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“...The desperation to hold onto a decent place to live became sheer panic as the pandemic set in during early 2020.”

COVER ILLUSTRATION:
JOE CIARDIELLO

*Viral art: A man walks past a mural promoting Covid vaccination in Jakarta, Indonesia.*
We have reached the point where the US Supreme Court has become one of the greatest threats to public health and welfare in this country. At a moment when many thousands of people are falling ill every day with Covid and state legislatures are taunting the Supreme Court by passing hundreds of laws that blatantly violate long-recognized constitutional rights relating to gun safety, reproductive rights, and voting, the court’s conservative justices insist that the most pressing constitutional emergency today is a conjured threat to religious liberty.

In a series of recent cases, the new conservative majority has accomplished a radical realignment in the way fundamental rights are recognized and enforced. The significance of this revolution cannot be overemphasized. Unlike previous decisions that shrunk the scope of equal rights, the court has now ruled that some rights are first-tier rights (religious liberty and gun rights), while all others (such as public health or race/sex/LGBTQ equality) enjoy a lower constitutional status. It will protect the rights of LGBTQ people as long as they don’t conflict with another person’s religious liberty. That’s how we won the marriage equality case, but lost the case challenging Catholic Social Services’ claim that it had a First Amendment right to discriminate against LGBTQ people when paid by the City of Philadelphia to vet couples to serve as foster parents.

It gets worse. When the governors of California and New York scrambled to implement limits on public gatherings early in the pandemic, religious groups resisted, saying their right to pray together supersedes the public interest in controlling the virus’s spread. Here too the religious objectors found favor with the court: The right to pray unmasked and in person was protected even during a global health crisis. In these cases the court honed a new, radical approach to religious liberty—if a law contains any secular exceptions, it must allow religious exemptions; otherwise it discriminates against religion.

Thus, if the state imposes widespread limits on public gatherings, including religious gatherings, yet allows people to go to a pharmacy or grocery store, this amounts to discrimination against religion. Never mind that popping into Walgreens for medication poses a much lower risk of contagion than sitting in a pew for hours singing.

Justice Neil Gorsuch wants to go even further. In addressing vaccine mandates that include medical, but not religious, exemptions, he suggests that one way to assure that faith-based objectors aren’t discriminated against would be “to restrict vaccine exemptions to a particular number divided in a nondiscriminatory manner between medical and religious objectors.” In other words, Justice Gorsuch thinks the First Amendment may require the forcible vaccination of people with severe allergies to the vaccine in order to make room for those with religious objections. This jettisons a fundamental principle of the First Amendment: that the protection of one person’s religious beliefs can’t be accomplished at the expense of another person’s rights or safety. As Thomas Jefferson put it, “It does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

The second-tier status of rights many Americans consider fundamental was underscored by the court’s approach to Texas’s six-week abortion ban, a clear violation of Roe v. Wade. Unpersuaded that the law posed any imminent threat to fundamental constitutional rights, the Supreme Court ruled that the law should go into effect while it makes its way through the federal courts. No constitutional emergency here, though access to abortion is fundamentally a public health issue.

The weaponization of religious liberty is not limited to the domains of sex, sexuality, and public health, and we find no limiting principle in the court’s rulings. Religious liberty claims have been used by employers to override workers’ rights to unionize, a minimum wage, and equal pay, and to avoid laws banning child labor and sexual harassment. So too religious liberty has been used to challenge laws regulating divorce, domestic violence, child welfare, sexual assault, and child pornography.

Starting in the Reagan era, the sphere of public values and morality—equality, health, education, and human dignity—has withered when compared with the exploding domain of private religious morality. Tragically, today’s Supreme Court is baking this fact into the Constitution.

Katherine Franke is the James L. Dohr Professor of Law at Columbia University and the founder and faculty director of the Law, Rights, and Religion Project.
The New Wave

With the pandemic returning to a state of emergency, we need to finally fix what was already broken in our society.

This winter brings a bleak sense of déjà vu to the Boston-area ICU where I work. Once again, beds are increasingly occupied by critically ill patients with Covid-19. When I join Zoom calls with physicians from other hospitals to coordinate regional “load balancing” of ICU beds—exchanging patients between facilities to prevent overload—the tone is again tense.

They too, seem about to burst. Compared with our last big surge a year ago, things should be much better now. After all, we have highly effective vaccines. But in many ways, things feel worse, and not just because of Omicron.

Over the past two years, meaningful policy supports helped sustain us through the Covid pandemic. They were nowhere near sufficient, but nonetheless constituted a stronger and wider safety net than we had seen before the virus struck. Emergencies, it turns out, can focus our minds, steady our nerves, and promote cooperation, putting Margaret Thatcher’s infamous assertion that “there’s no such thing as society” to rest once and for all. Both the transmission of the virus and our means of fighting it have proved that we are tied together. And what people need during emergencies is also what they need throughout their lives.

We may not have gotten Medicare for All (or even Medicare for All Things Covid), but federal legislation did provide coverage of coronavirus testing and treatment for the uninsured, as well as federally procured Covid vaccines that were provided free at the point of use throughout the country. In a break with business as usual, providers were strictly prohibited from charging patients a dime for administering them. Even private insurers waived copays and deductibles for Covid care (though they still turned record profits). New policies incentivized states to keep people on Medicaid rolls and raised subsidies for private plans, driving a possible decline in the ranks of the uninsured in spite of massive job losses. And the government spent trillions on enhanced unemployment insurance, child tax credits, stimulus payments, and student loan deferments. These measures helped maintain most people’s standard of living, while keeping tens of millions safely out of the workplace, even achieving a remarkable drop in the poverty rate.

But now a new strain is upon us. In the space of just a month or so, we’ve already experienced mass death. The collective resolve that helped bring about a major expansion in social spending during this crisis is yielding to the threadbare austerity we are used to.

That means we’re facing Omicron with the federal eviction moratorium extinct, expanded child tax credits on the chopping block, and robust unemployment insurance a memory. Private insurers have reimposed copays and deductibles for Covid care. Lines for PCR testing wrap around blocks in some locales. Home rapid tests are not only unaffordable but also sold out almost everywhere. Student loan payments will soon restart. Who needs such measures when, as some claim, we face a pandemic of only the unvaccinated? The spirit of collectivity gives way to the kind of rugged individualism normally embraced only by free-market fanatics.

It’s true that, on an individual level, most vaccinated people are at low risk for severe illness from Omicron. But we do live in a society, and that society still contains millions of vulnerable people. Most of my ICU patients with Covid in recent months have been unvaccinated. Many are no longer alive; some were relatively young. What some fail to realize is that such patients are the victims not only of disinformation but also of the societal inequities, ranging from inadequate treatment of substance-use disorders to exclusion from the health care system—to say nothing of policies that accelerate viral spread, like the mass reopening of nonessential workplaces.

The destructive capacity of the virus, it’s now a cliché to say, has been intensified by the social inequities of American society. In the ICU, I see just how true that is: All along, my patients have been disproportionately poor, immigrant, marginalized. As Omicron surges, they’re the ones who will once again bear the brunt of it, this time in a country that has lost the patience to install any safeguards to protect them.

Yet there is another, more hopeful truth here: The tools we need to fight this wave are the same ones we need to rectify the inequities that immiserate and sicken even outside of plague years. We already know what those are: decommodified health care, safe workplaces, strong social welfare programs, and more equitable education and housing policies. All of those things are still needed: If the pandemic has been a collective emergency, life is full of private ones that happen every day. We can better protect people against those too.

Emergencies can be terrible to live through, yet they can provoke action that both mitigates short-term harms and opens a window for long-term change. The collective experience of the Blitz in the United Kingdom during World War II—including the emergency medical response organized to meet it—is one historical example: It helped drive support for a future National Health Service, and perhaps the British welfare state itself.

The question before us now is whether the Omicron blitz can or will serve as such a catalyst for an invigorated and immediate public health response to the current Covid wave, for the urgently needed organization and rationalization of our medical services, and for an egalitarian reconstruction in the pandemic’s wake. Covid has exposed the structure of our society as not only unjust but untenable. Our work must now be to change it.

Adam Gaffney is a critical care physician and an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.
Recalling bell hooks

Recollections of the late scholar and activist, who revolutionized our understanding of race, class, gender, and mass media.

I was always unsure how to greet her, the radiantly brilliant scholar named Gloria Watkins who wrote worlds into being as bell hooks. She was a neighbor of mine in the 1990s; we lived within blocks of each other in Greenwich Village. I did not know her well, but our paths crossed with some regularity because we wrote on overlapping topics—race, gender, class. She was the eminence whose 1981 book Ain’t I a Woman?, written while she was an undergraduate, had revolutionized second-wave feminism. She forced an epistemic rethinking of intersectionality, encapsulated well by the title of the landmark 1982 anthology All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave.

One afternoon I ran into her at a bistro in the Village. The two of us habitually dressed in black, head to toe. It was a guise I affected as art and sophisticated in a specifically Manhattan way but for her was what she would sometimes wryly claim as “Kentucky cosmopolitan”—she never let go of her roots. Over tea, she talked about her experience in segregated Kentucky schools; she said it was violent, repressive, threatening. “I grew up afraid.” She thought of her survival in and escape from that milieu as a true victory. But she loved the emergence of what she called “the new Kentucky” into a world of “hope and beauty and promise.” Sustained by belief in the power of change, she moved back to Kentucky in 2004 to work at the tuition-free Berea College, which has described her contribution as helping the institution to “get closer to its Great Commitments,” in particular “the kinship of all people and interracial education,” “gender equality,” and “service to Appalachia.”

Perhaps precisely because she had grown up so afraid, kindness to others constituted a very large part of her literary legacy—from children’s books to tracts on the needs of poor mothers to self-help books on healing trauma and racism. She considered it a singular injury that Kentucky’s school system had taught her that “Black people didn’t write any books.” It was her life’s mission to repair that. She wrote more than 30, many of them advocating pedagogy that “respects and cares for” the whole spectrum of human need.

In mourning her, I also mourn a cruel irony: that despite all the gains, the Kentucky State Legislature has pending on its 2022 docket one Bill Request 69, “an act relating to prohibited instruction and declaring an emergency.” It would ban public schools, including post-secondary schools, from offering “any classroom instruction or discussion that promotes designated concepts related to race, sex, and religion.” It hurts beyond words to think that bell hooks’s prodigious output might be banned from the very schools she had hoped to help, and that new generations may be returned to that imposed oblivion where “raced” writers could be categorically erased.

Another recollection: There was a conference at the New School for Social Research at which we had both been among the speakers. A few of us left the conference a bit early and headed to the after-party at Café Loup. (We—and just about every other writer in the West Village of that era—used to love the now-gone Café Loup on West 13th Street, with its seasoned waiters, French café menu, and weekend jazz.) There would be live music and lots of jocular noise within the hour. But we were ahead of the crowd, needing time away from the intensity of audience.

We secured a table, ordered appetizers (whitefish pâté, sliced cucumber, rye bread), and settled in to talk idly while waiting for the rest. We talked about the complex aesthetic confinements of having been raised trying to assert one’s innocence to a world that rarely sees Black children as either innocent or feminine, forced by parents through the bewilder- ing virtue-signaling of “ruffled pink dresses.” It was just before she published her memoir, Bone Black, in which she wrote: “When she is older she will wear black every day…. She is not in mourning. She has learned to put all the broken bits and pieces of her heart back together again. She is a woman. She is dressed in black.”

We were all grown up that evening. I remember us enjoying our crispy, sophisticated breadsticks, the little pats of butter placed on tiny ceramic squares, centered in a pool of pale green olive oil—oh, the relaxed bohemianism of place and time.

As others came—the late writer and musician Greg Tate, the late jazz critic Stanley Crouch, and the late art critic Maurice Berger were all there—the waiters pulled more tables together and we sat in a long rectangle that extended for most of the length of the little restaurant. At one point bell stood up and spoke words I now think of as a perfect metaphor for her life: “Hello, I’m bell hooks, and I want to introduce myself to those of you at the far end of the table.” Her voice was light, high, and musical, like a silver bell, a meditation bell, a call to mindfulness, a beacon of resonant calm.

I remember the dim light of evening settling around us as others gathered, as other now-long-gone friends drifted in, as the live jazz grew louder, and we all raised our voices so as to be more clearly heard.

Patricia J. Williams is the University Distinguished Professor of Law and Humanities at Northeastern University.
Goysplaining

Jewish voices are too often excluded from precisely the conversations they should be leading about Israel and BDS.

Eleven years ago—in 2010—Linda Sarsour, Tamika Mallory, and Bob Bland stepped down from their leadership positions on the Women’s March board after a series of self-inflicted wounds. Aside from the widespread mismanagement that starved state chapters of funding and alienated them over trademark wars, the leadership’s failure to grapple with how it had cozed up to Louis Farrakhan exposed a gaping ignorance that many, especially Jewish women, simply could not abide.

Two years later, the Democratic Socialists of America seem determined to make the same mistake, one that’s common on the US left: offending Jews. This is a bad idea. It’s bad because Jews vote in higher numbers than the electorate at large. It’s bad because Jews have a long history of left-leaning activism. And it’s bad because—especially after Charlottesville and the Tree of Life synagogue massacre—it ought to be obvious that anti-Semitism, even in the United States, is no fucking joke.

The latest and perhaps most ridiculous example of this self-defeating strategy is the DSA’s dust-up with Representative Jamaal Bowman of New York over his recent trip to Israel with the lobbying group J Street and his refusal to back the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement, or BDS. Bowman is being raked over the coals by the DSA’s National Committee, and several chapters across the country have called for his ouster. Never mind the fact that Bernie Sanders—the most high-profile democratic socialist and a Jewish supporter of Palestinian rights who spent time on a kibbutz in Israel—doesn’t support BDS either. After weeks of rancor, the National Committee finally issued a 10-paragraph statement declining to expel Bowman, while repeatedly positioning the DSA as an opponent of the “Zionist lobby” and reiterating its commitment to BDS.

Bowman defeated Eliot Engel, a pro-Likud Israel hawk, to represent a district with a significant Jewish population. Surveys consistently show overwhelming opposition to BDS among American Jewry, including young people and those who identify as secular or “cultural” Jews. Despite its purpose as a standard political campaign against a state entity, BDS strikes profoundly emotional chords that can’t be denied. Maybe that’s because a boycott recalls the “Don’t buy from Jews” dictum the Nazis issued as a prelude to confiscating Jewish assets and cutting our world population by more than a third, thus necessitating the building of a modern nation-state as a refuge from mass extinction. Maybe it’s because a public and oft-stated goal of many of Israel’s neighboring countries is to annihilate the Jewish state—hence the need for an Iron Dome defense system to protect against missiles that target civilians. Or maybe it’s because in the Jewish liturgy “Am Yisrael” refers to the “nation of Israel,” often used interchangeably to mean the Jewish people, and our collective identity is inextricably bound up with centuries of forced exile from a historic homeland.

The DSA and many of those aligned with it don’t seem much concerned by any of that, insisting that criticism of Israel is not inherently or always anti-Semitic (true) and that any pushback against such criticism to that effect is inherently in bad faith (not true). The problem is that in the taxonomy of oppression, the left doesn’t leave much room for the experience or perspective of Jews, in part because we’re mostly racialized as white and enjoy the benefits thereof. The corollary to that designation, however—which is where the wheels come off the wagon—is the notion that we’re not “systemically” discriminated against. Indeed, compared with Black people, we’re not: White Jews do not fear state violence or experience disproportionately harsher outcomes in the criminal justice system. Visibly Jewish people absolutely are subject to violence in the US, though—as was seen this past spring, when people nominally protesting Israel’s bombing of Gaza drove through New York City’s heavily Jewish Diamond District (rather than, say, protesting at the Israeli embassy) and violently assaulted a man wearing a yarmulke. Those of us who aren’t immediately identifiable as Jews still contend with widespread conspiracy theories about how we secretly control the media, the money supply, and all the world’s power. When we point out the double standard on the left that routinely downplays the violence and racism against us, or stand up against our own discrimination, we’re selectively carved out of the prerogative afforded to every other minority group to serve as the authority on our own oppression. The blowback from the Women’s March included accusations that white Jewish women were inappropriately centering themselves. Sarsour had previously proclaimed that women who support Israel cannot be feminists.

Call it “goysplaining.” Which brings us back to BDS and Palestinian rights. More US Jews support the latter than the former, including J Street
(once angrily described by former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a “radical US leftist organization” for repeatedly opposing him), which advocates a two-state solution. It’s a compromise position that reflects a historical reality dating back thousands of years, one that most self-described anti-Zionists seem uninterested in learning anything about. The whole thing gets collapsed into an intellectual shortcut that equates Jews with white colonists: White colonialism is bad, ergo Israel is bad.

None of this is to absolve Netanyahu’s reign or excuse the oppression of the Palestinian people. But the DSA’s anti-Israel position is often thoughtless, self-righteous, and anti-Semitic. Also, claiming that it’s worse on the right doesn’t make the fact of it any less true on the left. It only leaves Jews who are inclined to support DSA’s politics but who are put off by its virulently anti-Israel position searching for a political home somewhere else. If the left wishes to advance a framework that values self-determination for ethnic minorities, it has to acknowledge that US Jews are an ethnic minority too, living in a state with a clear Christian hegemony, where the vast majority of people are massively ignorant of our history, traumas, traditions, and complexities.

If the left values self-determination, it has to acknowledge that US Jews are an ethnic minority too.

David Brooks is the prodigal son of the Democratic Party. As an undergrad at the University of Chicago in the early 1980s, he identified as a democratic socialist. But upon graduating he got caught up in the spirit of Reaganism, starting off as an intern for William F. Buckley Jr. Now, after more than three decades of being a formidable Republican advocate, Brooks is ready to return to the Democratic fold.

In an essay in the January/February issue of The Atlantic originally titled “I Remember Conservatism,” Brooks concedes that the Republican Party is likely to remain enthralled by some version of Trumpism, a degraded and bullying populism that threatens American democracy.

“A lot of my friends are trying to reclaim the GOP and make it a conservative party once again,” Brooks notes. “I cheer them on. America needs two responsible parties. But I am skeptical that the GOP is going to be home to the kind of conservatism I admire anytime soon.” Having abandoned the Republicans, Brooks has decided “to plant myself instead on the rightward edge of the leftward tendency—in the more promising soil of the moderate wing of the Democratic Party.”

The Gospel of Luke teaches that the prodigal son should be welcomed back with joy. Charity demands that the repentant sinner be given a second chance. But before we slay the fatted calf, it’s worth asking if the wayward wastrel has really reformed himself. Did he actually learn anything in his years of debauchery?

While Brooks has given up on the Republican Party, he remains faithful to conservatism, an intellectual tradition that he persists in seeing in literally romantic terms. “I fell in love with conservatism in my 20s,” Brooks enthuses. “As a politics and crime reporter in Chicago, I often found myself around public-housing projects like Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes, which had been built with the best of intentions but had become nightmares. The urban planners who designed those projects thought they could improve lives by replacing ramshackle old neighborhoods with a series of neatly ordered high-rises.”

In this account of his conversion to conservatism, we already see how little Brooks has changed. Responding to Brooks’s essay, the historian Rick Perlstein tweeted:

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by turning them into unseen, passive spectators of their own lives”?? How come lakefront condo buildings in that style didn’t become “national symbols of urban decay”? Projects decayed because they were starved of government funds the moment they became file cabinets for Black people while taxes subsidized suburbs for white people, and decayed exponentially worse when the conservatives in the Reagan White House and Congress of the generation David Brooks celebrates as if solons from some philosophical Olympus CUT THE FEDERAL HOUSING BUDGET BY 75%.

Most of Brooks’s essay is devoted to a selective and potted account of some of the great conservative thinkers who enthralled his young mind, teaching him the value of prudence and the organic evolution of society. His roll call of names includes Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan. A few oddball intellectuals are thrown in: Willmoore Kendall, Peter Viereck, and James Q. Wilson, as well as Buckley himself.

This history is weirdly denuded of complexity and particularity: Hamilton and Jefferson were foes—and they surely influenced liberals as much as conservatives. Both were revolutionaries, as was Lincoln. Even Theodore Roosevelt was a reformer.

We get Burke the lofty exalter of “little platoons”—but not the Burke who, absurdly, enthused over Marie Antoinette and the age of chivalry, the Burke who derided the “swinish multitude,” or the Burke who urged a total war against France. Willmoore Kendall is just name-dropped, with no mention of his support for Joseph McCarthy, his advocacy of preemptive war against the Soviet Union, or his promotion of biological racism. James Q. Wilson’s thoughts on morality are quoted without reflection on his key role as a promoter of mass incarceration.

About conservatism and race, Brooks writes: “To be conservative on racial matters is a moral crime. American conservatives never wrapped their mind around this. My beloved mentor, William F. Buckley Jr., made an ass of himself in his 1965 Cambridge debate against James Baldwin. By the time I worked at National Review, 20 years later, explicit racism was not evident in the office, but racial issues were generally overlooked and the GOP’s flirtation with racist dog whistles was casually tolerated.”

This is a whitewash of a much nastier and more consequential history. The Buckley-Baldwin debate is the least of it. National Review celebrated Jim Crow in the United States and apartheid in South Africa and promoted the “Southern strategy,” which polarized American parties along racial lines and paved the way for Trump. When Brooks was an intern in 1985, National Review still employed senior editor Joseph Sobran, whose open anti-Semitism and racism were notorious. It took Buckley many years to reprimand Sobran, who was eventually fired only for criticizing his employer.

As Spy magazine reported in 1989:

Senior editors Sobran and Jeffrey Hart have swapped jokes about crematoriums and gas chambers. Race relations is also a popular subject. In November 1986 NR ran a cover story, “Blacks and the G.O.P.: Just Called to Say I Love You,” that outlined possible GOP strategies for attracting black voters. Presiding over the traditional post-issue recap, Buckley quipped, “Maybe it should have been titled ‘Just Called to Say I Love You, Niggah.’” During another editorial meeting, Jeffrey Hart reflected wistfully that “under a real government, Bishop Tutu would be a cake of soap.”

Sam Tanenhaus, Buckley’s biographer, reports that the National Review editor in chief decided Brooks couldn’t be his successor because he’s Jewish. This seems to have caught Brooks off-guard and even caused some hurt feelings.

The history of conservatism is much uglier than Brooks admits even now. Leaving the GOP isn’t enough. Before we hold a feast for this prodigal son, he has to honestly reckon with his life of cavorting with a debauched ideology.

About 2021

Disasters happened all year long.
Whatever could go wrong went wrong.
So, ’21, it’s simply true:
We’re glad to see the back of you.

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CALVIN TRILLIN
Deadline Poet

Deadline Poet

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Underneath all the economic reporting of 2021, there was a hidden story: Aided by the American Recovery Act and other stimulus measures, low-wage workers launched a small-scale revolution. Employees and contractors used the additional resources of the past year to successfully demand better pay and working conditions. This occurred alongside giant job gains—over 6 million new jobs this year—creating a recovery about eight times faster than the one that followed the Great Recession of 2008-9. The way in which this is happening is one of the more important and hopeful stories about the labor market today.

Typically, labor conditions are quite bad during the initial recovery from a recession. This was especially true following the Great Recession, when stories of people being unemployed for more than 99 weeks or having to sign noncompete agreements to work at sandwich shops were common well into the middle of the 2010s. It wasn’t until 2018, when unemployment got below 4 percent, that employers had to start seeking out workers and offering better terms. For most of the previous decades, recoveries were slow and featured particularly terrible conditions for workers at the bottom of the income scale.

That isn’t happening now. Unemployment is lower than people had predicted both at the beginning and in the middle of 2021, and employers are having to improve conditions to attract workers. And not just by paying more; reporting shows that workers are able to demand more on-the-job training, more control over and advance knowledge of their working hours, and many other benefits often denied to working people. This is a direct pushback to the economic model of the past several decades. As the labor economist David Autor described it in The New York Times: “For the past 40 years, our economy has generated vast numbers of low-paid, economically insecure jobs with few prospects for career advancement.” Right now, this economic model is starting to change.

To the extent that the media is following this, it’s being covered almost as a lifestyle issue. The phrase “Great Resignation” has dominated many of these stories. They tend to use the rate at which workers are quitting their jobs as a sign that those workers are exiting the labor market. But those numbers come from surveys of employers, and they miss that those workers are going to new jobs. It’s more like a “Great Switching,” in which workers are leaving jobs for better opportunities. For decades economists worried about the lack of employee mobility and the long-term impact that this had on wages and growth. And yet, during this recovery, people are changing jobs like almost never before.

Dry economic statistics don’t describe what is happening on the ground, which is a wave of worker activism. There have been over 980 strikes and labor protests this year, with 13 involving more than 1,000 workers. We’ve seen activism across a wide variety of gig workers and others in the “fissured economy”: those who work in the legal gray zones that have been created and exploited by employers. In the last few months, overall increases in wages have struggled to keep pace with inflation, but that isn’t the case for most low-income earners. The bottom 70 percent of workers have seen growth in real wages over the past two years. Younger workers saw a 9.7 percent increase in real wages, and the bottom 25 percent of earners saw a 5.1 percent rise.

This is happening because of policy. Checks, unemployment insurance, and a swift recovery created through aggressive fiscal stimulus have ensured that workers could claim a larger part of the economy as it came back online. This is less about a labor shortage and more about bargaining over who benefits from the recovery.

Bosses hate this, but it might also be generating a reaction among higher-end consumers, who have been enjoying a kind of labor arbitrage, with cheaper services built on the brutal conditions of workers. Because of this opposition, it is possible this moment could pass without cementing workers’ gains further into place. Labor law needs to be overhauled through legislation like the PRO Act, as do the legal practices that employers use to set the terms for their workers through reforms like banning noncompete clauses in labor contracts. But to do that, we first need to realize that things can be different. This recovery shows that they already are, even during this difficult time.

Mike Konczal
COMMENT/MOHAMMED EL-KURD

My Neighbor, Murad

Murad Attieh has been in an Israeli prison for nearly five months for his role in the movement to save Sheikh Jarrah.

When Israeli officers and undercover agents raided Murad Attieh’s home and arrested him on August 10, his mother, Nuha, had hoped he would be out of the interrogation room in a matter of hours. She’d seen many of her neighbors in Sheikh Jarrah—including my siblings and myself—detained, interrogated, and released shortly after and assumed her son would fall into this pattern. Murad, however, has been in prison nearly five months. No one knows if or when he will be released.

Murad’s family lives a few houses up the street from my home. In recent years, when he wasn’t teaching history and Arabic at a local elementary school, he was busy pursuing a master’s degree in social sciences at a university in Jerusalem. Between the occasional small talk and hearing his thunderous chants at demonstrations, I’ve come to know him as a kind neighbor and an important part of the #SaveSheikhJarrah movement.

Like my own family, Murad’s has lived in the Sheikh Jarrah refugee housing project since its establishment in 1956. After being forcibly expelled from their original home in the western part of Jerusalem during the 1948 Nakba, they found refuge in the neighborhood. Over the decades, they have battled the prospect of a second Nakba as Zionist settler organizations have targeted Sheikh Jarrah and tried to expel us from our homes.

Murad spent much of his early teenage years watching his neighbors being brutally dragged into the streets during the first wave of displacement in 2009. He saw the Ghawi family sleeping in cars, homeschooling their children under the fig tree, while the Hannouns slept in a tent under the olive tree in front of their stolen home. He saw the funeral of Abu Kamel, a neighborhood elder who suffered a stroke and died within a month of his forced expulsion. And he was standing on the pavement outside my home on the day my grandmother was wheeled off to an ambulance because settlers had assaulted her after taking over half our house.

In many ways, much of the violence Murad protested against this past spring had already been at his doorstep for years. Even so, there was little preparing for the horrors that began last April. “Today…I go to sleep with my cloak and hijab in fear of any sudden raids,” Murad’s mother said in a May 2021 interview.

It wasn’t long before the family awoke to see Israeli authorities set up a checkpoint and cement barriers in front of their home, effectively blockading the neighborhood. Murad often complained that the soldiers could see into his windows, distressing his aunt and sister, both of whom have disabilities. In addition, he experienced the relentless tag-team attacks of police and settlers. For weeks, they ransacked homes, detained residents, and terrorized families with tear gas, sound bombs, and “skunk” water cannons, all in an attempt to stifle the community’s resistance.

This brutality was well-documented, garnering international attention at the time. But that attention eventually wandered, and few people know that the campaign of intimidation has continued, now in the form of arrests and trumped-up charges against both neighborhood residents and other Palestinians who protested during this time. Murad is one example of this campaign.

For those of us who have been following Murad’s case, what has made it disturbing is the way it seeks to criminalize his participation in the protests—and, in fact, the movement to save Sheikh Jarrah itself. Nasser Odeh, one of Murad’s two lawyers, described his case as an attempt to “smear the movement as violent before the international community.”

That attempt was made powerfully clear in the preamble to the charges brought against Murad in October. According to Lea Tsemel, Murad’s other attorney, prosecutors used it to accuse him of “nationalist activities” and “acts motivated by racism,” based in part on his membership in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood committee and the fact that the demonstrations took place during a time of war. What this means is that, rather than view Murad’s actions as part of a protest against his family’s and his neighbor’s expulsion from their homes by settlers, prosecutors have tried to frame them as “anti-Jewish.” Or, as Tsemel said, “It is a terrible description that we deny totally.”

As for the charges themselves, they include a number of offenses, according to both Tsemel and Odeh. Among them: conspiracy to commit a crime (specifically, to commit violent acts against law enforcement), aiding illegal demonstrations, and assisting the disruption of law and order. (The authorities, it’s worth noting, attempted to level the first accusation against my sister and me as well but released us without charges, thanks mainly to the hundreds of people who protested outside the precinct and the thousands who campaigned globally for our release.)

More specifically, Tsemel said the prosecutors accused Murad of paying several hundred shekels on two occasions for fireworks that were used by others in confrontations with occupation forces, and of buying four liters of gasoline that were used by other people in incendiary bottles. She said that, while Murad acknowledges giving money to activists, he denies...
Murad’s next hearing is on January 12, at which point his lawyers will formally answer the charges brought by the prosecution. The date could be important, but it’s also just the beginning of a longer legal process. In the meantime, Murad’s time in prison has already been traumatic, both his lawyers said.

Like many Palestinians, Murad has suffered an extended and punitive interrogation process in which he experienced ill treatment, intimidation, and psychological pressure, according to Odeh and Tselem. The prison administration denied Murad phone calls and visits and postponed his hearing multiple times. Additionally, a policy of “closed-door” court sessions has prevented his family from being in court. (During Murad’s first weeks in prison, Odeh himself felt the pressure: The Israeli magistrate court issued a 30-day gag order on Murad’s lawyers, which hindered advocacy efforts and press campaigns.)

Odeh maintains that “isolating [Murad] from the outside world is a method of psychological torture”; he believes it is part of an effort to pressure Murad into admitting to crimes he did not commit.

In one disturbing incident, the Shabak summoned Murad’s mother on September 30. She was questioned about a meal she had cooked for a group of young people in July. “I was shocked,” she said. “I thought they were going to ask me about my son, but all of [the interrogator’s] questions were about the food, how many people I fed. I told him hospitality is part of our culture.”

Murad’s lawyers have further said that he has been preyed on in the detention center by an undercover unit that Palestinians call “the birds,” a widespread network of Israeli officers impersonating Palestinian militants, as well as Palestinian informers posing as jailed militants. “The birds” pressure prisoners to confess through highly orchestrated scenes of coercive machismo, boasting, and even camaraderie.

As Murad’s family await his hearing, they continue to hope and advocate for his release, even as they go about their daily lives, marking events both big and small without him. On November 3, Murad’s sister Manar got married after he insisted that his family not postpone the ceremony until his release. His family and loved ones sang and danced as ordinary families do—and wore scarves printed with Murad’s face to the wedding, in a bittersweet gesture that most families are lucky enough to escape.

Murad spent much of his early teenage years watching his neighbors being brutally dragged into the streets.
How negligence, racism, and a politically connected medical provider turned homelessness into a capital crime.

CECILIA NOWELL

Joleen Nez

A Death in Custody

1982–2021
ON APRIL 16, 2020, OFFICER PRESTON PANANA walked up to Joleen Nez at the corner of Texas Street and Zuni Avenue in Albuquerque. Nez was living in a nearby encampment in a neighborhood known as the War Zone, along with dozens of other unhoused Native Americans. About six months pregnant with her fifth child, Nez, who is Navajo and Zia Pueblo, was getting her meals at the Albuquerque Indian Center, where she’d known some of the staff for years.

Panana was with four other police officers when he heard Nez and a man arguing. As the two quarreled, the man set a paper cup and bowl down on the sidewalk, and Nez knocked them over. That’s when, as Panana told in the incident report, he advised her “to pick up her litter and of the consequences if she did not.”

Nez had just started walking away, but she turned back and grabbed the bowl. Panana told her the cup was still on the ground. “It’s not my trash,” Nez said. “It’s his.” That didn’t matter to Panana, who cited Nez for littering.

That ticket kicked off a series of events that would end less than a year later with Nez’s death. She would become one of the eight people to die in the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Detention Center in a five-month period. The story of her death reveals a system of brutality that extends from the police to the jails to the medical providers and can be especially dangerous for those without stable homes.

JOLEEN NEZ WAS BORN IN SANTA FE, N.M., IN 1982, THE eldest of three daughters, she grew up in her grandmother’s home on the west side of Albuquerque. Gordon Joe, a cook at the Albuquerque Indian Center, told me he remembers living on the downtown streets with Nez’s mother in the 1980s. Nez and her youngest sister, Kayleen Medina, used to call him Dad, and he stayed in touch with their mother until her death in 2012.

When she was 21, Nez became the first of the sisters to leave home. Medina said that Nez had always wanted to travel, and so she went “all along the West Coast, from Seattle all the way down.”

In 2003, Nez married a Navajo man named John Kelly and moved with him to Scottsdale, Ariz. They had two daughters, but in 2009, Kelly died from cirrhosis of the liver. Like her husband, Nez had been struggling with alcoholism, and after his death, she and her daughters moved back to Albuquerque. There, she met Jason Howell. The two were friends on the streets for a while and would talk about seeing the world beyond Albuquerque together. But they fell out of touch after Howell enrolled in a rehab program.

When he finished, Howell saw Nez’s photo in the newspaper, alongside an article saying she was incarcerated. He began writing letters to her, and when Nez got out, the two started seeing each other and married in 2012. They had a son but were divorced within a year, Howell told me; the two were on different paths with their sobriety. But they remained close and raised their child together. Howell would come to think of two of Nez’s other children as his own—her eldest daughter and the now 1-year-old son, Elias, that she was pregnant with when police stopped her on the corner of Texas and Zuni.

On that spring day when Nez encountered Panana, she gave him the address of the Albuquerque Indian Center because she didn’t have an address of her own. That meant that when the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court mailed her a summons, it was returned to sender. When Nez didn’t appear at her first court date on May 19 and then at a rescheduled hearing on June 3, the court put out a warrant for her arrest.

That July, Nez gave birth to Elias, her fifth child, and decided to get sober. She’d been scared and hadn’t told many people that she was pregnant, but after she gave birth, she talked to her eldest daughter, who was living with Howell. Nez’s ex-husband stepped up to help take care of Elias, and Nez looked up rehab programs. By September 25, she was 65 days sober and enrolled at the Mountain Center, an outdoors education program with transitional living and counseling services on the Tesuque Pueblo in northern New Mexico. At the facility, Nez posted photographs of herself smiling under the azure sky. “I cannot remember the last time I was really HAPPY and PROUD of myself,” she wrote on Facebook the day she successfully walked the center’s tightrope course. “I’m starting to feel and see things differently... I’m walking in beauty.”

“I cannot remember the last time I was really happy and proud of myself. I’m starting to feel and see things differently.” —Joleen Nez

When she returned to Albuquerque in November, Nez focused on maintaining her sobriety. Howell told me she had done the best recovery work at rehab that he had ever seen from her. “We really had a good feeling that she was really going to make it and change,” he said. “Everybody was very proud of her.” But in late January 2021, she ran into a police officer. Howell and Gordon Joe heard that she was at the scene of a fight that broke out at the Circle K across the street from the

Cecilia Nowell is an Albuquerque-based journalist.
The city of Albuquerque had a practice of sweeping the streets of people who were looked at as nuisances or vagrants."

—Peter Cubra, civil rights lawyer

In 1995, detainees at the jail—then known as the Bernalillo County Detention Center—filed a class-action lawsuit alleging that the conditions there, specifically overcrowding and racial discrimination, violated their constitutional rights. The lawsuit, McClendon v. City of Albuquerque, took its name from one of the detainees, Jimmy Lee McClendon, who’d scratched his eye while unsupervised in the jail’s psychiatric unit and developed an eye infection that spread to and scarred his face. At the time, the county jail, which was then in downtown Albuquerque, sometimes housed more than 900 inmates in a space designed for less than 600.

Peter Cubra, a civil rights lawyer and longtime advocate for people with disabilities in New Mexico, was one of the attorneys representing McClendon. He said that one reason the jail was overcrowded was because, “in the mid-1990s, the city of Albuquerque and the county of Bernalillo had a custom and practice of sweeping the streets of people who were looked at as nuisances or vagrants—and that included people experiencing homelessness and people with psychiatric problems, people with substance abuse problems.”

Cubra and nearly 30 other attorneys claimed that the city and county were violating the Americans With Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act by arresting people because of their developmental and psychiatric disabilities and, “while incarcerated, denying them minimally adequate care,” Cubra said.

McClendon slowly wound its way through the courts over the next two decades, with the county attempting but failing to reduce the jail’s population and eventually constructing the new Metropolitan Detention Center in 2003. The court issued a consent decree ordering experts to inspect the still-overcrowded facility throughout the 2010s.

But in the mid-2010s, Cubra and the other attorneys for the plaintiffs realized that the city was still arresting and incarcerating people experiencing homelessness and people with disabilities. They filed a motion to hold the city and county in contempt, which was eventually denied but laid the groundwork for a settlement agreement concerning the city’s arrest procedures in 2017.

That deal included a “court order that said to the police department and the sheriff’s officials that they shouldn’t be arresting people because of their disability” and that explicitly prohibited “arresting someone solely on the basis that they didn’t have a permanent address,” Cubra said. But after that reform, he continued, the city and the police adopted a new tactic: Instead of arresting people, the cops would write them tickets.

While the policy meant that police weren’t “handcuffing and taking to jail as many people numerically as they had been in the past,” Cubra explained, they “were issuing citations to individuals for things where other citizens would never receive a citation,” such as for jaywalking or littering. In 2020, 34 percent of the citations issued by police were for littering on public property and no other crime, according to reporters at the Daily Lobo, the University of New Mexico’s student newspaper, who reviewed the city’s data.

For people who won’t be able to appear in court—because they lack either an address at which to receive a summons or the developmental or mental health capacity to attend a hearing—“issuing those citations is nothing more than a slow-motion arrest,” Cubra said. Instead of arresting someone on a petty charge, police did so for not showing up in court. Since the 2017 settlement, Cubra said, the Bernalillo County Metropolitan Court has issued “hundreds and thousands of bench warrants” regarding “offenses for which no one would be incarcerated” but that mandate “that the person be arrested, taken to the jail, and kept in the jail until they appear before a judge.”

When Nez was booked into the Metropolitan Detention Center, she disclosed that she had recently consumed alcohol and used heroin, according to an internal investigation by the jail. (A toxicology report performed after her death would list methamphetamines, not heroin, in her system. All of her friends and family that I spoke with maintain that although she was an alcoholic, they’d never seen her use hard drugs.) She was assigned to a detox unit, and by the time she’d gotten settled on her mattress, it was 1:18 AM on January 30.

Over the course of the next 10 hours, Nez would vomit 43 times. At 7:42 that morning, medical staff stopped to check on her, speaking to her for only about 30 seconds. Nez talked to medical staff again at 8:26, 8:54, and 9 AM, for a total of about five minutes. The people really caring for Nez were a few of the dozen other women in the detox area, who took turns bringing her water and rubbing her back.

One of those women was Autumn Brown, who knew Nez from being incarcerated together in the past. That day, Brown was working as a porter in the cell, distributing trays of food, and had heard that medical staff had given Nez detox medication—but that she had thrown it up.

At 11:25 AM, one of the women in the cell brought Nez a cup of water, and Nez curled
up in bed under her blanket. When Brown and another porter, Tabitha Grim, began passing out lunch trays around 11:40 AM, Grim tried to wake Nez up. When she wouldn’t stir, Grim pulled back her blanket and face mask—and saw that she had gone blue.

Grim immediately called for help. She was quickly joined by another inmate and then a correction officer, Destiny Cacho, who radioed for help. Within a minute, a third inmate began performing CPR. Brown said this wasn’t her first time seeing an inmate perform CPR on another: “There had been a couple other instances where [Grim and I] had found girls unresponsive [and] had to do lifesaving measures.” She recalled feeling grateful that when officers Cacho and Esmerelda Perea took over CPR, Cacho performed rescue breaths. Many of the other correction officers, according to internal reports, had declined to do so, citing the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

By 11:45 AM, EMTs from Centurion, the jail’s medical provider, had arrived on the scene, and correction officers were beginning to move the other women out to the recreation yard. Brown said that she and the others sat outside for three hours, waiting to find out what had happened.

Inside, the Centurion EMTs were continuing CPR. Forty-six minutes after Grim called for help, they were able to restart Nez’s heart and load her into an ambulance bound for the University of New Mexico Hospital. “She was alive, breathing, conscious, and speaking when we saw her at UNMH,” Metropolitan Detention Center spokesperson Julie Rivera told the Daily Lobo. When I contacted the detention center, it referred me to the hospital, whose only comment was to confirm that Nez’s case had been handled as an in-custody death.

No one had yet noted that a judge had dropped the charges against Nez at 10:54 that morning.

While Bernalillo County was trying to reduce the population at the Metropolitan Detention Center, the jail’s medical provider faced accusations of neglect and concerns about its significant campaign contributions to politicians.

In 2016, a Tennessee woman sued Centurion after nurses and a doctor ignored her labor pains for four hours, resulting in her giving birth in her prison cell without pain medication or a qualified ob-gyn. More recently, between December 2019 and August 2020, at least 53 people died in the Mississippi prisons serviced by Centurion, and 227 people incarcerated at Parchman Prison sued the company. Centurion would terminate its contract with Mississippi early, citing the state’s unwillingness to invest in the prison system. Earlier this year, the Justice Department announced that Centurion had agreed to a $215,000 settlement for violating the Controlled Substances Act while operating in New Mexico. The company had been distributing controlled substances at the Northeast New Mexico Detention Facility after its DEA registration had lapsed, and it had failed to maintain proper records.

Centurion and its parent company, Centene, also have a long history of donating to political campaigns, as documented by the Center for Responsive Politics and Follow the Money. In Florida, Centene donated $125,000 to Governor Rick Scott’s political committee in 2017 and $35,000 in 2014; it took over the state’s prison health care in 2016. In Mississippi, after a $50,000 contribution to Lieutenant Governor Tate Reeves, Centene became “the biggest donor of the highest fundraising Mississippi official in 2017,” according to the Clarion Ledger. And in Tennessee, the state’s Department of Corrections had to rebid its medical contracts after Centene’s competitor Corizon filed a lawsuit claiming that the department’s former chief financial officer sent internal e-mails related to the contract to Centurion. In return, the lawsuit states, the financial officer “got a ‘cushy’ job with a Centurion affiliate in Georgia.”

In New Mexico, the Albuquerque Journal reported in March that eight people had died at the Metropolitan Detention Center between August 31, 2020, and January 31, 2021, when Nez died; half of those deaths, the paper found, were related to drug or alcohol detoxification. Before 2020, there had been only 10 deaths at the center in the previous four years. Speaker Rivera acknowledged to the Journal that the detention center was understaffed: The jail’s plan calls for 476 employees, and there are currently 375.

Staffing problems have been a lingering issue for Centurion as well. Between 2016, when the company began operating in Santa Fe, and 2018, the Department of Corrections fined Centurion a total of $2.1 million for staffing shortages. On online job boards, nurses across the country complain of overwork and high turnover. (Centurion blames the understaffing on low state budgets.)

Meanwhile, Joseph Trujeque, the president of the Corrections Officers Association, directly called out Centurion’s policies in New Mexico. Although he did not respond to my requests for comment, Trujeque told the Albuquerque Journal that Centurion was often slow to respond to crises, and “when the medical professionals got there, they weren’t taking over right away. That put the burden on the officers.”

Albuquerque-based attorney Parrish Collins has filed at least 23 lawsuits against Centurion, largely involving medical neglect. He told me he sees many cases involving diabetes or spinal injuries, (continued on page 31)
Progressive thinkers are developing a foreign policy approach that opposes military confrontation while acknowledging Beijing’s oppressive policies.

DAVID KLION
Since March 2019, Hong Kong has confronted the greatest challenge to its relatively free and open civil society since it was transferred from British to Chinese rule in 1997. In incidents spanning more than a year, local police faced off against enormous crowds of young demonstrators fighting a losing battle to maintain the city’s autonomy within the People’s Republic of China. Using batons and more than 10,000 canisters of tear gas, officers crushed the protest movement in 2020, but the repression has continued: By February 2021, more than 10,000 Hong Kongers had been arrested in connection with these demonstrations, and over a quarter of those had been prosecuted, while tens of thousands more had sought asylum in Britain, Canada, or Australia.

For Promise Li, a young member of the Democratic Socialists of America born in Hong Kong, China’s crackdown was personal. “I have contacts and friends who are either imprisoned or under threat right now,” said Li, a cofounder of the Lausan Collective, which runs a site highlighting left-wing activist voices in Hong Kong. At the height of the unrest, Li helped organize a campaign for the DSA’s International Committee to put out a statement expressing solidarity with the working people of Hong Kong against the police. But the effort was rejected after a straw poll spanning the IC’s subcommittees.

According to Anlin Wang, an American-born Chinese DSA member and cochair of the Asia and Oceania subcommittee, there was an overwhelming three-to-one consensus against saying anything. “We tried our hardest to make sure that this was as maximally democratic as possible,” said Wang. “I think there are strong arguments on both sides.”

To Li, the incident reflects the influence within the DSA of “tankies,” a derogatory Cold War–era term for defenders of authoritarian communist regimes, which is often used now to call someone a China apologist. “There’s a big group of people who aren’t exactly tankies but see the tankie side as equally valid and try to preserve the unity of the left,” Li said. For his part, Wang acknowledges that such views circulate on Twitter, but he said he’s never seen them in his subcommittee Slack. “When we started the subcommittee, I was very committed to making sure that it didn’t devolve constantly into ideological fights where one side gets called ‘tankies’ and the other side gets called ‘liberal sellouts,’” Wang said.

This might all seem like inside baseball, and the DSA is riven by disagreements over many topics. But it serves as a microcosm of an unresolved debate on the left that carries global implications, not only for human rights but for the climate, labor, and questions of war and peace. With 1.4 billion people and a gross national product that by some measures now exceeds that of the United States, China is seen by Washington’s foreign policy “Blob” as the first true threat to US global hegemony since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tensions between Washington and Beijing have been increasing on every front—military, economic, diplomatic, cultural—as observers across the ideological spectrum warn of a new Cold War that could reshape the world. President Joe Biden has characterized the confrontation with China as a battle between autocracy and democracy and is carrying out a strategic pivot to Asia—quietly boosting the US troop presence in Taiwan, announcing a new defense pact with the United Kingdom and Australia, and justifying his ambitious domestic economic proposals as part of “a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century.” If the US left hopes to have any influence over this looming conflict, either via the Democratic Party or via non-electoral action, it will have to figure out a consistent stance on China.

Many people on the left who work on China or on broader foreign policy issues are trying to navigate the space between the two caricatured poles Wang describes. They are attempting to develop an alternative to a new Cold War—a position that opposes military confrontation in the Asia-Pacific while being open to increased cooperation with Beijing on issues like climate change. They are willing to denounce China’s oppressive policies from Hong Kong to Xinjiang and also other rights but for the climate, labor, and questions of war and peace. With 1.4 billion people and a gross national product that by some measures now exceeds that of the United States, China is seen by Washington’s foreign policy “Blob” as the first true threat to US global hegemony since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tensions between Washington and Beijing have been increasing on every front—military, economic, diplomatic, cultural—as observers across the ideological spectrum warn of a new Cold War that could reshape the world. President Joe Biden has characterized the confrontation with China as a battle between autocracy and democracy and is carrying out a strategic pivot to Asia—quietly boosting the US troop presence in Taiwan, announcing a new defense pact with the United Kingdom and Australia, and justifying his ambitious domestic economic proposals as part of “a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century.” If the US left hopes to have any influence over this looming conflict, either via the Democratic Party or via non-electoral action, it will have to figure out a consistent stance on China.

China hawks want to believe that there is a larger position on the left that is apologetic for China’s repression than there actually is.”

—Stephen Wertheim, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Everyone I spoke with could agree on one thing: Further escalation between the United States and China would be a disaster. Among the widely cited risks of a new Cold War—beyond the obvious risk of actual military conflict involving nuclear-armed belligerents—are the lost opportunities to work together on climate change and other transnational threats; squandered resources; increased discrimination and hate crimes against Asian Americans; a more repressive political climate in both countries; and the end of valuable civil society interactions. “I hate losing people-to-people diplomacy because of rising tensions,” said Keisha Brown, who teaches modern Chinese history and Afro-Asian diasporic identities at Tennessee State University. Brown is a cofounder of the Black China Caucus, an organization for China specialists from the African diaspora. “It’s very discouraging to know that if we do a study-abroad program, it might be difficult for students to go to China because of the state of affairs right now. I’m losing the opportunity to get more Black students to go.”

“For people actually involved in China policy, the debate isn’t whether China is a good or bad actor,” said Stephen Wertheim, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “The question is: What is the US going to do about it?” Wertheim is a co-founder of the Quincy Institute, a nonpartisan, anti-interventionist think tank in Washington, which he left last year. “I think China hawks want to believe that there is a larger position on the left that is apologetic for China’s repression than there actually is,” he added. “There are also people on the right who say things about China that are totally unwarranted and racist, and I see them occupying more prominent positions in our government than any fringe people who want to defend China.”

Some on the left, while wary of a new Cold War, are trying to advance non-militaristic and humanitarian foreign policy goals within this new context. “Any policy maker invested in a competition between Western and Chinese models should be pushing to show that the US will do right by the world in this time of crisis,” said David Segal, the executive director of the activist group Demand Progress; he suggests policies such as a more robust vaccine diplomacy and pushing the International Monetary Fund to issue more special drawing rights, which are desperately needed reserve assets that can allay economic suffering in the Global South. “Those who fan flames and are not advocating such measures betray their jingoism.”

“There is also the case, advanced by Biden and by liberals like Matthew Yglesias in his book One Billion Americans, that competition with China can be used to spur needed domestic...
improvements in the US. But other progressives see engaging in the language of international competition, even to justify good policies, as counterproductive. “We don’t need China as a justification to strengthen our democracy, rebuild our industry, and create a better life for Americans,” said Matt Duss, a foreign policy adviser to Senator Bernie Sanders who serves as a key link between left-leaning foreign policy thinkers and the policy-making process. “We should do those things because they’re the right things to do.”

One reason China confounds the left is that it’s hard to classify in terms of its basic ideology: Is it a doctrinaire Maoist people’s republic or an integral part of the globalized neoliberal order? Does it represent an alternative to American economic hegemony, or does it undergird that hegemony? Should it be credited with lifting hundreds of millions of workers out of rural poverty or blamed for using its cheap and politically powerless workers to undermine organized labor and anti-corporate regulatory regimes worldwide? Is it, in short, communist or capitalist?

Isabella Weber, a German political economist whose recent book How China Escaped Shock Therapy traces the origins of the economic liberalization implemented by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and ’80s, rejects these simplistic labels. “I think of China as a state-constituted market economy that relies on a strong capitalist dynamic,” she told me. “This is a new kind of economic system that we have to study on its own terms.” In Weber’s analysis, over the past four decades China’s powerful one-party state has created enormous markets that have reintegrated the country into the world economy (enriching capitalists and undermining unions in the process), but it has always done so in pursuit of China’s long-term economic development and political sovereignty.

This analysis is echoed by Duss, who noted that Sanders himself was an early critic of the 1990s consensus that opening trade relations with China would benefit American workers. Duss’s perspective on China is also shaped by conversations with Tobita Chow and Jake Werner, two young activists who are cofounders of Justice Is Global, a Chicago-based grassroots organization pursuing structural reforms that would result in a more sustainable and equitable global economy. “I originally got involved in building worker solidarity between the US and China,” said Chow, who currently directs Justice Is Global. “Unfortunately, I got involved just as the Chinese government was ramping up its crackdown on labor activists to the point where that kind of work is really no longer possible to do safely. I was able to see some of the fruits of the opening up of Chinese civil society, and to see them very quickly disappearing.”

Werner, who does research on modern Chinese history at Boston University, identifies the 2008 financial crisis as a turning point. China rode out the crisis with an economic stimulus of unprecedented scale and developed domestic corporate giants that now compete with Western firms. “It has put the fear of God into the US political elite,” Werner said. “If Chinese companies take over the high-profit sectors, that threatens US power over the global system as well as the US economy, which depends on quasi-monopoly industries like tech, finance, and pharmaceuticals. If China starts to push them aside, what’s going to happen to us?”

China, in other words, has ceased to be a passive player in the development of global supply chains dominated by Western companies and is pursuing an industrial policy that challenges the US-dominated international order. It’s in this context that the Washington establishment is becoming more critical of China—and it’s also in this context that some on the left might feel inclined to defend it.

Multiple interviewees mentioned the Qiao Collective, a cryptic organization that emerged seemingly as a counterpoint to Li’s Lausan Collective in early 2020. In an e-mailed statement, the Qiao Collective—which said it reaches decisions collectively and did not identify any individual members by name—described itself as “a group of students, artists, researchers, and young professionals in the US, UK, and Canada who contribute as volunteers in our spare time. Our members all belong to the broader Chinese diaspora, with family connections to mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and throughout Southeast Asia.” It further said it is funded solely through Patreon and has no formal ties to any political party, including the Chinese Communist Party, but did not respond to queries regarding the size of its membership, how it is governed, or who specifically is responsible for organizing it.

“Despite this lack of institutional support, we are thrilled by the rapid growth and attention we have gained in the less than two years since our founding, which we attribute to the hunger in English-language media spaces for critical left commentary on China that challenges dominant Western media narratives,” Qiao wrote in its statement. The narrative that the group propagates in left-wing circles aligns closely with Beijing’s. On its website, Qiao describes the Hong Kong protests as driven by “fervent anti-communism and a fetishization of abstract liberalism, British colonial nostalgia, anti-Chinese racism, and appeals to Western intervention” and accuses activists like Li of “leftwashing” what it characterizes as right-wing protests. Qiao has rapidly become popular on social media and has contributed an article warning against a US-China war to the Progressive International, a left-wing global wire service. (Progressive International’s general coordinator, David Adler, told me his group aims to provide a diversity of perspectives.)
Prashad, the director of an internationalist organization called Tricontinental and a Marxist intellectual who did an event with Qiao in May 2020, told me when I asked him about the Uyghurs. “The ‘cultural genocide’ charge is one that I’m not entirely sympathetic to,” said Prashad, who has visited China numerous times but has not been to Xinjiang. “Education policy is a big part of poverty alleviation,” he added. “The fact is that most modern societies have forced people to have an education.” In his telling, what is happening to the Uyghurs is analogous to what countries like the United States and Australia did to their Indigenous populations, or what the British Empire did in his native India—but somewhat to my surprise, he didn’t mean that in a bad way. “That’s the price that people pay,” Prashad told me. “You can’t preserve some cultural forms and alleviate or eradicate absolute poverty.”

To Rayhan Asat, a Uyghur human rights lawyer from Urumqi—Xinjiang’s capital—currently teaching at Yale, this stance is morally abhorrent. Asat’s brother has been imprisoned in Xinjiang since he returned from a business trip to the United States in 2016. “I don’t know what hurts more,” she told me, “the tormentors of my brother or the tankies who are enabling it and denying my pain and suffering.” Asat said she is against a US military buildup in response to the situation in Xinjiang; she acknowledged that after its wars in Iraq and elsewhere, the United States has a credibility problem on human rights. Her preferred approach would be to utilize the Global Magnitsky Act, named for a Russian anti-corruption activist who died in prison in 2009—in other words, that the US should apply targeted sanctions against individual Chinese officials complicit in human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Duss, the Sanders adviser, independently mentioned that this could be an appropriate response to the situation confronting the Uyghurs. “Broad-based sanctions have a very bad track record of making policy better and a very clear track record of helping immiserate populations,” Duss said. “There is some evidence that Magnitsky-style sanctions targeted at specific government actors who are implicated in human rights abuses can work. But we’re going to be much more effective in making these points if we are consistent, rather than raising these concerns as a cudgel against our adversaries while giving our allies a pass.”

Aside from Prashad, everyone I spoke with for this article unequivocally condemned China’s policies in Xinjiang. But Wang, the cochair of Code Pink, the established anti-war group, cites Qiao on its China FAQ page. Monthly Review, an independent socialist magazine published in New York, has also republished the Qiao Collective—and has been criticized for doing so by Critical China Scholars (CCS), a group of young academics that is pushing back against Qiao’s narrative.

CCS defines itself as being against any government’s ethnotnationalist agenda and tries to find a middle ground between demonizing the People’s Republic of China and reinforcing its propaganda. Last year, CCS published an open letter to Monthly Review that drew the line at its collaboration with Qiao; the signatories included Li, Werner, and Andy Liu, a Taiwanese American historian at Villanova who cohosts the left-wing Asian American podcast Time to Say Goodbye. Liu says CCS has had experiences analogous to Li’s in trying to engage with the DSA. “We’ve had ongoing conversations with DSA about doing a webinar, but we got a mixed response from them, and we’re still not sure what exactly went on behind the scenes,” Liu said. “It was a bit of a surprise that DSA was not more welcoming.”

Liu added that he understands why Qiao’s message resonates with some DSA members. “We don’t want to completely alienate these people,” he said. “We understand a lot of this comes from a suspicion of US foreign policy and a critique of corporate media, and we are sympathetic to that. But I think the leftist, internationalist position should be critical of all governments.”

Li is harsher. “I think the Qiao Collective holds an authoritarian, fascistic position that has nothing to do with socialism,” he said. “The quality of their content and the caliber of their information is no better than InfoWars. But there’s been an influx of their fans into DSA, especially in San Francisco’s Red Star caucus.” Even if Qiao’s viewpoint isn’t fully mainstream within the DSA, Li added, “these outlets have sowed enough confusion with their disinformation that we can’t do much with DSA committees without it being blocked.” And Qiao has proved to be particularly effective in stifling the left’s discourse over another human rights crisis nearly 3,000 miles northwest of Hong Kong.

Xinjiang is a region in China’s far west where ethnic Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have experienced discrimination and cultural erosion amid a state-directed influx of Han Chinese migrants. Under President Xi Jinping, China has intensified its repression of the Uyghurs, building an enormous network of prisons, reeducation centers, and labor camps in what many foreign observers have described as a cultural genocide. The situation in Xinjiang is opaque, as the Chinese government tightly controls information and movement in and out of the region, but testimony from refugees and émigrés paints a bleak picture.

According to a widely circulated 18,000-word resource list published by Qiao, however, the lack of reliable information out of Xinjiang suggests that these accounts are “Western atrocity propaganda.” This is also more or less what Vijay Prashad, the director of an internationalist organization called Tricontinental and a
of the DSA’s Asia and Oceania subcommittee, acknowledged that some on the left feel constrained in what they can say about China’s human rights record. “It’s important to think about the real-world impact of what we do,” Wang told me. “It’s really important that we, as a leftist institution, be staunchly anti-imperialist. So if we issue a statement about China, I want to make sure that it’s done in a way that can actually help working people and not hurt their cause.”

Referring to Li’s proposed statement on Hong Kong, Wang said, “We are Americans, and our country is in the process of a cold war with China. Signing on to the statement carries a serious risk that it could be used as left-wing support for the broader anti-China effort.”

Other progressives see a downside to not speaking out. “Trying to make excuses for or defend the Chinese government’s violations of human rights and aggression against its neighbors is not a winning political strategy,” Chow told me. “We’re not going to be able to bring the majority of the US population over to that position. We’re not going to find any allies among progressives in Congress for that position.”

“If you’re doing apologies for China’s treatment of ethnic minorities, you’re betraying everything the left stands for,” Werner said. “It discredits the left.”

Chow and Werner expanded on this point in a joint interview for the fall 2021 issue of Socialist Forum, a DSA publication that reached out to them for a proposed forum on the left and China. “The original idea was to address both sides,” said Chow, referring to the other side of the debate as “tankies.” “We gave them some suggestions [for an interlocutor], but they didn’t get a yes after a number of weeks.” The main pushback they did see from defenders of the Chinese Communist Party was, as is so often the case, on Twitter.

On his last day in office as Donald Trump’s secretary of state, Mike Pompeo accused China of committing genocide in Xinjiang. For someone who served in an openly Islamophobic administration to co-opt the just cause of Uyghur human rights is perverse, but one danger of ceding criticism of China to the right is that the US response to a legitimate human rights crisis ends up being led by xenophobes and warmongers.

Lausan and CCS are two groups on the left that aren’t shying away from these debates. In December 2020, they held a roundtable together, later republished by the Marxist journal Spectre, to discuss Qiao’s resource list and how it might be countered. One participant—David Brophy, a senior lecturer at the University of Sydney—recalled an argument made by E.P. Thompson: that during the final years of the Cold War, “the cause of freedom and the cause of peace seemed to break apart,” with the Soviets monopolizing the former and the US the latter. Brophy suggested that something similar is happening now, with China’s apologists prioritizing peace while its critics prioritize human rights. The questions for the left, then as now, are whether and how those priorities can be reconciled.
Portland isn’t the anarchic hellscape right-wingers make it out to be. And yet the pandemic, the protests, and climate disasters have left the city reeling.

BY BRYCE COVERT

Will the pandemic change how America thinks of housing for good?

BY BRYCE COVERT

Demanding more: Moms 4 Housing activist Misty Cross in front of the house in Oakland, Calif., that she and other local homeless mothers occupied in 2019.
As you drive onto a college campus in the up-and-coming Midtown neighborhood in Santa Fe, N.M., you run into a security gate where you might expect to be asked for some identification. But no one is manning the gate under the wide, wan blue sky of a mid-November day. The College of Santa Fe, which relocated to the Midtown property in 1947, closed in 2009, succumbing to the financial pressures of the last big recession. What’s left is a city-owned plot of 64 acres that’s almost entirely empty, save for some space leased by the Santa Fe Art Institute’s artist residency program and a few other businesses.

The campus, purchased by the city in 1942 to create an Army hospital during World War II, is dotted by small, graffitispckled buildings with corrugated metal roofs that served as wartime barracks, and low, square brick buildings that were college dorms. Some of the dorms are being used to house homeless residents who were moved there during the pandemic. In between the buildings are vast, empty parking lots and open stretches of brown ground dappled with shrubs. The only green is a patch of Astroturf near a patio area outside of the old, vacant cafeteria.

It’s a huge piece of land in a city that’s only about 46 square miles total. At its height, the college housed over 1,000 students. It would take most of an afternoon to walk the entire plot. “It’s a whole neighborhood,” pointed out Tomás Rivera, a founder of the Chainbreaker Collective, a local economic and environmental justice organization.

“It’s a whole neighborhood that, if developed appropriately, could provide a haven for thousands of Santa Fe residents who are currently struggling to afford a place to live. Like many places in the United States, Santa Fe had a housing crisis long before the pandemic. Median renter income was lower than what was needed to afford a two-bedroom home, and nearly half of renters were already spending at least one-third of their income on rent. Santa Fe is a small city, with a population of about 87,500. But as housing scarcity drives people out of larger metro areas, an influx of newcomers are vying for its limited housing stock. Santa Fe has just three public housing complexes with a total of 198 units, a number that has declined thanks to renovations and sales. The city is short an estimated 5,000 affordable units. Just 77 of the 1,128 housing units under construction in November 2020 qualified as affordable, “This pandemic has taught us as organizers and as tenants that tenants’ collective power does yield results.”

—Trent Leon Lierman, CASA
meaning that they will be rented at below-market rates. Meanwhile, arty-looking studio apartments and juice bars are cropping up in the neighborhood around the campus.

Then the pandemic shut down businesses around the country and threw millions of people’s lives and jobs into chaos. Santa Fe was hit hard, given how much its economy depends on tourism, and the unemployment rate stayed far above pre-pandemic levels for all of 2020. As of June 2021, the average Santa Fe County resident had accumulated $3,400 in rent debt, the highest in the state.

In response to the escalating housing crisis, Chainbreaker has launched a campaign to turn the Midtown campus into a community land trust. Under such an arrangement, the community owns the land, usually through a nonprofit, and then leases it to residents, who can buy homes on it for less than market-rate prices, given that they’re not paying for the underlying land. Trusts prohibit the residents from later selling their homes for inflated prices, thus keeping housing costs affordable for future owners. Community land trusts “assume that land is a public asset and not a private good,” in the words of three academics who studied them. Their primary purpose “is to preserve long-term affordable housing in neighborhoods by removing houses, buildings, and lands from the market.” Chainbreaker envisions the campus as a permanent way of addressing the city’s housing crisis.

There’s a lot about the site that makes sense for affordable housing development. For one, it’s in a prime location. Although the college sealed off an entrance near the northeastern corner, grocery stores and restaurants can be spotted just over a low red wall. There is a public library and a large public park on its grounds, and it’s within walking distance of public elementary, middle, and high schools. Government service offices are clustered around it. “This is the heart of Santa Fe,” Rivera said. It’s nestled among low-income neighborhoods where residents make between $21,000 and $48,000 a year. The campus is surrounded on nearly all sides by apartment complexes where Chainbreaker has been organizing to improve conditions and halt evictions.

“All of this is public land,” Rivera said as he surveyed the vast campus. He and his fellow organizers aim to keep it that way.

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“It’s just unbelievable to me that all these vacant homes are sitting here when people are suffering on the streets.”

—Martha Escudero, housing activist

The supply of housing is tight almost everywhere in the United States. There’s a shortfall of 6.8 million affordable and available rental homes, and rents are on the rise. Nationally, there were just 35 affordable and available rental homes for every 100 extremely low-income families in 2018, and nearly half of renters were spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Then the pandemic hit, and by the middle of 2020, one in five renters in the US were behind on payments.

But the pandemic hasn’t just accelerated the housing crisis. It has changed the way the entire country thinks about housing: A home became not merely a commodity to be bought and sold on the market; all of a sudden, it was a lifesaving necessity to ward off contagion and death. When the abrupt loss of jobs and income threatened to create a widespread mass eviction event, tenants’ organizations and policy makers sprang into action to institute programs the likes of which the country had never seen before, including eviction moratoriums and $46.5 billion in federal rental assistance. These measures prevented millions of Americans from becoming homeless during a public health disaster. But even before Covid, organizers were redefining the movement for affordable housing, calling for housing to be recognized as a human right. Now they hope the pandemic has sparked a durable movement that can forever transform the conversation about affordable housing.

During the latter decades of the past century, as the government retrenched from spending on housing and real estate prices soared, affordable housing advocates pushed for protections like just-cause eviction requirements (which prevent landlords from kicking out tenants without good reason) and rent control measures for low-income people and all those left behind by the housing market. But alongside those specific policy changes, “the community and our affiliates have always had these transformational demands,” said Katie Goldstein, a senior national organizer for the Center for Popular Democracy. Groups like Goldstein’s pushed for investments in social housing, or housing provided by the government, and a government guarantee of housing, or the right of each person to a home. “Housing shouldn’t be a commodity,” she said.

But during that time, there wasn’t a coordinated, powerful national housing movement, and the issue didn’t appear in campaign ads or...
political debates. Kevin Simowitz, codirector of the HouseUS Fund, who has been organizing on various issues for over 15 years, saw a gap between many progressive organizations and those focused exclusively on housing. “The movement muscle for housing justice was kind of siloed,” he said.

Then the failures of the housing market started to affect more Americans. The instability set off by the 2008 foreclosure crisis reverberated well into the middle class. As housing prices and rents kept increasing in the aftermath, the issue started to reach “a little farther up the income scale,” said Nan Roman, the CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. “A lot of midsize cities became impossible to afford to live in,” noted Pam Phan, a national field organizer with the Right to the City Alliance.

As more voters started worrying about their rent or mortgage, the issue appeared on the radar of national politics. Progressive candidates started talking about “housing for all” and referring to housing as a human right. In 2018, then-Senator Kamala Harris introduced a bill to help people afford rent. Senator Cory Booker backed legislation to defray the cost of housing and encourage private development of more units, and Senator Elizabeth Warren put forward legislation for the federal government to build 3.2 million new housing units. In 2019, Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez introduced the Green New Deal for Public Housing, which proposed $180 billion to repair and retrofit public housing. During the 2020 presidential race, “all of the Democrats had platforms having to do with affordable housing, which has never, ever happened,” Roman said. None of the individual plans would have been enough to end the housing crisis, and politicians still frequently turned to the private sector for solutions rather than getting the government more involved. Still, it marked a clear turning point in how they talked about affordable housing.

Many housing advocates I spoke with pointed to Moms 4 Housing as an important catalyst for a new kind of thinking and action on the topic. At the end of 2019, a group of homeless mothers in Oakland, Calif., a city with more vacant properties than unsheltered people, occupied a vacant house, making the case that “housing is a human right” and that they were “using that right.” Their effort drew national coverage and attention, and in early 2020, they successfully secured the house as their own after the owner agreed to sell the property to a community land trust, which vowed to fix it up and give it to the mothers. In the wake of the action, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf promised to put together a community housing advisory board cochaired by one of the mothers. “I cannot condone unlawful acts. But I can respect them, and I can passionately advance the cause that inspired them,” Schaaf said.

That assertive way of demanding housing served as an inspiration for Martha Escudero, a single mother of two daughters in Los Angeles. Before she and her children moved to Chile for a few years, Escudero had a full-time job and paid around $1,200 a month for a small two-bedroom duplex home. When they returned to California in 2019, rent had “quadrupled,” she said. They stayed with her mother for a time, but it was crowded—Escudero’s brother was there too—so they started staying with friends. She and her daughters were spending nights on the floor of a friend’s house when she heard about Moms 4 Housing. “I was like, ‘Wow, if they could do it, if they’re moms of color and they did this, maybe I could do it,’” she said.

Escudero had never been involved in housing activism before, but she had become “really desperate.” She started connecting with other people who had the same idea to occupy vacant homes. “It’s just unbelievable to me and insane that all these vacant homes are sitting here when people are suffering on the streets,” she said. So one morning in March 2020, surrounded by lawyers and allies, she and her daughters moved into an empty two-bedroom home owned by the state. It was blue, with a nice yard and a garage.

Eventually the group of activists, who call themselves LA Reclaimers, occupied 13 houses in the same area. The city didn’t kick Escudero out, although it did move her to another home a few blocks away in October 2020. She likes it better, as it has a bigger yard and larger bedrooms. The city has deemed it transitional housing for her family, which means they’ll be given a voucher and expected to find a new home at the end of 2022. But Escudero is trying to hold onto it, working with activists to turn the area into a land trust, which would enable her to own the home.

The pandemic revealed that a home is not just a commodity to be bought and sold; it’s a lifesaving necessity to ward off contagion and death.
To Escudero, the occupation of the homes changed the conversation. “We’ve exhausted ourselves talking,” she said. “Sometimes you just have to break the law in order for us to be listened to.”

The desperation to hold onto a decent place to live became sheer panic as the pandemic set in during early 2020. The long-simmering housing crisis boiled over, overwhelming millions more families. It “laid bare the horrors of our system,” Goldstein said. If the best way to stay safe was to stay home, it became clear that housing was a public health necessity as well as a human right. Not just strapped renters but the broader public began to recognize “the public sector’s responsibility” in housing, Roman said.

Grassroots organizers across the country met the crisis with a single call: Cancel rent. They pressured lawmakers to block all evictions and halt the accumulation of unpaid rent debt, as well as suspend mortgage payments. It built “a lot of unity,” Goldstein said. In some ways it was a new development for these groups to rise above their disparate local campaigns and speak in unison.

Renters, for their part, responded to the crisis “with more direct and radical action,” Goldstein said. People went on rent strikes across the country; nearly a third of renters didn’t pay rent on April 1, 2020. By fall, organizers were deploying blockades and taking other direct actions to defend tenants against eviction. Because so many people were suddenly struggling to pay rent, more came out of the shadows to talk about it and organize around it, including “folks who may have never come into organizing before or had thought about it,” Phan said. It allowed renters “to speak their truth very openly, because for the first time the issue has come to a national scale.”

With the stakes so high, tenants found they had less to lose by getting active and going radical. A sense of solidarity grew from the fact that so many people were experiencing the same thing all at once. People were not just talking about the problems they faced but connecting them to the larger forces that have always shaped the housing market, such as real estate speculation and housing scarcity.

Ruby Salazar, her husband, and her two children have lived in an apartment complex in Maryland for nearly a decade. The rent is “bien caro” (very expensive), and yet there’s no maintenance and the apartments are “feos” (ugly). There’s currently a leak in the pipes of the unit above hers, which means water runs into her apartment. But even though she’s undocumented, Salazar had work and always paid her rent in full.

When the pandemic hit, she lost all of her various jobs doing things like housekeeping, construction, and caring for children. She hasn’t been able to find work since. Her family is now months behind on the rent.

Her neighbors were also in the same boat, so they started knocking on each other’s doors and organizing a rent strike. It was the first time Salazar had ever done anything like that. In October 2020, they sent the owners a letter demanding a reduction in the rent, better maintenance, and the creation of a payment plan for those who couldn’t pay in full. They thought the strike wouldn’t last long. But they never heard back. As of December, Salazar and her neighbors were still on rent strike. “Estamos más unidos” (We are more united now), she said. “Un año ya estamos en esta lucha, y seguimos” (We’re a year into this fight already, and we continue).

The main focus of CASA, the Maryland nonprofit that helped Salazar and her neighbors organize the strike, is immigrant rights and economic justice. Pre-pandemic, it had done some organizing around displacement and rent control. But “we were too scared to do rent strikes,” said Trent Leon Lierman, the Maryland organizing lead at CASA. Then its members lost income and struggled to get pandemic aid, and organizers felt called to act. “The pandemic exploded our housing work,” Leon Lierman said. The organization is now working on other ways to continue taking collective action on housing issues. “This pandemic has taught us as organizers and as tenants that tenants’ collective power does yield results,” he said. “You can’t shut that switch off once it’s been turned on.”

All of that excitement presents a new challenge. The pandemic created a wave of new tenant organizations, at the very base of the grass roots, across the country. Organizers now have to figure out how to harness that energy and keep their members engaged, as well as what should come next. KC Tenants was formed in Kansas City, Mo., in early 2019 as the national conversation about housing was heating up. The group soon got a tenants’ bill of rights passed and made housing a key issue in that year’s city council and mayoral elections. But when the pandemic started, its leaders were among the hardest-hit, and other residents started calling the personal cell phone of Tara Raghuvieer, the founding director of KC Tenants, desperately seeking help. Raghuvieer and other organizers realized that the organization “needed to shift in the direction of radical solidarity,” she said, and launched a hotline and a mutual aid fund. It repeatedly held actions to shut down the eviction process— it says it delayed over 850 in January alone.

But while the hotline and the aid fund are...
here to stay, KC Tenants doesn’t want to end up as a service organization or get stuck in “reaction mode,” Raghuveer said. So it’s now shifting focus to “campaign around our North Star, our vision of the world as it should be”—municipal social housing.

“One of the most important things we need to do is massively expand, in a serious, rigorous, deep way, the scale of the tenant movement,” Raghuveer said. “We just have to build more tenant power.” After all, as explosive as the moment was for housing activism, there were limits. Rather than cancel rent, cities, states, and eventually the federal government imposed eviction moratoriums with plenty of holes in them. Though the federal government offered rental assistance funds through state and local agencies, that money has only dribbled into people’s pockets, failing to meet the crushing demand.

By the middle of 2020, one in five renters in the United States were behind on payments.

ONE DAY IN 2020, YETZALI REYNA Aguilar got a knock on her door from a Chainbreaker organizer. Aguilar and her family had been struggling to pay rent even before the pandemic. She had immigrated to Texas seven years ago, then came to Santa Fe to be with her family and moved in with an aunt. But her aunt left the city when she could no longer afford the housing, and Aguilar started hunting for a place to live. She eventually landed with her boyfriend in his mother’s mobile home. Then she quit her job at Burger King out of fear of Covid. She and her boyfriend are trying to find their own place, but “there are not many options here,” she said. Rents used to be between $500 and $700 a month; now they’re around $1,000. That day, as she talked to the organizer at her door, Aguilar began to realize that “this is a struggle we’re all going through.”

Aguilar, who started volunteering with Chainbreaker and has since become its communications organizer, is herself an example of the people the group is trying to help. She began going door-to-door, distributing information about the city and state eviction moratoriums and helping people fill out applications for rental assistance. “It has been really touching and humbling talking with people and feeling like I’m not alone,” she said. Those conversations inevitably turned to the larger need for affordable housing. “They had the solution already in their mind, but they didn’t know how to call it,” she said. Aguilar and the other organizers would offer theirs: a community land trust.

Chainbreaker’s first office, if it could be called that, was a structure that members built out of wooden pallets. The organization was founded in 2004 to fix people’s bikes and fight for better, safer public transportation. But eventually it became clear that transportation is intimately connected to housing—if people were getting pushed farther and farther out of the city, bikes weren’t going to be enough. The group started organizing on housing issues and pushed for a residents’ bill of rights that the city council approved unanimously in 2015.

Fearing eviction: During the pandemic, housing activists across the country coalesced around a demand to “cancel rent,” as seen here in Brooklyn.
Then, in 2018, the Santa Fe University of Art and Design, which had been leasing the Midtown campus since the College of Santa Fe closed, also shut its doors, putting the land back into the city’s hands. Chainbreaker, whose headquarters is now across the street, saw the change of ownership as both a threat—for its potential to increase housing costs and cause displacement—and an opportunity, as an opening to do things differently. Organizers took the question of what should be done with the land directly to members, who kept raising the idea of community control. The group settled on the idea of a community land trust as a way to “insulate people from the erratic whims of the market,” Rivera said, “and challenge the idea of for-profit housing.”

Chainbreaker knocked on thousands of doors to get the campaign going and held a day-long meeting in the summer of 2019. And then the pandemic hit. As with many other grassroots organizations, Chainbreaker was flooded with requests from members to help them cover rent as workers lost their jobs. It found itself trying to educate people about their rights—both the previously existing ones and the new ones that emerged under the eviction moratoriums. It organized tenants to ward off evictions. It helped get rental assistance, when it became available, into their hands.

Out of that chaos arose a different conversation about housing. “The pandemic has lifted the veil,” Rivera said. The city responded quickly, instituting its eviction moratorium before the state and federal government did. Cathy Garcia, a community organizer at Chainbreaker, has seen a “greater sense of urgency” on the issue from city lawmakers and, in particular, from the collective’s members, who “are willing to go more out on a limb because they see more is at stake.”

During the worst of the crisis, the Santa Fe City Council often turned to Chainbreaker for help distributing masks and rental assistance to its members, which built a new relationship between the two. “It allowed the guards to come down a little bit” on both sides, Rivera said. As the city starts to think not just about short-term emergency measures but also long-term recovery, “there’s more hope for an actual, real progressive path forward than there was pre-pandemic,” he added.

The $300 billion was significantly whittled down during intra-party negotiations over the cost of the package, and just before Christmas, Senator Joe Manchin pulled his support from the bill. Democratic leaders insist they’ll push it again in 2022, but its future remains uncertain.

As eviction moratoriums disappear, rental assistance dries up, and the country tries to think about life after the pandemic, “at some point we need to ask ourselves: What is it about the system itself that created the dynamics in which these threats are so grave?” Chainbreaker’s Rivera said. “We need to look at different ways of thinking about housing.” For his group, the community land trust is “the most obvious answer to that.” Chainbreaker is now in the middle of its campaign to create that trust. It’s playing a key role in the city’s community engagement process to survey residents about what they want Santa Fe to do with the Midtown campus. The results of that process will be presented to the city council in early 2022. Chainbreaker is hopeful that the council will wait to make any decisions until it has that report in its hands.

The significance goes far beyond the city. “The decisions we’re making here in Santa Fe are going to have national implications, no matter what,” Rivera said. Garcia went further. “Santa Fe feels tiny,” she said. “But if we can do this, we’re creating the sense of what’s possible.”
where inmates face retaliation for filing medical grievance reports and must wait until their health deteriorates to file a lawsuit to get care. “It’s beyond gross negligence,” Collins said. “It’s deliberate denial of basic medical care, and we get calls every day” from people asking for help.

When her ambulance arrived at the University of New Mexico Hospital, Nez was taken to a trauma room where doctors worked to save her life. Although the hospital asked jail staff repeatedly for her next of kin’s contact information, they had no one listed for her. Eventually, doctors got in touch with Howell, who brought Nez’s eldest daughter and son with him to see her at the hospital. On his drive over, Howell also picked up her sister Kayleen Medina, who was pregnant and staying in a shelter at the time. When they arrived at the hospital, Nez’s family was told that her son was too young to go up to her room because of the Covid-19 protocols—so Howell and Medina took shifts sitting with him in the waiting room while the others went to see her.

“We were up there most of the night,” Howell recalled, adding that he later had to drive Medina back to the shelter, so he spent several hours sitting in his car with his son, talking with his daughter by video while she sat by Nez’s bedside.

The next morning, doctors declared Nez dead. Although internal reports show that the jail believed she was detoxing from heroin and alcohol, neither was found in her system in the blood tests that the hospital—and then the coroner—performed. An autopsy report found that Nez had died from “the toxic effects of methamphetamine.” The report also noted that she’d suffered multiple heart attacks and that her brain had herniated, swelling until it shifted out of place—symptoms that Karen Kelly, a forensic pathologist and medical expert with Physicians for Human Rights, told me were likely a result of the attempts to resuscitate her and how long she remained unresponsive.

In an internal investigation, the jail would conclude that “there was no indication of danger to inmate Nez that set her apart from any of the other inmates going through detoxification.”

AFTER THE DAILY LOBO BROKE THE NEWS OF NEZ’S DEATH, LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS, INCLUDING THE COALITION TO STOP VIOLENCE AGAINST NATIVE WOMEN, BEGAN CALLING FOR AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE JAIL AND LOCAL POLICE. “WE KNOW NATIVE WOMEN EXPERIENCE ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE, AND THAT UNSHelterED PEOPLE EXPERIENCE HEIGHTENED VIOLENCE PARTICULARLY AT THE HANDS OF THE POLICE AND STATE,” THE COALITION WROTE IN A

press statement. “Native people are [more] likely to be murdered by law enforcement than any other minority group in the United States.”

Meanwhile, after the public defender’s office reported Nez’s death at a monthly meeting of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, Cubra told me, the council began reevaluating the city’s use of bench warrants. “Informal rules have been promulgated in the Metropolitan Court that require that when a person fails to appear on a petty offense, [the court] will have [its] staff check and see if the person’s got a history of having these petty charges brought and then have the cases dismissed, because a person’s mental disability renders them incompetent to stand trial,” he said. The hope is that if judges do not issue bench warrants in cases that will likely be dismissed, police will not be able to arrest and incarcerate people on minor charges. But, Cubra added, “police officers continue to issue these citations.” The Albuquerque Police Department did not respond to my requests for comment about this policy.

Cubra told me that he has asked the APD to issue an order to officers “that explicitly says if it appears to you that the individual is homeless and/or psychically impaired, that you absolutely don’t issue citations for them at all for petty misdemeanors.” He said the chief of police agreed with the idea, but “it’s never been done.”

In the absence of that police order, Cubra said, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council suggested that in cases of petty misdemeanors, police should refer people to the new Community Safety Department. Formed in the wake of the police brutality protests that followed George Floyd’s killing, the CSD launched this September with teams of civilians trained to respond to mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness issues. The aim, Cubra said, was to hand cases like Nez’s “over to someone who can’t put them in jail.” But Cubra told me that the APD again said, “Great idea, we’ll surely do that,’ and it’s not been done.”

At the Metropolitan Detention Center, the Office of Professional Standards conducted an internal investigation into Nez’s death and concluded that “MDC staff who responded to this incident, and were directly involved, responded appropriately and within MDC policy.” Yet one correction officer noted that he wished the jail had additional Narcan on hand for emergencies. (Although Nez was not withdrawing from heroin, that was what jail staff believed at the time.) And two inmates, including Autumn Brown, said that staff had refused to give Nez rescue breaths while performing CPR and weren’t trained to recognize the signs of an overdose. Brown told me that after she raised her concerns with jail staff, they retaliated by placing her in solitary for the next several months as she awaited trial. When she spoke with me, she said that she was doing so “because I feel like Joleen and all the other inmates that have died in there just really do deserve for everybody to know what’s going on.”

In April, just a month after the Albuquerque Journal published its story on the spike in in-custody deaths, Centurion announced that it would be leaving Bernalillo County in October—more than a year before the end of its contract. But the county chose a new medical contractor, Corizon, that Cubra said has “a long, unhappy history of denying adequate care to people in the state prison system.” In fact, in 2016, Centurion replaced Corizon in New Mexico after one of Corizon’s former doctors, Mark E. Walden—nicknamed “Dr. Fingers”—was sued for allegedly sexually assaulting at least 77 prisoners.

Almost a year after Nez’s death, her family, especially her two eldest daughters, still don’t know why the detention center didn’t get her help sooner or implement changes after seven others had died there in the months before she did. The family has hired an attorney to find out more, but Howell told me nothing will bring Nez back to her children. “She loved being with her kids,” he said. “It’s a sad thing she won’t be a part of growing up with them.”

“Native people are more likely to be murdered by law enforcement than any other minority group in the United States.”

—Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women
A Free South

The Black Arts Movement and the politics of emancipation

BY ELIAS RODRIGUES

T NEIGHBORHOOD ART CENTER STAFF PHOTO, COMMUNITY ART IN ATLANTA, 1977–1987 (JIM ALEXANDER / COURTESY OF THE AUBURN AVENUE RESEARCH LIBRARY ON AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE AND HISTORY)

N THE 1960s, THE FREE SOUTHERN THEATER, an organization founded by a group of activists with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), traveled to a predominantly Black, rural corner of Mississippi. There they staged Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, an absurdist drama about characters conversing as they wait for someone who never arrives. The play may have seemed like a strange choice—who would imagine that Beckett might connect with rural Black Americans in the throes of the civil rights movement?—but it found at least one admirer in civil rights leader Fan- nee Lou Hamer. “I guess we know something about waiting, don’t we?” Hamer said from the audience.
Everyone agreed, and as they discussed the play, the conversation eventually turned to slavery and prisons. “We had this incredible discussion with people who barely had a sixth-grade education,” Denise Nicholas, an actress in the Free Southern Theater, said later. And drama—even high-modernist, experimental drama—functioned as political education.

This was the Free Southern Theater’s goal. As cofounder John O’Neal recalled of its creation:

We claimed to be playwrights and poets; yet the political facts of life presented by the situation we first learned of in the South called for a life of useful (political or economic) engagement. How could we remain true to ourselves and our own concerns as artists and at the same time remain true to our developing recognition of political responsibility?

Their answer was a theater group that aimed, as another cofounder, Doris Derby, put it, “to take the plays out to the rural areas, go around and perform out in the cotton fields or in the churches.” They did so out of the belief that, as Nicholas later explained, “the theater, the images, the language, the physicality of it would open doors in people’s minds that they didn’t necessarily need to read a lot of books to get to.” For the Free Southern Theater’s members, bringing the stage to the countryside made political education accessible while enabling artists to participate in politics.

As James Smethurst chronicles in Behold the Land: The Black Arts Movement in the South, the Free Southern Theater was just one of a number of institutions that sought to marry art with local Black Power politics in the South. In a sweeping history of arts institutions from the 1930s to the ’80s, the book tells the story of how the turn to Black Power politics in the ’60s produced a corollary Black Arts Movement that was especially long-lasting in the South. The Black Power and Black Arts movements, in Smethurst’s account, were “so twinned and joined at the hip that it is impossible, really, to tell where one begins and the other ends.” While Black Power generally aimed to develop Black autonomy rather than gain inclusion in American society, the Black Arts Movement sought to produce a culture that valued Black people and used cultural forms like theater to encourage their entry into Black Power politics.

How the Free Southern Theater and other Southern Black Arts Movement institutions were funded is central to Smethurst’s story. As he notes, among the enduring successes of the Black Power movement in the South were its electoral victories, which allowed politicians like Maynard Jackson, the first Black mayor of Atlanta, to allocate funding to Black arts institutions. “The movement in the South,” Smethurst writes, “saw some of the most intense publicly supported institutionalization of African American art and culture of anywhere in the country.” Financing these institutions enabled them to outlast not only the Black Arts Movement’s greatest period of success in Northern cities like New York but also the early stages of post-civil-rights Southern conservatism. Their longevity ensured that these institutions continued to provide essential services and arts instruction to Black communities. In his careful attention to this history, Smethurst reminds readers that building solid institutions can provide a means of outlasting the backlash that inevitably follows radical progress.

Smethurst’s history begins with Marcus Garvey’s early-20th-century Black nationalism and the Black communism of the 1930s, which together, he argues, laid the groundwork for the civil rights, Black Power, and Black Arts movements. In the 1910s and ’20s, Garvey pushed for the creation of a nation in Africa to which all the descendants of enslaved people could repatriate. His biggest organization was the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which likely reached millions of people at its height in the early 20th century. While Garvey was largely based in New York City, the association was especially prominent in the South: In Miami the UNIA organized self-defense, and in New Orleans it supported labor organizing and a clinic providing health care to Black people. It also sponsored a jazz band, foreshadowing the twinned emphasis of later Black nationalists on material change and cultural production.

Garveyism declined in the late 1920s, after Garvey’s 1927 deportation to Jamaica. In its wake, many UNIA members flocked to the Communist Party, which became increasingly prominent in Black politics, especially in the South, where the struggle against the Depression and segregation attracted many new members to the party and its subsidiary organizations. Art as well as labor politics were central sites for Black and white Communists organizing in the South.

Eventually headquartered in Birmingham, Ala., a Communist Party stronghold, the Southern Negro Youth Congress was founded in 1937 both to pursue revolutionary change and to promote Black art. The SNYC’s Puppet Caravan Theatre performed plays about labor and voting rights for Southern farmworkers. It also provided political experience for activists like Ernest Wright, who helped lead the People’s Defense League in New Orleans, which marched for jobs and the right to vote and against police brutality.

Elsewhere in New Orleans, the Dillard History Unit, founded in 1936 and funded by the Federal Writers’ Project, employed the novelist Margaret Walker and contributed to the history The Negro in Louisiana. And in Atlanta in 1942, the visual artist and professor Hale Woodruff joined W.E.B. Du Bois at Atlanta University’s People’s School in creating a program to educate local adults. In these and other organizations, Smethurst writes, the cross-organizational politics rooted in the Communist Party “became the most viable space for building radical African American institutions with a bent toward Black self-determination in most of the South.”

McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare resulted in the persecution of leftists in the early postwar years, but many of these Black cultural workers continued to be active in
The South proved to be an especially fertile ground from which civil rights organizers were able to harvest the fruit of seeds sown by past radical movements. In the 1960s, the region was home to about half of all Black Americans living in the United States. It hosted a large consortium of HBCUs, which provided shelter for teachers who might have fallen victim to anti-communism at other institutions. And the South provided a home base for SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and many of the other best-known civil rights groups and organizers. “By the early 1960s,” Smethurst writes, “the South was the terrain of the most vibrant and diverse grassroots Black political activity in the United States, ranging from direct action nonviolent protest to actual armed self-defense.”

Amid the tumult of the civil rights movement, Black artists sought out new means of making their work relevant to Black politics. In 1964, two members of SNCC’s literacy project and a journalist employed by the Mississippi Free Press put their interest in theater to good use by forming the Free Southern Theater. Conceived as a cultural wing of SNCC, the group offered a writing workshop and staged drama for Black Southerners out of its base at Tougaloo College, until police harassment forced it to move to New Orleans. Though rehearsed, the Free Southern Theater’s productions required improvisation because Black Southern artists often interacted with the performers, including on one occasion when an audience member stood onstage for much of the play. One cofounder, John O’Neal, encouraged as much when he told the audience, “You are the actors.” The theater group may have read the lines and provided the set, but poor Black Southerners were the actual protagonists, and their lives were the central dramatic arc.

Like many radical Black organizations in the mid-1960s, the Free Southern Theater eventually moved past the integrationist politics of the early civil rights movement and began to concentrate on developing Black culture. This focus on cultural nationalism was occasioned in part by the arrival in 1965 of Tom Dent, a New Orleans native who had left the South for New York. In his time in the North, Dent had participated in Black cultural and political organizations whose members included Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, Harold Cruse, and Archie Shepp. But Dent had grown frustrated with the factionalism of many Black Power and Black Arts Movement activists in New York and decided to return to the Big Easy to help bring their ideas (but not their infighting) home. Once there, Dent soon fell in with the Free Southern Theater, and through his extensive contacts the group garnered new financial, personal, and institutional support. The following year, Dent became chairman of the theater’s board and facilitated its move from “an integrated civil rights institution,” Smethurst writes, “to a more self-consciously Black theater with a strong nationalist bent.” This change meant the departure of the group’s white members, but it also provided new possibilities. Under Dent, the Free Southern Theater transitioned “from civil rights to Black Arts, from Negro to Black, from serving the folk of the Black South to being emphatically southern in a Black modality.”

Organizations across the South followed a similar trajectory. At Howard University in Washington, D.C., the poet Sterling Brown mentored students who became key organizers in SNCC as well as those who became noted Black Power activists, including Stokely Carmichael, and Black Arts Movement writers, such as Baraka and Toni Morrison. Off campus, the poet Gaston Neal used War on Poverty funds to establish the Cardozo Area Arts Committee, which in 1965 started the New School of Afro-American Thought, an education and cultural center that taught literature courses to nearby residents. Its opening event featured Black artists ranging from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, from Brown to Baraka. In the following years, it hosted many important jazz musicians, including Sun Ra’s Arkestra and Joseph Jarman. At another HBCU, Nashville’s Fisk University, in 1966, the novelist John Oliver Killens organized the Black Writers Conference. Though Baraka was not among the participants, “the new militant nationalist writing was a specter haunting the conference,” Smethurst notes. In time, that specter made itself felt.

In the late 1960s and the early ’70s, Black Power radicals and artists opened new institutions and transformed older ones to marry the arts and politics. At the 1967 Black Writers Conference at Fisk, Baraka dominated the proceedings, while several older Black writers, including Gwendolyn
Brooks, championed the Black Power and Black Arts movements. That same year, one of Brown's mentees, Charlie Cobb, visited the pan-African Parisian bookstore Présence Africaine, which inspired him to create a Black nationalist bookstore, Drum and Spear, in D.C. with other SNCC alumni in 1968. Another of Brown's mentees, A.B. Spellman, moved from New York to Atlanta, where he joined Morehouse professor Stephen Henderson and the historian Vincent Harding in forming what would become the first Black think tank, the Institute of the Black World, which they founded in 1969. And though the Free Southern Theater stopped its tours that year, in part because of diminished funding, its mission of spreading Black culture and inspiring Black people to create their own cultural institutions was sweeping the South.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 and the Black uprisings across the nation that followed pushed these organizers to reconsider the relationship between their institutions and local Black communities. At the newly founded Drum and Spear, Cobb and others hosted political meetings, classes, and readings, including poetry by Gaston Neal. Drum and Spear Press also reprinted C.L.R. James's 1938 *A History of Pan-African Revolt* and a translated collection of Palestinian poetry, *Enemy of the Sun*. Elsewhere in the city, James Garrett, whose family had a history of radical organizing and who had helped found the Black studies program at San Francisco State, began running the Black studies department at the newly opened Federal City College. There, he hired Cobb and other SNCC alumni involved with Drum and Spear. As Cobb recalled:

“The question of black education turned on the question or issue of what you were going to do with your education once you finished.... The question you had to confront as a college student was, “Upon graduation, how am I going to use my education for the black community?”

This pedagogical philosophy reoriented many disciplines, from science to literature, toward practical means of serving Black people. Though clashes with administrators led Garrett and others to leave Federal City College and establish a community school, the Center for Black Education, their new approach to the academy influenced other institutions.

Where D.C. became a hub for rethinking Black education, New Orleans served as a locus for rethinking Black art. In 1968, the *Tulane Drama Review*, edited by onetime Free Southern Theater member Richard Schechner, published its landmark “Black Theatre” issue. Among the offerings was Larry Neal’s foundational essay “The Black Arts Movement,” which described the movement’s ongoing efforts as the cultural wing of Black Power. If the Black Arts Movement sought to create culture that aided autonomous political efforts, as Neal suggested, the Free Southern Theater put that theory into practice. At the time, its theater troupe formally separated from the group’s writers’ workshop, BLKARTSOUTH, then under the leadership of Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam. “For Black theater to have viability in our communities we must have a working tie to those communities,” Dent wrote of the group’s mission, “something more than the mere performance of plays now and then.” Consequently, BLKARTSOUTH was composed entirely of New Orleanians, presented their original work, and primarily cast residents as actors. By valorizing the workshop over the production, BLKARTSOUTH embodied a defining trait of the Black Arts Movement: It valued “process over product.”

Groups across the South likewise experimented with creating new institutions to develop Black culture and political thought. In 1969, the Institute for the Black World began running seminars in Atlanta. “We were trying to put forward the idea,” Vincent Harding later recalled, “that Black scholarship and Black activism were not meant to be separated…and that all of that should be permeated by the arts as well.” Members of Duke University’s Afro-American Association followed through on Harding’s goals in Raleigh-Durham, when protests on campus led them to found Malcolm X Liberation University, which aimed to provide an alternative education for Durham’s Black residents, including Duke students seeking refuge from a violent campus. And in Nashville in 1970, HBCU faculty and staff founded People’s College to teach political and cultural analysis in ways that applied to everyday life. They did so because they saw educating Black people and creating a unique Black culture as essential to building Black nationalism.

As the Black Power and Black Arts movements progressed across the South, they increasingly directed their energy toward electoral campaigns as well as the arts and education. In his 1970 “Coordinator’s Statement,” delivered at the founding convention of the Congress of African Peoples in Atlanta, Baraka emphasized the importance of voter registration and mobilizing the Black vote. Art played a key part in that effort, with singers like Stevie Wonder, James Brown, and Isaac Hayes supporting Kenneth Gibson’s successful 1970 mayoral campaign in Newark. And these electoral victories, as Smethurst notes, also helped the Black Arts Movement by giving “Black people the administration of political apparatuses with significant control over material resources not before available to Black Power and Black Arts groups.”

Perhaps nowhere was the importance of electoral victories to bolster the Black Arts Movement more on display than in Atlanta. Following his election in 1973, the city’s “culture mayor,” Maynard Jackson, pledged better funding for the arts. His former speechwriter Michael Lomax led that effort: In 1974 he, the poet Ebon Dooley, and another Jackson campaign staffer and writer, Pearl Cleage, founded the Neighborhood Arts Center, which provided arts education and hosted theater groups in a working-class Black neighborhood. Lomax also helped the writer Toni Cade Bambara secure a position as a writer in residence at Spelman College, another HBCU. In 1975 Jackson appointed Lomax as director of cultural affairs, a position through which he continued financing Black Arts Movement institutions; and in 1978 Bambara, Dooley, and Alice Lovelace founded the Southern Collective of African American Writers, which the Neighborhood Arts Center hosted. In 1979 Lomax helped establish the Fulton County Arts Council, which...
funded Black Arts Movement organizations throughout the county. By gaining control of the government’s spending power through the vote, politicians like Lomax and Jackson, and artists like Bambara and Dooley, developed Atlanta into a hub for radical Black culture.

Regional collaborations bolstered these efforts. As the Free Southern Theater and BLKAARTSOUTH unraveled in the early 1970s, Dent turned his attention to arts organizations in the South more broadly. He had “a great dissatisfaction,” he later recalled, “with the situation in the early ’70s, because I knew that what they were doing in New York was about on the same level with us, but we just didn’t have any money.” Hoping to gain greater recognition and funding, Dent founded the Southern Black Cultural Alliance, which held yearly business meetings at which various organizations could learn from one another how to solve their problems. The alliance also held a yearly conference that brought Black theater troupes and artists across the South to perform. Dent, Salaa, and others then wrote about the conference for a variety of magazines—most notably Hoyt Fuller’s Atlanta-based First World, which replaced Black World—as a means of garnering new exposure for their work. By helping artists across the South, the Southern Black Cultural Alliance aided many Black Arts Movement groups in surviving difficult times.

Unfortunately, many of these organizations, in Atlanta and in the South more generally, faltered as the federal government scaled back its local funding in the 1980s. In the same year that Ronald Reagan was elected, First World published its final issue. In 1981, when Lomax became chair of the Fulton County Arts Council, the federal government defunded the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, which had supported many local arts organizations; its 1982 replacement, the Job Placement Training Act, funded far fewer theaters than CETA had. The Reagan administration also provided fewer community block grants, while increasingly conservative Southern state legislatures slashed the funding for Black Arts organizations. Though some managed to persevere, many others had to change their political mission to survive. But as Smethurst reminds his readers, these organizations would have shut down much earlier had they been in other regions; their difficulties in the 1980s after surviving many other conservative turns was less a mark of failure than it was a sign of success.

In Be Bold the Land, Smethurst demonstrates that decades of organizing and institution building, from the Garveyite years and the Popular Front to the civil rights movement, helped preserve a Black radicalism in the South that eventually became central to the Black Arts Movement in the region. This radicalism was passed on both directly, as when SNYC members published Black Arts writers in Freedomways, and indirectly, as when the Southern Black Cultural Alliance provided a forum for Black Arts Movement workers to collaborate. But in all cases, the Black Arts and Black Power movements were driven by the goal “to build a new culture of Black cooperation and self-determination.” Doing so through the arts had the potential to reorient Black political relations toward a collective building of Black autonomy. “The great strength of Black Arts, its grassroots character, makes it hard to grasp,” Smethurst observes. “Black Arts activities and institutions appeared in almost every community and on every campus where there was an appreciable number of Black people.” By following some of the lines of Black Arts networks, Smethurst gestures toward the broader collaborative endeavors that enabled the movement to gain a foothold in the South and persevere through periods of conservatism.

Through interviews conducted with its surviving participants as well as archival research, Smethurst joins scholars like GerShun Avilez and Carter Mathes in revising the canonical understanding of the Black Arts Movement. Where Margo Crawford has argued, in Black Post-Blackness, that the movement foreshadowed contemporary Black artists in their complication of the meanings of Blackness, Smethurst demonstrates that one way that the Black Arts Movement did so was by building institutions that shaped, if not the contemporary artists directly, then the consumers of the art they produce, the venues in which they produce it, and

The great strength of the Black Arts Movement was its grassroots character.

the communities in which they grew up. This aesthetic legacy also bred a political one: The Black Arts Movement laid the foundation for contemporary community arts organizations, for the use of Black art in electoral campaigns, and for arts education as a Black radical, political practice. Though many Black Power organizations eventually folded, the Black Arts Movement helped spread and institutionalize their ideas.

This afterlife is especially clear in the long-lasting reach of Southern Black feminism. While scholars like Mary Helen Washington and activists like Mariame Kaba have worked to recover the often neglected history and legacy of midcentury Black radical feminists, Smethurst’s account also reminds us of the role of those and other Popular Front radicals in the formation of the Black Arts Movement, especially in the South. Among the SNYC leaders that Smethurst discusses, for instance, was one Alabaman, Sallye Davis. While she worked as a national officer for the SNYC, she was also raising her daughter, Angela, in the intellectual and physical presence of Communist Party members. This early exposure to Marxism, one imagines, influenced not only Angela Davis’s great Black Power autobiography, edited by Toni Morrison and published in 1974, but also her intellectual production and anti-carceral radicalism today.

In a similar fashion, the legacy of many Southern Black Arts Movement organizations lives on in the present. As Smethurst argues, they helped “build new African American cultural institutions in historic African American communities that one finds throughout the South today, and the desire to construct networks between these institutions.” This institutional and coalitional approach ensured that the unraveling of specific institutions did not mark the end of the Black Arts story. If, as Fannie Lou Hamer observed after viewing the Free Southern Theater’s production of Waiting for Godot, Black people know something about waiting, they also know something about the long campaign. Liberation may not come tomorrow, but building institutions might mean that freedom can be achieved in the future.

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In 1956, the former commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service made a surprising political turn: He announced in an essay in *The Washington Post* that he saw taxation as a Marxist scheme to “bring capitalism to its knees.” Even though T. Coleman Andrews had served in government only a year before, under Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower, once out of Washington he turned against the entire enterprise of the modern state. Any progressive or liberal, he insisted, was “either a dupe or, at heart, a dictator.”

Andrews’s bold words made him a hero within a growing world of right-wing activists, and they drafted him to challenge Eisenhower for the presidency. His supporters were a motley crew comprising members of For America (an organization that built on America First, which had opposed US entry into World War II); Southerners who hoped to block the integration of public schools in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*; and business opponents of labor and the welfare state. They were drawn to Andrews’s dire political vision and to his depiction of the United States as being on the verge of a communist takeover. As one supporter put it, “It matters very little if...Roosevelt or Eisenhower is a Communist or not. What does matter is that they have advanced the Communist cause and American Liberals, by participating in the advance of the cause of Communism are unwitting dupes of the International Communist Conspiracy.”

Running as the candidate of the States’ Rights Party, Andrews won just over 111,000 votes in the 1956 election. At the time, the liberal mainstream dismissed the far-right constituency for which he spoke as politically marginal. Such activists (along with the supporters of Senator Joseph McCarthy) would later serve as the prototypes for the deranged, pathetic wackos that Richard Hofstadter chronicled in his famous essays on the “paranoid style” in American politics and the rise of “pseudo-conservatism”—freakish figures desperately clinging to national identity and social status who were to be pitied more than feared. Confident in the telos of liberalism as seen from his perch at Columbia University, Hofstadter concluded that the right was hysterical, a fringe force that might be disruptive but would never prove dominant. But were people like Andrews and his supporters merely on the margins of American conservatism, or were they representative of its ethos and worldview?

Ever since Hofstadter published his essays, historians have taken issue with his dismissive stance. The scholarly consensus has shifted to an interpretation of the conservative movement of the mid-20th century not as a mobilization of zealous cranks but rather as a force that must be taken seriously, its leaders motivated not by paranoia or rage but by deeply held ideas and a canny understanding of their interests. However, as the far-right end of the American political spectrum has grown in recent years—from QAnon and Tucker Carlson to the Capitol rioters and those making death threats against school board officials—and as substantial parts of the Republican Party have actively encouraged or tacitly benefited from this shift, it is also worth asking how marginal the followers of people like Andrews truly were. When it comes to American conservatism and the right, how should we think about the relationship between fringe and mainstream?

The historian John Huntington’s *Far-Right Vanguard* offers the fullest portrait yet of the ultraconservative mobilization of the 20th century. Whereas many scholars of the right have focused on the
self-conscious development of a conservative movement that took shape in the 1950s, espousing such high-minded principles as individual freedom, support of the market, and opposition to communism, Huntington pushes the story back to World War I and the 1920s. He suggests that we should see the rightward edge of American politics as itself a spectrum, with the white-power militias and the neo-Nazis, the vigilantes and those who peddled a belief in The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, as the farthest extreme.

When we take this broader view, it becomes clear that the ultraconservatives were neither completely marginal nor assimilated into a mainstream right. Huntington argues that they made up the "base of the conservative movement": its networks, its members, its readers and listeners, the people who tuned in to early right-wing radio programs, showed up at rallies to defend the House Committee on Un-American Activities, subscribed to National Review, and canvassed for Barry Goldwater. For Huntington, they were at once "fellow travelers and acerbic critics" of modern conservatism, forming a "vanguard" of the movement that helped to entrench the melodramatic tropes and conspiracy theorizing that remain so foundational today.

Huntington acknowledges that there is a real distinction between the far-right activists he describes, who believed that the United States was headed for an apocalyptic confrontation but who did not themselves engage in acts of terrorist violence, and right-wing extremists such as the Minutemen and the Ku Klux Klan of the 1950s and '60s, who stockpiled arms and assassinated civil rights activists. But he also insists that the dividing line between the ultra and the mainstream right was and still is far more "porous" than has been commonly understood. Activists, leaders, ideas, and resources flowed easily between the world of the ultraconservatives and their more reputable mainstream comrades. The two political communities were separated more by tactics than by ideology. Here, in this driven, Manichaean mobilization of the mid-20th century, is where we can find the predecessors of today's politics of reaction.

Huntington describes leaders like James A. Reed, the former Missouri senator and the founder of the Jeffersonian Democrats, who argued that FDR had usurped control of the Democratic Party. An invertebrate racist, Reed warned that the League of Nations would prove to be a vehicle whereby the "degenerate races" of the world could dominate whites and insisted that New Dealers would "rush into homes, spy upon people, shoot down citizens without warrant and without right...and undertake in every imaginable way the supervision and regulation of humanity." Reed was a lifelong Democrat, but with Roosevelt in the White House, he called for reclaiming the party of the Solid South. As he put it, "You cannot make socialists out of evildoers." Reed worked with other opponents of the New Deal and to Franklin D. Roosevelt, he argues, built on the political conservativism of the previous decade: the revival of the Klan as a mass political movement bent on protecting a white Protestant America from immigrants and Black Americans; the cultural war focused on keeping the teaching of evolution out of schools; the fear of Bolshevism and anarchism following the Russian Revolution and the strike wave of 1919. All of this inculcated a vision of a besieged America that crystallized in opposition to the New Deal.

Far-Right Vanguard
By John S. Huntington
University of Pennsylvania Press. 328 pp. $36.50

The Cold War nurtured the extreme right, legitimating its fears while fueling the anxiety that not enough was being done to defeat the Red Menace. Even as mainstream Republicans grew concerned that Joseph McCarthy's brandishing of lists containing the names of alleged communist sympathizers might damage their cause, the Wisconsin senator emerged as the ultras' next hero; as Gen. Robert E. Wood, the former president of Sears, Roebuck, declared, "McCarthy is doing a great job that had to be done to put traitors and spies out of our government." William L. Manchester, the Christian evangelical leader, depicted the United States as divided between Christianity and communism. Rhetoric likening communism and socialism to disease and perversion was everywhere on the right. Another conservative writer of the mid-1950s spoke of a "highly-organized socialist conspiracy" that had "infected every artery of our country," while Southern California
Representative James Utt (echoing the Pizzagate fanatics of today) likened the welfare state to pedophilia: “The child molester always entices a child with candy or some other gift before he performs his evil deed. Likewise, governments promise something for nothing in order to extend their control and dominion” over the people.

The early successes of the civil rights movement—most notably Brown v. Board of Education—also served to spur the far right, as white Southerners joined the Citizens’ Council movement to challenge the Supreme Court and resist integration. By 1956, there were some 90 Citizens’ Councils in the South, which may have had as many as 250,000 members. Even though these were people who “blanketed the South with segregationist propaganda” and took as their inspiration a speech by Mississippi Circuit Court Judge Tom P. Brady warning that the United States faced a choice between “Segregation or Amalgamation,” they mostly eschewed the violence of the Klan. They were, they insisted, “respectable” members of society.

Within the broader world of the right, this double act existed as well. Republican politicians and conservative intellectuals distanced themselves from the outright racists and the anti-communist conspiracy theorists who believed that President Eisenhower was serving his masters in Moscow, and yet, like the ultras, they argued on “principled” grounds that the Supreme Court had overstepped its authority in Brown, that unions were akin to tyrants, and that communists should be barred from teaching in public schools.

Throughout the 1940s and early ’50s, the political community of the right was a big tent, with ultras mingling easily with Republican Party regulars. But that began to change in the late ’50s, as the ultras became a more cohesive force and as the possibility of winning elections began to seem within reach for conservative Republicans. With the establishment of publications like National Review, “gatekeepers” (as Huntington terms them) such as William F. Buckley Jr. began to draw a line between their version of conservatism and that of the ultras. When the Harvard-educated businessman Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society in 1958, it brought together many of the strains of the far right into a single political organization and forced the strategic questions into the open. The Birchers now had to decide how to use their clout and whether they would try to work within the Republican Party or form a third party. Conservative politicians were faced with a similar dilemma: Should they accept the support of the Birch Society and other ultras, even though this might make it harder to win over centrist Republicans and other voters? When Richard Nixon tried in 1962 to repudiate the Birchers while running for governor of California (despite their strength in the southern part of the state), he lost the election. With the rise of Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964, both the ultras and the Republicans had their answer. Goldwater was willing to associate with and to encourage his far-right supporters, but he did so through the vehicle of the Republican Party: “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice!” he thundered at the party convention that year. His ultra politics helped to doom his candidacy, as the press portrayed him as mentally unstable and trigger-happy. But at the same time, even in the midst of Goldwater’s defeat, the most committed of his supporters saw signs of victory.

The Conservative Society of America peddled neon bumper stickers announcing “27,000,000 Americans Can’t Be Wrong.” They continued to mobilize, backing George Wallace’s independent presidential bid in 1968 and flirting with the idea of starting a third party—and as they did, Republicans began to worry that they had taken the support of the ultras for granted and might be “losing their right wing to Wallace.” For Huntington, the defection of the far right to an independent candidate suggests its partisan flexibility. But with the Wallace campaign, the Republicans also realized that they not only needed to court and flatter the far right but that by doing so, they might appeal to dissenting Southern Democrats as well.

Huntington’s narrative draws to a close in the 1970s, when the rise of Reagan’s more mainstream style of conservatism siphoned off some of the passion of the ultras, while the anti-communism that had once held the mobilization together ceased to be such a powerful unifying force. But it is not hard to see the impact that midcentury ultraconservatism had on the conservative institutions of the United States—the Republican Party above all, but also right-wing media, think tanks, and the movement’s general gestalt. A new conservatism had emerged out of the center-right’s dalliance with the far right: The extreme rhetoric, the effort to build a separate media universe, the fanatical celebration of free markets, the hostility to bureaucracy and the public sphere itself, and the willingness to denounce political opponents as “traitors”—all hallmarks of the ultra-right during the midcentury—became representative of conservatism as a whole. From Newt Gingrich to the Tea Party and finally to Donald Trump, the harsh motifs and ferocious imaginary of the far right had been merged into the conservative mainstream.
forward. They were the voters, the supporters, the contributors, the subscribers. As the historian David Walsh has argued, even if people like Buckley sought to distinguish the genteel intellectualism of National Review from the loony paranoia of the Birchers, in reality his magazine succeeded precisely because it was able to reach out to the base that the far right had created. He raised funds for National Review from ultra donors and published the writers who wrote for American Mercury, which trafficked in anti-Semitism. And in truth, Buckley shared more with the far right—including his defense of McCarthy and his hostility to the civil rights movement in its early years—than his admirers might like to remember.

Throughout the period Huntington describes, the intellectual and ideological overlap between the “mainstream” right and the ultras was always more extensive than later conservative politicians cared to admit. They shared the libertarian antagonism toward government, the passionate hatred of unions, and the fierce critique of federal action to protect the civil rights of Black Americans. Their differences mattered less than their common ground.

Long after the end of the Soviet Union, conservatives continued to rail against socialism. As the political culture turned rightward, the vitriol of the far right only intensified. Today, the organizations, the worldview, and the “paranoid” political style that in the 1950s seemed like relics now appear instead to be the predecessors of the vaccine resisters, the school-board activists, and the backers of Trump. “Indeed,” as Huntington notes, “Trump and the modern Republican Party represent the culmination of the long ultraconservative movement.”

But is this the whole story? While the intransigent rhetoric of the midcentury ultraconservatives is echoed by the right today, in other ways the ultras seem like a very distinct mobilization. Most of Huntington’s focus is on the leadership of the movement rather than its social base. But the far-right politics he traces seems to have found its most loyal supporters in the world of business—specifically among the midsize manufacturers and affluent suburban professionals who might have been most directly challenged by the changes of the New Deal. Out of the real disruption to their power in the workplace—Sewell Avery, outraged that the federal government had the temerity to challenge his basic property rights and tell him to recognize a union!—they fashioned a broad conspiracy theory in which the reforms of the New Deal really were a communist takeover.

The same was true, in different ways, for the white Southerners who joined the Citizens’ Councils. After all, they were not wrong to perceive that something was changing, that the absolute power that had once belonged to them over the lives of Black people was being hemmed in. But their rage and sense of betrayal morphed into a fantastic vision of the world in which they were entirely victimized by malign, mysterious outsiders. Anti-communism bound the movement together and gave its incoherence a clarity it would otherwise have lacked.

Today, by contrast, the social base of the far right—while not entirely clear—seems likely to include fewer people who are actually the owners of manufacturing enterprises, who might be considered members of a genuine (if local) social elite. They are not necessarily downwardly mobile or economically desperate: The January 6
insurgents, for example, seem to have included many white-collar, middle-class employees—doctors, architects, people in marketing. Some may own businesses, but these are probably smaller than the manufacturing enterprises that fueled the postwar right. No longer can their mobilization be understood simply as a defense of actual economic practices or a literal Jim Crow state; in many ways, it seems as if the privileges these people seek to preserve are in fact illusory. Similarly, the liberalism that the right rails against is not really that of the New Deal any longer—it is instead the strange mash-up advanced by the contemporary Democratic Party, which conceives of so much social and political authority to business from the start.

Where the organizations and individuals that Huntington describes sought to defend a particular social order out of which they had emerged and in which they had prospered, today's right (especially in those parts of the country that have been ravaged by plant closures and deindustrialization) channels a widespread sense of powerlessness that has come unmoored from any material interpretation. Its energy, at times, seems to come from the untethering of the white working class from the collective institutions, such as labor unions, that once helped to give its members a way of understanding themselves and their struggles as part of a broader social conflict and at their best helped to foster a spirit of common purpose and solidarity. In the absence of these connections, many of these workers may have the sense that they are perilously isolated, forced to confront a ruthless world as lone individuals—their only commonality and refuge being that of race. Today's far right is shot through with the rhetoric of entrepreneurship alongside fantasies of racial displacement. The ravenous embrace of market individualism and the presumed creativity of the businessman that is constantly reiterated and celebrated at the top of the social order is reinforced by the lived economic experience of the self-employed, the middle managers, the small business owners—groups pressed between ideals of autonomy and an increasingly fragile economic reality—and by the precarious nature of many jobs today, whose temporary, insecure, and degrading qualities are justified by the dream that they are only the prelude to a big break. Anti-communism as the glue holding the movement together has been replaced by a frenetic emphasis on self-preservation and self-enrichment—aspirations that must be defended against those immigrants, foreigners, and people imagined as racial subordinates who threaten to usurp the material security and wealth that ought to go to those most deserving, to the true Americans.

The libertarian vision of mid-20th century conservatism helped to create the atomized social world that powers the far right today. What is remarkable, then, is the rise of a new strain of conservatism that actively seeks to distance the movement from the free-market faiths of Goldwater and Reagan. Articulated in its more elaborate form by writers such as Michael Anton at the Claremont Review of Books, this conservatism tries to position itself as speaking for a muscular working class, castigating “globalism” and the soulless power of cosmopolitan elites who are sapping the energy of the virtuous (and male) people of the nation. An earlier version of this framework animated the 1992 and ’96 presidential campaigns of Patrick Buchanan, whose trajectory illustrates how closely its typology veers toward anti-Semitism and the sensibility of fascism. At the same time, most of the actual prerogatives of the wealthy and the extremely wealthy have continued to be defended by Trump’s Republican Party, so that the policy agenda put together in the economic departments and think tanks far from the Birch Society coffee klatches has remained relevant and germane—not replaced entirely by Trump’s posturing against free trade. Yes, at the end of the Trump years, organizations like the Business Roundtable were suddenly horrified by the specter of insurrection and a challenge to the legitimate transfer of power—but until then, they were happy to take the tax cuts.

The contemporary right, in other words, may echo certain preoccupations of the postwar ultras, and it may borrow their melodramatic tone. But socially and politically it is different, as is the broader context in which it operates. In his 1975 article “The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem,” the historian Arno Mayer described an “inner core of conservatism” that might be embraced by the lower-middle classes, especially in moments of “acute social and political crisis.” Mayer might not have imagined how the ranks of this social group would swell with the decline of unions and the revival of ideas of self-branding and going it alone. But he described the way that the office professionals, small shopkeepers, accountants, and marketers—the predecessors of today’s Internet merchants and Web entrepreneurs—would join together to protect the power of “those higher social classes and governing elites on whom [they] never cease to be dependent and for whom [they] feel envy exacerbated by resentment.” This element of social analysis is needed to make sense of what we are living through today.

Far-Right Vanguard borrows a metaphor of the left—the “vanguard”—to describe the ultrareactionaries of the 1940s and ’50s. They pioneered a political style that remains potent today, an ideological infrastructure that underlies the Trump faction of the Republican Party. But in resurrecting this world and showing its centrality to the emergence of the postwar right, Huntington forces the reader to consider how different our own time may be—and the possibility that the resurgence of the right today not only builds on the legacies of the 20th century, but may be threatening and dangerous in new ways.
Perpetual Conflict

What is new in the new West Side Story?

BY ED MORALES

As I sat through a screening of West Side Story at a movie theater in Lincoln Square—literally in the same Manhattan neighborhood that’s portrayed in the film—I couldn’t escape a growing realization: These days, we are trapped in a cycle of repetition, one in which the gnarled conflicts and perhaps small triumphs of the postwar era repeat themselves over and over again, sometimes with profound new expression and sometimes just as shiny objects of entertainment consumption. In Steven Spielberg’s new “reimagining” of West Side Story, we get a film that offers a far more inclusive vision of postwar America, but one that retains the original’s flawed view of working-class tribalism.

The original West Side Story was itself born out of a repetition of a repetition. Created by Jerome Robbins, Stephen Sondheim, Leonard Bernstein, and Arthur Laurents in the 1950s, the musical was conceived as the tale of an ill-fated Catholic/Jewish romance based on Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. But concerned that this would too closely resemble the plot of an earlier play, Abie’s Irish Rose, and becoming interested in Los Angeles’s Mexican American gangs, the quartet had a change of heart: They would make the musical about New York’s West Side gangs, specifically downwardly mobile whites and recently migrated Puerto Ricans. The story, for the most part, would remain the same, the tale of star-crossed lovers—Tony, a Polish-Irish boy, and Maria, a Puerto Rican girl—who meet a tragic end, but now the lovers would be caught up in a world of street violence.

The product—first a Broadway play, then a wildly successful film—was at once an all-time mainstream crowd-pleaser and a dismaying sordid representation of Puerto Ricans. For New York Puerto Ricans, West Side Story stung particularly deep. For me, this sting was also close to home: I grew up on these streets with Puerto Rican migrant parents who shuddered at the mere mention of the film and wanted to shield me from its distorted portrayal of our presence here.

But watching West Side Story, I always sensed an underlying tale being told. The structuring principle is the conflict between European ethnic groups recently assimilated after an earlier era of being othered, but still unable to escape the creeping gentrification of the city planners, and a Latinx group that was arriving in great numbers to escape a US program to restructure Puerto Rico’s economy. The 1961 film relayed a story of the
binary oppositions that run through American society: There is an “us” and a “them,” natives and aliens, those who have made it in the United States and those haven’t, those who are “American” and those who are not. By doing so, it also solidified the notion in me and my peers that as racial others and colonized citizens, Puerto Ricans were a threat to American identity.

The new production tries to avoid many of the worst features of the original. Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner hired language and accent experts. They enlisted the involvement of the City University of New York professor Virginia Sánchez Korroll and the archives of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies to get detailed insight into the lives of New York Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and ‘60s. The pair even went to the island territory itself to speak with and gather insights from the residents, even though many of them had little to do with the migrants of the postwar period.

The results of this effort are for the most part welcome and satisfying, giving new life to a narrative that once felt awkward and superficial. Gone are the clumsy accents of Natalie Wood’s Maria and most of the Sharks, who were mainly played by non-Latinx actors. Even more gratifying is the extensive use of untranslated dialogue, perhaps intended to allow the characters to speak more fully for themselves without an English filter and to defy the constant demands from the Jets and the police to speak English. For the first time in a Hollywood movie I was able to hear one of my favorite disparaging epiphanies—zángano—as well as La Jara, a code word for New York’s then mostly Irish police force (many with the surname O’Hara), immortalized by the salsa singer Héctor Lavoe in concert with the Fania All Stars.

Yet some of the amendments, although well-intentioned, seem off. Having the Sharks sing the patriotic hymn “La Borinqueña” before their first battle with the Jets didn’t ring true, nor did the constant display of Puerto Rican flags hanging from windows and fire escapes, something that became more common in the late ‘60s–early ’70s era of the Young Lords. More important, the true colonial nature of the US relationship with Puerto Rico, which was a direct cause of the migration in the first place, is not acknowledged. Kushner’s earnest attempt at authenticity and inclusion doesn’t entirely (or even adequately) address the deeper colonial wound.

The character of Anita, played by Rita Moreno in the 1961 film version, is re-conceived here as an Afro-Latina played by Ariana DeBose, who was in the stage version of Hamilton, as an effort to address the unseemliness of having the light-skinned Moreno wear dark makeup in the original. The new Anita even calls out light-skinned Latinx racism directly in Spanish when she admonishes her boyfriend, the Sharks’ leader Bernardo, for implying that she is not a member of the family because she is Black.

Still, the presence of Afro-Latinos in the rest of the cast is muted, and neither version of West Side Story makes reference to the fact that San Juan Hill, the neighborhood that was condemned for slum clearance to make possible the construction of Lincoln Center, was one of New York’s most significant African American neighborhoods, home to Thelonious Monk. The erasure of African Americans in the new film echoes the failings of both Hamilton and In the Heights, musicals that ignore the founding role of African Americans in the United States in favor of a drama about assimilation, which was denied to African Americans almost by definition. The narrative of how natives define who is American and who is not is also a feature of classic American films like Gangs of New York and Saturday Night Fever.

Looking more closely at the different immigration experiences of the families of the play’s creators and those of its subjects is another way to understand some of the missteps of the original West Side Story. In the 1961 film’s version of the signature song “America,” Anita asserts that she would be happy to see Puerto Rico sink into the ocean—an attitude that better fits a Jewish immigrant fleeing persecution and racism in Europe than a Puerto Rican who had reluctantly fled her island home as a result of a colonized, underdeveloped economy.

The new version corrects much of this, and it offers a more complex reading of the Jets as well. Once a rowdy group of miscreants trying to assert their gang’s dominance, they are now drawn as the prototypes for white nationalists, often vocalizing a “they will replace us” trope. They are also presented as the losers of the New Deal, defined largely by social pathologies that make them the predecessors of a certain strand of downtown punks. The original version’s tomboy, Anybodys, is reinvented here as an assertive nonbinary character. As the victims, along with the Puerto Rican migrants, of the collapse of New York City as an industrial manufacturing center, the Jets are faced with annihilation.

This reimagined version of West Side Story certainly brings with technical brilliance, from the blue and gray hues bathing the Jets as they perform the quirky “Cool” on West Side docks to the dreamlike Gimbels set populated by Maria and her coworkers for the repurposed “I Feel Pretty,” to the claustrophobic salt shed fight scene, eerily reminiscent of Kara Walker’s 2014 installation at the old Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn. The cast—particularly Ansel Elgort as Tony, Rachel Zegler as Maria, and DeBose as Anita—is winning, and the songs still pack some potency despite their familiarity.

The recasting of Moreno as the widow of the original Doc, the candy store owner who gives the final moralizing speech in the 1961 film, is the screenplay’s intended masterstroke: Her redux of “Somewhere,” delivered after we have to sit through yet another sexual assault against Anita, is about the limits of this reimagining. Now all she can offer is a plea to “find a way of forgiving”—despite Chino, the zángano who avenges Bernardo’s death, insisting that “sooner or later gringos kill everything”—while Anita concludes that she is not an American but a Puerto Rican.

The overwhelming power of forgiveness and love are frequently proffered in the new West Side Story as a solution for tribal conflict. But in the end, despite all of the film’s gestures toward inclusion and liberal reconciliation, we also realize they might not be enough: for Maria, while still not losing her cool, finally understands the hate as something that is not going away—a fitting, if bleak, end for a film made in the Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene era. Hollywood may seek to offer a more inclusive vision, but ultimately West Side Story leaves us with a vision of perpetual conflict, not reconciliation.
Letters

Josephine Baker’s French Exile

Joe. Gary Younge writes in “The Dancer Was a Spy” [Dec. 13/20]: “Embracing exiles from their ally-cum-rival [the United States] gave the French a sense of being morally and culturally superior—even as they wrestled with their military and economic inferiority.” Indeed, one might also see elite US institutions’ “embrace” of French intellectuals of color (The Washington Post’s and Georgetown University’s recent hiring of French journalist Rokhaya Diallo comes to mind) as obscuring the political, economic, and cultural hegemony the United States wields in today’s world. Certainly, France’s refusal to fully come to terms with its colonial past disqualifies it to provide any lessons in matters of racism.

William Poulin-Deltour

It was good to see Gary Younge in your pages again. He never disappoints. Thanks!

Nina Ramos

I’m old enough to have met the musician Luther Allison in person on the Rue Mouffetard before entering the small club where he was performing in Paris every night.

He experienced segregation in France, just as, unfortunately, he would have anywhere else. But he understood that a despicable minority does not represent a whole country.

Marc Chanliau

Climate Wars

In regard to Tina Gerhardt’s editorial, “Heating Up,” in the December 13/20 issue: How many believe the Global North cares about pressure from those concerned with environmental justice? It seems to me that climate change will bring more, not less, exploitation and repression as rich nations maneuver to maintain their privilege and competitive edge against other rich nations.

Tom Civeletti

A Report Worth Reading

Thank you, D.D. Guttenplan, for bringing the New York Times report on a US drone strike that killed civilians to the attention of readers of The Nation (“Revealing the Truth,” Dec. 13/20). Years ago I stopped supporting, reading, or listening to The New York Times for the reasons you succinctly list in your article. If only this sort of good investigative journalism were the norm at the Times, I’d start including it in my information basket.

Robert Borneman

Build Back Better, Please

Re “The Violent Party” by Jeet Heer [Dec. 13/20]: In my view, the best way to combat a resurgence of Donald Trump and the violent Republicans would be to enact the vastly popular agenda that Joe Biden promised in the 2020 election campaign (not the grotesquely watered-down version that Congress is now considering and may or may not ultimately accept). I haven’t seen a single article in The Nation in recent weeks that forthrightly calls upon the Democrats to do this.

Caleb Melamed

Comment drawn from our website letters@thenation.com

Please do not send attachments
Rebecca Solnit

Rebecca Solnit, the great essayist of this time, gave us a fresh understanding of George Orwell with her brilliant 2021 book *Orwell’s Roses* (Viking). But as with all things Solnit, *Orwell’s Roses* is about a good deal more than its nominal subject: the flowers that the author of *Animal Farm* and 1984 planted in the garden of a rented cottage in the English village of Wallington. I spoke with Solnit about the need for bread and roses—especially in perilous times.

—John Nichols

JN: Why Orwell? Why now?

RS: The book kind of ambushed me. Although I’d known the essay where he described planting those roses well, I’d never thought about what it meant that our great prophet of totalitarianism, the man famous for facing unpleasant facts, was planting roses. It let me talk about all these things that I wanted to talk about—essentially about the left, about how we lead our lives, about what it looks like to lead a sustainable life.

It was only after I met the rose bushes and started reading Orwell’s domestic diaries and letters that I realized that I, like most people, had a misapprehension of him as this grim, pessimistic figure, and that he took immense pleasure in a lot of everyday things, and that’s what kept him going.

JN: In a sense, you’re looking at how people on the left might keep a sense of perspective in the face of overwhelming challenges.

RS: I learned a lot from writing the book. I didn’t understand—few of us do—what “bread and roses” really means, and that has been such a wonderful piece of equipment for my thinking and arguing.

We all know what “bread” is: food, clothing, shelter, the bodily necessities, which can be more or less homogenized and administered from above. But “roses” was this radical cry, in a way, for individualism, for private life, for freedom of choice—because my roses and your roses won’t be the same roses, you know? It’s saying that people are subtle, complex, subjective creatures who need culture, need nature, need beauty, need leisure.

This is not something the left has always been good at defending or even recognizing. We’re also in a really difficult time, and it’s not going to stop being difficult for the foreseeable future, with the climate chaos and the new authoritarianism, etc. We all have a lot of work to do.

As somebody who’s been around the left most of my adult life, I’m seeing bitterness and burnout. It felt like Orwell suggested some of what it looks like to remain committed to the work without getting embittered by it—without losing your sense of what you were for.

JN: It’s interesting the extent to which Orwell has become a reference point in discussions about Donald Trump.

RS: Well, I remember Ronald Reagan being “Orwellian.” I remember both George Bushes being “Orwellian.” I say at the end of the book that it’s almost too easy to explain how “Orwellian” or whatever (since I question that adjective) this era is. It just feels like it would be really valuable for people to talk about the politics of lying—the inextricable relationship between authoritarianism and lies—and you don’t need to name Trump. But I also knew that by the time the book came out, Trump might no longer be president, which turned out to be the case.

JN: Despite it all, you bring us back to hope.

RS: I’m not quite a broken record, but I’ve been attacked a few times for repeating myself, and it’s like, “Do you know how many times Aretha Franklin sang ‘Respect?’” I’ll say it until it’s no longer useful.

I said when Trump was elected, “Thirteen years ago I took personal responsibility for hope, and I’m not giving up now.”

I think a lot of people on the left think they were personally appointed to be in charge of despair—or cynicism—and how to spread it, judging by how they conduct themselves or how they clobber people with it.

Having hope as your assignment is kind of great: You’re looking at who’s heroic, at what we’ve achieved, at what’s possible—and so much of it comes from what I think of as having a historical imagination.

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