

REMEMBERING FIDEL CASTRO | 10-PAGE SPECIAL REPORT
KILLED BY FAKE NEWS | DARIUS SHAHTAHMASEBI
WHO BUILDS THE WALLS? | PAUL CURRION

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING | PHOTOS WORTH SEEING

ISSUE 130



MAIN STREET **BREXITLAND**

People in England's northern towns and cities are scared. Their fears stoked by xenophobic right-wing media, they hate Europe and they hate migrants. But, most of all, they hate the way they are being squeezed into poverty by a post-industrial society that has turned their dreams into nightmares and replaced hope with despair



Cover:


King Street, South Shields, England.

Photo: Tony Sutton

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The Golden Arches theory of decline

Why is there a worldwide revolt against politics as usual? Because corporate globalisation has crushed democratic choice, writes **George Monbiot**

A wave of revulsion rolls around the world. Approval ratings for incumbent leaders are everywhere collapsing. Symbols, slogans and sensation trump facts and nuanced argument. One in six Americans now believe that military rule would be a good idea. From all this I draw the following, peculiar conclusion: no country with a McDonald's can remain a democracy.

Twenty years ago, the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman proposed his “golden arches theory of conflict prevention”. This holds that “no two countries that both have McDonald's have ever fought a war against each other since they each got their McDonald's.”

Friedman's was one of several end-of-history narratives suggesting that global capitalism would lead to permanent peace. He claimed that it might create “a tip-over point at which a country, by integrating with the global economy, opening itself up to foreign investment and empowering its consumers, permanently restricts its capacity for troublemaking and promotes gradual democratisation and widening peace.” He didn't mean that McDonald's ends war, but that its arrival in a nation symbolised the transition.

In using McDonald's as shorthand for the forces tearing democracy apart, I am, like him, writing figuratively. I do not mean that the presence of the burger chain itself is the cause of the decline of open, democratic so-

cieties (though it has played its part in Britain, using our defamation laws against its critics). Nor do I mean that countries hosting McDonald's will necessarily mutate into dictatorships.

What I mean is that, under the onslaught of the placeless, transnational capital that McDonald's exemplifies, democracy as a living system withers and dies. The old forms and forums still exist – parliaments and congresses remain standing – but the power they once contained seeps away, re-emerging where we can no longer reach it.

The political power that should belong to us has flitted into confidential meetings with the lobbyists and donors who establish the limits of debate and action. It has slipped into the diktats of the IMF and the European Central Bank, which respond not to the people but to the financial sector. It has been transported, under armed guard, into the icy fastness of Davos, where Friedman finds so warm a welcome (even when he's talking cobblers).

Above all, the power that should belong to the people is being crushed by international treaty. Contracts such as Nafta, Ceta the proposed TransPacific Partnership and Trade in Services Agreement and the failed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership are crafted behind closed doors in discussions dominated by corporate lobbyists. And those lobbyists are able to slip in clauses

I do not mean that the presence of McDonald's itself is the cause of the decline of open, democratic societies (though it has played its part in Britain, using our defamation laws against its critics)

TOO MUCH POWER



NO MORE WARS?: McDonald's restaurant, Leicester Square, London.

Photo: Garry Knight (via Flickr.com)

Democracy depends on reciprocal belief, trust and belonging: the conviction that you belong to the nation and the nation belongs to you

no informed electorate would ever approve of, such as the establishment of opaque offshore tribunals, through which corporations can bypass national courts, challenge national laws and demand compensation for the results of democratic decisions.

These treaties limit the scope of politics, prevent states changing social outcomes and drive down labour rights, consumer protection, financial regulation and the quality of neighbourhoods. They make a mockery of sovereignty. Anyone who forgets that striking them down was one of Donald Trump's main promises will fail to understand why people were prepared to risk so much in electing him.

At the national level too, the McDonald's model destroys meaningful democracy. Democracy depends on reciprocal belief, trust and belonging: the conviction that you belong to the nation and the nation belongs to you. The McDonald's model, by rooting out attachment, could not have been better designed to erase that perception.

As Tom Wolfe observes in his novel *A Man in Full*, "the only way you could tell

you were leaving one community and entering another was when the franchise chains started repeating and you spotted another 7-Eleven, another Wendy's, another Costco, another Home Depot." The alienation and anomie this destruction of place promotes are enhanced by the casualisation of labour and a spirit-crushing regime of monitoring, quantification and assessment (at which McDonald's excels). Public health disasters contribute to the sense of rupture. After falling for decades, for instance, death rates among middle-aged white Americans are now rising. Among the likely causes are obesity and diabetes, opioid addiction and liver failure, diseases whose carriers are corporations.

Corporations, released from democratic constraints, drive us towards climate breakdown, an urgent threat to global peace. McDonald's has done more than its fair share: beef production is among the most powerful causes of climate change.

In his book *The Globalisation Paradox*, the Harvard economist Dani Rodrik describes a political trilemma. Democracy, national sovereignty and hyper globalisation, he argues,

are incompatible. You cannot have all three at once. McDonaldisation crowds out domestic politics. Incoherent and dangerous as it often is, the global backlash against mainstream politicians is at heart an attempt to reassert national sovereignty against the forces of undemocratic globalisation.

An article about the history of the Democratic party by Matt Stoller in the Atlantic reminds us that a similar choice was articulated by the great US jurist Louis Brandeis. “We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both,” he said. In 1936 the congressman Wright Patman managed to pass a bill against the concentration of corporate power. Among his targets was A&P, the giant chain store of his day, which was hollowing out towns, destroying local retailers and turning “independent tradesmen into clerks.”

In 1938 President Roosevelt warned that “the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than

their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism.” The Democrats saw concentrated corporate power as a form of dictatorship. They broke up giant banks and businesses and chained the chain stores. What Roosevelt, Brandeis and Patman knew has been forgotten by those in power, including powerful journalists. But not by the victims of this system.

One of the answers to Trump, Putin, Orbán, Erdoğan, Salvini, Duterte, Le Pen, Farage and the politics they represent is to rescue democracy from transnational corporations. It is to defend the crucial political unit that is under assault by banks, monopolies and chain stores: community. It is to recognise that there is no greater hazard to peace between nations than a corporate model that crushes democratic choice. **CT**

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George Monbiot’s latest book, How Did We Get Into This Mess?, is published by Verso. This article was first published in the Guardian newspaper. Monbiot’s web site is www.monbiot.com

What Roosevelt, Brandeis and Patman knew has been forgotten by those in power, including powerful journalists. But not by the victims of this system

GREED AT A GLANCE

www.inequality.org

Auctioneers at last month’s Geneva Watch Auction expected to rake in \$3-million for this 63-year-old stainless steel Patek Philippe watch. But buyers had something else in mind. After a 13-minute battle, the timepiece sold for \$11-million, the most expensive price a wristwatch has ever made at auction.



BROKEN DREAMS



Closing down: King Street, the main shopping thoroughfare of South Shields is broad and car-free – and almost devoid of shops.

People in England's northern towns and cities are scared. Their fears stoked by xenophobic right-wing media, they hate Europe, and they hate migrants. But, most of all, they hate the way they are being squeezed into poverty by a post-industrial society that has turned dreams into nightmares and replaced hope with despair. **Tony Sutton** returns to South Shields, a place he once called home

Main Street, **Brexitland**

South Shields was prospering: Its last-remaining slums had been demolished, major roads built, new factories developed

British Prime Minister Theresa May has committed herself to a scheme to arrest the economic decline of the north of England. However, the plan, originally proposed by George Osborne, who was axed as Chancellor of the Exchequer after the exit of David Cameron as PM following June's Brexit vote, is still in a stage of incoherence, doubletalk and indecision.

Nothing has yet been agreed, other than the setting up of a think tank – the Northern Powerhouse Partnership – by Osborne, who raised few hopes for speedy action when he said at its mid-September launch: “Trying to

turn around 100 years of relative economic decline is not going to happen overnight.” Then he hopped off to the US to take care of his own economic decline, pocketing £500,000 for a few speeches to bankers and hedge fund managers on the financial snout-troughing circuit.

I was in the north, at South Shields, on Tyneside, just before Osborne's announcement, and I was shocked at the way the town had degenerated since I worked for daily and Sunday newspapers there and at Newcastle upon Tyne, 11 miles to the west.



Where once there were thriving stores with signs advertising their wares, there are now shuttered doorways and “To Let” signs.



King Street, South Shields: Empty stores, little hope for the future.



Pretty as a picture? Decals adorn the front of vacant property.

Forty years ago, South Shields **was** part of a regional powerhouse and didn't yet need the transformative magical thinking that is now being spouted by May and Osborne. In the 1970s, the town of 75,000 boasted high-paying jobs in shipbuilding and coal mining. Its last-remaining slums had been demolished, major roads were being built and new factories developed. And King Street, South Shields' main thoroughfare, reflected that prosperity. What could go possibly go wrong? Lots, as it happens.

The rot set in when Margaret Thatcher arrived in Downing Street late in the decade.

Her war on unions, especially the mine workers, together with economic policies that encouraged the offshoring of jobs, saw the collapse of Tyneside's major industries. Eleven years of Tony Blair's neoliberalism, from 1997 to 2007, continued Thatcher's work, the area hitting rock-bottom at the end of the 20th-century when South Shields had the highest unemployment rate in Britain.

Thatcher's political philosophy – “There is no such thing as society,” she had famously claimed in a 1987 interview with a women's magazine – began a process that led to the elimination of secure, well-paying jobs

The area hit rock-bottom at the end of the 20th-century when South Shields had the highest unemployment rate in Britain

BROKEN DREAMS



Marks & Spencer, once a key retailer in South Shields' King Street, has now moved to a big box store away from the town's main drag.

Encouraged by xenophobic right-wing media, UKIP declared war on migrants, blaming them – along with the European Union – for stealing jobs and robbing British workers of income, housing and benefits

and their replacement by humiliating zero-hour contracts with one-step-above-poverty wages. This decades-long economic decline played an key part in the rise of the far-right political party UKIP, which took advantage of the increased social turmoil that was not being addressed by the Labour Party, traditionally the champion of Britain's working class. Encouraged by xenophobic right-wing media, UKIP declared war on migrants, blaming them – along with the European Union – for stealing jobs and robbing British workers of income, housing and benefits. Then David Cameron, newly-relected as Prime Minister, honoured an election pledge to hold a referendum earlier this year on whether or not to stay inside the Europe Union. The result was a narrow, unexpected, victory for the Brexiteers, a greatly divided land, and the speedy exit of Cameron as prime minister.

South Shields was one of the “deprived” areas that voted overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit, much to the dismay of bewildered southern-based liberal commentators who couldn't understand why, in light of all the European cash being injected into northern development zones, their residents would vote “against their best interests.”

Brendan O'Neill, writing in the Spectator, explained: “Britain's poor and workless have risen up. And in doing so they didn't just give the EU and its British backers the bloodiest of bloody noses. They also brought crashing down the Blairite myth of a post-class, Third Way Blighty, where the old ideological divide between rich and poor did not exist, since we were all supposed to be ‘stakeholders’ in society.

“This peasants’ revolt has sent shockwaves through the elite . . . and they're now frantically trying to work out why it happened. They've come up with two answers – one fuelled by rage, the other by something worse: pity. The ragers say the plebs voted Leave because they're a bit racist and got hoodwinked by the shiny, xenophobic demagoguery of the likes of Nigel Farage.

“This idea – that the poor are easy prey for demagogues – is the same claptrap the Chartists had to put up with in the 1840s. Their snooty critics frequently told them that, since the poor do not have a ‘ripened wisdom’ they are ‘more exposed than any other class . . . to be converted to the vicious ends of faction.’ Now, the metropolitan set once again accuse the little people of exactly the same thing.”

BROKEN DREAMS



Charity shops, betting shops – empty store fronts. Welcome to Main Street, Brexitland!

That same despair is apparent right across the whole of the north of England. And it is echoed, too, on mainland Europe, where residents of Greece, Spain and Italy are also witnessing the collapse of the old world order, as they slide towards poverty in a new Fourth World

O'Neill was right. The pre-Thatcher '60s generation knew their basic dreams would almost certainly see fruition: job-for-life security and regular pay rises would elevate their families into comfort, if not outright prosperity. That was the social contract developed after the end of World War II: Work hard and contribute to society, then society will take care of you. That contract died when Thatcher broke the miners' union in 1984-85. After that, it was everyone for himself.

On the face of it, today's political turmoil in Britain has little to do with Thatcher and her successors: It's about Brexit and immigrants and the average Briton's deep hatred of Europe, isn't it? But dig a little deeper and the link becomes more apparent. The real fight is about dignity, security and fear. It's about a need for lasting, well-paid careers instead of the dumbed-down servility of short-term jobs in the service industry. It's about the right to affordable housing, instead of having to pay exorbitant rents to slumlords. But, most of all, it's about a future that offers hope, not despair.

A quick stroll down South Shields's King Street will give the most-jaundiced observer

an indication of the troubled times in which many Britons live. Once a bustling thoroughfare that furnished the dreams of an affluent society, the broad boulevard is now a nightmare of austerity. Many storefronts are empty, their windows displaying stark "For Sale" and "To Let" notices. The businesses that remain are mainly charity outlets, betting shops and pound stores for cash-strapped customers, while those that cater for the wealthier have decamped to big-box citadels elsewhere. Welcome to the shabby new face of Main Street, Brexitland.

This scenario – a nation of distinct, economically-divided societies – is not unique to Tyneside, but is evident across the north of England. And on mainland Europe, where disillusioned residents of Greece, Spain and Italy are also witnessing the collapse of the old world order, as they slide towards poverty in a new Fourth World. Weary of the lies and false promises of their money-grubbing politicians and the hoggish corporations they serve, the people are now sending a stark warning to their political masters in London and Brussels: "If you don't help us, we'll suffer more. And, if that happens, we'll take you down with us."

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CT

Killed by fake news

Darius Shahtahmasebi says that we should be more concerned about the lies of the mainstream media rather than launch attacks on independent journalism

I'm sure Milosevic did some truly heinous things while in office, but that's beside the point. The point is that we were lied to, and NATO was able to launch a war based on those promulgated lies

Most of the time, the president says things we more or less agree with. When he says things along the lines of attacks on civilians must be stopped, of course, we all approve. How can we not? The only problem is that, usually, he is only applying those standards to uncooperative governments and never to himself or his allies. The war on alternative media is a prime example of this. Obama's spiel at a recent press conference in Germany is hard to argue with on its face, as he stated that fake news undermines the American political process: "If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems."

I agree. I think everyone agrees. Fake news must be stopped.

During the late '90s, the NATO war machine decided to spread its democratic principles to Yugoslavia. The country's president at the time, Slobodan Milosevic, was widely branded as a war criminal by the mainstream media. There was some consensus that intervention was necessary to bring an



end to his actions.

Years later, that perspective persisted. A 2011 article in London's Telegraph explains that under Milosevic's rule, "ethnic cleansing became a reality as whole populations were forced from their homes and hundreds of thousands were killed."

However, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague exonerated him earlier this year. Despite all the media's claims, the ICTY determined he was not respon-

sible for war crimes committed during the 1992-95 Bosnian war.

I'm sure Milosevic did some truly heinous things while in office, but that's beside the point. The point is that we were lied to, and NATO was able to launch a war based on those promulgated lies.

In 2011, we were told that the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was about to commit a mass genocide against his own

Above, right: Balanced reporting? Covers from Time magazine



Serbia blazes as NATO bombs fall during the West's war to rid Yugoslavia of Slobodan Milosevic.

The mainstream media also failed to tell us a number of things about Libyan society. Although the country was ruled by Gaddafi, decision-making was conducted at the local level through a very participative democratic system

people. The mainstream media advanced these claims without question. However, on the off chance we were not getting the full picture, Amnesty International decided to do an investigation of its own. As noted by the Independent: "NATO leaders, opposition groups and the media have produced a stream of stories since the start of the insurrection on 15 February, claiming the Gaddafi regime has ordered mass rapes, used foreign mercenaries and employed helicopters against civilian protesters.

"An investigation by Amnesty International has failed to find evidence for these human rights violations and in many cases has discredited or cast doubt on them. It also found indications that on several occasions the rebels in Benghazi appeared to have knowingly made false claims or manufactured evidence."

The mainstream media also failed to tell us a number of things about Libyan society. Although the country was ruled by Gaddafi, decision-making was conducted at the local level through a very participative democratic system. As explained by Counter Punch: "Far from control being in the hands of one man, Libya was highly decentralised and di-

vided into several small communities that were essentially "mini-autonomous States" within a State. These autonomous States had control over their districts and could make a range of decisions including how to allocate oil revenue and budgetary funds. Within these mini autonomous States, the three main bodies of Libya's democracy were Local Committees, Basic People's Congresses and Executive Revolutionary Councils."

Under Gaddafi, Libya transformed itself into the most developed country in Africa with the highest standard of living on the continent. Libyans enjoyed state-sponsored health care and a number of other public services. The country was also debt-free.

Once again, the result of the media's deceitful dissemination of half-truths was a NATO-led war.

Gaddafi was clearly no saint. There are numerous allegations about his use of torture against political dissidents. But the idea that these allegations exonerate the media for peddling the lies that ultimately led to the destruction of Libya's future as a healthy state is so ludicrously untenable that it begs the question: Why do social media giants like Facebook not consider this disinforma-

WHAT IS NEWS? / 1

There is no war on fake news. There is only a war on alternative and independent media – media which question the official lines advanced by the corporate media

tion to be worthy of the title “fake news?”

Syria is no different. In fact, the current Syrian conflict exists only because of a concoction of media lies so extensive that this topic alone would require an entire book dedicated to it.

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has maintained the majority support of his people. The most recent poll I am aware of (a French poll, believe it or not) gives him an approval rating of over 70 per cent – much higher than Barack Obama’s personal rating. Yet we have been told time and time again by the mainstream media that Assad has no legitimacy and the people of Syria want to overthrow him.

Wrong. The governments of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Israel, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States want to overthrow the current Syrian president over a pipeline that could potentially strengthen Russia and Iran’s position in the Middle East. The idea that any of those players care about human rights in Syria when every single one of them is responsible for all kinds of human rights abuses, both domestically and abroad, should be questioned by every mainstream media outlet in the world. But it’s not.

Has Assad committed some horrible crimes, including widespread torture and indiscriminate attacks on civilians? Most probably. But so have many of Washington’s allies, and many of the so-called opposition groups in Syria are dominated by violent extremists, including the Free Syrian Army.

The war in Syria was instigated by external powers, but the media continues to push the agenda of the military industrial complex.

Further, Iraq has been the victim of years

and years of mainstream media lies, which have led to what can only be aptly described as the biggest crime(s) of our generation.

Obama is right. Facebook is right. Google and Twitter are right. Fake news is all around us, and it must be stopped.

But there is no war on fake news. There is only a war on alternative and independent media – media which question the official lines advanced by the corporate media.

There is a reason the Guardian newspaper is begging for donations and other corporate outlets are promoting half-baked theories about Russian propaganda. The media has lost all credibility when it comes to important topics – and we have become the scapegoat.

What we are witnessing is utter desperation from the corporate elites in their attempts to control what we read and what we choose to believe.

In the words of Secretary of State John Kerry: “It [the internet] makes it much harder to govern, it makes it much harder to organise people, much harder to find the common interest and that is complicated by a rise of sectarianism and religious extremism that is prepared to employ violent means to impose on other people a way of thinking and a way of living that is completely contrary to everything the United States of America has ever stood for. So we need to keep in mind what our goals are and how complicated this world is that we’re operating in.”

Or maybe, we could simply be taught to think and analyse critically at the school level rather than being told what to believe by corporate giants like Facebook and Google.

CT

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Darius Shahtahmasebi is a columnist for www.theAntiMedia.org where this article first appeared.



Above, right: Time magazine finds another Monster of the Century.

Fake news about 'fake news'

If you want hoaxes, propaganda and misinformation, you need look no further than the mainstream media, writes **David Edwards**

In the wake of Brexit and Trump, mainstream media have done the formerly unthinkable by focusing on media bias. The intensity of focus has been such that the Oxford Dictionaries have announced that “post-truth” is their Word of the Year 2016. “Post-truth” refers to “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

Students of “brainwashing under freedom” will notice that this bears a striking resemblance to 20th-century US policy advisor Reinhold Niebuhr’s insistence on the use of “emotionally potent over-simplifications” to control the public mind. It’s nothing new, in other words.

We learn from a lengthy article on Wikipedia that “post-truth politics” is driven by “fake news”: “Fake news websites publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation to drive web traffic inflamed by social media.”

This “fake news” is being harvested by social media that seal unwitting users in airtight “filter bubbles”: “A filter bubble is a result of a personalised search in which a website algorithm selectively guesses what information a user would like to see based on information about the user (such as location, past click behaviour and search history) and, as a result, users become separated from information that disagrees with their viewpoints, effectively isolating them in

their own cultural or ideological bubbles.”

The results are terrifying indeed. Author Andrew Smith argued in the Guardian that, post-Trump and Brexit, future historians will decide “whether this will go down as the year democracy revealed itself unworkable in the age of the internet.” The forecast is grim: “One day, I suspect, we will look back in disbelief that we let the net-induced friction on civil society reach this pitch, because if we didn’t know before, we know now that our stark choice is between social networks’ bottom line and democracy. I know which I prefer.”

These words appeared less than two years after the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre, when a Guardian editorial had opined: “Any society that’s serious about liberty has to defend the free flow of ugly words, even ugly sentiments.”

Now, it seems, anyone “serious about liberty” has to resist the free flow of ugly words for fear of “net-induced friction on civil society.” Whatever that means.

Smith was reacting to “the accidental or deliberate propagation of misinformation via social media.” Many millions of people “saw and believed fake reports that the pope had endorsed Trump; Democrats had paid and bussed anti-Trump protesters . . .”; and so on.

Curiously, Smith made no mention of the relentless mainstream and social me-

The fury and loathing directed at climate scientists and campaigners seemed incomprehensible until I realised they were fake: the hatred had been paid for

WHAT IS NEWS? / 2

A few billion dollars spent on persuasion buys you all the politics you want. Genuine campaigners, working in their free time, simply cannot match a professional network staffed by thousands of well-paid, unscrupulous people

dia efforts to link Trump with Putin seen by many millions of people around the globe. Nor did Smith mention the upside of social media – the democratisation of outreach, the related growth in popular support for Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, and for left-wing movements like Spain’s Podemos.

Like the rest of mainstream journalism, Smith had nothing to say about the leading role played by traditional corporate media in the “deliberate propagation of misinformation.” A remarkable omission, given the unprecedented ferocity of the smear campaign against Jeremy Corbyn.

In one news report, seven different Guardian journalists discussed the rise of “fake news” around the world without mentioning the key role of mainstream media. This led to conclusions such as: “Fake news is not a problem of any scale in Australia: the media market, dominated by a handful of key players serving a population of just over 21 million people, does not seem fragmented enough.”

Some perspective was provided by former CIA counterterrorism official Philip Giraldi in 2009: “The Rupert Murdoch chain has been used extensively to publish false intelligence from the Israelis and occasionally from the British government.”

Another Guardian piece was titled: “Bursting the Facebook bubble: we asked voters on the left and right to swap feeds - Social media has made it easy to live in filter bubbles, sheltered from opposing viewpoints. So what happens when liberals and conservatives trade realities?”

The problem being: “Facebook users are increasingly sheltered from opposing viewpoints – and reliable news sources [sic] – and the viciously polarised state of our national politics appears to be one of the results.”

Facebook readers, then, are sheltered from the giant, global corporate media that dominate our newspapers, magazines, publishing companies, cinema, TVs, radios and computer screens – even though social media are themselves corporate media. And

presumably we are to believe that readers of “reliable news sources” – the BBC, Guardian, the Times, Telegraph and other traditional outlets - are forever being exposed to “opposing viewpoints” by these media.

If I beg to differ, having studied the media intensively for two decades, it may be because Medialens, of which I am co-editor belongs on a list of 200 websites that “are at the very least acting as bona-fide ‘useful idiots’ of the Russian intelligence services, and are worthy of further scrutiny,” according to the PropOrNot group.

The Washington Post reports: “PropOrNot’s monitoring report, which was provided to The Washington Post in advance of its public release, identifies more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season, with combined audiences of at least 15 million Americans. On Facebook, PropOrNot estimates that stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”

Matt Taibbi notes in Rolling Stone that outlets as diverse as AntiWar.com, LewRockwell.com and the Ron Paul Institute are on the list, although the Washington Post offered no information about the PropOrNot group, “which offered zero concrete evidence of coordination with Russian intelligence agencies.” Chris Hedges of Truthdig, which is on the list, describes the Post’s report as an “updated form of Red-Baiting.” He added: “This attack signals an open war on the independent press. Those who do not spew the official line will be increasingly demonised in corporate echo chambers such as the Post or CNN as useful idiots or fifth columnists.”

Significantly, the Guardian experiment in swapping social media concluded with this extraordinary comment from one of the participants, again just two years after Charlie Hebdo: “Maybe we should stop having social media. For all the things that social media has done in terms of making it easier for me to stay in touch with someone that I

was vaguely friends with in college, maybe the ability with social media for people to construct their own reality to create a mob is not worth it.

A liberal breaks bad

Reporting from the “fake news” frontline, a Guardian piece titled, ‘Alt-right’ online poison nearly turned me into a racist, described the experience of an anonymous commentator: outwardly, a normal, sane liberal: “I am a happily married, young white man. I grew up in a happy, Conservative household. I’ve spent my entire life – save the last four months – as a progressive liberal. All of my friends are very liberal or left-leaning centrists.”

It sounds idyllic – presumably he was a Guardian reader and helped the elderly cross the road. But then things started to go wrong: “This, I think, is where YouTube’s ‘suggested videos’ can lead you down a rabbit hole. . . . I unlocked the Pandora’s box of ‘It’s not racist to criticise Islam!’ content.”

Despite his virtuous liberal heart, ‘Anonymous’ started to drift to the dark side: “I’d started to roll my eyes when my friends talked about liberal, progressive things. What was wrong with them?”

Eventually, realising he was becoming an intolerant racist, he confronted himself: “What you’re doing is turning you into a terrible, hateful person.”

This is a close copy of material that appeared during the original version of McCarthyite hysteria. Between 1948 and 1954, Hollywood made more than 40 propaganda films with titles such as, I Married A Communist, and I Was A Communist For The FBI. Large-circulation magazines were titled, How Communists Get That Way, and Communists Are After Your Child. (Quoted, Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States, Harper Colophon, 1990.)

With perfect irony, this attack on “fake news” may itself have been faked. Satirist Godfrey Elfwick has since claimed authorship of the Guardian story. Elfwick certainly

has form, having previously hoaxed several national news organisations on related issues.

Elsewhere, the Sun newspaper, no less, warned against “fake news” in an article titled, Don’t believe the hyperlink: “Fake news is on the rise. In the past three months of the White House race the top 20 false stories about it were bigger on Facebook than the top 20 from the world’s most reputable news outlets.” (Robert Colvile, the Sun, November 19, 2016)

The key word here is “reputable.” In 2012, the Sun wrote of the Hillsborough football disaster: “Nothing can excuse the Sun’s Page One presentation, under the headline The Truth.

“It was inaccurate, grossly insensitive and offensive. This version of events was NOT the truth.”

Fake news, in other words.

In the Mirror, Pat Flanagan helped clarify the meaning of “reputable:” “The top 20 fake news stories during the presidential campaign collectively outperformed the top 20 legitimate stories.” (Flanagan, Web of lies shows net is strangling democracy, Mirror, November 25, 2016)

So the “reputable” outlets (the BBC calls them “legitimate news outlets”) were those producing “legitimate stories.”

In May 2004, the BBC reported of Flanagan’s newspaper: “Daily Mirror editor Piers Morgan has been sacked after the newspaper conceded photos of British soldiers abusing an Iraqi were fake.

“In a statement the Mirror said it had fallen victim to a ‘calculated and malicious hoax’ and that it would be ‘inappropriate’ for Morgan to continue.”

As John Hilley notes on his Zenpolitics blog, the most fantastic moment of post-re-al irony was reached when the BBC hosted Tony Blair’s Iraq spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, defending the term “post-truth.” Campbell said: “It’s acknowledging that politics, which has always been rough, has moved to a different phase where politicians who lie

I also wonder how Mr. Kirby deals with reporters from the BBC, a STATE-OWNED television and radio entity in the UK, broadcasting in the US and all around the world

WHAT IS NEWS? / 2

If the American mainstream media were officially state-controlled, would they look or sound significantly different when it comes to US foreign policy?

now appear to get rewarded for it.” (BBC2 Jeremy Vine Show, November 16, 2016)

The Performance Pyramid – conformity without design

To reiterate, “fake news” is said to refer to “websites [that] publish hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation to drive web traffic.” A simple, table-top experiment can help us understand why this definition can be generalised to all corporate media, not just social media.

Place a square wooden framework on a flat surface and pour into it a stream of ball bearings, marbles, or other round objects. Some of the balls may bounce out, but many will form a layer within the wooden framework; others will then find a place atop this first layer. In this way, the flow of ball bearings steadily builds new layers that inevitably produce a pyramid-style shape.

This experiment is used to demonstrate how near-perfect crystalline structures such as snowflakes arise in nature without conscious design. We will use it here as a way of understanding Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s “propaganda model” of mainstream performance.

Imagine now that the four sides of the wooden framework are labelled to indicate the framing conditions shaping the corporate media:

- 1) Corporate nature, elite/parent company ownership and profit-maximising orientation
- 2) Dependence on allied corporate advertisers for 50 percent or more of revenues
- 3) Dependence on cheap, subsidised news supplied by state-corporate allies
- 4) Political, economic, legal carrots and sticks rewarding corporate media conformity and punishing dissent

When facts, ideas, journalists and managers are poured into this framework, the result is a highly filtered, power-friendly pyramid of media performance. Every aspect of corporate media output is shaped by these framing conditions. Consider media cover-

age of the recent death of Fidel Castro. In his book, *Inventing Reality* (1993), political analyst Michael Parenti wrote: “References may occasionally appear in the press about the great disparities of wealth and poverty in Third World nations, but US corporate imperialism is never treated as one of the causes of such poverty. Indeed, it seems the US press has never heard of US imperialism. Imperialism, the process by which the dominant interests of one country appropriate the land, labor, markets, capital, and natural resources of another, and neo-imperialism, the process of expropriation that occurs without direct colonization, are both unmentionables. Anyone who might try to introduce the subject would be quickly dismissed as ‘ideological.’ Media people, like mainstream academics and others, might recognize that the US went through a brief imperialist period around the Spanish-American War. And they would probably acknowledge that there once existed ancient Roman imperialism and nineteenth-century British imperialism and certainly twentieth-century ‘Soviet imperialism.’ But not many, if any, mainstream editors and commentators would consider the existence of US imperialism (or neo-imperialism), let alone entertain criticisms of it.

“Media commentators, like political leaders, treat corporate investment as a solution to Third World poverty and indebtedness rather than as a cause. What US corporations do in the Third World is a story largely untold . . .

“What capitalism as a transnational system does to impoverish people throughout the world is simply not a fit subject for the US news media. Instead, poverty is treated as its own cause. We are asked to believe that Third World people are poor because that has long been their condition; they live in countries that are overpopulated, or there is something about their land, culture, or temperament that makes them unable to cope. Subsistence wages, forced displacement from homesteads, the plunder of natural

resources, the lack of public education and public health programs, the suppression of independent labor unions and other democratic forces by US-supported police states, such things – if we were to believe the way they remain untreated in the media – have nothing much to do with poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.” (Parenti, *Inventing Reality*, 2nd edition, St. Martin’s Press, 1993.)

Given the four framing conditions described above, it is easy to understand why Parenti’s facts and arguments find no place in the corporate media performance pyramid. This means that everything that appears in the pyramid about the West’s relations with the Third World is either fake news, or half-truth presented in a fake context.

Thus, a leading article after the death of Fidel Castro in the Times blamed “the clumsiness of American diplomacy that, in trying to rid the world of an opportunistic agitator, built up his global image as a plucky opponent of Yankee imperialism.” (Leading article, *Cuba Libre*; For half a century Fidel Castro’s country has stagnated under his repressive rule. Now the island has a chance to free itself from his malign shadow, the Times, November 28, 2016.)

Parenti’s accurate analysis of US imperial violence is replaced by a mocking, fake reference to US “clumsiness.” The fakery is such that the Times actually reverses the truth of history: “Washington now has a chance to coax Cuba down the road to liberty.”

In a Guardian leader, Parenti’s version of truth was replaced by another fake take: “Castro’s international reputation was built partly on a foreign policy of supporting other third world struggles that, while not perfect, has certainly been far more impressive than most of the west.”

Cuba’s foreign policy is thus compared to that of the less “impressive” West, rather than presented as a desperate attempt to escape and survive Western imperialism. When the Guardian says that, in Castro, some “see a dictator who trampled human

rights,” it fails to mention how the British government curtailed democratic freedoms at home when threatened by a far more evenly matched enemy from 1939-1945.

With the truth nowhere in sight, an Independent leader can deliver fake news of fake hope: “Cuba has no reason to fear a free media, free trade unions and free trade with her neighbours (assuming her neighbours want it).”

The superpower’s long, terrible history of subordinating Latin American people to US profit and power – most recently helping to overthrow democracy in Haiti and Honduras, and supporting a failed coup attempt in Venezuela – is replaced by a faked discussion of Cuba’s “uneasy relationship with its powerful superpower neighbour.” The editors added: “It would be tragic if misunderstandings and diplomatic blunders wrecked what would be a transformative rebuilding of relations between two nations who have more in common than they care to admit.”

A comment from Noam Chomsky puts all of this in perspective: “Terrorist activities continued under Nixon, peaking in the mid-1970s, with attacks on fishing boats, embassies, and Cuban offices overseas, and the bombing of a Cubana airliner, killing all seventy-three passengers. . .

“So matters proceeded, while Castro was condemned by [Western] editors for maintaining an ‘armed camp, despite the security from attack promised by Washington in 1962.’ The promise should have sufficed, despite what followed. . . “

Put simply, it is not reasonable to expect corporate media to report honestly on a world dominated by corporations. With perfect irony, the latest focus on ‘fake news’ is itself fake news because the corporate media never have discussed and never will discuss the framing conditions that make it a leading purveyor of “hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation.” **CT**

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David Edwards is co-editor of *Medialens*, the UK media watchdog – www.medialens.org

The Washington Post article fails to provide a single example showing how the actual facts of a specific news event were rewritten or distorted by a Russian agency to produce a news event with a contrary political message

Who builds the walls?

Journalists should spare a thought for those stuck on the wrong side of these artificial barriers, says **Paul Currier**



Israel's "separation barrier."

Photo: Sarah Tz (via Flickr.com)

The wall – no, the “separation barrier” – is the most visible aspect of the occupation that has hit the Palestinian economy hard, but business has been good for you . . .

You are a German, remembering the Berlin Wall. It seemed like it would last forever, but it was only 30 years before the pressure became too much and people spilled over it like water – but not before the fissure represented by the wall created deep and lasting divisions between the two halves of Germany. An icon of certainty, a dividing line between good and evil, although which was good and which was evil depended on which side of the wall you wanted to be on, of course. In the end everybody agreed though: the side that built the wall was on the wrong side of history.

You are an American, hoping to stop illegal immigrants. You want jobs for American citizens, and that means no more Central Americans fleeing from violence and poverty. You know it’s not politically correct to call them walls – in Europe they call them “border fences” – but you like it when Donald Trump tells it like it really is. It doesn’t matter if Mexico pays for it or not, at least a wall will keep all those problems in Mexico. It’s not racism to want more jobs for Americans – although little do you realise that Mexican companies employing Mexican workers are more likely to benefit when Trump becomes president.

You are a Palestinian, running a business in the West Bank. The wall – no, the “separation barrier” – is the most visible aspect of the occupation that has hit the Palestinian economy hard, but business has been good for you. You run a cement company, and if there’s one thing that’s needed to build a separation barrier it’s a lot of cement. So you sold Egyptian cement to Israel and walled yourself in, trying to avoid answering awkward questions about how your business was pulling in millions instead of rebuilding homes in Gaza.

You are a Hungarian, serving time for assault. You are happy to have more time outside your prison cell, joining other prisoners working in an old steel mill, receiving \$117 a day to produce the girders and razor wire

that form the basis of the border fence with Serbia. Hungary had a border fence before, to prevent people from fleeing to Austria during the Cold War. That fence came down in 1989, but now Austria is planning to build a fence on that same border. The border fences going up around your country look a lot like the fence around your jail.

You are a Sahrawi, living in an open-air prison. You wonder why the Moroccan government would build a berm in the middle of a desert, with nothing much on either side. Ensuring security is the reason given for the wall, but increasing poverty is the result. The evidence that shows that the core predictor of wall construction is economic inequality, and the claim that the people on the far side of any wall – whether they're labelled refugees or terrorists – pose a threat to the country rings deeply unconvincing when those people are the ones doing the dying.

You are an Iraqi, running for your life. There is nowhere left to run, and especially not to the south. That's where Saudi Arabia has built a wall that's like something out of

the future: of course there's the girders and razor wire, but there's also the radar towers, movement sensors, thermal cameras, and a million and a half metres of fibre-optic cable connecting it all together. They say it's to protect the kingdom from ISIS, but they're building a similar wall against Yemen in the south, and eventually the entire country will be fenced in – all in the name of security.

You're a journalist, writing your next column. Every country you read about has justifications for their border walls, but they all seem to be suffering from a similar delusion to the fiction of quarantine that emerged during the Ebola crisis. It's a fantasy of exclusivity and distinction that is unattainable in a globalised world and completely fails to address the underlying drivers of migration. Despite this, nothing seems able to stop the trend: the increase in the number of border walls has been matched only by an increase in the number of articles about border walls. Meanwhile, spare a thought for those stuck on the wrong side of these walls – although probably on the right side of history.

CT

The border fences going up around your country look a lot like the fence around your jail

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Paul Currion is a columnist for IRIN, the Inside Story on Emergencies – www.irinnews.org – where this article was first published.

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The most dangerous country on earth

The election that changed everything could prove history's deal-breaker, writes **Tom Engelhardt**

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, "regime change" became the phrase du jour. As a course of action, there was no longer anything to be covert about

For decades, Washington had a habit of using the Central Intelligence Agency to deep-six governments of the people, by the people, and for the people that weren't to its taste and replacing them with governments of the [take your choice: military junta, shah, autocrat, dictator] across the planet.

There was the infamous 1953 CIA- and British-organised coup that toppled the democratic Iranian government of Mohammad Mosadegh and put the Shah (and his secret police, the SAVAK) in power. There was the 1954 CIA coup against the government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala that installed the military dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas. There was the CIA's move to make Ngo Dinh Diem the head of South Vietnam, also in 1954, and the CIA-Belgian plot to assassinate the Congo's first elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961 that led, in the end, to the military dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. There was the 1964 CIA-backed military coup in Brazil that overthrew elected president Jango Goulart and brought to power a military junta. And, of course, there was the first 9/11 (September 11, 1973) when the democratically elected socialist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, was overthrown and killed in a US-backed military coup. Well, you get the idea.

In this way, Washington repeatedly

worked its will as the leader of what was then called "the Free World." Although such operations were carried out on the sly, when they were revealed, Americans, proud of their own democratic traditions, generally remained unfazed by what the CIA had done to democracies (and other kinds of governments) abroad in their name. If Washington repeatedly empowered regimes of a sort Americans would have found unacceptable for ourselves, it wasn't something that most of us spent a whole lot of time fretting about in the context of the Cold War.

At least those acts remained largely covert, undoubtedly reflecting a sense that this wasn't the sort of thing you should proudly broadcast in the light of day. In the early years of the 21st-century, however, a new mindset emerged. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, "regime change" became the phrase du jour. As a course of action, there was no longer anything to be covert about. Instead, the process was debated openly and carried out in the full glare of media attention.

No longer would Washington set the CIA plotting in the shadows to rid it of detested governments and put in their place more malleable client states. Instead, as the "sole superpower" of Planet Earth, with a military believed to be beyond compare or challenge, the Bush administration would claim the right to dislodge governments it disdained directly, bluntly, and openly with the

straightforward use of military force. Later, the Obama administration would take the same tack under the rubric of “humanitarian intervention” or R2P (“responsibility to protect”). In this sense, regime change and R2P would become shorthand for Washington’s right to topple governments in the full light of day by cruise missile, drone, and Apache helicopter, not to mention troops, if needed. (Saddam Hussein’s Iraq would, of course, be exhibit A in this process and Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, exhibit B.)

With this history in mind and in the wake of the recent election, a question came to me recently. In 2016, did the American people leave the CIA in a ditch and potentially do to themselves what the Agency (and more recently the US military) had done to others? In other words, in the strangest election of our lifetimes, have we just seen something like a slow-motion democratic coup d’état or some form of domestic regime change?

Only time will tell, but one sign of that possibility: for the first time, part of the national security state directly intervened in an American election. In this case, not the CIA, but our leading domestic investigative outfit, the FBI. Inside it, as we now know, fulminating and plotting had been ongoing against one of the two candidates for president before its director, James Comey, openly, even brazenly, entered the fray with 11 days to go. He did so on grounds that, even at the time, seemed shaky at best, if not simply bogus, and ran against firm department traditions for such election periods. In the process, his intervention may indeed have changed the trajectory of the election, a commonplace in the rest of the world, but a unique moment in this country.

Donald Trump’s administration, now filling up with racists, Islamophobes, Iranophobes, and assorted fellow billionaires, already has the feel of an increasingly militarised, autocratic government-in-the-making, favouring short-tempered, militaristic white guys who don’t take criticism lightly or react to speed bumps well. In addition,

on January 20, they will find themselves with immense repressive powers of every sort at their fingertips, powers ranging from torture to surveillance that were institutionalized in remarkable ways in the post-9/11 years with the rise of the national security state as a fourth branch of government, powers which some of them are clearly eager to test out.

Blowback and blowforward as the history of Our Times

It took 22 years – in the wake of Washington’s 1979 decision to use the CIA to arm, fund, and train the most extreme Afghan (and other) Muslim fundamentalists and so give the Soviet Union a Vietnam-style bloody nose – for the initial American investment in radical Islam to come home big time. On that blowback path, there would be American military housing in Saudi Arabia blown sky high, two US embassies bombed in Africa, and a US destroyer ripped apart in a harbour in Aden. But it was 9/11 that truly put blowback on the map in this country (and, appropriately enough, turned Chalmers Johnson’s book with that title, published in 2000, into a bestseller). Those al-Qaeda attacks, estimated to cost only \$400,000, were aimed at three iconic structures: the World Trade Center in Manhattan (representing American financial power), the Pentagon in Washington (military power), and assumedly either the White House or the Capitol (political power) – as United Airlines Flight 93 was undoubtedly headed there when it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Those strikes by 19 mainly Saudi hijackers were meant to deliver a devastating blow to American *amour propre*, and so they did.

In response, the Bush administration launched the Global War on Terror, or GWOT (one of the worst acronyms ever), also known to its rabid promoters as “the Long War” or “World War IV.” Think of that “war,” including the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, as a kind of

Donald Trump’s administration, now filling up with racists, Islamophobes, Iranophobes, and assorted fellow billionaires, already has the feel of an increasingly militarised, autocratic government-in-the-making

NEW BARBARIANS / 1

37 years after the first Afghan intervention and 15 years after the second one, in the wake of an American election, blowback from the war on terror – its generals, its mindset, its manias, its urge to militarise everything – has come home in a significant way

“blowforward,” or a second vast, long-term investment of time, money, and lives in Islamic extremism that only entrenched the phenomenon further in our world, helped recruit more supporters for it, and spread it ever more widely.

In other words, Osama bin Laden’s relatively modest \$400,000 investment would lead Washington to squander literally trillions more dollars in ever-expanding wars and insurgencies, and on the targeting of growing, morphing terror outfits in the Greater Middle East and Africa. The resulting years of military effort that spiralled out of control and into disaster in that vast region led to what I’ve called an “empire of chaos” and set a new kind of blowback on a path home, blowback that would change and distort the nature of American governance and society.

Now, 37 years after the first Afghan intervention and 15 years after the second one, in the wake of an American election, blowback from the war on terror – its generals, its mindset, its manias, its urge to militarise everything – has come home in a significant way. In fact, we just held what may someday be seen as our first 9/11-style election. And with it, with the various mad proposals to ban or register Muslims and the like, the literal war on terror is threatening to come home big time, too. Based on the last decade and a half of “results” in distant lands, that can’t be good news. (According to the latest report, for instance, fears of persecution are growing even among Muslims in the Pentagon, the CIA, and the Department of Homeland Security, and with Islamophobic sentiments already rampant inside the newly forming Trump administration, you can conclude that this won’t end well either.)

History’s deal-breaker?

On September 12, 2001, you would have been hard put to guess just how the shock of the attacks of the previous day would play out in the US and the world, so perhaps

it’s idle to speculate on what the events of 11/8/16 will lead to in the years to come. Prediction’s a dicey business in the best of times, and the future ordinarily is a black hole. But one thing does seem likely amid the murk: with the generals (and other officials) who ran America’s failed wars these last years potentially dominating the national security structure of a future Trump administration, our empire of chaos (including perhaps regime change) will indeed have come home. It’s reasonable to think of the victory of Donald Trump and his brand of right-wing corporatist or billionaire “populism” and of the rising tide of white racism that has accompanied it as a 9/11-style shock to the body politic, even if it proves a slo-mo version of the original event.

As with 9/11, a long, blowback-ridden history preceded 11/8 and Donald Trump’s triumph. That history included the institutionalisation of permanent war as a way of life in Washington, the growing independent power and preeminence of the national security state, the accompanying growth and institutionalisation of the most oppressive powers of that state, including intrusive surveillance of almost every imaginable sort, the return from distant battlefields of the technology and mindset of permanent war, and the ability to assassinate whomever the White House chooses to kill (even an American citizen). In addition, in blowback terms, domestically you would need to include the results of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision of 2010, which helped release staggering amounts of corporate and 1 percenter funds from the engorged top of an increasingly unequal society into the political system (without which a billionaire running for president and a cabinet of billionaires and multimillionaires would have been inconceivable).

As I wrote in early October, “a significant part of the white working class . . . feels as if, whether economically or psychologically, its back is up against the wall and there’s nowhere left to go . . . many of these voters

have evidently decided that they're ready to send a literal loose cannon into the White House; they're willing, that is, to take a chance on the roof collapsing, even if it collapses on them." Think of Donald Trump's election, then, as the victory of the suicide bomber the white working class dispatched to the Oval Office to, as people now say politely, "shake things up."

In a moment that, in so many senses, is filling with extremism and in which the jihadists of the national security state are clearly going to be riding high, it's at least possible that election 2016 will prove the equivalent of a slow-motion coup in America. Donald Trump, like right-wing populists before him, has a temperament that could lend itself not only to demagoguery (as in the recent election campaign), but to an American version of authoritarianism, especially since in recent years, in terms of a loss of rights and the strengthening of government powers, the country has already moved in an autocratic direction, even if that's been a little noted reality.

Whatever Americans may have ushered in with the events of 11/8, one thing is increasingly certain about the country that Donald Trump will govern. Forget Vladimir Putin and his rickety petro-state: the most dangerous nation on the planet will now be ours. Led by a man who knows remarkably little, other than how to manipulate the media (on which he's a natural-born genius) and, at least in part, by the frustrated generals from America's war on terror, the United States is likely to be more extreme, belligerent, irrational, filled with manias, and heavily armed, its military funded to even greater levels no other country could come close to, and with staggering powers to intervene, interfere, and repress.

It's not a pretty picture. And yet it's just a lead-in to what, undoubtedly, should be considered the ultimate question in Donald Trump's America: With both the CIA's coup-making and the military's regime-change traditions in mind, could the United States

also overthrow a planet? If, as the head of what's already the world's second largest greenhouse gas emitter, Trump carries out the future energy policies he promised during the election campaign – climate-science funding torn up, climate agreements denounced or ignored, alternative energy development downplayed, pipelines greenlighted, fracking and other forms of fossil-fuel extraction further encouraged, and the US fully reimagined as the Saudi Arabia of North America – he will, in effect, be launching a regime-change action against Planet Earth.

All the rest of what a Trump administration might do, including ushering in a period of American autocracy, would be just part and parcel of human history. Autocracies come and go. Autocrats rise and die. Rebellions break out and fail. Democracies work and then don't. Life goes on. Climate change is, however, none of that. It may be part of planetary history, but not of human history. It is instead history's potential deal-breaker. What the Trump administration does to us in the years to come could prove a grim period to live through but a passing matter, at least when compared to the possible full-scale destabilisation of life on Earth and of history as we've known it these last thousands of years.

This would, of course, put 9/11 in the shade. The election victory of 11/8 might ultimately prove the shock of a lifetime, of any lifetime, for eons to come. That's the danger we've faced since 11/8, and make no mistake, it could be devastating. **CT**

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Tom Engelhardt is a co-founder of the *American Empire Project* and the author of *The United States of Fear* as well as a history of the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*. He is a fellow of the *Nation Institute* and runs *TomDispatch.com*. His latest book is *Shadow Government: Surveillance, Secret Wars, and a Global Security State in a Single-Superpower World*. This essay first appeared at www.tomdispatch.com

Forget Vladimir Putin and his rickety petro-state: the most dangerous nation on the planet will now be ours

The Mafia state

A cruel and morally bankrupt elite, backed by the organs of state security and law enforcement wants to turn us into slaves, warns **Chris Hedges**

Even when corporate executives commit massive fraud, such as the billing of hundreds of thousands of Wells Fargo customers for accounts they never opened, they elude punishment and personally profit

Systems of governance that are seized by a tiny cabal become mafia states. The early years – Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton in the United States – are marked by promises that the pillage will benefit everyone. The later years – George W Bush and Barack Obama – are marked by declarations that things are getting better even though they are getting worse. The final years – Donald Trump – see the lunatic trolls, hedge fund parasites, con artists, conspiracy theorists and criminals drop all pretence and carry out an orgy of looting and corruption.

The rich never have enough. The more they get, the more they want. It is a disease. CEOs demand and receive pay that is 200 times what their workers earn. And even when corporate executives commit massive fraud, such as the billing of hundreds of thousands of Wells Fargo customers for accounts they never opened, they elude punishment and personally profit. Disgraced CEO John Stumpf left Wells Fargo with a pay package that averages nearly \$15-million a year. Richard Fuld received nearly half a billion dollars from 1993 to 2007, a time in which he was bankrupting Lehman Brothers.

The list of financial titans, including Trump, who have profited from a rigged financial system and fraud is endless. Many in the 1 percent make money by using lobbyists

and bought politicians to write self-serving laws and rules and by forming unassailable monopolies. They push up prices on products or services these monopolies provide. Or they lend money to the 99 percent and charge exorbitant interest. Or they use their control of government and the courts to ship jobs to Mexico or China, where wages can be as low as 22 cents an hour, and leave American workers destitute. Neoliberalism is state-sponsored extortion. It is a vast, nationally orchestrated Ponzi scheme.

This fevered speculation and mounting inequality, made possible by the two ruling political parties, corroded and destroyed the mechanisms and institutions that permitted democratic participation and provided some protection for workers. Politicians, from Reagan on, were handsomely rewarded by their funders for delivering their credulous supporters to the corporate guillotine. The corporate coup created a mafia capitalism. This mafia capitalism, as economists such as Karl Polanyi and Joseph Stiglitz warned, gave birth to a mafia political system. Financial and political power in the hands of institutions such as Goldman Sachs and the Clinton Foundation becomes solely about personal gain. The Obamas in a few weeks will begin to give us a transparent lesson into how service to the corporate state translates into personal enrichment.

Adam Smith wrote that profits are often

highest in nations on the verge of economic collapse. These profits are obtained, he wrote, by massively indebting the economy. A rentier class, composed of managers at hedge funds, banks, financial firms and other companies, makes money not by manufacturing products but from the control of economic rents. To increase profits, lenders, credit card companies and others charge higher and higher interest rates. Or they use their monopolies to gouge the public. The pharmaceutical company Mylan, in a classic example, raised the price of an epinephrine auto-injector used to treat allergy reactions from \$57 in 2007 to about \$500.

These profits are counted as economic growth. But this is a fiction, a sleight of hand, like unemployment statistics or the consumer price index, used to mask the speculative shell game.

“The head of Goldman Sachs came out and said that Goldman Sachs workers are the most productive in the world,” the economist Michael Hudson told me. “That’s why they’re paid what they are. The concept of productivity in America is income divided by labour. So if you’re Goldman Sachs and you pay yourself \$20-million a year in salary and bonuses, you’re considered to have added \$20-million to GDP, and that’s enormously productive.

“We’re talking with tautology,” said Hudson, the author of *Killing the Host: How Financial Parasites and Debt Bondage Destroy the Global Economy*. “We’re talking with circular reasoning here. So the issue is whether Goldman Sachs, Wall Street and predatory pharmaceutical firms actually add product or whether they’re just exploiting other people. That’s why I used the word ‘parasites’ in my book’s title. People think of a parasite as simply taking money, taking blood out of a host or taking money out of the economy. But in nature it’s much more complicated. The parasite can’t simply come in and take something. First of all, it needs to numb the host. It has an enzyme so that the host doesn’t realize the parasite’s

there. And then the parasites have another enzyme that takes over the host’s brain. It makes the host imagine that the parasite is part of its own body, actually part of itself and hence to be protected. That’s basically what Wall Street has done. It depicts itself as part of the economy. Not as a wrapping around it, not as external to it, but actually the part that’s helping the body grow, and that actually is responsible for most of the growth. But in fact it’s the parasite that is taking over the growth.

“The result is an inversion of classical economics,” Hudson said. “It turns Adam Smith upside down. It says what the classical economists said was unproductive parasitism actually is the real economy. And that the parasites are labour and industry that get in the way of what the parasite wants, which is to reproduce itself, not help the host, that is, labour and capital.”

The established elites dislike Trump because he is gauche, vulgar and boorish. He is not part of the refined group of mandarins trained to become plutocrats in Ivy League universities and business schools. He never mastered the cloying patina of refinement and carefully calibrated rhetoric of our courtier class.

Trump and his coterie of half-wits, criminals, racists and deviants play the role of the Snopes clan in William Faulkner’s novels *The Hamlet*, *The Town*, and *The Mansion*. The Snopeses rose up out of the power vacuum of the decayed South and ruthlessly seized control from the degenerated aristocratic elites. Flem Snopes and his extended family – which includes a killer, a paedophile, a bigamist, an arsonist, a mentally disabled man who copulates with a cow, and a relative who sells tickets to witness the bestiality – are fictional representations of the scum we have elevated to the highest level of the federal government. They embody the ethos of modern capitalism Faulkner warned us against.

“The usual reference to ‘amorality,’ while accurate, is not sufficiently distinctive and

Flem Snopes and his extended family – which includes a killer, a paedophile, a bigamist, an arsonist, a mentally disabled man who copulates with a cow, and a relative who sells tickets to witness the bestiality – are fictional representations of the scum we have elevated to the highest level of the federal government

NEW BARBARIANS / 2

“The Wall Street vocabulary is one of conquest and wiping out. You’re having a replay in the financial sphere of what feudalism was in the military sphere”

by itself does not allow us to place them, as they should be placed, in a historical moment,” the critic Irving Howe wrote of the Snopeses. “Perhaps the most important thing to be said is that they are what comes afterwards: the creatures that emerge from the devastation, with the slime still upon their lips.

“Let a world collapse, in the South or Russia, and there appear figures of coarse ambition driving their way up from beneath the social bottom, men to whom moral claims are not so much absurd as incomprehensible, sons of bushwhackers or muzhiks drifting in from nowhere and taking over through the sheer outrageousness of their monolithic force,” Howe wrote. “They become presidents of local banks and chairmen of party regional committees, and later, a trifle slicked up, they muscle their way into Congress or the Politburo. Scavengers without inhibition, they need not believe in the crumbling official code of their society; they need only learn to mimic its sounds.”

The Snopes-like mentality of our president-elect is portrayed in a documentary movie, “The Queen of Versailles,” about another sleazy developer. The film, by Lauren Greenfield, chronicles the tawdry and insatiable greed of David Siegel and his ditzzy trophy wife, Jackie, who is three decades younger, and their quest to build one of the largest private residences in the United States, a 90,000-square-foot mansion modelled after Versailles. Siegel and his wife, who once dated Trump, are fervent Trump supporters. Siegel, like Trump, is a barely literate philistine. He, like the president-elect, sponsored beauty pageants, was accused of sexual assault, made his money through high-pressure sales tactics and had access to hundreds of millions in bank loans. And he, like Trump, he uses bankruptcy or the threat of bankruptcy to protect his wealth. And, like our next president, he has a volatile and vicious temper.

“The great Roman historians Livy and Plutarch blamed the decline of the Roman

Empire on the creditor class being predatory, and the latifundia,” Hudson said. “The creditors took all the money, and would just buy more and more land, displacing the other people. The result in Rome was a dark age, and that can last a very long time. The dark age is what happens when the rentiers take over.

“If you look back in the 1930s, Leon Trotsky said that fascism was the inability of the socialist parties to come forth with an alternative,” Hudson said. “If the socialist parties and media don’t come forth with an alternative to this neofeudalism, you’re going to have a rollback to feudalism. But instead of the military taking over the land, as occurred with the Norman Conquest, you take over the land financially. Finance has become the new mode of warfare.

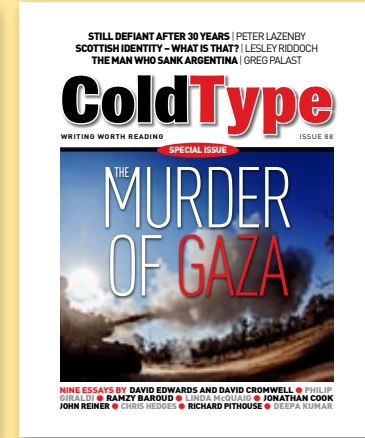
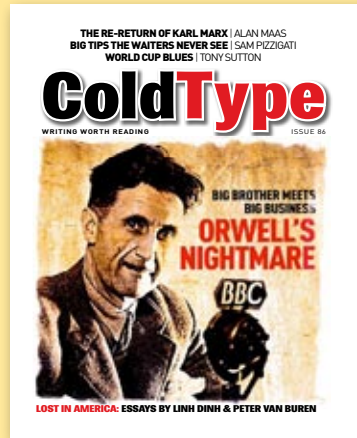
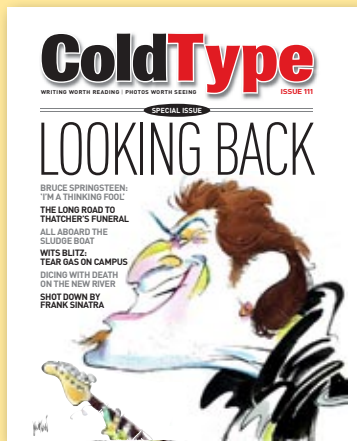
“You can achieve the takeover of land and the takeover of companies by corporate raids,” he said. “The Wall Street vocabulary is one of conquest and wiping out. You’re having a replay in the financial sphere of what feudalism was in the military sphere.”

What comes next, history has shown, will not be pleasant. A cruel and morally bankrupt elite, backed by the organs of state security and law enforcement, will, as the Eupatridaetid in sixth-century-BC Athens, bankrupt the citizenry through state-sponsored theft, war, austerity and debt peonage. They will reduce workers to the status of serfs or slaves. The most benign dissent will be criminalised and crushed. America’s Snopes-like elites have no external or internal constraints. They are barbarians. We will remove them from power or enter a new dark age.

CT

Chris Hedges has reported from more than 50 countries and has worked for The Christian Science Monitor and The New York Times, for which he was a foreign correspondent for 15 years. This essay was first published at www.truthdig.com

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How Fidel Castro changed Cuba

Mervyn Bain on the man who led a small band of guerrillas to more than 50 years of power



Fidel Castro: Defied the US for more than 50 years.

Photo: Warren K. Leffler

Cuba became involved in attempting to spark revolutions throughout the developing world

ate on November 25, 2016, it was announced that Fidel Castro Ruz, one of the last remaining iconic political figures of the 20th-century, had died. Castro had played a less prominent role in the Cuban political system since 2006, when his health began to deteriorate, but his legacy, both within Cuba and internationally, is hard to overestimate.

This is the man who led a small band of guerrilla fighters to power in the late 1950s, outlasted 10 US presidents and ended up at the centre of the most dangerous moment in the Cold War. He even holds the record for the longest speech at the United Nations. In short, he brought a small Caribbean island to the centre of world politics.

Since January, 1959, Cuba has been able to exert a disproportionate amount of influence on the international stage. In the 1960s, after surviving a US-backed attempt to overthrow its fledgling government, Cuba became involved in attempting to spark revolutions throughout the developing world.

In the 1970s the Cuban military was dispatched to fight wars in Africa. Even in the post-Cold War era, Cuban doctors and teachers continued to travel abroad. Now two-million cataract operations have been conducted by Cuban doctors in the developing world, paid for by the government in Havana.

Castro was also at the forefront of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) that emerged in the early 2000s. He was seen as leading the pink tide which swept through Latin America, bringing left-wing governments to power. His defiance in the face of US hegemony was key to their success.



Internally, the Castro regime fundamentally changed Cuban society. In the early 1960s, a programme to spread literacy throughout Cuba was initiated, and a healthcare system was created which would not only become the envy of countries in the global south, but also the global north. Cuba also has a highly advanced biotechnology industry.

These internal advancements and expansive foreign policy have all been achieved in the face of continual US aggression and an economic embargo which has endured for more than 50 years.

Some within the island have been dissatisfied at the lack of political freedom, but large scale protests against the government have been absent since 1959. However, recently the “ladies in white” (originally relatives of those arrested in the spring of 2003 crackdown) have protested weekly in the Miaramar district of the capital.

Dissidents jailed

Castro’s record is considerably less positive if you ask members of the Cuban diaspora. His regime quickly began to repress its opponents after the Cuban revolution. Over the next 30 years a number of dissidents

were given lengthy prison sentences and human rights abuses took place. Many dissatisfied Cubans simply left the island. In the wake of his death, some were out on the streets of Miami celebrating.

The revolution’s continuation was called into question in the early to mid-1990s during the “special period,” when food shortages took hold. Cuba was struggling to survive the end of its relationship with the Soviet Union and change had to come. In the search for hard currency the economy began to be opened up to foreign investment and tourism was encouraged. Both were key for the revolution’s continuation.

Now, at the time of Castro’s death, Cuba bears little resemblance to the country he took over in 1959. The excesses of 1950s Cuba have been replaced by a more equalitarian and proud nation. After such a long, extraordinary life, it is inevitable the Castro’s legacy will play out differently for various groups. But he was certainly a man who could not be ignored. **CT**

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Mervyn Bain is senior lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. This article was first published at www.theconversation.com

Cuba’s internal advancements and expansive foreign policy have all been achieved in the face of continual US aggression and an economic embargo

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History will be the judge of Fidel Castro

Latin America has already elevated him into the ranks of the continent's great heroes, writes **Tariq Ali**

"Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me"

*Fidel Castro, Cuba's leader of revolution, has died aged 90. Here is an extract from Tariq Ali's introduction to *The Declarations of Havana*, Verso Book's collection of Castro's speeches.*

On 26 July, 1953, an angry young lawyer, Fidel Castro, led a small band of armed men in an attempt to seize the Moncada barracks in Santiago



Fidel Castro: Leader of Cuba's revolution.

de Cuba, in Oriente province. Most of the guerrillas were killed. Castro was tried and defended himself with a masterly speech replete with classical references and quotations from Balzac and Rousseau, that ended with the words: "Condemn me. It does not matter. History will absolve me." It won him both notoriety and popularity.

Released in an amnesty in 1954, Castro left the island and began to organise a rebellion in Mexico. For a time he stayed in the hacienda that had once belonged to the legendary Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. In late November 1956, 82 people including Fidel Castro and Che Guevara set sail from Mexico in a tiny vessel, the *Granma*, and headed for the impenetrable, forested hills of the Sierra Maestra in Oriente province.

Ambushed by Batista's men after they landed, 12 survivors reached the Sierra Maestra and began the guerrilla war. They were backed by a strong urban network of students, workers and public employees who became the backbone of the 26 July Movement.

In 1958 the guerrilla armies began to move from the mountains to the plains: a column led by Fidel began to take towns in Oriente, while Che Guevara's irregulars stormed and took the central Cuban city of Santa Clara. The day after, Batista and his Mafia chums fled the island as the rebel army, now greet-



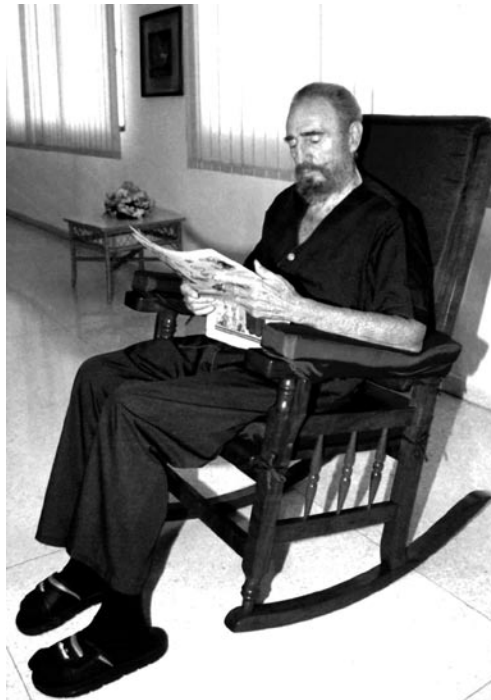
ed as liberators, marched across the island into Havana.

The popularity of the revolution was there for all to see. Castro's victory stunned the Americas. It soon became obvious that this was no ordinary event. Any doubts as to the revolution's intentions were dispelled by the First Declaration of Havana, Castro's declaration of total independence from the US made in public before a million people in Revolution Square. Washington reacted angrily and hastily, trying to cordon off the new regime from the rest of the continent.

This led to a radical response by the Cuban leadership. It decided to nationalise US-owned industries without compensation. Three months later, on October 13, 1961, the United States severed diplomatic relations; subsequently, it armed Cuban exiles in Florida and launched an invasion of the island near the Bay of Pigs. It was defeated. President Kennedy then imposed a total economic blockade, pushing the Cubans in Moscow's direction.

On February 4, 1962, the Second Declaration of Havana denounced the US presence in South America and called for the liberation of the entire continent. Forty years later Castro explained the necessity for the Declarations: "At the beginning of the revolution . . . we made two statements, which we called the First Declaration of Havana and the Second Declaration of Havana. That was during a rally of over a million people in Revolution Square. Through these declarations, we were responding to the plans hatched in the United States against Cuba and against Latin America – because the United States forced every Latin American country to break off relations with Cuba . . . [These declarations] said that an armed struggle should not be embarked on if there existed legal and constitutional conditions for a peaceful civic struggle. That was our thesis in relation to Latin America . . ."

While they were in the Sierra Maestra,



Fidel Castro: "The Havana Resolutions . . . said that an armed struggle should not be embarked on if there existed legal and constitutional conditions for a peaceful civic struggle."

the direction that the revolution would take was still not clear – even to Castro. Until that point, he had never been a socialist, and relations with the official Cuban Communist Party were often tense. It was the reaction of that noisy and powerful neighbour from the north that helped determine the orientation of the revolution.

The results were mixed. Politically, the dependence on the Soviet Union led to the mimicking of Soviet institutions and all that that entailed. Socially, the Cuban revolution created an education system and health service that remain the envy of much of the neo-liberal world.

History will be the final judge, but Fidel Castro has already been elevated by a vast number of Latin Americans to the plinth occupied by those great liberators Bolívar, San Martín, Sucre and José Martí. **CT**

*Tariq Ali is the author of **The Obama Syndrome** (Verso).*

The Cuban revolution created an education system and health service that remain the envy of much of the neo-liberal world



Cuba is poor, but who is to blame?

Castro presided over mistakes and errors in Cuba's planned economy, but his successes in the face of US aggression were far more significant, writes **Helen Yaffe**

It was the search for solutions to the challenge of development that led Cuba's revolutionary government to adopt a socialist system

Alongside his depiction as a “brutal dictator,” negative reflections on Fidel Castro since his death on November 25 have focused on his “mismanagement” of the Cuban economy and the consequent “extremes of poverty” suffered by ordinary Cubans.

This caricature is problematic – not only because it ignores the devastating economic impact of the United States embargo over 55 years, but also because it is premised on neoclassical economic assumptions. This means that by stressing economic policy over economic restraints, critics can shift responsibility for Cuba's alleged poverty on to Castro without implicating successive US administrations that have imposed the suffocating embargo.

This approach also ignores key questions about Cuba after the revolution. Where can medium and low-income countries get the capital to invest in infrastructure and welfare provision? How can foreign capital be obtained under conditions which do not obstruct such development, and how can a late-developing country such as Cuba use international trade to produce a surplus in a global economy which – many claim – tends to “unequal terms of trade”?

It was the search for solutions to the challenge of development that led Cuba's revolutionary government to adopt a so-

cialist system. They adopted a centrally planned economy in which state ownership predominated because they thought this system offered the best answer to those historical challenges.

But the commitment to operate within a socialist framework implied additional restraints and complications, particularly in the context of a bipolar world. My book, *Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution*, examines the contradictions and challenges faced by the nascent revolutionary government from the perspective of Guevara's role as president of the National Bank and minister of industries.

Literature on Cuba is dominated by Cubanology, an academic school central to the political and ideological opposition to Cuban socialism. Its emergence and links to the US government are well documented. Its arguments are that the revolution changed everything in Cuba – and Fidel (and then Raul) Castro have personally dominated domestic and foreign policy since, denying Cuban democracy and repressing civil society. Thanks to their mismanagement of the economy, growth since 1959 has been negligible. They simply replaced dependency on the US with dependency on the USSR until its collapse in 1990.

These ideas have also shaped political and media discourse on Cuba. But the prob-



lem with this analysis is that it obstructs our ability to see clearly what goes on in Cuba or explain the revolution's endurance and Cuban society's vitality.

Arguments about the success or failure of the post-1959 economy often hang on the state of the Cuban economy in the 1950s. The post-1959 government inherited a sugar-dominated economy with the deep socioeconomic and racial scars of slavery.

Cubanologist Jaime Suchlicki argues that Batista's Cuba was "well into what Walter Rostow has characterised as the take-off stage," while Fred Judson points to structural weaknesses in the Cuban economy: "Long-term crises characterised the economy, which had a surface and transient prosperity." So while one side insists that the revolution interrupted healthy capitalist growth, the other believes it was a precondition to resolving the contradictions obstructing development by ending Cuba's subjugation to the needs of US capitalism.

Following the revolution, Castro set out to bring social welfare and land reform to the Cuban people and to confiscate the ill-gotten gains of the Cuban elite. But when the defeated Fulgencio Batista and his associates fled Cuba, they stole millions of pesos from the National Bank and the Treasury. The country was decapitalised, severely limiting the capacity for public spending and private investments. Wealthy Cubans were leaving the island, taking their deposits and taxes with them. How was the new government going to carry out the ambitious socioeconomic reforms without financial resources?

We have to consider these real circumstances at every juncture. For example, when the US embargo was first implemented, 95 percent of Cuba's capital goods and 100 percent of its spare parts were imported from the US – and the US was overwhelmingly the main recipient of Cuban exports. When the Soviet bloc disintegrated, Cuba lost 85 percent of its trade and investment, leading GDP to plummet 35 percent. These events

produced serious economic constraints on Cuba's room for manoeuvre.

Moving on, we should also ask: how are we to measure Cuba's poverty? Is it GDP per capita? Is it money-income per day? Should we apply the yardsticks of capitalist economics, focusing on growth and productivity statistics to measure "success" or "failure," while paying little attention to social and political priorities?

Even factoring in its low GDP per capita, the Human Development Index (HDI) lists Cuba in the "high human development" category; it excels not just in health and education, but also in women's participation and political inclusion. Cuba has eliminated child malnutrition. No children sleep on the streets. In fact, there is no homelessness. Even during the hungry years of economic crisis of the 1990s, Cubans did not starve. Cuba stuck with the planned economy and it enabled them to ration their scarce resources.

Yes, salaries are extremely low (as both Fidel and Raul have lamented) – but Cubans' salaries do not determine their standard of living. About 85 percent of Cubans own their own homes and rent cannot exceed 4 percent of a tenant's income. The state provides a (very) basic food basket while utility bills, transport and medicine costs are kept low. The opera, cinema, ballet and so on are cheap for all. High-quality education and healthcare are free. They are part of the material wealth of Cuba and should not be dismissed – as if individual consumption of consumer goods were the only measure of economic success.

The specific and real challenges Cuban development has faced has generated unique contradictions. In a planned economy, with an extremely tight budget, they have had to prioritise: the infrastructure is crumbling and yet they have first-world human development indicators. Infant mortality rates reveal a lot about the standard of living, being influenced by multiple socioeconomic and medical factors. Cuba's infant mortality rate is 4.5 per 1,000 live

Even during the hungry years of economic crisis of the 1990s, Cubans did not starve. Cuba stuck with the planned economy and it enabled them to ration their scarce resources



As a direct initiative of Fidel, in 1999, the Latin American School of Medicine was inaugurated in Havana to provide foreign students from poor countries with six years of training and accommodation completely free

births, which sits it among first-world countries – and above the US on the CIA’s own ranking.

It is not just Cubans who have benefited from these investments. Tens of thousands of Cuban doctors, educators and other development aid workers have served around the world. At present some 37,000 Cuban doctors and nurses work in 77 countries. They generate foreign exchange of some US\$8 billion a year – Cuba’s biggest export.

In addition, Cuba provides both free medical treatment and free medical training to thousands of foreigners every year. As a direct initiative of Fidel, in 1999, the Latin American School of Medicine was inaugurated in Havana to provide foreign students from poor countries with six years of training and accommodation completely free. In 2004, Cuba teamed up with Venezuela to provide free eye surgery to people in three dozen countries under Operation Miracle. In the first ten years more than three-million people had their sight restored.

Prohibiting even trade in medicines, the US embargo led Castro to prioritise investments in medical sciences. Cuba now owns around 900 patents and markets pharmaceutical products and vaccines in 40 countries, generating yearly revenues of \$300-million, with the potential for massive expansion. The sector produces more than 70 percent of the medicines consumed by its 11-million people. The entire industry is state owned, research programmes respond to the needs of the population, and all surpluses are reinvested into the sector. Without state planning and investment it is unlikely that this could have been achieved in a poor country.

In the mid-1980s Cuba developed the world’s first Meningitis B vaccine. Today, it leads in oncology drugs. In 2012 Cuba patented the first therapeutic cancer vaccine. The US embargo forces Cuba to source medicines, medical devices and radiology products outside the United States, incurring additional transportation costs.

Ecuador’s president, Rafael Correa, told me in 2009: “A great example provided by Cuba is that in its poverty it has known how to share, with all its international programmes. Cuba is the country with the greatest cooperation in relation to its gross domestic product and it is an example for all of us. This doesn’t mean that Cuba doesn’t have big problems, but it is also certain that it is impossible to judge the success or failure of the Cuban model without considering the US blockade, a blockade that has lasted for 50 years. Ecuador wouldn’t survive for five months with that blockade.”

Let’s consider the embargo: The Cuban government estimates that it has cost the island \$753.69-billion. Their annual report to the United Nations provides a detailed account of that calculation. That’s a lot for a country whose average GDP between 1970 and 2014 has been calculated at \$31.7-billion.

Yes, Castro presided over mistakes and errors in Cuba’s planned economy. Yes, there is bureaucracy, low productivity, liquidity crisis, debt and numerous other problems – but where aren’t there? Castro pointed to these weaknesses in his own speeches to the Cuban people. But President Correa is right – to objectively judge Castro’s legacy, Cuban development and contemporary reforms today, we cannot pretend that the US blockade – which remains today despite rapprochement – has not shaped the Cuban economy.

Castro almost saw out 11 US presidents since 1959, but he never lived to see the end of the US embargo. New challenges face Cuba, with economic reforms underway and the restoration of relations with the United States. Next week, I will begin new research in Cuba to assess the revolution’s resilience in this post-Castro, Donald Trump era. **CT**

Helen Yaffe is a fellow, economic history, at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This article first appeared at www.theconversation.com



Viva Fidel! Africa's love for Castro

Sean Jacobs traces Cuba's support of revolutions against colonial forces in Africa

If Africa is a country, then Fidel Castro is one of its national heroes.

After fronting the Cuban revolution against a corrupt, American-sponsored dictatorship in 1959, Cuba under Fidel worked hard to develop its own distinct foreign policy independent from its more powerful neighbour, the United States, or its supposed ally, the Soviet Union. Africa became central to that foreign policy. For me, and people of my generation, Fidel Castro entered our consciousness as a hero of our liberation. He wasn't just fighting for an abstract cause. He was literally fighting for us.

One of Castro's central foreign policy goals was "internationalism" – the promotion of decolonisation and revolutionary politics abroad. This involved sending troops to fight in wars against colonial or proxy forces on the African continent, as well as supporting those movements with logistics and technical support. Cuba sent troops, but it also sent tens of thousands of doctors, dentists, nurses, health-care technicians, academics, teachers and engineers to the continent and elsewhere. That a significant proportion of Cubans trace their ancestries to West and Central Africa (owing to slavery) contributes to this politics. It is important to note that critics of Cuba have pointed to the paradox of this policy: While Cuba has a progressive foreign policy on

race, at home Afro-Cubans have often been at odds with the Communist Party's failure to reflect the full range of Cuba's racial diversity in its leadership structures or to fully address race politics. Nevertheless, this doesn't detract from Cuba's Africa policy.

Cuba's involvement in Africa started with the Congo (later renamed Zaire, and now the Democratic Republic of Congo or DRC) following the murder of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, by a conspiracy of Western intelligence agencies (the strong hand of former Belgian rulers), and local elites. In 1964, Castro sent his personal emissary, Che Guevara, on a three-month visit to a number of African countries, including Algeria, Benin, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Congo-Brazzaville and Tanzania.

The Cubans believed there was a revolutionary situation in Central Africa, and they wanted to help, argued historian Piero Gleijeses, who studied Cuba's Cold War foreign policy in his books, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa 1959-1976* and *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa 1976-1991*.

Crucially, Guevara established relations with the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), then based in Congo-Brazzaville. In 1965, Cubans instructors trained MPLA fighters to fight Portuguese

Cuba sent troops to Africa, but it also sent tens of thousands of doctors, dentists, nurses, health-care technicians, academics, teachers and engineers to the continent and elsewhere



Castro in South Africa: With Nelson Mandela and Blade Nzimande, head of the South African Communist Party.

Cuba's successful battle against South Africa in Angola also hastened the apartheid regime's withdrawal from Namibia

colonialism. Later that year, Guevara and a group of exclusively black Cubans joined Lumumbaists, led by Laurent Kabila, in a revolt against Mobutu Sese Seko's government (then backed by South African and Rhodesian mercenaries). This revolt was crushed due to a mix of factors: naiveté, unpreparedness, and the poor quality and lack of commitment of Kabila and his men.

Successes followed elsewhere, however. Even as Cuba's intervention struggled in Congo, Amilcar Cabral, leading a guerrilla

struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, asked for Cuban assistance. Between 1966 and 1974 a small Cuban force proved pivotal in the Guineans' victory over the Portuguese. Following the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974, Guinea-Bissau finally won independence. This time Cuba's involvement also stretched to medical support (Cuban doctors) and technical know-how. After shifting their efforts to Guinea-Bissau and Capo Verde, the Cubans were critical to the MPLA's success in taking the capital city of Luanda and declaring independence on November 11, 1975.

Fighting apartheid

Cuba's involvement in the freedom of South Africa from white minority rule was even more dramatic. Twice – in 1976, and again in 1988 – the Cubans defeated a US-supported proxy force of the South African apartheid army and Angolan “rebels.” These instances were the first times South Africa's army was defeated, a humbling experience that the apartheid regime's white generals still have trouble stomaching in retirement.

As Gleijeses told Democracy Now! in December 2013, at the time of Mandela's death, black South Africans understood the significance of these defeats. The black South African newspaper, *World*, wrote about the 1975 skirmishes: “Black Africa is riding the crest of a wave generated by the Cuban victory in Angola. Black Africa is tasting the heady wine of the possibility of achieving total liberation.” Gleijeses remembered how Mandela wrote from Robben Island: “It was the first time that a country had come from another continent not to take something away, but to help Africans to achieve their freedom.” (Another excellent account of Cuba's African policy is Egyptian director Jihan el Tahri's film, *Cuba: An African Odyssey*.)

Ultimately, Cuba's successful battle against South Africa in Angola also hastened the apartheid regime's withdrawal from Na-



mibia after 70 years of occupation, and that country's subsequent independence.

In a 1998 speech, Fidel Castro told the South African Parliament (it was his first visit to the country) that by the end of the Cold War, at least 381,432 Cuban soldiers and officers had been on duty or "fought hand-in-hand with African soldiers and officers in this continent for national independence or against foreign aggression." Many Cubans also lost their lives in these wars.

Given this history, it was no surprise that one of Mandela's first trips outside South Africa after he was freed was to Havana. There, in July 1991, Mandela, referred to Castro as "a source of inspiration to all freedom-loving people," adding that Cuba, under Castro's leadership "helped us in training our people, gave us resources to keep current with our struggle, trained our people as doctors." At the end of his Cuban trip, Mandela responded to American criticism about his loyalty to Castro and Cuba: "We are now being advised about Cuba by people who have supported the apartheid regime these last 40 years. No honourable man or woman could ever accept advice from people who never cared for us at the most difficult times."

That loyalty to Cuba led to Mandela being boycotted by Cuban exiles on a 1990 visit to Miami, Florida. The local African-American community, however, supported Mandela's stance.

The Cold War ended a long time ago, but Cuba continues its involvement on the Af-

rican continent, including training Africans in Cuban universities. During the Ebola outbreak in three West African countries, even Cuba's American critics had to acknowledge the Cuban contribution to alleviating the crisis. The Washington Post, a newspaper hardly favourable to Cuba's government, conceded that Cuba's "official response to Ebola seems far more robust than many countries far wealthier than it." The Post noted – via Reuters – that Cuba had around 50,000 health workers working in 66 countries, including more than 4,000 in 32 African countries.

At one point during the Ebola crisis, Cuba – a country with only 11-million people – had supplied the largest contingent of foreign medical personnel by any single nation working alongside African medics.

Altogether fitting was Cuban President Raul Castro's address at Nelson Mandela's funeral in 2013. In Johannesburg, Raul reminded his audience: "We shall never forget Mandela's moving homage to our common struggle when on the occasion of his visit to our country on July 26, 1991, he said, 'the Cuban people have a special place in the hearts of the peoples of Africa'."

If Raul Castro decided to give all the credit for that love to his older brother Fidel, well, no one would blame him. **CT**

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Sean Jacobs is on the international affairs faculty of the New School. He is the founder and editor of the web site Africa is a Country – www.africasacountry.com

Nelson Mandela, referred to Castro as "a source of inspiration to all freedom-loving people," adding that Cuba, under Castro's leadership "helped us in training our people, gave us resources to keep current with our struggle, trained our people as doctors"

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OBAMA'S ACHIEVEMENTS?

Strange words, indeed!

Thomas S. Harrington reject liberal self-deceit about a 'courageous African American president of impeccable progressive instincts'



PRAISED BY NPR: Does outgoing President Obama deserve the praise heaped on him?

White House photo by Pete Souza

Obama did virtually nothing with the federal power at his disposal to curb the daily slaughter of black people in this country

Ari Shapiro of the National Public Radio programme All Things Considered opened a story on December 8, about what might be coming in the realm of law in enforcement under Trump with the following words:

“Under President Obama, the US Justice Department has focused on civil rights. For the past eight years, its lawyers have made investigating discrimination in police departments and advancing protections for LGBT people top priorities. Once Donald

Trump becomes president in January, the Justice Department’s agenda could be very different. Here’s NPR’s Carrie Johnson.”

Strange words to utter about a president who did virtually nothing with the federal power at his disposal to curb the daily slaughter of black people in this country and who, whenever pressed on the issue (which was not often) always made sure to pay homage to our wonderful men in uniform, and who, in these same statements ,not infrequently slipped in Uncle Tomish

OBAMA'S ACHIEVEMENTS?

jibes regarding the need of black people to curb their anti-social behaviours.

Strange words to utter about a man who was to the first president to openly and shamelessly grant himself the right to kill US citizens without trial, thus insouciantly throwing 1,000 years of Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence, rooted in the notion of habeas corpus, out the window.

Strange words to utter about the man whose justice department ran a massive spying and infiltration operation within the peaceful Occupy movement and then working in concert with private industry and the combined forces of the FBI, DHS and NSA to forcefully shut all of the protest sites of the movement one night in October 2011.

Strange words to utter about a man who flouted US treaty obligations – which are de facto the law of the land in the US – to prosecute that most heinous of crimes, torture.

Strange words to utter about a man who refused to prosecute the blatant perjury before congress of his Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper.

Strange words to utter about the man who did nothing to change the regime of 24/7 espionage that we all now live under and who, for good measure mercilessly used his justice department and other agencies to pursue the heroic people who decided to

reveal to us the beyond Orwellian nature of this regime of snooping.

What he did do, however, was to issue an executive order on bathroom use for transgendered people in August of 2016. (As if we haven't all been unknowingly – and I might add uncaringly – defecating or urinating beside transgendered people for years without any problems)

Apparently, for Ari Shapiro and those who share in the National Public Radio/ New York Times worldview this has made him a real crusader on civil rights.

Some day, the connections between the systemic anti-progressive perfidy of Obama and the rise of Trump will be studied.

Meanwhile, however, liberals seem content to weave self-deceiving stories about the courageous African American president of impeccable progressive instincts on civil rights and other matters who did his utmost to save us from the base ignorance of “the deplorables.” **CT**

Thomas S. Harrington is a professor of Hispanic Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and the author of Public Intellectuals and Nation Building in the Iberian Peninsula, 1900–1925: The Alchemy of Identity, published in 2014 by Bucknell University Press

Strange words to utter about a man who flouted US treaty obligations – which are de facto the law of the land in the US – to prosecute that most heinous of crimes, torture

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Using anti-semitism to silence Israel's critics

Sarah Levy uncovers a classic bait-and-switch operation designed to whip up opposition to Palestine solidarity organising on college campuses

The bill is part of the ongoing and intensifying effort by pro-Israel advocates to silence campus organising in support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement

The election of Donald Trump has been accompanied by an alarming rise in anti-semitism. Trump appointed Steve Bannon, an open anti-semite, to be his senior counsellor, and in the days after the election, there was a dramatic uptick in anti-semitic incidents.

Given this, you might be tempted to regard the US Senate's passage, by unanimous consent, of a bill called the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act as a welcome measure in dark times.

Unfortunately, you would be mistaken.

Despite the bill's title, it is actually part of the ongoing and intensifying effort by pro-Israel advocates to silence campus organising in support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The legislation is really directed at opposition to Israel's apartheid system – being against Israel is synonymous with “anti-semitism.”

The bill is a bipartisan effort sponsored by Sens. Bob Casey (D-Pennsylvania) and Tim Scott (R-South Carolina) to, they say, “combat increasing incidents of anti-semitism on college campuses nationwide.” According to Casey's press release, “The senators joined together to ensure the US Department of Education (DOE) has the necessary statutory tools at their disposal to investigate anti-Jewish incidents.”

The bill is backed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Anti-Defama-

tion League (ADL), the Jewish Federations of North America and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. But like a growing list of laws and legislation, the Anti-Semitism Awareness Act uses the code word of “anti-semitism” to justify a crackdown on Palestine solidarity efforts, particularly on college campuses.

According to The Intercept website – www.theintercept.com – the bill: “encourages the Department of Education to use the State Department's broad, widely criticized definition of anti-semitism when investigating schools. That definition, from a 2010 memo, includes as examples of anti-semitism “delegitimising” Israel, “demonising” Israel, “applying double standards” to Israel, and “focusing on Israel only for peace or human rights investigations.”

In other words, it encourages the labelling of legitimate political positions criticising the policies of the Israeli government as “anti-semitic.”

In case it weren't clear enough what the bill is actually meant to do, the ADL confidently tweeted on December 2, the day after it passed the Senate: “Worried about anti-#Israel activity on campus? We drafted a law that will help show when it's gone too far.”

Not only are bills like this not targeted at actual anti-semitism, but they are dangerous because they conflate anti-semitism and legitimate criticism of Zionism, thus

mystifying what is and what is not an incident of anti-semitism and making it harder to identify and fight this type of bigotry.

Labelling all criticism of Israel “anti-semitic” weakens the fight against actual anti-semitism by aiming the efforts of those genuinely seeking to oppose it at the wrong targets. In particular, it directs outrage at Palestinians who are the victims of Israel’s drive to colonise Palestinian land. That’s precisely what the architects of this bill want, but anyone who is a consistent anti-racist should reject this.

As someone who has been the target of anti-semitism, I think that everyone, but especially Jews, should speak out against this bill, which will do nothing to make it safer for Jews or any other oppressed groups living in Trumpian times. Jewish Voice for Peace has already begun to do this work, and I applaud them for it.

Instead of this counter-productive legislation, it is the continuation of protests by thousands of people – like the one that recently drove Steve Bannon out of New York – that will make it safer for Jews and other oppressed groups.

And when Zionists and university presidents try to use the rhetoric of “safety” to silence BDS activists, we must shine a spotlight on their hypocrisy. Such sanctimonious words ring hollow when university administrators arm campus police against the protests of students and ignore student activists’ concern about armed right-wingers turning up at organising meetings.

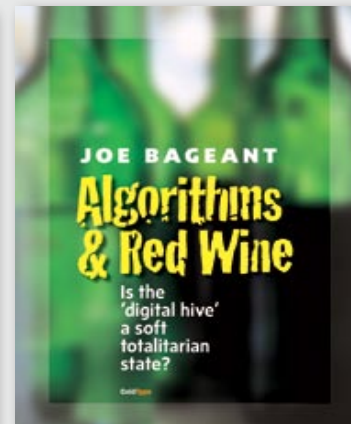
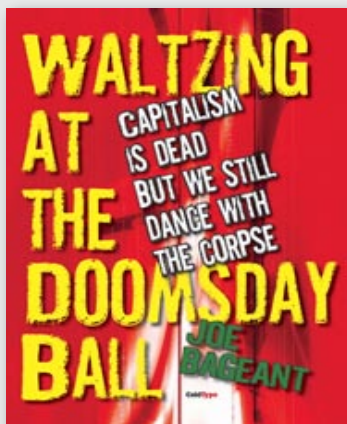
Since the advent of Israel, Zionists have tried to wed the question of Jewish liberation to the question of developing a Jewish state, an explicitly racist colonial project. But the construction of an apartheid state won’t secure Jewish liberation, but instead perpetuate the hold of racism and nationalism that will inevitably produce bouts of anti-Semitism as well – witness the incoming Trump administration.

Jewish liberation requires connecting the fight against anti-Semitism to the fight against racism of any sort, including the fight for Palestinian liberation from Zionists’ racist efforts to deny Palestinian rights. **CT**

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Sarah Levy’s commentary was first published by Socialist Worker at www.socialistworker.org

The construction of an apartheid state won’t secure Jewish liberation, but instead perpetuate the hold of racism and nationalism that will inevitably produce bouts of anti-Semitism as well – witness the incoming Trump administration

Read the best of Joe Bageant



www.coldtype.net/joe.html

After the whistle has blown

W. Stephen Gilbert looks into the latest scandal – the sexual abuse of junior football players who went on to play for top clubs – that is rocking Britain

Is everybody unaware that the “diddling” of boys by grown men has been the modus operandi of assailants in many fields for decades: scout troops, church choirs, hobby groups?

Britain is weathering a ferocious media pole-axeing scandal about the sexual abuse of boy footballers who went on to play for the top clubs. It raises many questions. For one thing, is everybody unaware that the “diddling” of boys by grown men has been the modus operandi of assailants in many fields for decades: scout troops, church choirs, hobby groups? If the football profession can be brought to its knees by discovering that this went on, then the Press will soon start looking for another area to investigate. Perhaps, if they start investigating the teaching profession, there will never be an end to it. Every local authority will be ordering a public enquiry.

The story tells us a great deal about contemporary society’s attitudes to sexuality, at least insofar as the Press and broadcasting truly reflect those attitudes. In particular, it tells us about attitudes to male homosexuality, which is viewed differently from heterosexuality and from lesbianism, even after the palpable changes, both legally and sociologically, in the way gay men are viewed and treated.

Abuse of girls by men still touches a less affronted and vengeful threshold of public outrage than that of boys by men. But attitudes to man-on-woman rape have changed since the time we earnestly argued about the acceptability of the rape scene in Dennis Potter’s 1976 television play, *Brimstone and Treacle*,

which the BBC finally screened in 1987. In an on-air discussion with me back then, Germaine Greer proposed that there were many things worse than rape, including, somewhat to my surprise, the dating show *Blind Date*. Does she still think so?

No doubt some still take the view that it’s up to women to look out for themselves, offering unspoken agreement with last century’s judicial view that a woman hitching a lift or wearing “provocative clothing” was guilty of “contributory negligence.” Further back still, rape was nothing to get excited about, in fact, it was the subject of a very jolly musical, *Lock Up Your Daughters*, which I saw in the mid-’60s (on an official school outing, would you believe?), and of plentiful jokes that no comedian would risk now (“Grape, grape!” – “Don’t you mean ‘Rape, rape!’?” – “There was a bunch of them”).

The notion of under-age gay sex was also less inflammatory in years past. A television play, titled *Circle Line*, that I wrote while a university student won an award from the BBC and was broadcast as a *Play for Today* in 1971. Transmission had been delayed for a while because of concern about a scene in which masturbation was discussed. However, no misgivings were expressed about the scene in which a male student was discovered in bed with a 14-year-old boy, a guarantee that the play could not be repeated today, even if the master tape still existed. Times do change.

Why is the abuse of boys now thought the *ne plus ultra* of sins? One might argue that the abuse of girls is the more palpable and dangerous, involving the possibility of pregnancy as well as the actual, rather than the merely notional, rupturing of virginity. What's more, though parents would be appalled to know its prevalence and sceptical about its actuality, millions of young men and boys post explicit selfies of themselves online for all to see, heedless that vastly more men than women will browse them. No doubt some girls do this, too, but, I suggest, in nothing like such profusion. And there have always been boys, some of them pre-adolescent, who have found out where the local cruising grounds are located and ventured out to sample them, others who have set out actively to seduce grown men who are handily to be found in loco parentis. This is not to condone or indeed to condemn, just to be realistic.

The abuse of footballers speaks to a particular mindset. As the cultural commentator Andy Medhurst puts it, "That particular sport has always set itself up as such a societal yardstick of normative masculinity." The horror of the "pouf" taint in football has ensured that once Norwich City's Justin Fashanu, the only footballer to come out mid-career, killed himself, no one else would run that risk. The way to break this logjam is to do what public figures did on the subjects of abortion and recreational drugs in the 1960s: sign a shared statement in significant numbers. Once the clandestine nature of homosexuality in the game is curtailed, boys will be able to fend off predatory men without being persuaded that somehow they are snared in a guilty secret.

For it is this general fear of being thought to be gay that allows pederasts to evade public scrutiny. Boys who are coerced into sex with men commonly fear that this somehow makes them gay, too, or acts as a punishment for their own latent desires. Abusers are apt to interpret as consent any signs of arousal – which are not necessarily in the victim's control (here boys are a greater disadvantage than girls). The conviction on the part of both

parties that the boy has been in some sense complicit is frequently the source of the long-term psychological damage.

As a by-product of this particular dynamic between boys and their abusers, the danger to girls is downgraded because it's still considered "normal," if not quite respectable, for a man to leer at a schoolgirl. The newspapers that are most strident in their demonising of "paedos" are the most consistent in making little distinction between women who professionally satisfy a demand for the voluptuous, and celebrity daughters who are not yet out of adolescence. In men's banter, it is widely thought little worse than roguish to describe a girl of between 13 and 16 as "jailbait." To so describe a boy in the same bracket would be generally held to be unacceptable. This is really quite a profound societal distinction.

All sex pesting and sex crime – stalking, exhibitionism, groping, assault, rape – is more about power than anything else. "I can hurt this person/dominate this person/make this person do what I want, so I will". Domestic violence also comes under this heading.

Corporal punishment was abolished in the education system, as much because teachers relished it too much and used it as a form of dominance as because society developed a liberal distaste for the use of physical force against other people's children. However, as recently as 2008, one in five secondary school teachers still supported the right to use corporal punishment "in extreme cases." People who have power over others like to keep it.

And then, of course, there is the danger of overreaction. Chief constables have found themselves making abject apologies to public figures forever tainted by allegations that turn out to be unsustainable and/or malicious. Past gullibility or hushing up is not remedied by a witch-hunt. The culture of the police service is no more progressive or supportive than that of professional football. Working with received ideas about sex offenders or indeed their victims may do more damage than it fixes.

Corporal punishment was abolished in the education system, as much because teachers relished it too much and used it as a form of dominance as because society developed a liberal distaste for the use of physical force against other people's children

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W Stephen Gilbert is the author of *Jeremy Corbyn – Accidental Hero*

CT

IN THE PICTURE



Smile, please!

With Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union came the need for visual documentation.

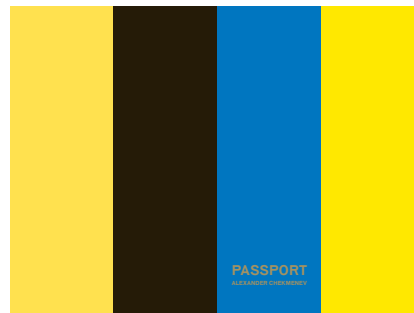
Alexander Chekmenev was one of the photographers

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became necessary in the newly independent Ukraine to replace the old Soviet passports with new Ukrainian ones. There was a rush to accomplish this, with all Ukrainians being required to get a new passport within a year.

In 1994-1995, in Luhansk in southeast Ukraine, social services began employing photographers to take passport photos in the homes of those who were elderly or ill, and could not afford to pay a photographer. Alexander Chekmenev was one of the photographers commissioned for this extraordinary task.

Witnessing how people were living out their final years made a very strong impression on him. One day he took 60 portraits, mainly of elderly people. The very next day, he was shocked to discover that one of the men he had photographed had died. In one house, he





PASSPORT
Alexander Chekmenev
Dewi Lewis Publishing,
dewilewispublishing.com
£35 (amazon.co.uk)

IN THE PICTURE



Old woman lived in one room, with her coffin in the other

discovered an old woman who had had a coffin prepared for herself. She lived in one room, with the coffin in the other.

He also came across a 92-year-old man who had made similar arrangements, acquiring a coffin, and waiting for his death. He had placed it in his shed and whenever he finished off a bottle of vodka, he would

put the empty bottle into the coffin. When it was full, he passed the coffin on to somebody else, saying that it was a sign that his time had not yet come. When they came to take his photo, the old man sat at a table with his nephew, a bottle of vodka and two full shot glasses standing in front of them.

Chekmenev also took photos of people who were mentally confused. They did not know what was going on, why they were being seated, or why he was taking pictures of them. One person, unable to move, had to be lifted from his bed. Two social workers held him in an upright position, whilst two others held the backdrop. Evidently, he too needed a new passport.

Born in Eastern Ukraine, Alexander Chekmenev's early work focused on people affected by the collapse of the Soviet Union. His is an intimate and unique insider view of the painful transition of what was once a major coal mining region. In 1997, he moved to Kiev, where he is as photojournalist. **CT**

Lessons for Serbia from Trump's victory

Srdjan D. Stojanovic outlines the political jostling taking place in advance of next year's presidential election in Serbia

The recent British referendum on exit from the EU (Brexit) and the American presidential election resonate loudly around the globe – Italy, Austria, France, Germany, Philippines or Serbia. No matter how different states are in terms of economy and institutional development, certain patterns and similarities can be established. However, it seems that the political order of democracy, established long time ago, has been challenged lately.

This can be attributed to a breakdown of classical ideology, along with credibility of the traditional political parties, whose leaders seem unprepared and unwilling to accept the new realities of a profoundly different world. The advent of the Internet has changed the nature of communications among people, as much as the arrival of printing press, radio and television had done in the past. Yes, it is much easier and cheaper to enter voters' homes thanks to electronic media and social networks, but the trust of voters should not be taken for granted – such is the nature of this form of political communication. But nothing can replace traditional “town hall debates,” where the voters meet the candidates face-to-face, and find out whether they truly represent their interests, or if they are merely the product of a shrewd marketing campaign.

The grass root availability of informa-

tion has generally empowered citizens, and makes it hard for “old school” politicians to manipulate and manoeuvre within their home states/nations. Curiously, the changes in political agendas and attitudes have not been embraced by pollsters and the mainstream media – resulting in their failure to predict the outcomes of Brexit or the American presidential election, making them a laughing stock.

Stage for Serbian presidential election 2017

The forthcoming presidential election in Serbia, expected to be called in April 2017, has already stirred the emotions of the public as much as they did on October 5, 2000 when the Milosevic regime was defeated in an election, which was followed by a brief, but violent, period of unrest during the hand over of power. Sixteen years later, Serbia has still not achieved democratic standards of governance, mainly due to the 12 years of ineffective and corrupt reign of several divergent “democratic” political options that were partners in the ousting of Milosevic.

For the last four years the country has voted in the same political forces that were defeated in 2000. The inept and corrupt were replaced with the poor man's populists – a dangerous and unskilled bunch, notorious for acquiring high academic qualifications through bribery, plagiarism or forgery.

Curiously enough, the current govern-

Nothing can replace traditional “town hall debates,” where the voters meet the candidates face-to-face, and find out whether they truly represent their interest

ELECTION TIME

What is evident is the absence of competent leaders who can take Serbia to the stable and peaceful future that is so desperately needed

ment is supported by the West (especially Germany and USA), which seem to have forgotten the problems they had with their political father, Milosevic. The current Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic is a clever manipulator, who manages to sustain Western support with his pro-European Union rhetoric, in exchange for their not interfering in his far-from-democratic practices. His true nature remains violent, undemocratic and theatrical – practices he learned from his political mentor, the notorious Dr Vojislav Seselj.

According to the Serbian constitution, the powers of a president are limited and resemble those of the British monarch's, although he or she is chosen every five years.

Parliamentary elections are held every four years, but in 2012 people went to the polls for both presidential and parliamentary elections, the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) winning both. Since then, the SPP called two extraordinary parliamentary elections, in 2014 and 2016, to further cement their grip on power. The key to its success is an abysmal election system, originating from the Milosevic era, that favours ruling political options. Prime Minister Vucic has denied any intention to run for president – because its limited powers don't suit him – while saying the election of non-Serbian Progressive Party candidate would be detrimental to their rule.

This is how the political stage in Serbia looks today: what is evident is the absence of competent leaders to take the country to the stable and peaceful future that is so desperately needed in a country that entered the club of democratic nations rather late – 11 years after the fall of the Berlin wall.

Learning from the American experience?

The voting behaviour tends to be universally similar – when people get tired of a certain political options or personalities, no ideology, party platform, voting loyalty



Slobodan Milosevic.

Photo: ictyphotos

or pattern can save them. This was clearly visible in the case of Democratic contender Al Gore's unsuccessful bid for the US presidency in 2000. Gore, an experienced two-term vice-president with a reputation as a superior intellectual and Washington insider lost to George W. Bush, who was presented as a "common man with whom you

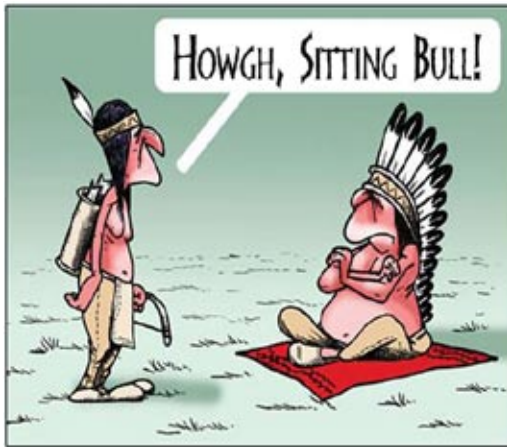
could have a beer." The voters were fed with tales of the superficiality, immorality and lying of the Clinton era, from which Gore was unable to distance himself. (And, of course, Bush did get a little extra-democratic help from his little brother in Florida.)

Something similar happened with the recent triumph of Donald Trump, the unloved candidate of the Republican Party. His opponent Hillary Clinton's candidacy came after Democratic National Committee manipulations eliminated the people's candidate Bernie Sanders, who would almost certainly have won the presidency over Trump or any other Republican contender.

Grim prospects for Serbia's democracy

There is no doubt that the current regime of the Serbian Progressive Party is detrimental and destructive for Serbia. Arrogance, primitivism, incompetence, manipulation, are used by the parliamentary majority in the exercise of power.

The political temperature in Serbia is rising, although the presidential elections have not yet been called. The election fever seems to be a daily modus operandi for the ruling party and their beloved leader. For the SPP, an unending campaign is a God-sent substitute for hard work in reforming national institutions, tackling serious social problems and developing functional policies. The opposition, both parliamentary and non-parliamentary, has clearly not learned any lessons from previous catastrophic defeats, and is not viewed by the electorate as a meaningful alternative.



Sasha Dimitrijevic



The proposed opposition candidates seem to think the level of one's popularity (or electability) is a reflection of the number of clever posts on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram

Since the Serbian opposition leaders cannot stand each other, they are searching for a joint candidate to stand against SPP candidate. So far this search has been unsuccessful, the initiative having been left to the country's non-governmental sector to propose the names, thereby saving the opposition political parties from further bickering and back-stabbing.

The essence of every political election campaign should be based on each party's programme. But the proposed opposition candidates have not tried to present himself/herself with programmes or ideas, falsely assuming an election is about personal popularity. They seem to think the level of one's popularity (or electability) is a reflection of the number of clever posts on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. No wonder Serbians would like to see respected figures such as Novak Djokovic, the tennis player and philanthropist, or Emir Kusturica, the internationally acclaimed movie director, as president, rather than any politician.

Ideology is hardly important to Serbian political parties – they do not represent values or principles that will be defended at any cost; instead, whatever policies they have are simply means to attain power. And, to achieve that goal, all kinds of compromises and unprincipled alliances are tolerated. Regular pogroms are conducted against members who either have their own

opinions, or who call into question the infallibility of leaders. Advancing through the party ranks is based purely on loyalty. Migrations from one party to another are common, with insider knowledge being highly prized, although in normal circumstances such persons would be considered absolutely unsuitable.

Such grotesque political practices in Serbia are exactly what is wrong in understanding and operating the process of democracy – no matter that majority of the parties have a “democratic” prefix to their names.

How Donald Trump's future presidency going to affect the world remains to be seen, but the lesson other democracies can learn from his victory is that the power and intelligence of the people should never be underestimated. Voters should not be treated as small screws in the voting machine. Both the ruling party and the opposition in Serbia must keep this in mind – because we are not far from the time when enough is enough. Given the recent political history and current practices in Serbia – I'm afraid that there may be no time for us to rejoice after April 2017.

CT

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Srdjan D. Stojanovic is an activist and publisher of the Serbian Internet magazine *Vreme Je (It's Time)*, for which he writes a weekly *News Dissector* column, named in tribute to Danny Schechter, the *News Dissector*.

A challenge to Europe

Jeremy Corbyn, British Labour Party leader, made the following speech to the Party of European Socialists Council in Prague on Saturday, December 3, 2016

COLLEAGUES AND COMRADES

“ I want to thank you for inviting me here today, and for the reception we have received from our hosts in this magnificent city. It is fitting we are in Prague to discuss the challenges ahead for democracy in Europe. This is a city which has been at the heart of the history of our continent and the convulsions of the past century – of war, revolution and the struggle for democracy and social justice.

We are in a city that also suffered the scourge of Nazi occupation and the horror of its genocidal crimes.

Today I will also be visiting the Terezin memorial which commemorates the victims of Nazi political and racial persecution in the Czech Republic, a permanent testimony to the threat posed by far right politics, anti-semitism and racist scapegoating.

On behalf of the British Labour party I will be paying tribute and remembering those who died, whose suffering is a reminder of the scars left by the far right, not just on this country or this continent, but on the whole world.

Today, we live in a different time with different pressures and opportunities. But it is clear, across Europe and beyond there has been an alarming acceleration in the rise of the populist right, whether it be UKIP in Britain, Donald Trump in the United States, Jobbik in Hungary or Marine Le Pen's National Front in France.

Politics has been shaken across the world and, as

socialists and progressives, we know very well why the populist right is gaining ground. But we are finding it increasingly hard to get our message heard and it is up to us to offer the political leadership needed for a real alternative.

We know the gap between rich and poor is widening. We know living standards are stagnating or falling and insecurity is growing. We know that many people feel left behind by the forces unleashed by globalisation – powerless in the face of deregulated corporate power.

Often the populist right do identify the right problems but their solutions are the toxic dead ends of the past, seeking to divert it with rhetoric designed to divide and blame. They are political parasites, feeding on people's concerns and worsening conditions, blaming the most vulnerable for society's ills instead of offering a way to take back real control of our lives from powerful elites who serve their own interests.

But, unless progressive parties and movements break with that failed economic and political establishment, it is the siren voices of the populist far right that will fill the gap. It can be difficult to convince the long-term unemployed that the reason there is no work is not that immigrants are stealing their jobs, but the result of the economic programme of the right that has failed to deliver sustainable growth, security and rising living standards for all.

It can be hard to make clear that our public services are being run down because of years of austerity and predatory privatisation, rather than overspending and government waste, but it is vital that we do.

Photo: Paul Newport

(via Flickr.com)

We cannot abandon our socialist principles because we are told this is the only way to win power. That is nonsense. The reason we are losing ground to the right today is because the message of what socialism is and what it can achieve in people's daily lives has been steadily diluted.

Many people no longer understand what we stand for.

Too often in recent years the left in Europe has been seen as apologists for a broken system rather than the answer to how to deliver radical social and economic reform for the 21st-century.

Too often the left has been seen as the accomplice to reckless, unfettered capitalism rather than as a challenge to it.

Too often the left has been seen as standing up for the privileged few rather than for the many we exist to represent and defend.

If we are only seen as protectors of the status quo how can we expect people to turn to us when they can see that status quo has failed? We must stand for real change, and a break with the failed elite politics and economics of the past.

If we do, I have every confidence that the principles of solidarity, internationalism and socialism that we stand for can be at the heart of European politics in the 21st-century. That's why it is vital that our rhetoric cannot be used to legitimise the scapegoating of refugees or migrant workers.

When we talk about refugees, we need to talk about them as human beings, not as numbers, or as a burden but, instead, as children, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters.

And when we face the challenge of migration we need to work together to halt the exploitation of migrant labour to undercut pay and conditions in a race to the bottom across Europe. We cannot allow the parties of the right to sow divisions and fan the flames of fear.

When it comes to Britain's referendum vote to



"It can be difficult to convince the long-term unemployed that the reason there is no work is not that immigrants are stealing their jobs, but the result of the economic programme of the right that has failed to deliver sustainable growth, security and rising living standards for all"

leave the European Union we in the Labour party respect that decision, and we want to work together with socialist and progressive parties across Europe to find the best possible solution that benefits both Britain and the EU in the Brexit negotiations.

Labour is calling on the British Government to guarantee the rights of all EU citizens before Article 50 negotiations begin, and not to use them as a bargaining chip in negotiations.

Labour is pushing for Brexit negotiations to be carried out in a transparent manner, in a spirit that aims to find a deal that works for all across the continent. That is why I am inviting leaders from socialist and progressive parties and movements across Europe to a special conference in London in February.

I believe our movement has the new ideas to take on and beat the populist right. But we must harvest those ideas and that energy, allow a space within our parties for new ideas to be heard and build a movement with a democratic culture at its very heart. It is when people lose faith in the power of politics to improve people's lives that the space opens up for the far right to scapegoat and blame. Our task is harder, to restore people's confidence that we have both the vision and an understanding of the lives of those we represent to change them for the better.

As we head towards 2017, many people are worried about the direction that Europe is taking. Well now is time for us to turn the tide. To put the interests of working people front and centre stage and to fight for our values, of social justice, solidarity, equality and internationalism.

If we do that together, and break with the failed politics of the past, I am confident we can overcome the challenge from the populist right."



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