program.

But the cure for privatization is not to increase the power and authority of the state (be it by regulation, taxation, or nationalization) but to dismantle the state (the standing army and the cops; the nightmare bureaucracies) and to reorganize society, cooperatively and democratically from the bottom up, locally based and with emphasis on mutual aid. We are confident that new mass movements from below will rise again, in a massive surge, as did Occupy in 2011. And we hope and anticipate that, like Occupy (in its initial stages, at least), these movements will reject reformism and statism.

Another highly problematic phenomenon has been the rise of Islamist/Jihadist religious fanaticism, which exploits radical hopes for escape from western domination to build mass support for a tyrannical, socially regressive, and exceptionally brutal war against both non-Muslims and the great majority of Muslims. This development is partly a response to the collapse of secular anti-imperialism in Africa, the Arab world, and Asia in the past fifty years, and partly to continuing European/North American domination of these areas, now made worse by an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim backlash in Europe and the United States. The road

forward lies in rebuilding a democratic, radical anti-imperialism, but how this may occur we don't know.

Moreover, with a few exceptions, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist groups remain small and their influence limited. Various kinds of reformism and Marxism still attract radical-minded people. Indeed, the support for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Party primaries and the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) since the November 2016 elections show that various strains of left statism, reformist and Marxist, still attract radically minded people. Reformism and Marxism, and their corresponding movements, accept the state, capital-labor relations, conventional technology, and political authoritarianism. Nevertheless, despite the dominance of reformists and statistes in the world of the organized left, over the past two decades the influence of anarchists and libertarian socialists has clearly increased (as was seen in the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization as well as the Occupy movement).

It is important to continue to work for freedom and to speak of utopia. This racist, sexist, and authoritarian society has not developed any new charms. It remains exploitative and unstable, threatening economic collapse and environmental destruction. It wages war around the globe, while nuclear weapons still exist and even spread. Even at its best — most stable and peaceful — it provides a way of life that should be intolerable: a life of often meaningless work and overwork; hatred and oppression within the family, violence from the authorities; the continuing risk of sudden violent death for LGBTQ people, women, and Black people; the threat of deportation of undocumented immigrants. The major reforms of the last period of social struggle, in the 1960s, while changing much, left African Americans and other Black and brown populations in the U.S. and around the world facing exclusion and daily police (state) violence, literally without effective rights to life. The videos we see every day (in which new technology makes visible what has always been going on) reveal, like sheet lightning, the reality of the system we live under. For this society, from its inception, to call itself "democracy" is a slap in the face of language.

This paradoxical situation — a society in obvious decay but without a mass movement to challenge it fundamentally — is, we hope, coming to an end. As new movements develop, liberal-reform and

Marxist ideas will show new life, but so will utopian and libertarian ideas. We work with this in mind. We have to do what was not done during the last period of really radical social struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other things, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist theory very much needs further development, including its critique of Marxism, and its ideas about how to relate to mass struggles, democratic and socialist theory, and popular culture. And we need to reinvigorate the ideals of anarchism/libertarian socialism and the threads in today's world that may, if we can find them and follow them, lead to a future worth dying for and living in.

Based on all of the above, we state a few basic principles:

We fight for reforms, but we do not believe that capitalism can be reformed or transformed into socialism via reformism or reliance on the state, be that reliance via nationalization, parliamentarism, a social democratic New Deal, or any such statist scheme.

We are opposed to social democracy, electoralism, and the capitalist parties. Consequently, we are categorically opposed to supporting Republican or Democratic candidates (including "insurgent" Democrats such as Sanders, Warren, and Ocasio-Cortez), and third parties.

We are not pacifists. We are internationalists who, as well, support struggles for national liberation. We oppose neoliberal globalization, but also oppose the virulent racism and scapegoating being directed at immigrants, at women, at Black and brown people, at LGBTQ people, at religious and ethnic minorities. We are for fully open borders.

We support and encourage workers to organize. Organizing may take place outside the unions, inside the unions, or both inside and outside, depending on current situations and future developments. And organizing should not be limited to workplace issues, but should embrace broader social, environmental, and community concerns as well.

We are anarchists and libertarian socialists. We seek collaboration with all who share our core values, including those who consider themselves libertarian Marxists, although our view — of which we

hope to convince them — is that Marx, far from being a libertarian, was an authoritarian centralist and statist.

This future, we state clearly, is an ideal, not a certainty. The lure of Marxism, for many, has been its promise that a new world is objectively determined and inevitable. This idea is not only wrong, it is elitist and brutal. If the new society is inevitable, then those who are for it will feel free to shoot or imprison everyone who stands in their way. That is the key to Marxism's development from utopia to dictatorship, which everyone except Marxists is aware of. Nor do we believe in an inevitable collapse of the present system — capitalism may be able to continue to push its way from crisis to crisis at the usual cost in broken lives and destroyed hopes.

We fight all oppression under capitalism and urge all oppressed people to work in a common struggle to end their own oppression and that of their sisters and brothers.

We believe people have to make ethical choices about whether to accept life as it is or to struggle for a new society, and then about whether the society they are for will be democratic or authoritarian. The only key to the future is a moral determination to get there, a dream of a world in which those who were obscure to one another will one day walk together. We do not know where this key may be found, but we know the only way to find it is to search for it.

That is who we are.

Who We Are

(Originally printed in *Utopian 2*, 2001. Revised 2016.)



To look for Utopia means providing a vision for the future – of a world worth living in, of a life beyond what people settle for as experience clouds their hopes. It means insisting that hope is real, counting on human potential and dreams.

Utopians do not accept “what is” as “what must be.” We see potential for freedom even in the hardest of apparent reality. Within our oppressive society are forces for hope, freedom, and human solidarity, possibilities pressing toward a self-managed, cooperative commonwealth. We don’t know if these forces will win out; we see them as hopes, as moral norms by which to judge society today, as challenges to all of us to act in such a way as to realize a fully human community.

We can describe some of these possibilities: worldwide opposition to the imperialist domination of the global economy; struggles against dictatorship in China, Syria, Egypt, and Venezuela; fights for national liberation in Ukraine, Kurdistan, and Palestine; cultural movements for the defense and recovery of indigenous languages and histories; changes in society’s acceptance of homosexuality, trans-gender freedom, and women’s equality, campaigns to defend the rights of immigrants and racial and religious minorities. The organized labor movement and the Black movement in the United States have – we hope – new utopian phases ahead.

But beyond these specifics, we are talking about something familiar to everyone, although difficult to get a handle on. In small ways, every day, people live by cooperation, not competition. Filling in for a co-worker, caring for an old woman upstairs, helping out at AA meetings, donating and working for disaster relief – people know how to live cooperatively on a small scale. What we don’t know, and no one has found a blueprint for, is how to live cooperatively on a national and international scale – even on the scale of a mass

political movement. Nobody has described how the society we want will look, or how to get it, though we know what it will be – a society where people are free to be good.

This is a good time to be publishing a journal dedicated to utopianism, revolutionary socialism, and anarchism. The left is no longer in retreat. The struggles of organized labor, the Black and Latino communities, women, lesbian/bisexual/gay/transgender people, indigenists, and environmentalists are gaining strength. Within the world of the organized left, the influence of anarchists and libertarian socialists has greatly increased.

But these are perilous times as well. The fabric of the post-World War II world system—a “democratic ideal” for Europe and the United States masking elite control and international domination—is fraying. In the U.S. and Europe we see ideals of openness and inclusion in collision with xenophobia and race resentment. The parties of reform – the Democrats in the U.S., the Social Democrats in Europe, the Christian Democrats in Latin America, the old nationalist parties in Africa and Asia (where they still exist) – have abandoned the idea of social reform and freedom from international capital; yet, at least in the U.S., the Democratic Party has lost none of its ability to absorb, blunt, and demoralize radical efforts at change from within. While the collapse of the Soviet bloc and China’s adoption of a capitalist economic system under a Communist political dictatorship have tarnished Marxism’s idealist image, they have also discredited, for many, the very idea of changing society fundamentally. As never since the early nineteenth century, many believe that market capitalism is the only path to human progress.

A highly problematic new phenomenon in recent years has been the rise of Islamicist or Jihadist religious fanaticism, which exploits radical hopes for escape from western domination as mass support for a tyrannical, socially regressive, and exceptionally brutal war against non-Muslims and the great majority of Muslims. This development is a response partly to the collapse of secular anti-imperialism in Africa, the Arab world, and Asia since fifty years ago, and partly to continuing European domination in these areas, now made worse by the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim backlash in Europe itself. The road forward, clearly, lies in rebuilding a democratic, radical anti-imperialism, but how this may occur we don’t know.

Moreover, with a few exceptions, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist groups remain small and their influence limited. Various kinds of reformism and Marxism still attract radical-minded people. Both these ideologies and their corresponding movements accept the state, capital-labor relations, conventional technology, and political authoritarianism.

But these are reasons why it is important to continue to work for freedom and speak of utopia. This racist, sexist, and authoritarian society has not developed any new charms. It remains exploitive and unstable, threatening economic collapse and environmental destruction. It wages war around the globe, while nuclear weapons still exist and even spread. Even at its best -- most stable and peaceful -- it provides a way of life that should be intolerable: a life of often meaningless work and overwork; hatred and oppression within the family, violence from the authorities; the continuing risk of sudden violent death for LGBT people, women, and Black people; the threat of deportation of undocumented immigrants. The very major reforms of the last period of social struggle, in the 1960s, while changing so much, left African Americans and other minority populations in the U.S. and around the world facing exclusion and daily police (state) violence, literally without effective rights to life. The videos we see every day (in which new technology makes visible what has always been going on) reveal, like sheet lightning, the reality of the system we live under. For this society, from its inception, to call itself "democracy" is a slap in the face of language.

This paradoxical situation -- a society in obvious decay but without a mass movement to challenge it fundamentally -- is, we hope, coming to an end. As new movements develop, liberal-reform and Marxist ideas will show new life, but so have utopian and libertarian ideas. We work with this in mind. We have to do what was not done during the last period of really radical social struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other things, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist theory very much needs further development, including its critique of Marxism, and its ideas about how to relate to mass struggles, democratic and socialist theory, and popular culture. And we need to reinvigorate the ideals of anarchism/libertarian socialism and the threads in today's world that may, if we can find them and follow them, lead to a future worth dying for and living in.

This future, we state clearly, is an ideal, not a certainty. The lure of Marxism, for many, has been its seeming promise that a new world is objectively determined and inevitable. This idea is not only wrong but elitist and brutal: if the new society is inevitable then those who are for it are free to shoot or imprison everyone who stands in the way. That is the key to Marxism's development from utopia to dictatorship, which everyone except Marxists is aware of. Nor do we believe in an inevitable collapse of the present system—capitalism can push its way from crisis to crisis at its usual cost in broken lives and destroyed hopes. We believe people have to make ethical choices about whether to accept life as it is or to struggle for a new society, and then about whether the society they are for will be democratic or authoritarian. The only key to the future is a moral determination to get there, a dream of a world in which those who were obscure to one another will one day walk together. We do not know where this key may be found, but we know the only way to find it is to search for it.

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