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1941–2012
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COUNTERPUNCH VOLUME 21 NUMBER 4, 2014
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Nuclear Japan
We appreciate your stories and coverage of this issue as we live in Japan and need to make the decision to leave or to go almost on a daily basis. This entire Fukushima incident is a HUGE worldwide problem.

Colin and Keico Walker

Mainstream Radicals
I regret to tell you that when it comes to Islam your writers are mostly mainstream and not CounterPunch. Nevertheless ... I love your articles. I also stand deeply indebted to Paul Craig Roberts, Mike Whitney, Ellen Brown, Ralph Nader, and all their other colleagues who have made it their vocation to elucidate the truth in what is going on for us. CounterPunchers. Please, keep up the good work. We are all benefitting tremendously from it.

Admiring CounterPuncher

Easter Offensive
I enjoy your website. I subscribed to your print magazine back when I was still working. I share your website's Facebook posts with my friends to try to increase your exposure. I am not easy to offend, even about Christianity. But to have this vituperative, juvenile diatribe against the Christian religion appear two days after Easter is in very poor taste, to say the least. Many of my friends are Christian, and if I were a devout Christian, I would have been livid.

Frank Green

Nation Liberals
I was wondering if you saw Perry Anderson's nice piece on Alex in the latest New Left Review. While I was aware of the shoddy treatment Alex endured at the hands of vanden Heuvel/Navasky through the years, Anderson's mention of it really got under my skin. I've read The Nation – which is about to celebrate its 150th anniversary - since Carey McWilliams was at the helm in the 1960s, but I'm finally through with it.

For one thing, I'm sick of reading Alterman and his ilk, as well as variations on the same lede editorial exhorting us all to pressure Obama to do the right thing, as if he's some closet lefty. There's even been a recent endorsement of Hilary Clinton for president by one of the magazine's columnists. Anyway, there is a story here, pointing out the magazine's transition into a mouthpiece for the Democrats.

Frank Green

Marx: Authoritarian Grouch
Dear CounterPunch,
I have been a fan of your magazine for several years now and often recommend it to friends, as I tend to find your analyses to be cogent and your criticism ruthless. I must say, however, that I am thoroughly disappointed by Louis Proyect's article “A Hero for Our Time?” in Volume 21, Number 3, and in your decision to publish a picture of Karl Marx as “Superman”. As if anything could be more absurd than the idea that an egotistical, self-obsessed, and authoritarian grouch like Marx could somehow be a savior for me and my generation. Marx bequeathed to us an extraordinary critique of capitalism and a method for analyzing its historical development – nothing more, nothing less. Mr. Proyect's Marxist proselytizing is dated and belongs in the dustbin of history. He criticizes the “autonomists and anarchists” of the Occupy movement for failing to establish a political party that could push left-socialist ideas on the American public via mainstream channels. But what he fails to realize is that many young people in the U.S. (not just anarchists) have lost all faith in the ability of political parties to fundamentally change anything. We are not interested in his parties and we are not interested in repeating the mistakes of the past. What we want to is to move on, leaving behind the leftist dogmatism that doomed past revolutionary movements, and develop new methods of resistance to the oppression and exploitation that we are all in some way subject to. This development may not be smooth or instantaneous, but in the long run we will all be better off.

J. Sheffield
Knoxville, TN

Best Political Magazine
Just wanted to say that I couldn't put the last magazine issue down, really fine, Jeffrey's piece was heart-breaking and fierce, same with Jo Ann's and Kristin Kolb's. The Proyect piece articulates a lot of things that have been on my mind for years and pushes on them. In a curious way, the Proyect piece is one of the simplest and cleanest assessments of Occupy and articulates well the lessons of its retreat. Gray's piece on Mandela simply masterful. Phenomenal job. I really think CP is the only American political magazine worth reading. The work coming out of Jeffrey's “compound in Oregon City” as Cockburn called it once, seems to be much more trenchant and energetic than anything going on elsewhere.

Standard Schaefer
Portland, Oregon

Editors' Note: Our dear friend and star columnist, Kristin Kolb, was recently diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. She is now undergoing intensive radiation therapy. We hope to have her back next month. Meanwhile, as a single mother of a precocious 10-year-old, she could certainly use your financial help and encouragement at this fraught time. You can send letters and contributions to Kristin at the CP address. --JSC / JF
If it’s spring, it must be time for Barack Obama’s annual drive-by of black America, where he piously lectures African-Americans on the state of their lives. Though the tinsel adorning his rhetorical flourishes is frayed, the president didn’t disappoint this year. Indeed, he treated the nation to two sermons on civil rights in a single week—a rare double-header for the commander of drones.

On April 10, Obama could be found in Texas, delivering an arid speech at the LBJ Presidential Library, studded with pompous non-sequiturs (“history not only travels forwards, it travels backwards”) and awkward allusions to civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, for whom Obama has little natural affinity.

The main takeaway from the Austin speech was that the legislative landmarks of the mid-1960s were about as good as it’s ever going to get. There was no mention of new legislation or programs to address unemployment, malnutrition, decaying public schools or poverty (or Vietnam). At best Obama made a rather timid call for the defense of the old Johnson era laws, which, in his tendentious narrative, are being gnawed away by the reactionary right.

Obama confessed no regrets, offered no apologies, copped to no transgressions against any of the battered ideals of the Great Society, even as that very week his administration quietly surpassed the mark of deporting two million undocumented immigrants. What Obama doesn’t say outright, but surely believes, is that the brawny liberalism of LBJ is passé, the legislative ruins of a former age. The president is the grinning face of neo-liberalism, an ideology that rejects legislative cures for the magical elixir of financial incentives and market-driven remedies. How’s that working out for you, Detroit?

Obama is a master of casual condescension. His true gift as an orator is in making you feel as if your misfortunes in life—losing your job, being evicted from your house, going bankrupt—are the products of your own lack of initiative or some moral failing. And then, remarkably, he entices the victims into applauding their own humiliation. That’s a kind of political prestidigitation even Reagan couldn’t quite pull off.

This bag of parlor tricks was on full-display a few days later, when Obama spoke at the National Action Network conference. NAN is run by Rev. Al Sharpton, who had, only days earlier, been exposed as an FBI snitch, having deployed a bugged briefcase to gather damaging information on mobsters and, more pungently, black radicals. No wonder Sharpton has a gig on MSNBC.

Obama gave a jauntier talk at the NAN convention, tuning his banal homilies to the rhythms of a Jay-Z rap. You know: Uptown and sanctimonious. His mission that day was to skewer Republicans (easy enough) and offer up some rationale for Sharpton’s troops to remain loyal retainers of the Democratic Party (a more vexing challenge). In the end, he chose to present himself as a vigorous champion of the Voting Rights Act and proclaimed the election of Democrats in the midterms as the last line of defense for the franchise. The audience lapped it up, naturally. After all, he’d made a special visit just to see them.

But in the context of his presidency (or any president since LBJ, for that matter), what does the right to vote mean, if there’s no one to vote for? No one who represents your interests? No one who will speak for you? If each pull of the ballot lever simply rings up the same merciless policies?

The returns are in on the Obama economy. He saved Wall Street, bailed out the banks, declined to prosecute felonious executives and redistributed billions upward into the off-shore accounts of the mega-rich. Pretty much everyone else got the shaft. But no community has fared worse under Obama, than urban blacks. The plight of black Americans is more extreme today than when Obama assumed command. Fresh evidence of this travesty rolls in every day. On April 1, a report by the Ann Casey Foundation described the conditions of black children as being “dire,” significantly worse, in terms of health, nutrition, education and housing, than even Native American children. This bleak assessment received scant attention in the national press.

The new Jim Crow extends far beyond the savage politics of mass incarceration. The American economy is more and more segregated and hostile to the aspirations of minorities. The black unemployment rate remains twice that of whites, a disparity that has not narrowed over the course of Obama’s term. In fact, it’s almost certainly widened since blacks are much more likely to be part of the long-term unemployed and thus uncounted. Even during the so-called recovery, black unemployment rates hover far above recession levels.

The income gap between blacks and whites is widening, with white workers earning nearly $20,000 more a year on average than blacks. The wealth disparity is even more extreme. A recent report by the Urban Institute reveals that family wealth for whites is more than six-times that of blacks, a gap of more than $450,000 per family. Meanwhile, public schools are more segregated than at anytime since 1970.

The insidious economic violence of everyday life in black America grinds on, all but unnoticed except by those on the receiving end. Welcome to the economics of contempt.
Readers have written in lately down-hearted about the generally dark-cloud perspective of this column. *Is there nothing uplifting?* they implore. I’d say the everyday decision by most of humanity to get on with life despite pretty solid evidence that this mortal coil tightens by the minute is reason enough to be cheerful. So yes to the question; now, bowing to it and the budding spring, here is a story about beauty.

Mexicali is not beautiful by any standard measure. Across the border from the Imperial Valley, where the sweep of alfalfa and vegetable fields against the purple rickrack of Mexico’s mountains can temporarily banish any disturbing thought of water theft, chem-agro or the system of moats, fencing, iron bars and armed force meant to keep Them out, Mexicali announces want on first approach, and then, in almost the same instant, abundance.

The pavement is not dreadful but not good either. Restaurants, lettering and pagodas bespeak the time, early last century, when Chinese laborers came to dig canals in the desert, when this onetime city of bachelors thrived as a city of vice and the U.S. established the Border Patrol to keep back the ruin, look-at-me brick with decorative glass, guarded by Cyclone fencing, ornate ironwork, heavy black gates, blue plywood panels, the occasional barbed wire – a city jazz rich with small pleasures and large affronts, and suggesting that however little one might have, someone else has less and just possibly a motive to take.

About 700,000 people live in Mexicali, many crossing the border each day to work in the Imperial fields. I crossed the other way to meet just one, a mechanic called Felix Lopez. Felix has a shed on a lot in a part of town thick with signs advertising the services of a Mecanica General or related business. Felix has no sign. People with car trouble either know him or, like me, are lucky to know someone who does. He has no garage, strictly speaking. At the back of his lot a corrugated metal roof on wooden posts partly bordered by cinderblock and hung with canvas and blue tarp on two sides to block the sun serves as his workspace. The place is cool, dark, orderly down to the precise cut-outs that have transformed plastic antifreeze jugs into shallow pans.

Felix has the manner of a tool and die maker, which is to say of my father, who similarly refashioned plastic jugs, respected the humblest tool and approached every material problem with a sure, deliberate hand. For years Felix was a bookkeeper; he started repairing radios, which led him to car radios and finally cars. When we met in the morning he was fresh scrubbed, again like my father, as if prepared for surgery, which in a way he was. All day long, between procedures, he washed his hands fastidiously at a tap jutting from the cinderblock, ending the day almost as elegant as at the start.

The 1963 Valiant I have had driving for twenty-seven years is a simple car, but its spark ignition, timing and carburetion systems are part of the vanishing world of mechanical knowledge in the U.S. Felix is part of the world that still knows. Knows with a sense of mastery: the machine is but a matter of parts, subordinate to skill and invention.

It is important that the parts are metal. Across the street from Felix a machinist called Pelicanos works in a back room past a mound of water pumps, fans, transmissions and other auto guts awaiting their chance to be manipulated back to vigor. He buffed my brake drums free of nicks and scratches and coated them with graphite, while on the opposite end of the building, in a narrow room lined with carburetors neatly shelved, another man cleaned and repaired my carburetor (and rehabbed a faulty spare I’d been carrying around for ten years on the off chance I’d run into a guy who could renew it). Like Felix, both men worked with brisk efficiency, all square shoulders, and bantered with my friend Jose Luis while I, striving but mostly failing to pick out something from the Spanish that might offer a key to their jokes, appreciated the *joie de vivre*, the syncing of merriment, mind and *mana*. In all but the words, it was a familiar language of unalienated labor.

Anglos have got used to calling Mexicans in the U.S. hard workers. The term has become a crown of thorns. *Oh they work so hard* meaning, subliminally or in practical fact, that hardness and not work is what counts: what confers value on people who might otherwise be cloaked in suspicion; shames those who question conditions, pay or job rules; and elevates suffering over skill.

Skill made that day in Mexicali beautiful. Knowledge, camaraderie and magic in the hands of men. Felix returned the car to me tuned like an instrument, its leaks stanchéd, its brakes newly shoed. It took Jose Luis and me an hour and a half to crawl in line toward the gates and guns and surly questions that welcome people traveling from Mexico to the United States. The next day I probably shouldn’t have let the Valiant fly 90 mph up Highway 10 to L.A., but the car felt almost willful, like it was young again. *CP*
EMPIRE BURLESQUE
The Roots of Russian Revanchism

By Chris Floyd

The Shock Doctrine vultures are coming home to roost. The intensifying crisis in Ukraine is one of the many malign, long-reverberating consequences of the West’s decision to bludgeon Russia when it was reeling from the crack-up of the Soviet Union. Instead of giving the country breathing space, helping it find its way from the shattered socialist past toward its own new forms of civic life and economic organization, the West rushed to impose a brutal “market fundamentalism”: the now-familiar horror show of “austerity,” privatization, ruinous debt, plunging life expectancy, and rising infant mortality – the pitiless devouring of the common good by crony capitalism.

This dish was served up by willing Russian stooges – dazed patsies like Boris Yeltsin and the wild-eyed market zealots, converts to “Chicago School” economics, who filled his first government and tried, in the space of a few months, to transform a land that had never known capitalism (except in a few slivers of the economy, for a few decades, a century before) into the wet dream of Margaret Thatcher and Milton Friedman. The country was turned over to gangsters and hucksters, and to murky operators in the bowels of the security apparatchiks. These were adherents of a different “Chicago School” – the school of Al Capone.

I lived in Moscow when the Shock Doctrine was reaching its full fury. Murder was rampant: high-flying businessmen were gunned down on the steps of the metro, reporters investigating corruption were blown up in their newspaper offices. Used car salesmen became nation-straddling oligarchs; nuclear engineers and factory managers became drivers and janitors for Western-owned businesses. Ordinary people in threadbare clothes lined the streets and train stations, hawking their few private possessions and family mementos for ever-more worthless rubles. Homeless children – the besprizorniki – roamed the city, in packs or alone, abandoned, dirty, feral, scared. Drunks killed by rotgut turned up in the snow beneath gleaming billboards for Revlon and Marlboro. Casinos proliferated, while local bakeries and health clinics disappeared.

Meanwhile, in the Kremlin, the jihad of the market extremists raged on. With the encouragement of Western governments and the assistance of Western privateers and consultants, the government “auctioned” off a trillion dollars’ worth of public assets to oligarchs and insiders – for $5 billion. Much of this money – up to $350 billion from 1992-2001 – was stripped from the country in capital flight and parked safely and profitably in Western financial firms. It was the greatest fire sale in history.

The death toll of the first 10 years of “demokratia” in Russia is astounding: an in-depth study published in the British Medical Journal found that “an extra 2.5 million to 3 million Russian adults died in middle age in the period 1992-2001 than would have been expected based on 1991 mortality rates.” Up to 3 million unnecessary deaths – as many as were killed in the Vietnam War.

It’s no wonder that while I was there, in the mid-1990s, the general public had already come to regard “demokratia” as a dirty word, synonymous with the endemic corruption, ruin and violence that the Western-backed elites had visited upon the country. This cynicism was confirmed by the election of 1996 – my last hurrah in Moscow – when a half-dead Yeltsin, supported vigorously by the West, miraculously overcame a 2 percent popularity rating to win “re-election.” The price of this pyrrhic victory was the final surrender of the state to the oligarchs and security apparatchiks who, along with their American campaign operatives, had engineered the outcome. Flush with victory, they proceeded to push the country into yet another major crash in 1998, when life expectancy rates plummeted to the lowest levels since the famine years of the 1930s.

This is the rotten foundation upon which the increasingly ugly regime of Vladimir Putin is built. A culture, a country, a people savaged over and over through a century of unprecedented upheaval and violence, were once again subjected to a firestorm of chaos that killed 3 million innocent people and left millions more stripped of hope, of opportunity, of meaning. Now Putin, who emerged from the dark nexus of power blocs that saved Yeltsin, fills this moonscape with empty symbols that play upon the fears and resentments of a battered people: hysterical nationalism, cartoon history, blustering machismo, fake religiosity, and “traditional values” more aligned with American Tea Party tropes than anything that has actually existed in Russian culture. He rails against the West but he rules a mirror image of it: a violent, militarized crony-capitalist pigsty that degrades and deceives its own people while directing their anger and confusion toward outsiders. In many ways, it’s the American Cold Warriors’ dream come true: we have finally turned the Russians into us.

The conflict in Ukraine has many causes – not least the meddling of American apparatchiks and oligarchs to engineer the overthrow of the elected government and destabilize the region. But if Western governments find themselves puzzled by the motives and moves of the Russian regime that now vexes them, they need only look in the mirror, and it will all become clear.
GRASPING AT STRAWS

The Impending GOP Landslide

BY MIKE WHITNEY

If things shake out the way they have in the past, the 2014 mid-term elections are going to be decided on the basis of the economy. Unfortunately for the Democrats, the economy isn’t looking that hot. While unemployment has been gradually drifting lower, wages haven’t budged at all, prices on food and gas have been steadily rising, and incomes have actually declined by roughly 8 percent since 2000.

On top of that, according to a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, “Sixty-five percent of respondents say the country is on the wrong track”, while “57% believe the U.S. is still in a recession”. Those are hardly the kind of stats you’d want to hang your reelection dreams on. In fact, the numbers suggest that people are pretty upset right now, which means the Dems could be headed for a full-blown election day blowout.

So why aren’t the party leaders worried? Maybe they’re counting on the Republicans shooting themselves in the foot again as they did during the debt ceiling debacle.

Or maybe they figure they’ll be swept back into office on the coattails of the Dear Leader. If that’s what they’re hoping for, they’re in for a rude awakening because the majority of people no longer believe Obama is looking out for their interests.

According to a recent Gallup poll, less than half of respondents (42%) have confidence in Obama “doing or recommending the right thing for the economy” which is the lowest figure Gallup has on record for him. Also, there are indications that the American people have shifted blame for the condition of the economy from the Republicans to the Democrats. When respondents were asked “Who is most responsible for the current state of the economy” in a George Washington Battleground Poll by Lake Research and the Tarrance Group, 32 percent said Obama, while a mere 12 percent blamed the Republicans. So, the GOP is off the hook on that one, too.

So what do the Democrats have going for them?

Not much really. The economy is weak, the country is at war, and the party faithful have never been more demoralized, mainly because the man who was going to bring hope and change to America turned out to be another phony politician who never had any intention of keeping his campaign promises.

This is why the Democrats have zero momentum heading into the midterms. It’s because Obama has zilch to show for his six years in office.

Now it could be that the party bigwigs have something up their sleeve that will shock everyone and tip the ballot in their favor, but that seems improbable.

The more likely scenario is that they’ll keep reiterating their poll-tested talking points ad nauseam, and hope for the best. They’ll send Obama traipsing around the country blasting the Republicans and preaching the gospel of universal preschool, the minimum wage and inequality, and hope that puts them over the top? But will it?

I doubt it. People are just too frustrated about the way things are going. Obama’s been a major blow to the collective psyche of liberals and progressives everywhere. No one expected the guy to be as big a stiff as he turned out to be. Even the diehard Obamabots have thrown in the towel and admitted that they’re disappointed. And talk about two-faced. Obama can yap for hours about “meeting the challenge of inequality” and then slash funding for food stamps or cut unemployment benefits just minutes later. Voters remember stuff like that and it makes them less inclined to rush off to the voting booth on the big day.

Anyone running on the Democratic ticket is going to be impacted by Obama’s abysmal pamper-the-rich and squeeze-the-poor performance. How could they not be?

Obama is the face of the party, the man who is supposed to embody the ethos and vision of the broader membership. If that’s the case, then Democratic candidates better start looking for other forms of employment now, before they get their heads handed to them in November. Bottom line: No one is going to ride our radioactive president’s coattails into office. Those days are over for good.

Of course, there is a way the Dems could do well in November, that is, if Obama was seen to make a genuine effort to reduce unemployment, make some accommodation on delinquent student loans, and try to get the economy back on track.

This is much less than what he promised to do when he first ran for office but, even so, a solid effort on these three issues would probably help to energize the base, scatter the cynics and naysayers, and put a little oomph in the Democratic candidates better start looking for other forms of employment now, before they get their heads handed to them in November. Bottom line: No one is going to ride our radioactive president’s coattails into office. Those days are over for good.

But Obama’s not going to do an about-face now; it’s a pipe dream. Why would he? He’s spent his entire term of office kowtowing to the people who’ll undoubtedly fund his presidential library, pay lavish fees for his speaking engagements, and give him bundles of dough for his memoirs the day he steps down.

Would he really risk all that just to win the respect and affection of his fellow countrymen? Not on your life. CP
Revolutions From Below

Venezuela After Chavez

By Daniel Edwards

From its explosive beginnings in February of this year, protests in Venezuela against President Nicolás Maduro have begun to take on the appearance of a low-level guerilla war. Demonstrators ostensively on the side of democracy have adopted the heavy-handed tactic of blocking off major roads and arteries of the state, causing massive disruption and damage in affected areas.

Far from effecting change with a sustained message, objectives appeared to have altered. Instead, security personnel are goaded into using force against protesters armed with projectiles and Molotov cocktails, who then use a sympathetic foreign-based media to highlight their plight against a supposedly oppressive government.

The demonstrations, like all such events, claim to have altruistic means. Centred around the figure of Leopoldo López, a Harvard-educated economist from the Caracas elite who was arrested following the first eruptions of violence for his part in instigating the student uprisings, those on the streets say they are fighting for the Venezuelan people, to correct supposed government failings which have led to high inflation, a devalued currency and shortages of some products. To what point these assertions can be taken at face-value, however, is a debatable issue.

Many would argue that a movement that uses as a slogan La Salida (The Exit), and to that end explicitly disrupts civic life with the goal of toppling a president and political movement, Bolivarian socialism, which has won 18 of the 19 elections it has entered – most recently in December 2013 when the governing front took 48 percent of votes and destroyed the principal opposition by almost 10 points – is not a great signal of legitimacy. But perhaps even more pertinently, those maintaining desperate barricades against Maduro fail to understand Venezuela and the profound change it has experienced since Hugo Chávez first took power in 1998.

There has been a seismic shift in the nation’s society in those years. Maduro himself, early in the conflict, hinted at who held the real power in Venezuela as he warned protesters what would happen in the case of an attempt to revert to the old power system.

“If this working class, assaulted by you people, is taken to the limit and explodes, what would happen?” the president asked, in a direct recognition that the Bolivarian Revolution had gone further than maybe even he could fathom.

“We cannot allow this fascist infection to complicate lives in the fatherland”.

“I can give you my word that what these Colectivos are doing is working to produce organipónicos [a type of community gardens], culture. They had to arm themselves in the past and they have organized to protect their community.”

Here we arrive at the central issue at the heart of the new Venezuela. Who are these Colectivos that Maduro references, and why are they so important in understanding what is happening right now?

The colectivos, to use a more simplistic explanation, are groups of mostly young people formed in Venezuela’s most marginalised neighbourhoods and cities. Their expressed aim is to provide self-defence and social aid in such barrios, as well as organizing for the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) on a local level. Critics accuse those groups of vigilantism and of fomenting violence in the nation, charges that are gleefully repeated in the mainstream media.

Just as in the 1960s groups such as the Black Panthers were vilified for even espousing the idea that working-class, ethnic minority groups had the right to arm themselves in their communities against outside dangers like whites did, so the Colectivos are villains amongst the Venezuelan middle-class for their brash flouting of what are supposedly societal norms.

But what do the groups themselves say? Glen Martínez, from the Caracas 23 de Enero slum and a Colectivo leader, gives a more eloquent view to Reuters on what his role is in the community and the nation as a whole:

“They say we’re armed, that we’re ‘the Guardians of Chavez’, we’re ultra-violent, we’re killers…No. We’re the people who were excluded (by previous governments), who are now included, dignified and organized. We’re showing that we’re capable of doing valuable, high-quality things in the barrio. We’d be an immense resource for the right, for the multinationals, for capitalism. But we do things from a more social point of view, more Bolivarian, more egalitarian, more humanist. That makes them scared, bro.”

Those who live and work around the Colectivos, in Venezuela’s most marginalised neighbourhoods, also give another version of the truth. Preacher Gustavo Borges, also from the 23 de Enero slum, spoke out after a photo of one of the groups featuring young children wielding weapons invited criticism. For the activist, such images merely reflected life in the barrio.

“Our kids are used to this type of situation. They see guns every day, not in the Colectivos but from the gangs. They are used to seeing that weapons are only useful to the gangs,” he told BBC Mundo.

“The Colectivos have never trained kids to use guns, but they do help them to see that they are a tool, like a book, a gun has a reason to exist… that should be used with social conscience, in the historical moment that merits it. Weapons have a long tradition in the fight and liberation of Latin America.”
When the protests began, there was a reaction from the Colectivos. Seeing a direct threat to the system that has dragged millions out of abject poverty, given them basic nutritional and educational needs and access to healthcare perhaps for the first time, a need for self-defence against those actively espousing the end of the Bolivarian project was evident. Maduro was right: take them to the limit, and the working class will explode.

Similar criticisms have been heard on the other side of South America. In Argentina as in Venezuela, there has been a growing tendency for working-class people to organise outside of conventional political parties and recreate politics in their own image. Down in Buenos Aires and across the country, these groups have been dubbed the Piqueteros.

The Piqueteros, from the Spanish word for street protest piquete (picket, roadblock), came to prominence during the neo-liberal administration of Carlos Ménem in the 1990s. Following International Monetary Fund dogma to the letter, the charismatic president went on a rampage of privatisations and austerity measures, selling off state-owned petroleum concern YPF with the almost inevitable result of massive job losses.

The movement was born in the oil-rich province of Neuquén, in the south of Argentina. Adherents blocked highways in protest against the lay-offs in the region, effectively a death sentence for cities such as Cutral-Có, dependent on the petroleum industry as a source of employment.

The fight was not without its martyrs. In 1997 a 24-year-old maid, Teresa Rodríguez, was shot dead by a member of the national gendarmerie during a protest in Cutral-Có led by teachers and unemployed workers. The young militant would be one of many left injured or worse during fierce state repression, but nevertheless the piquetero movement spread across the nation, taking a centre stage in the bitter demonstrations and insurrection that hit Argentina during the social and economic meltdown of December 2001.

Since the assumption of Nestor and later Cristina Kirchner as presidents in 2003, these groups have begun to play a more active role in the nation’s politics. Organisations such as the Earth, Home and Habitat Foundation, led by the controversial Luis D’Elia, became what he dubbed “critical supporters” of the Kirchner administration, who put as central pillars of government the end of slavery to the IMF and foreign debt, and the growth of the nation through domestic strength, reindustrialisation and full employment.

As well as organising in the shanty towns on the periphery of Argentina’s biggest cities, the so-called Villas Miseries (miserable settlements), the numerous piqueteros have succeeded in becoming the official spokesmen for the co-operative movement. These co-operatives were formed through the Kirchnerite ‘Argentina Works’ program: for a monthly stipend, unemployed individuals formed groups that perform public works and beautification projects, a form of community service in exchange for a regular wage. This project has brought tens of thousands out of abject poverty, although right-wing critics tend to overlook the work component to see it as a way of maintaining the poor’s inertia and laziness.

But one should not fall into the trap of thinking the co-operatives are content as unquestioned supporters of the current presidency. Quite the contrary; movements such as D’Elia’s foundation, and other piquetero movements such as Barrios de pie have no qualms in taking their grievances and demands to the heart of metropolitan Buenos Aires.

Walking into a protest, as this writer did not long ago, is quite a sight. Hundreds of people from the capital’s most impoverished areas completely shut down the iconic 9 de Julio avenue, paralysing traffic as they requested improved wages and conditions for those in co-operatives as well as a comprehensive urbanisation program in the villas miserias. Those involved are the individuals and families the middle-classes like
to pretend do not exist; dark-skinned, vocal, the descendants of those workers from the country’s interior who moved to the centre desperate for work and the chance of a better life. The protest takes place to a continuous drum beat and the chanting of slogans, while its adherents are armed with clubs to discourage over-enthusiastic intervention from security forces.

Just as the carrying of arms in Venezuela provokes unease, so the sight of Argentina’s invisible majority armed with clubs and sticks does not go down well with many observers. The Quebracho movement go even further, encouraging members to carry out their protests in hoods and carrying clubs; a nightmarish vision of social conflict for those who prefer to maintain the current visage of peace.

“The daily work of Quebracho is working in the neighbourhoods and in our territory. We try to organise bonds of community integration, create daycares, give legal assistance and school support, make contact with businesses and the state for the benefit of community kitchens,” says Fernando Esteche, currently detained for charges related to a protest in 2007 against the death of a militant in police repression.

So why the hoods and clubs? Piquetero director Oscar Kuperman sees the two elements as important symbols in their fight. “Carrying clubs and wearing hoods are part of the piquetero folklore,” he told in a frank interview, while recognising that the hoods also mean police “cannot identify the kids”. In short, it is a direct challenge to the status quo. Lucia Consiglia Mura sought to answer the question of why the presence of those two elements is crucial to the movement in her 2010 paper, The piquetero club and hood: A symbol of political dispute?

“That is why, in our understanding, the heart of the violence that is attributed to the Piquetero movement resides here. Without a shadow of a doubt, seeing a tide of poor people, who were excluded from everything, even being seen by the rest of society, coming out of the silence and taking to the streets, trying to revert the social space that the social structure had reserved for them, is extremely violent.”

In the self-defence of Venezuela then, and in the multitudinous protests organised by Argentina’s periphery that paralyse the centre, we have the real threat to the established social order. Equally when D’Elia tweets that Maduro should put Leopoldo López, CIA agent, up against the wall and execute him, we feel uneasy as a society. But South America’s poor have had enough. In explaining himself against a torrent of criticism, Argentina’s piquetero symbol justified the need for violent imagery.

“What is happening is an embarrassment: the inflation, the attack on the currency and the violence of small groups are the right’s old tricks on the entire continent,” he fired, referring to the situation in Venezuela.

“[The Bolivarian nation] is suffering a cancer that nobody on the continent is suffering: extortion. How can democracies be inoculated against these market attacks headed by concentrated groups?”

For D’Elia, and for the Colectivos, the answer is to fight on the streets. Nobody is trying to justify extra-judicial killings or torture; even President Maduro has made clear that anyone, opposition or pro-government, colectivo or police, suspected of committing a criminal action during the protests will be charged and prosecuted to the full extent of the law. That is a correct move from the head of state, who has performed admirably in pleading for national unity and peace at a time where Venezuela has faced more danger to its democracy than any other point since 2002.

But other initiatives coming from the opposition are unlikely to contribute to any lasting social peace. CP

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Frack, Rattle and Roll
How Regulators Ignore Science and Cave to Oil & Gas Companies
by Joshua Frank

When one thinks of earthquakes, what comes to mind is usually the vast fault line straddled lands of southern California or the great subduction zones off the coasts of Chile and Japan. Surely, it isn’t the cattle fields of Texas or the rolling plains of Ohio and Oklahoma. Natural disasters in the central and southern United States typically blow in with the winds in the form of deadly tornadoes and storms. Yet, thanks to the insatiable rush to tap every last drop of oil and gas from the depths of the earth’s crust, earthquakes are fast becoming the new norm in “fly-over country”.

Fracking involves shooting a mix of sand, water and chemicals deep underground to force natural gas and oil to the surface. The practice is employed in geological areas where typical extraction methods can’t be utilized. Depending on the size of the operations, fracking produces millions of gallons of water waste, which ends up being stored underground in so-called injection wells. In 2012 fracking in the U.S. produced nearly 280 billion gallons of this chemically-laden fluid and the EPA reports there are over 155,000 oil and gas wastewater wells active nationwide. Geologists have long associated these deep wells with earthquakes.

Back in the 1960s the U.S. military injected chemical waste northeast of Denver, Colorado at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal station. From March of 1962 to September 1963 an average of 21 million liters were injected 3,600 meters below the earth’s surface monthly. While injections ceased for nearly a year, the military again resumed the practice in April 1965 through February 1966, only to be halted once earthquakes
lack of seismic activity changed dramatically when the area recorded 100+ tremors over the course of 2011, including a 3.9 quake that shook the town on New Year’s Eve. Those earthquakes, according to a study by Won-Young Kim of Columbia University, published in the *Journal of Geophysical Research*, were the result of a pesky injection well known as Northstar 1.

“Earthquakes were triggered by fluid injection shortly after the injection initiated – less than two weeks,” Dr. Won-Young Kim told *LiveScience*.

After eight quakes occurred near Northstar 1, Ohio Department of Natural Resources’ (ODNR) spokesperson Heidi Hetzel-Evans stated, “ODNR has not seen any evidence that shows a correlation between localized seismic activity and deep injection well disposal.”

It’s important to note that it’s not the process of fracking itself that is causing quakes, but the practice of pumping wastewater back into the earth after it’s been used to help extract oil or natural gas. These wells, if located in and around fault lines, have a high likelihood to causing tremors.

were reported at local seismic stations. After observing this earthquake activity before, during and after the injection of chemical water waste, researchers were convinced the pressurized injection had caused numerous tremors that would have otherwise not occurred.

Since this recorded instance, dozens of other cases have been studied with reports being published in peer reviewed journals, where geologists have concluded there is indeed causality between deep-well injections and earthquakes. Yet, this stark research hasn't stopped state governments from issuing thousands of permits to allow wastewater and other drilling to proceed, often in close proximity to homes and schools. In many such instances state resource departments blatantly ignore science that doesn’t favor the oil and gas industry.

Take the case of lonesome Youngstown, Ohio. Prior to 2011, Youngstown, population 65,405, had never experienced an earthquake, at least not since records were first kept by Europeans who settled the region in 1776. Nonetheless, this
Dr. Ray Beiersdorfer, a geology professor at Youngstown University, was mystified by ODNR’s response to the Youngstown quakes. “Based on what I witnessed in the 2011 incident, I believe ODNR is a captured agency,” argues Beiersdorfer. “The language used by industry and the regulatory agency was indistinguishable.”

Professor Beiersdorfer’s suspicion that ODNR is in bed with industry isn’t far-fetched. In a leaked internal document obtained by the Sierra Club, a 2012 draft communication plan outlined how agency staff ought to respond to criticism of the fracking operations ODNR was greenlighting.

“[Fracking] will be met with zealous resistance by environmental activist opponents, who are skilled propagandists,” the Communication Plan stated. “Neutral parties in particular – such as ordinary citizens concerned about families’ health – will be vulnerable to messaging by opponents that the initiative represents dangerous and radical state policy by Gov. Kasich.”

While the Northstar 1 injection well was shut down after the significant 3.9 magnitude earthquake on December 31, 2011, ODNR wasn’t about to admit it had ignored the science and allowed the operation to continue for far too long. It also didn’t stop ODNR from issuing other permits to allow injection well drilling in Ohio.

Consequently, in March 2014 twelve new earthquakes hit south of Lowellville, Ohio where Hilcorp Energy was drilling a disposal well. On March 10, ODNR stated it would force Hilcorp to “suspend all activity”, yet the agency allowed the company to continue gas production and flaring at the site.

Unsurprisingly, Beiersdorfer and others aren’t pleased with the state’s half-hearted response and have called on ODNR to deploy portable seismic stations closer to the Hilcorp operation to get better measurements of quakes, which will in turn provide scientists clearer information about size and location of the tremors.

“The request has been ignored,” Beiersdorfer frustratingly asserts in a piece in Columbus Free Press, “According to a telephone conversation I had with [ODNR Spokesperson] Mark Bruce they are not even discussing deploying portable seismic stations to the site. He said that the five seismometers located within 8 miles (the closest is 4 miles away) are sufficient. My reply that these stations are not close enough to precisely determine the depth of these small earthquakes was not addressed.”

Ohio state Representative Bob Hagen has repeatedly asked ODNR for more information on these quakes as well as drilling activity, yet Hagen has been stonewalled by the agency who would rather fight the “zealous resistance” by environmentalists than allow geologists and even elected representatives access to information about drilling activity. Without the data there can be no research and therefore no blame.

Currently citizens of Youngstown are rallying to ban fracking and injection wells through ballot measures, having failed twice before. Beiersdorfer and his wife, a fellow geologist, have joined the local fight against fracking despite having both worked for oil companies in the past.

“We suffered another set of earthquakes in [Ohio’s] Mahoning Valley and the ODNR claims to be getting to the bottom of this, yet the most important thing they could do, deploy the remote seismic stations, is not being done,” Professor Beiersdorfer contends. “Representative Hagan is being neglected. The press is being avoided. Somehow, we are expected to believe that ODNR has the technical expertise and social reasonability to decide where in our communities fracking and waste-injection can take place, whether you want them or not.”

* * *

Oklahoma is far worse than Ohio, and California for that matter, at least when it comes to earthquake activity. By early April of this year the state had already been dealt 109 earthquakes with a magnitude 3.0 or higher – that’s as many quakes as the Sooner state had in all of 2013. Still, Oklahoma regulatory and industry officials aren’t ready to admit outright the quakes are a result of injection wells.

Yet, all this shaking is not an entirely new phenomenon. In 2011 Oklahoma experienced a large 5.6 earthquake and a 4.7 aftershock near the sleepy town of Prague, which damaged over 200 buildings and injured two people. The Corporation Commission, which tracks injection wells in the state, says there are at least 10,000 active underground injection wells in Oklahoma.

The Oklahoma Geological Survey examined a cluster of quakes that hit near wells in August 2011 and found “that shortly after hydraulic fracturing began small earthquakes started occurring, and more than 50 were identified, of which 43 were large enough to be located. Most of these earthquakes occurred within a 24 hour period after hydraulic fracturing operations had ceased.”

“We’re trying to make sure we understand what data the state needs in order to start making some determinations on cause and effect,” Chad Warmington, president Oklahoma Oil and Gas Association told Bloomberg in response to the seismic activity. “We don’t want anybody to jump to conclusions.”

But conclusive links between deep wastewater injection wells and earthquakes is exactly what the scientific community has detected. The U.S. Interior Department has openly acknowledged the six-fold increase in quakes in the central U.S. from 2000-2011 are strongly correlated to wastewater injection, including those rolling through Oklahoma.

Even the few scientists that don’t oppose fracking see the dangers. Stanford University professor Mark Zoback, who moonlights as a senior adviser to Baker-Hughes, a multinational well services firm, wrote in a 2011 issue of Earth Magazine that man-made earthquakes can be managed,
noting that "...it is important to avoid injection into active faults." Zoback went on to admit that "a number of the small-to-moderate earthquakes that occurred in the U.S. interior in 2011 appear to be associated with the disposal of wastewater, at least in part related to natural gas production."

Even so, state officials have not halted companies from continuing to inject millions of gallons of wastewater into underground wells in Oklahoma near known faults. Many of these wastewater dumping holes are located less than three miles from the epicenter of the large Prague quake of 2011.

Austin Holland, an Oklahoma Geological Survey seismologist, recently told E&E News that injections must continue despite the swarm of quake activity rattling Oklahoma. "We can actually learn what's going on," he claimed, "and perhaps mitigate these things in the future."

Such brash sentiments are disconcerting to folks who are living in the midst of these ongoing earthquakes. For those residing in the tremor zones down in Arkansas, where numerous injection wells are active, daily anxiety caused by numerous quakes has many on edge.

“I remember days when the tremors were most active in the Greenbrier area, the rural town where I grew up [in Arkansas],” says Emily Lane, who now sits on the Board of Directors of Faulkner County Citizens Advisory Group in Arkansas. "Some days I'd feel 1-2 earthquakes an hour. The roar would approach quickly and roll through the house like a train passing through. Pictures rattled, the dog barked, and a fear grew inside me and many in the community about when the 'big one' would come."

Arkansas officials shut down four disposal wells near Greenbrier and the quakes have stopped; yet tremors in other areas of the state near injection wells continue. "These quakes in outlying areas continue to compromise the integrity of well casings, increasing the likelihood of water contamination in the area," attests Lane, who is deeply concerned about what lies ahead. "What is most discouraging, beyond the obvious dangers present from future earthquakes and fluid migration/contamination, is that most people in Arkansas still do not realize that a strong correlation was found between disposal wells and seismicity."

Residents in Arkansas have filed a class action suit against the drillers who operate the disposal wells. Texas residents also lodged a similar case against Royal Dutch Shell, Sunoco and others, claiming their properties have been damaged by earthquakes near the companies' injection wells.

The fight to end fracking, or at least relocate these earthquake-inducing disposal wells away from fault zones, is going to be an uphill battle. It will likely take thousands more earthquakes, severe property damage, injuries and perhaps death before regulatory agencies stop ignoring science and start protecting people instead of Oil & Gas industry profits. CP

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The biggest form of financial assistance was short sales, over $20 billion in value. These were deals in which underwater homeowners were made to walk away from their houses with nothing, most of them losing their savings which had been devoured by negative equity. The banks, however, claimed 41 percent of their dollar credits required under the terms of the Settlement by short sales.

The second largest category for which the banks claimed credit under the settlement was through the extinguishment of 2nd lien debts tied to mortgages. This has been criticized by many because the lenders holding 2nd lien mortgages were never out to foreclose on borrowers. If they did, their ability to recoup money would fall in line after the holder of a 1st lien mortgage, and so in most cases the lender would never see a penny.

So 1st lien mortgage principle reduction was really the meaningful type of relief, but it was only 17 percent in dollar terms of all the credit awarded to the banks.

Meanwhile Bank of America, Wells Fargo, JPMorgan Chase, Citibank, and Ally have either continued to conduct many of the illegal and harmful servicing practices that entrap more borrowers in foreclosure. Across the country lawyers, housing counselors, and homeowners continue to complain of dual tracking, failure to provide single points of contact during loan modifications, and even the recording of defective documents to initiate and execute foreclosures.

In California, the epicenter of the foreclosure crisis, and arguably the state that has done the most to empower homeowners against the banks by creating a monitor’s office to track the settlement, and by passing strict legislation for mortgage servicing, the situation today remains grim. “Obviously the system is beholden to the powers of the financial institutions,” Lenore Albert, an Orange County lawyer who represents borrowers against banks, told me. “It’s blatantly so. You see the prejudice in the entire process.”

“Why would the bank think they could get away with such a blatant fraud? Because they keep on getting away with it,” said Albert.

California’s courts are filled with homeowner lawsuits. They’re virtually all the same; in the early or mid-2000s a loan officer at a now defunct mortgage operation (Countrywide, World Savings, take your pick) deceptively signed a borrower (disproportionately Blacks and Latinos) to a volatile loan, hiding features like negative amortization. The payments exploded in 2008. The borrower eventually defaulted and sought a loan modification. The bank promised to work with them, but instead quietly executed a foreclosure, using illegal methods.

Lawyers like Matthew Mellen of San Mateo County have a nearly endless stream of clients still, even though mortgage defaults are dropping. Mellen has settled 80 cases over several years. But counsels are hard to find. “The National Mortgage Settlement is useless,” said Mellen in an interview. “California Attorney General Harris saw what was going one and got the Home Owners Bill of Rights passed,” explained Mellen about California’s tougher laws. “The problem is, you have to an attorney like me if you want to stop a foreclosure.”

Most borrowers can’t afford a lawyer, or don’t know their rights, and so they quietly, with frustration, accept foreclosure, losing their home and savings, and taking damaging hits.
to their credit scores.

Los Angeles attorney Nick Pacheco thinks the banks know this and have made the calculation that it’s more profitable to continue breaking the laws, dealing with the few and unorganized lawsuits from private attorneys, no longer fearing government action from tamed state prosecutors.

“They figure it’s cheaper to deal with Pacheco and these other attorneys than to staff up and inform their employees, and have their employees doing their job under the law,” said Pacheco. CP

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Veterans as Others
Support the Troops, Support Yourself
By Lee Ballinger

After returning from Vietnam and being discharged, I sought out a few of the self-help groups of veterans that had sprung up everywhere. Each time it was the same: a couple of guys loudly attacking our participation in the war and a couple of guys loudly saying it was not the fault of the vets and that the morality of the war should not be discussed. Myself and the majority were caught in the middle, thinking: “Yes, I have my opinions. But I have severe problems of my own. Who is going to help me?”

Today, hundreds of thousands of veterans are asking the same question.

On any given night, there are at least 420,000 veterans in the United States who are homeless. According to the federal government’s Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), nearly 50,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans were homeless during 2013, almost triple the number in 2011. Veterans are 50% more likely to end up without a home than other Americans.

That’s not all that’s likely to happen to you if you’re a vet. There is an ongoing epidemic of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among veterans, a problem made worse by the relatively new policy of sending troops back for repeated combat duty tours. During Barack Obama’s 2014 State of the Union message, recognition was given to Staff Sgt. Cory Remsburg, an Army Ranger nearly killed by an explosion last October. At the time of the incident, Remsburg was on his tenth deployment to Afghanistan.

As a result, our troops are increasingly over-medicated. As of 2010, according to a Military Times report, nearly 20 per cent of active duty service members were taking one or more psychiatric medications. The use of such medications has increased 76 per cent since the start of the current wars. Air Force Times revealed that “cocktails” of drugs prescribed to Marine and Army soldiers had led to at least 32 accidental overdose deaths since 2007.

But even properly prescribed meds are often not enough. Twenty-two veterans take their lives every day. The suicide rate for young male and female veterans is growing.

What is being done about these problems? Doesn’t the federal government have a massive apparatus to take care of such issues?

Both the devil and the angel land on the shoulders of the Veterans Administration (VA) and its cabinet level parent, the Department of Veterans Affairs. On the one hand, the VA delivers mostly free medical care to millions of vets. I have several friends who use the VA and are quite satisfied with it.

On the other hand, as of 2013, retroactive benefits had been paid to the families of nearly 19,500 veterans who died waiting for treatment by the VA, as revealed in a report in The Bay Citizen. According to the New York Times, as of May 2013 just under 600,000 claims for disability compensation were designated as backlogged.

Matthew Goldberg, who served three tours in Iraq, told the Washington Post: “The VA tries to beat you into submission. They make it so difficult, guys give up.” There are currently a quarter million veterans appealing decisions to deny or limit their disability claims, a 50 per cent increase since Obama took office. The Board of Veterans Appeals expects the number of pending cases to double over the next four years. A veteran who takes such an appeal through all available administrative steps faces an average wait of 1,598 days (over four years).

Rather than clear up its overwhelming backlog of pending cases, the Department of Veterans Affairs proposed to review more than 70,000 cases where it had already decided in favor of veterans suffering from PTSD. The Veterans of Foreign Wars said that “The review’s sole purpose was to revoke awards for disability compensation under the guise of fraud review.” Under pressure, the proposal was eventually withdrawn but the fact that it was put forward in the first place shows how hollow the mantra of “support the troops” rings in the corridors of Washington.

The VA is also a conduit for massive subsidies to Big Pharma, which supplies VA medical centers with huge quantities of drugs, some of which are helpful and some of which distort the delivery of good medical care. Either way, the taxpayer-funded guarantee of billions of dollars in profits to pharmaceutical companies siphons away money which could be used to create a backlog-free VA.

Paula Caplan, author of When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home, writes: “Whatever traumas or disasters increase human suffering, the mental health establishment and the pharmaceutical companies benefit from persuading us that the suffering is best labeled mental illness and best treated through the methods of therapist guilds and drug suppliers.” Caplan adds that the issue is generally framed as “The problem comes from within me, I want to be fixed”
when the fundamental problem to be solved is the existence of war in the first place. Caplan points out that there are many other options for healing, including “talking with friends and family, exercise, involvement in creative pursuits, volunteer work, and having adequate food, housing, and employment.”

In order to appear responsive to the mounting list of veterans issues, the DVA has set 2015 as the deadline to complete its “Final Push to End Homelessness Among Veterans.” In conjunction with that lofty goal, the DVA has allocated $600 million in funding for local groups serving homeless veterans. The 2015 deadline has no relation to reality. Examining the $600 million budget reveals that it’s not going to be used to purchase homes for vets nor is the federal government going to transfer ownership to veterans of any of the tens of thousands of properties it owns (homes paid for by the money of taxpayers, millions of whom are vets). Much of the $600 million will go to de facto homeless shelters and other programs which do not actually put vets into homes. Some of the money will go to help with mortgage payments to prevent foreclosure, but even that is a subsidy to the banks which own the mortgages. Each day, according to Amnesty International, those same banks foreclose on more than 10,000 homeowners, a significant percentage of whom are veterans.

Rather than a triumphant journey to zero homelessness, we are much more likely to see homelessness among veterans continue to grow. Jobs, the only real guarantee of having a roof over your head, continue to disappear and, according to USA Today, the rate of foreclosure is skyrocketing in the 163 Zip codes located closest to military bases. Amnesty International points out that there are approximately 3.5 million people in the U.S. who are homeless while there are 18.5 million empty vacant housing units. The solution could be simple: Put the people without a place to live into the empty homes. That isn’t happening because the government chooses to protect the real estate industry and subsidize the banks instead of ending homelessness. You can’t do both.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, is a former four star general and Army chief of staff. Allison Hickey, the undersecretary who oversees disability compensation, is a retired brigadier general. They represent the rarified upper ranks of the officer class where the line often blurs between public service and private ambition. In my experience, officers at that level always parrot the line “The needs of the service come first,” which inevitably means the needs of the troops come last. The result is endless delays and ongoing attempts to take away benefits. Do the makers of drones ever have to wait for their payments? Are their invoices ever returned as “denied,” as are so many veteran applications for disability?
The DVA “needs to be run as a business,” like “an insurance company,” says Congressman Duncan Hunter, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, like an HMO. At times, that’s just what the VA resembles, with a large wing of its bureaucracy focused on denying benefits, the same as any other outpost of the healthcare industrial complex.

Are our current mechanisms for helping veterans inherently flawed or just inherently insufficient? Todd DiPastino, co-organizer of the Veteran’s Breakfast Club in Pittsburgh, wrote me that “the burdens combat veterans carry are the responsibility of non-veterans.” As a veteran who has received more help with my burdens from non-veterans than from the veterans who run the VA, my immediate response to that is enthusiastic agreement. But upon reflection, I think the question of who is responsible for what and to whom is more complicated. To unravel those complexities, we need to take a look at the role that veterans play in our national life.

There is a tradition among veterans that when they meet for the first time they say to each other: “Thank you for your service.” Civilians often echo that sentiment. What exactly are we being thanked for?

I was in boot camp in 1964 when Congress approved the invasion of Vietnam by American troops. Even though none of us could find Vietnam on a map, we were eager to go there. Somebody’s freedom was being messed with and it was up to us to set things right. On the other hand, we were also vaguely aware that 90 per cent of the world lived worse than our miserable boot camp existence. We wanted to defend that position too. As we would soon find out first-hand, our primary role was to ensure that a disproportionate share of the world’s resources kept flowing to the United States. We compressed all this until it became, in our minds, one inseparable thing mislabeled “freedom.”

These contradictions have shaped the special authority that veterans hold on the American psyche. It comes from the sacrifice of so many sons and daughters, a river of blood and grief which has personally touched most Americans. It comes from the fact that our military has been the ultimate guarantor of our high standard of living at the expense of the rest of the world. It comes from the national chauvinism which colors so much of our country’s history.

It also comes from the three wars the United States has fought that Americans can be proud of. The Revolutionary War, which created the United States as a nation, was the first war of national independence, a war that helped to inspire world-shaking uprisings in countries such as France and Vietnam. The Civil War ended slavery. World War II, fought under the banner of the Four Freedoms, helped to liberate the world from the grip of the Axis powers.

The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War II reflect one aspect of our national character. The slaughter of the Native Americans and imperial ventures in Vietnam, El Salvador, Iraq, and Afghanistan reflect another. But in America we don’t like to make such distinctions. We say that war is bad (having long ago changed the name of the War Department to the Department of Defense) while reflexively supporting “U.S. interests.” There are three million men and women on active duty now and 22 million living veterans. Collectively, they have ties to most families in the United States. If we turn against what they do, are we turning against them? If we turn against them, are we turning against much of what is good in our collective history?

We don’t want friends or family members to come home in a box. But we also know that our military has ensured a standard of living for us much higher than that of the countries we invade. The end result is that we are conditioned by a twentieth century reality of guns and butter. This has made national confusion over peace and war, over support for the troops, impossible to avoid.

The political role of veterans has so far been pretty much cut and dried. Vets and their suffering are used with great fanfare to promote America’s drive for empire by everyone from the U.S. Army to the National Football League. Little noted is the way that veterans often do the exact opposite.

Legend has it that as many as one million people were members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War at one time
or another. It is without a doubt true that at one point in the early 1970s there were groups of vets staging protests in almost every city and town in America. The war ended and the vets indeed played a role in that. The idea that veterans speaking out against war was the sole political role of vets gained traction because it “worked.” The idea that “support the troops” meant to bring them home resonated widely and still echoes today.

Veterans are certainly well-positioned to be champions of peace due to their military experience and due to the way that they can disrupt the simplistic messages of pro-war propaganda continually issued in their name. While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the elegant wall in Washington D.C. emblazoned with the names of all U.S. military casualties in Vietnam, is studiously neutral on the issue of war, under the radar there are other quite different memorials. Arlington West, the passionately anti-war installations in Santa Monica and Santa Barbara put together by Veterans for Peace, takes its name from Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. I have visited the Arlington West in Santa Monica on several occasions. Each Sunday morning on a long stretch of beach by the pier, a vast field of crosses is set up in the sand with the names of U.S. personnel killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Friends and relatives come and put flowers and mementos on the crosses. There is a cohort of flag-draped coffins and there is also recognition of those from other countries who were killed by U.S. military action. To stand in the middle of all that and take it in alongside other visitors from around the world is an overwhelming experience.

Pro-peace veterans have undoubtedly had an impact on public opinion. Since the first Gulf War, polls confirm that opposition to the wars in the Mideast has grown steadily among the American people. A study by the Institute for Southern Studies revealed that the South, usually the most pro-war section of the country, had become the most anti-war.

Yet despite such sentiments, the peace movement today is much smaller than it was during the Vietnam War or even during U.S. military intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua. This is due at least in part to the fact that there’s so much else going on now in the United States. Unlike the fundamental economic stability of the Vietnam era when there was a job for almost anyone who wanted one, today the country is disintegrating rapidly.

If veterans’ voice of special authority is used only to agitate for peace, its power is limited, its full potential unrealized. Consider the possibilities. The VA, despite its many serious flaws, is also a reasonable facsimile of free universal health care for 22 million Americans. Almost everyone in the country is in favor of this version of socialized medicine. This puts veterans in a position to say: “I have free health care, everyone should have it.” Veterans can also use their special place in the American psyche to say: “I deserve a place to live. So does everyone. I deserve an education. So does everyone.”

Changes in the makeup of our military potentially amplify the power of the voices of veterans. When I was in the military, the women served in separate branches and we had no contact with them at all. To this day, I have no idea what they did. Now there are 212,000 women on active duty and they serve with the men. There are now 1.7 million women veterans. There are 65,000 immigrants in the military, 11,000 of them women.

If veterans are going to speak out for a broad agenda, that will have to be reciprocated. The needs of military personnel, their dependents, and veterans for the basics of life have long been ignored by most organizations in America, except for the likes of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. Influenced by the Vietnam experience, the conception that the special role of vets is to be authoritative voices for peace and peace only remains prevalent. Influenced by the Vietnam experience, the conception that “support the troops” means only to state that we want to bring them home remains prevalent.

As long as veterans are thought of by themselves and by others as a separate part of society with their own needs that only they have, progress will be minimal. On the other hand, are the problems of vets aren’t really all that different from the problems of the rest of the population? A lack of health care or housing is essentially the same for anyone it impacts and we should ask: Is the post-traumatic stress which results from war really all that different from the post-traumatic stress of prison violence, police brutality or domestic abuse?

The commonality of active duty personnel and civilians, of veterans and non-veterans, can also be seen in the fact that while America’s power elite continues to maneuver to eliminate Social Security, a Pentagon advisory panel recently proposed eliminating the pensions of all military personnel. Forty-five million Americans annually experience “food insecurity” (the threat of malnourishment or even starvation) and organizations such as Feed the Children and local food banks all across the nation must raise money to provide food for the children of military personnel.

Our commonality should lead us to confirm the obvious: Peace is not simply the absence of war. Peace cannot break out in isolation, it can only flower in a world where everyone is housed, fed, and educated.

Instead of looking upon our veterans as a separate section of the population with its own special needs, let’s meet at that place deep in America’s soul where veterans are revered and move outward together from there. The Four Freedoms we fought for in World War II still await realization: Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear.

To get to that destination will certainly require a dramatic change of priorities in our war-driven economy. Maintaining a huge military machine once guaranteed our comfort, now it guarantees our poverty. With itchy fingers on the nuclear
trigger today, war now threatens the continued existence of the human race.

The U.S. military budget, by far the largest in the world, is now nearly a trillion dollars a year. This grotesque diversion of our national resources isn’t driven by the costs of veteran or active duty benefits but primarily by the cost of maintaining several hundred military bases in 130 countries and by arms transfers to foreign governments. All guns, no butter. We need a different menu. 

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Who Really Needs the Book Industry? The Gatekeepers of Publishing

By M.G. Piety

“At a time,” observes literary agent David Genert, “when we are bombarded with information from all sides, we need more gatekeepers, not fewer.” This, he volunteers, is his reason for disliking the phenomenon of self-publishing. “I’m not a fan of self-publishing in general. It removes the gatekeepers from the process, and if we come to a point where every person in America who is writing a book can ‘publish’ it, it becomes much more difficult for readers to find the good ones. A lot of what is published is awful” (Poets and Writers, January/February 2014).

It’s no surprise that a literary agent would not be a fan of self-publishing. If people can start publishing their own books, they won’t need literary agents. And indeed, there is a trend not simply among first-time authors but also among established authors, to turn to self-publishing. The November/December issue of Poets and Writers featured an article entitled “The Power of Self Publishing.” Letters to the editor of a recent issue of The Author, the official publication of the Society of Authors in the UK, extolled the virtues of self-publishing as a way of making available again books that had gone out of print. Several authors wrote that this had revived their careers.

Not only does self-publishing give people a way to get into print, or back into print, who might not otherwise have been able to do that, it also allows them to keep most of the money from the sales. Publishers typically give authors only around ten per cent of the profits from the sale of their books, keeping ninety per-cent for themselves (and often even more than that on overseas sales, discounted sales, and ebooks). This imbalance was traditionally defended as necessary to cover the cost of printing and promoting books, as well as to cover the losses to the publisher from books that failed to sell. There is almost no cost, however, associated with producing an ebook, and print-on-demand means that publishers no longer need to incur the risk of costly print runs for lesser-known authors.

The traditional defense for giving authors such small royalties now looks pretty weak. Yet publishers continue to keep most of the money made from the sale of books. Authors who self-publish, on the other hand, can keep anywhere from 70% (if they publish with Amazon) to 100% of the profits.

Of course the ease of self-publishing means just about anyone can get into print, and Genert is correct in his claim that a lot of what is published these days is awful. Much of this “awful” material, however, is coming from apparently reputable publishing houses, rather than from people publishing their own work. Even academic presses have taken to cranking out real dreck. This dreck is far more threatening to the quality of print media, not to mention the intellectual life of the nation, than is self-published material in that coming as it does with the imprimatur of a reputable publishing house, people are inclined to an uncritical acceptance of its content. Editors, even at academic presses, frequently don’t know enough about the disciplines they cover in order to make reliable judgments concerning whose views are deserving of publication, and proofreading and editing services have been stripped to the bare minimum.

Just how wretched much traditional publishing has become was brought home to me recently. I just finished reading a book about figure skating coach Don Laws by someone named Beverly Ann Menke. Unfortunately, Menke, according to her bio, is not a professional writer, and she apparently did not avail herself of the services of a professional editor. The book is riddled with errors. I’m not just talking typos. Ice dancers are described as winning “pairs” titles (pairs skating and ice dancing are two different disciplines, the former being far more dangerous than the latter). The Philadelphia Skating Club and Humane Society is identified as the Philadelphia Figure Skating Club and Humane Society (a name by which it has never gone). Laws describes himself as listening to the Beach Boys in the 1940s. The list goes on.

There were other problems with the book as well. There was far too much biographical info about Laws that has nothing to do with figure skating. Menke also used the device of italics to indicate when she was speaking as opposed to when someone she interviewed was speaking. At least I think that’s what she did. She didn’t seem to do that consistently, with the result that it was occasionally very difficult to figure out who was speaking, the author or the subject.

There was some interesting material in the book, and a professional editor, one who knew something about the subject
of the book, as well as about editing, could have turned it into a first class work. I assumed it had been self-published and was thus surprised to see it identified as having been published by something called Scarecrow Press. I’d never heard of Scarecrow Press, so I did a quick Google search on the name. Scarecrow Press is a legitimate imprint of Rowman and Littlefield. I knew very little about Rowman and Littlefield except that it was, at least at one time, a reputable publishing house. Now, however, it has so many imprints that they will not all fit on a single web page. This is likely shrewd on their part. They may well want to start shedding some of these imprints after word of their quality gets out.

But if Menke’s book had a reputable publisher, it appeared no editor had ever laid eyes on it. That’s a problem. If editors aren’t looking at the material they publish, in what sense are traditional publishing houses “gatekeepers”? Yes, they’re restricting the flow of information, but how? What criteria are they using? Is it starting to look like there’s only one criterion, and that’s whether a book will sell.

This is made all too sadly apparent in an interview in Poets and Writers with Amy Einhorn, the head of Amy Einhorn Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House. Einhorn reports “being in a postmortem meeting once at another company.” The company, she explains, “had done a huge push with this book, and the book didn’t work, and they were going through it, asking why. They did TV advertising and all this stuff. Finally, someone said in a very small voice, ‘You know, the book wasn’t very good’” (Poets and Writers, March/April 2014). The publisher in question had presumably acquired the book without any concern for whether it was good simply on the assumption that it had some quality that would make it sell.

It isn’t just the literary merits of books that are being sacrificed to the almighty dollar. Truth is a casualty as well. The commercial potential of James Frey’s A Million Little Pieces is likely part of the reason the publisher, Random House, didn’t bother to verify what Frey purported were the facts of his life. And, indeed, the book did make money, even after it was exposed as largely a fabrication. Henry Holt and Co. appears not to have been too concerned with the accuracy of the information in Bill O’Reilly’s error-ridden Killing Lincoln, despite the fact that O’Reilly is a television personality, not a historian. They knew anything by O’Reilly would sell, and that appears to have been what mattered most to them.

It isn’t just the big commercial publishing houses that seem to value profits over quality. Publishers of all sorts are increasingly in it merely for the money. Peter Dougherty, the head of Princeton University Press, when confronted with the fact that a biography they had published of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had been discredited in Denmark because of the many errors and plagiarisms it contained, responded that the book had “been a marvelous success” for them (“Kierkegaard Biography Draws Praise and Criticism,” Chronicle of Higher Education, 16 September 2005). When Dougherty said the book had been “a marvelous success” he meant, of course, that it had made money. He was apparently unconcerned that it was seriously misleading and downright wrong on many important points about Kierkegaard’s life.

People generally take it for granted material from traditional publishing houses, and, in particular, from academic presses is of acceptable quality. It’s increasingly clear, however, that the content of much that comes from these presses is of acceptable quality. So do we really need these gatekeepers anymore?

Scholars are increasingly posting their articles directly to websites such as Social Science Research Network and Academia.edu rather than going through the long, drawn-out process of submitting them to traditional academic journals. Sure, pretty much anyone can post work to these websites. Only the better articles, however, get cited. Scholars trawl these sites for work that relates to their own and download articles that look promising. So status is gradually being transferred from the journal or press with which one has published to the number of downloads one has. It’s not a foolproof system, of course. It presumes that scholars in general are good judges of the quality of other scholars’ work. But traditional academic publishing makes a similar, though far less democratic, assumption. That is, traditional academic publishing, like publishing more generally, assumes that some small handful of editors are competent to make judgments about the quality of work in a wide variety of disciplines. Most academic publishers maintain a list of external reviewers, scholars who are known as specialists in particular fields, to vet proposals and manuscripts. This list is sometimes more a reflection, however, of a person’s social skills, or gift for self-promotion, than of his or her scholarly acumen.

The success of Wikipedia has shown that the general public is not actually so bad as one might have thought at sorting the factual wheat from the chaff. And if people are inherently capable of doing that, how much better are they at determining what they like in terms of literary style? Why do they need editors, whom they don’t even know, to decide for them what they would and would not like?

The idea of publishing gatekeepers is not only intellectually elitist, it’s also antithetical to democracy. It’s certainly helpful to have “experts” assess works of nonfiction, and it can be helpful to have people with literary tastes similar to one’s own weigh the relative merits and demerits of novels. That isn’t gatekeeping though—it’s book reviewing. Gatekeepers literally keep works from reaching the reading public. That practice is hard to defend, particularly when the criterion for allowing works through the gates is whether they will enrich the gatekeepers, not whether they will enlighten or edify potential readers.

It can be daunting to slog one’s way through a bunch of unvetted written material. I’m not at all confident, however, that
having the imprimatur of a purportedly reputable publishing house is any longer a help. There is just too much bad material coming from these places. Conversely, there's a lot of good material that is being self-published. Let me go back to figure skating, the topic with which I started, Dick Button recently self-published an excellent book entitled Push Dick's Button (which CounterPunchers may enjoy in that Button takes aim at corruption in the International Skating Union). It could use a little editorial help, but it's no worse in that respect than many commercially published books, and in terms of content, it's first rate. Button doesn't need to go through a traditional publisher, so why should he? Why should anyone, anymore, who knows what he's talking about and knows how to support his points with evidence and argument?

It would appear that the age of the gatekeeper is gone, that we are entering an age when people are going to have to sort through information for themselves—and that's as it should be. CP

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Life After the Bombs
Return to Vieques

By Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero

The ferry from the town of Fajardo to Vieques island leaves at 4:30 pm. I arrive at 4:25 and there is a line at the ticket counter, made up of Viequenses and tourists who seem to have been waiting for quite a while. The line does not move and the ferry takes off without us. Next ferry comes at 8. Some respond with resignation and others with fury, which they vent at the port employees, the poor saps.

This is not unusual. Getting in and out of Vieques can be a real hassle sometimes due to the ferry's frequent delays and breakdowns. You could fly there from Fajardo airport or from the international airport in the San Juan metro area, but most Viequenses could never even dream of affording plane travel—certainly not on a regular basis, and many tourists who go to the island are backpackers on a shoestring budget. Whenever the ferry breaks down, all of Vieques might as well be under house arrest.

Twice the size of Manhattan and located to the east of the main island of Puerto Rico, Vieques had most of its land occupied by the US Navy at the start of World War Two for use in war games and target practice, and as munitions depot. An unprecedented mass civil disobedience campaign from 1999 to 2003 forced the Navy to close down its firing range in the island’s eastern half. I had visited Vieques several times as a journalist since the 1990s, when local residents expressed to me their feelings of frustration and hopelessness after decades of efforts to get the Navy to leave and let them be, and witnessed in April 1999 how a small group of protesters started a wildcat sit-in inside the firing range. The protest snowballed into a massive non-violent movement of defiance that turned all of Puerto Rican society upside down and got noticed all over the world.

Now the Navy target practice and war games are a thing of the past. The island has a new generation of teens too young to have heard bombs falling a few miles away from them, or to have seen the desobedientes stepping off the ferry, coming by the hundreds, from Puerto Rico’s Isla Grande and even from the USA, trespassing by sea and land into the territory occupied by the Navy, many of them getting arrested and sent to federal prison.

After victory in 2003 the international peace movement pretty much forgot about Vieques, faced with more urgent issues, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Most of the Puerto Rican activistas returned to their normal lives, as those four years of relentless and exhausting anti-Navy activities strained the family relations and professional careers for many of them almost to the breaking point. So, what ever happened to Vieques? How is life after the Navy? I was about to find out. I had not set foot there in six years.

Stuck in Fajardo, I search for ways to kill three-plus hours. The ferry terminal is only a stone’s throw away from posh mega-resorts and luxury marinas to the north, but there is nothing to suggest tourism in this scruffy, working class part of town. I remember the town being more lively. The Delicias Hotel, right across the street from the pier, used so much by travelers who had to take the early morning ferry, is now closed, an abandoned decaying eyesore. There is only one business within walking distance: a lackluster bar on the ground level of what used to be the Delicias. There is a ceteria in the pier, but going there is hitting rock bottom. If empanadilla de pizza washed down with cola does it for you, then you are welcome to eat there.

The ferry starts to board its tired passengers at eight and departs just over half an hour later. We arrive at the pier at the Isabel Segunda village in Vieques’ north coast at about ten. There is no reasonable expectation of public transport this late in the evening. If getting to this island can be problematic, moving around on it is an even bigger issue. The roads of Vieques are not pedestrian-friendly or bike-friendly. And if you have a car, gas is extremely expensive. In Vieques, moving from point A to point B is almost always an issue, especially if you are on a tight budget.

My friend Elisa, a lifelong activist from the San Juan area, picks me up in a borrowed car, and as we drive to Esperanza, on the island’s southern half, she tells me things. Crime is skyrocketing. Last year there were over a dozen murders, and the
police made not one arrest. There is around one murder a week this year so far. The last murder victim was grotesquely mutilated and displayed on Facebook.

Interestingly enough, no tourist has ever been touched by this violence, except for an occasional burglary here and there. There is a consensus among the population, even among the lowliest cacos and hoodlums, that any violent crime committed against a tourist would amount to a kind of collective economic suicide for Vieques.

We pass by herds of horses as we drive to Esperanza. Elisa informs me that the murder before the latest one had been caused by a dispute over these animals. You can see horses all over Vieques, grazing and lazily hanging out in pairs or small groups. Uninformed tourists call them wild horses, but they all have owners, and the owners always know where they are. For tourists it is simply delightful to see them lounging about on the beach and in town. But for many residents they are a real bother: they eat harvests, defecate in public places and block traffic, causing car accidents especially at night.

I leave my things in the house where I’m staying, and then we’re off to dinner. We drive by the boardwalk at Esperanza, lively with tourists consuming and spending. She suggests that we go someplace else: “the food here is expensive and bad”. The “boom” of Navy bombs, which ended for good 15 years ago, has given way to another boom, that of real estate, speculation and gentrification. Well-off white Americans come here to start businesses and employ friends they bring along with them, leaving the most humiliating and menial jobs to the locals. That is, when they hire any locals at all.

We are back at Isabel Segunda. We stop in a street corner where a Viequense called Geigel cooks hamburgers under a tent. Geigel works at the Vieques-Fajardo ferry and also runs a farm in the island’s south. On weekend nights he makes a little extra cash with hamburgers, which are popular among those looking for homemade fare at proletarian prices. I’m told he also runs a photo studio, but I will believe it when I see it. How does he find the time? Geigel puts cheese on my burger, and more and more meat. The sandwich is enormous: it’s the size of a zip code, a hamburger that could kill Burger King. It’s simply delicious, but eating it makes me fear I have just exceeded my cholesterol quota for the whole week.

The following day we hop from one farm to the next. We start at Geigel’s, on the north side of the road between Esperanza and Luján. Although he incorporates some ecological techniques in his farming, it’s a conventional non-organic operation. Geigel plants guava, passion fruit, basil, mamey, salad greens- including four varieties of spinach, mustard, okra, tomato, lilac pepper, pumpkin, and other crops, his main customers being local supermarkets and hotels. He used to provide Wal-Mart with 5,000 pounds of eggplant per week, but currently production is scaled down somewhat as Geigel is busy reorganizing the farm, and applying for Agriculture Department help in putting an additional 25 acres into production and with hiring full time staff.

Next door to Geigel’s farm, on the west side, is the Hydro Organics farm. Vanessa Valedon, the co-owner, shows us around. The 30-acre lot has squash, green beans, papaya, moringa, avocado, coconut, eggplant, pineapple, guava, romaine lettuce, and lemongrass, as well as a tilapia pond. The labor force consists mostly of woofers, internationalist backpackers that work in sustainable farms all over the world in exchange for no more than food and lodging. The farm is run
according to the principles of permaculture, a discipline that combines agriculture, ecology, architecture and design.

We finish our tour in Monte Carmelo, a squatter community with an extraordinary history of struggle, hardship and solidarity. Founded by the charismatic grassroots organizer Carmelo Felix-Matta, this community was built on high ground seized from the Navy. I first went to Vieques in 1989 as part of a contingent of University of Puerto Rico students that participated in what is now remembered as the Battle of Monte Carmelo, the decisive confrontation with the US Navy in which the community earned its permanence.

I had not been to Monte Carmelo since then. Things have changed quite a bit in these last 25 years. Gentrification has set in: rich Americans have moved into the neighborhood, and in general the place has been overrun by people, both rich and poor, who would rather not be found. But this hillside still has the crazy look of an impromptu community, a planner’s textbook case of how not to do things.

We drive uphill on an unpaved road that is impassable when it rains to to the farm of Jorge Cora. The farm is on a hill summit with a majestic view of the island’s south coast, including the gorgeous Sun Bay public beach and Mosquito Bay, the latter famous for the nighttime glow of its waters, caused by bioluminescent microorganisms. Cora lives in this hilltop in a modest wooden structure with no electricity. He plants vegetables, lettuce, peppers, neem, beets, basil, tobacco, and other crops. He uses no pesticides and no industrial agricultural inputs, and gets no government help of any kind. Proud of his independence, Cora lives fully according to his beliefs, in the tradition of Thoreau and Puerto Rico’s rural jíbaros of yesteryear and today.

But is this produce safe to eat? After all, Vieques was mercilessly bombed for sixty years from both sea and air. And the explosions lifted up deadly clouds of dust polluted with heavy metals and toxic chemicals used in ordnance, and even particulates from uranium ammunition. These clouds of death moved downwind to the west, blanketing the civilian zone. The cancer rate among Vieques residents is 26.9 percent above Puerto Rico’s average, according to PR Health Department statistics compiled in the 1990s. Peer reviewed in situ studies carried out by the non-governmental organization Casa Pueblo determined that there are toxic military residues in the civilian zone, and that these are traveling up the food chain. These toxins accumulate in the fatty tissues of herbivores like cattle and chickens and eventually end up in the bodies of humans who eat them.

Professor Arturo Massol, Casa Pueblo’s in house biologist, told me further studies are needed in order to reach a conclusive verdict regarding the safety of produce grown in Vieques. Casa Pueblo’s credibility and standing are beyond question. For its crucial role in preventing strip mining in Puerto Rico’s central mountain range, its participation in the anti-Navy struggle in Vieques, and many other contributions in the fields of ecology and culture, the organization won the
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Magical Humanism
The Lost Legacy of García Márquez

By Dr. Cesar Chelala

I met Gabriel García Márquez and Fidel Castro at the Convention Palace in Havana during a medical meeting I attended in Cuba in the early eighties. I also had the honor of being extensively quoted in one of his articles, “Con las Malvinas o sin ellas,” (With or Without the Malvinas). My article (which I had signed under the pseudonym of Juan Montalvo, to protect my family in Argentina) was a long interview with two leaders of the “Madres de Plaza de Mayo” organization in Argentina. They are a courageous group of women who still search for their sons and daughters who were “made to disappear” by the Argentine military ruling the country.

In his essay, García Márquez reflects on two of his main preoccupations: the abusive relationship between big industrial powers and Latin American and Caribbean countries, and the state of human rights in the continent. Although comments on his life and work talk primarily about his literary achievements, they don’t deal with political aspects.

“The world has lost one of its greatest visionary writers — and one of my favorites from the time I was young,” said President Obama in a statement, and called the author “a representative and voice for the people of the Americas.” President Obama is absolutely right about this: in his long career as a writer Márquez has always sided with the less fortunate and against those who abuse them.

In his Nobel acceptance presentation García Márquez elaborated on some of the topics that haunted him. He talked about two presidents that were suspiciously killed in airplane accidents, the reasons for which were never discovered. One of them, Jaime Roldós Aguilera, a president of Ecuador known for his firm stance on human rights, died in a plane crash on May 24, 1981, with his assistants and their spouses.

John Perkins, former economist at the World Bank and author of Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, believes that Roldós was assassinated because his plan to reorganize his country’s hydrocarbon sector would have threatened U.S. interests. Months after Roldós death, another Latin American leader and close friend of Márquez, General Omar Torrijos, Panamá’s President, also died in a suspicious plane crash. John Perkins believes that it was the result of a CIA-conducted assassination.

García Márquez also refers in his lecture to three countries in Central America, punished by long and bloody wars. “Because they tried to change this state of things,” he said, “nearly two hundred thousand men and women have died throughout the continent, and over one hundred thousand have lost their lives in three small and ill-fated countries of Central America: Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. If this had happened in the United States, the corresponding figure would be that of one million six hundred thousand violent deaths in four years.”

Because of foreign intervention, progress in many Latin American countries has been delayed for decades, a painful reality I was able to see in several health-related missions throughout the continent. But I also saw the optimism and the desire for a better future in peoples punished by long and brutal wars. Márquez expresses this powerfully in his own words, “In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines or cataclysms, not even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistence advantage of life over death.”

It is that desire for a better life that I saw one day leaving my hotel in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, when a band of school children passed in front of me neatly dressed, singing on their way to school. I couldn’t but marvel that in the poorest country in the hemisphere, with persistent lack of water and material means, those children were able to proudly walk to school in their clean uniforms, their singing a manifestation of their optimism.

These facts make me reflect than the best way to honor the memory and keep the legacy of one of Latin America greatest writers is not only to remember the literary man but also the man who always expressed his concern for the dispossessed of the earth. CP

Dr. Cesar Chelala is a co-winner of an Overseas Press Club of America award.
Jesse Winchester: An Appreciation

By Daniel Wolff

It’s 2009. Jesse Winchester is 65. He’s a slight, gray haired man in a button-down shirt under a dark vest. As he begins to play a song he’s recently written, he looks directly out at the audience, dark eyes set back, head cocked slightly to one side.

He has a six-string acoustic guitar that he picks. It’s a slow, steady melody, and his guitar has this funny stop-and-start approach that keeps the beat but is built on almost full pauses. It’s like reluctant speech, like the guitar is a little shy and doesn’t want to intrude too much.

At first, he’s just singing sounds: a series of “whoas” in a light, rough voice, sweet but unpretentious. When he adds words, it takes just a few to set the scene: “The boys were singing shin-a-ling… You were turning 17.” As every star watches, “two teenagers fall in love.”

Which makes it 1959. Dion and the Belmonts’ “A Teenager in Love” has just been released. It’s from an era of rock & roll that people nowadays make fun of: doo-wop music, saccharine, silly, greased-back hair and fluffy prom dresses. But both the song, written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shulman, and Dion’s lead vocal are painfully in the moment: “Why must I be a teenager in love?” Starting with the wordless opening – his one-man version of the Belmonts – Winchester looks back and wonders.

He was fifteen when the song came out. A few years earlier, his family had moved to Memphis, as Elvis burst on a local scene already rich with the talents of Muddy Waters, Bobby Bland, Johnny Ace. It was a segregated world: black groups played at country club dances for white teens. A decade later, when the Band’s Robbie Robertson produced Winchester’s first record, his music was already looking back. “Brand New Tennessee Waltz” answered Patti Page’s “Tennessee Waltz” from 1950. “Love is mainly memories,” it insists, as its dancers are “literally waltzing on air.”

In this new song, the dancers do something similar, floating in space. As his guitar plays that stop-and-start beat, he sings in his shy voice how he was too shy, back then, to kiss her. So “shing-a-ling said everything for me.” He lays down the emphasis like a country preacher, lifting his eyebrows, and then explains how the old folks thought the teenagers were crazy: dancing to doo-wop’s nonsense sounds. And how the teenagers knew it wasn’t nonsense – and sang along.

At which point, Winchester sings what they sang, the chorus and title of his song: “Sham-a-ling-dong-ding.” His picking switches to doo-wop’s repeated chords, as he – this middle-aged man – echoes the sound of his adolescence.

By the second verse, time’s gone by. The old folks warn the teenagers their love won’t last. “All we’d get,” Winchester sings, “was soaking wet/from walking in the rain.” Which brings us to 1964. The Ronettes release “Walking in the Rain” during what music critic Dave Marsh has called the doo-wop revival. As the Beatles dominate the charts, and rock & roll heads for guitar loudness, Brill Building writers Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil team up with producer Phil Spector to write this throw-back, “girl group” tune. Complete with thunder-and-rain sound effects, it’s unabashedly emotional.

Bob Dylan was supposed to have killed off the teeny bop sound of the Brill Building. And Winchester, as one of the many “next-Bob-Dylans,” was supposed to help with the murder. But there was no denying the power behind Ronnie Spector’s voice as she prayed for a “kinda shy” guy. From the beginning, Winchester was drawn to the ache and humor in the songwriting tradition of Pomus, Weil, Carole King.

As the old folks dismiss the teenage music, Winchester bets they did “some sham-a-lang-a-ding-dong in their day.” Doo-wop, from the Edsels’ “Rama Lama Ding Dong” in 1958 through the Crystals’ “Da Doo Ron Ron” in 1963, used “nonsense” lyrics as code for something too private – maybe too sexy – to put into words. It served as a kind of secret, generational language.

As Winchester swings back into the chorus, we don’t know if he’s singing as one of the old folks then, or one of the old folks now. Before we can ask, the stop-start guitar interrupts, and he modulates up into his falsetto: an astonishing, urgent, and sweet sound coming from this gray-haired singer. After years, he insists, the “funny rhymes” of doo-wop still ring true. He translates the code: sham-a-ling-dong-ding means sweetheart. It means the love has lasted. And it means just what it says: “sham-a-ling-dong-ding.”

You can almost hear the song click closed. As he hits his last note, Winchester makes a little flourish with his picking hand. It’s a dance move that says, in a wordless way, songs end – but the music goes on.

Sound Grammar

By Jeffrey St. Clair


Albert Ayler’s music was far-out even within the context of the “New Thing,” the experimental jazz of the mid-sixties that was linked so intimately with the black liberation movement. To many, even some of his admirers, Ayler’s performances seemed insular and unapproachable, almost a kind of sonic solipsism. Then again, others have experienced soul-changing epiphanies while listening to Ayler’s music. His most esteemed acolyte was, of course, John Coltrane, who radically transformed his own style after being baptized in the redeeming waves of Ayler’s revolutionary sound. At his most ecstatic, Ayler sounds as if he is drilling right down into the core of the true American music, deep in the primordial strata of New Orleans. He blows like a blistering Buddy Bolden, a scalding Sydney Bechet, a fissioning Louis Armstrong – and, here’s a key part of his singularity, sometimes like all of them at once, which means that Ayler’s quest wasn’t about individual expression but toward something universal, a collective sound, as if he were the Jung of jazz. In his early years, Ayler was known as “Little Bird,” because his playing reminded older players of the intensity of Charlie Parker. Though Ayler was one of jazz’s most astounding innovators, an advocate of unrestrained tonal freedom, he got his start as a professional playing sax in the Chicago blues band lead by the mercurial Little Walter, the greatest post-war harmonica player. He was only 18 at the time of this extraordinary apprenticeship. Ayler’s music, even at its most extreme, never deviated far from the essential elements of the blues, as revealed on Holy Ghost. This remarkable collection, lovingly assembled by the late John Fahey’s magnificent Revenant label, contains nine cds of live recordings, outtakes and interviews over the tragically short arc of Ayler’s career. Across the vast sonic landscape charted by Holy Ghost, one thing remains constant: the emotional intensity of Ayler’s playing. Ayler’s sax, even at its freest, never sounds abstract or detached; it is always a tangible and urgent expression of deep feelings. Ayler’s music is at once political and spiritual, never more so than in his plaintive, spine-tingling performance at Coltrane’s funeral. A single collection, no matter how inclusive, couldn’t possibly distill Albert Ayler’s unruly genius into a definitive summary, but as testimonials go, Holy Ghost, has the capacity to convert even the sternest skeptics.

Lydia Loveless: Somewhere Else (Bloodshot, 2014)

Naughty prodigy from rural Ohio grows up a little, but remains bad to the bone. In the taxonomy of music genres, Lydia Loveless, now all of 23, is consigned to the country bin. Perhaps. But this is country music with a punk sensibility: fierce and reckless. Loveless can sing and she can rock, but her supreme talent is as a songwriter. She’s as gifted a lyricist as Rodney Crowell, but shorn of Crowell’s sentimentality. “Everything is Gone” is the best song about the decay of the Midwest since fellow Ohioan Chrissie Hynde penned “My City is Gone.” Loveless doesn’t sound nostalgic about the ravages of ruthless bankers and shithole real estate developers, but dangerously pissed off (“If I ever get back home, I’ll find that rich man’s and I’ll burn it down, I’ll burn it down.”) There are also plenty of songs about cheating, busted relationships, getting drunk, losing control — all standard country fare, except Loveless turns these rusty tropes inside out. Her songs are not cautionary tales, but apologetic endorsements of loving hard and living free. I have no idea what the country DJ’s will make of a song like “When Verlaine Shot Rimbaud” with its searing couplet: “Verlaine shot Rimbaud cause he loved him so / and, honey, that’s how I want to go.” I just know that I want to hear more songs like it. So don’t go just yet, Lydia.

Jon Langford and Skull Orchard: Here Be Monsters (In De Goot Recordings / Relativity, 2014)

The title is a reference to the old maps of Empire, where the territories beyond the borders of authority, the unruled world, were inscribed with warning signs. The imperial cartographers of Rome marked unknown lands with the phrase: HIC SVNT LEONES – Here be Lions. Lions became dragons in the Middle Ages, mutating to monsters for the seafarers of the Renaissance. In Langford’s suite of caustic songs, however, the real monsters seem to be manning the helm. The Welsh-born veteran of the venerable British post-punk band The Mekons now lives in Chicago, where he has pioneered the fusion of American roots music with the ferocious sound and attitude of punk. The new record lacks the ragged anarchy of the Mekons’ best work. It is more finely crafted and measured,. And, it turns out, that’s just fine. These songs are about living in a world were nearly every inch is delineated, inventoried, monitored, but still doesn’t make much sense, except, perhaps, when you summon the ghost of Hank Williams as your guide through the wreckage. In Langford’s blasted landscape, we encounter searchers and the faithless, war profiteers, street wanderers, separated lovers, victims and victimizers, the vanished and the lost, and those of us who find our consolations in old poems and rum. The music may not rock as savagely as it once did, but Langford’s lyrics are, if anything, more acrid, the ironies biting even deeper. His song, “Drone Operator,” is perhaps the closest any rock musician has yet come to capturing the black comedy of Terry Southern. Here Be Monsters may not be the album you want to take with you when exiled to a desert island, but it’s precisely the kind of music you want playing loud as you amble through the ruins of an empire in the grip of terminal entropy.
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