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CAMERON K. LEWIS

INDYPENDENT.ORG
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HOPE FOR 2012


The long race certainly provides an opportunity for the candidates better. For that I am grateful.

— DANIEL DIXON

AGAINST AUSTERITY

Responses to “Bloombergville 13 Released, Reflect on a Night in Jail,” July 8, online exclusive:

Thank you for your great and concise article, and your work. I would like to add that the city’s budget (which UFT president Malgrew negotiated with Quinn and Bloomberg behind closed doors late Friday night) has no official teacher lay-offs, BUT (big BUT!) about 2,600 teachers will lose their jobs to attrition. Why isn’t that, like, the same as teachers being laid off? All but in name. In short: Bloomberg and Quinn and Malgrew will force 2,600 teachers out of their jobs at a time when we should be hiring more teachers, as small class sizes are the most proven way to increase the quality of education?

— BLOOMBERGVILLE 13ER

If 1 percent of New Yorkers are making 44 percent of the income, in a city brimming with multi-millionaires and billionaires (including Bloomberg), why not tax those folks in order to pay for needed city services? New York City would no doubt safely fund any reorganization of instituting, austerity measures? You’d think an overwhelmingly Democratic City and Council wouldn’t have much problem raising that kind of idea, but...well, it ain’t so.

— CLOUDY
MURDOCH MASSACRES NEW YORK MEDIA

By Manny Jalonshi

Much ado has been made of Rupert Murdoch’s ethical issues in England, with the conservative billion-naire and his son James answering to a British parliamentary panel for News Corp. hacking the phones of child murder and terrorism victims alike. Less mentioned are Murdoch’s stake in U.S. media, accounting for over 75 percent of News Corp.’s revenue. In New York City, where his U.S. empire is based, Murdoch’s creep into daily life extends even past possible breaches of 9/11 victims’ privacy. In 35 years, the scandal-chasing publisher has gone from a new player in a rough-and-tumble media market to one of its most dominant and aggressive shot callers. Although News Corp. has scuttled its bid for a majority position in British Sky Broadcasting, no similar signs of retreat can be seen in New York City, where Murdoch’s reach extends from television to cable to a wide variety of newspapers and now even public education.

Murdoch’s foray into the Big Apple began with his purchase of the New York Post for $31 million in 1976. Prior to Murdoch, the paper supported traditional liberal causes and featured writers like Pete Hamill and Eleanor Roosevelt. Under Murdoch’s supervision the Post immediately converted into a scandal sheet with a far-right editorial line. Continuing to add to his newspaper holdings in the United States throughout the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, Murdoch also sought to expand into U.S. television broadcasting. In order to comply with FCC standards for television station ownership, Murdoch became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1985. He then bought six television stations from cash-strapped Metromedia, among them WNEW in New York. The station’s call letters were changed to WNYW (Channel 9 in New York) and it soon became the flagship of Murdoch’s broadcast empire (Murdoch also owns WWOR Channel 9 based just across the river in Secaucus, NJ). His cross-ownership of both a TV station and a daily newspaper in the same city violated FCC anti-trust policy, so in 1988 Murdoch sold the Post, a move Alexander Cockburn compared to “Dracula selling his coffin.”

While Murdoch turned WNYW into the centerpiece of the newly launched Fox Network, the Post’s fortunes plummeted. In 1993, industry analysts put the Post’s annual losses between $15 and $30 million a year. The paper has also been a chronic center of controversy, hawking bigotry and Murdoch’s conservative views.

Murdoch’s drive to dominate it from top-to-bottom accelerated during the past five years as he sought to establish the kind of hegemony over political and cultural life here that he achieved in Great Britain.

In 2000, News Corp. also bought two weekly newspaper groups — the Times, edger and Courier-Life companies — based in Queens and Brooklyn respectively. They were reorganized as the Community Newspaper Group, which now runs seven papers in Brooklyn and seven in Queens. When News Corp. purchased the Bronx Times and Bronx Times Reporter in 2007, its circulation of New York weeklies rose to nearly 300,000. That same year Murdoch made his boldest move to date, purchasing Dow Jones & Company and its subsidiary the Wall Street Journal.

Murdoch not only changed the Journal’s style, but he also created a Greater New York section as a direct competitor to the New York Times, the publication he loathes and would like to supplant as the agenda-setting “paper of record.” New York City has four of the country’s 15 biggest daily newspapers, two of which are owned and operated by Rupert Murdoch. The Post’s circulation tops 520,000. The Wall Street Journal has the nation’s highest daily circulation, more than 2.1 million.

In 2009 Murdoch once again extended his reach into local media, buying out the Brooklyn Papers, a newspaper group run by the Post’s former Brooklyn Editor Gersh Kuntzman. Kuntzman, who had once decreed the influence of “billionaires” in the local news market, was content to rejoin his former employers and increase News Corp.’s weekly circulation in New York to 340,000. Murdoch’s New York City weeklies already show signs of falling in line with the Post’s conservative, scandal-sheet editorial style.

Perhaps even more worrying in the long term for New Yorkers is Murdoch’s increasing reach into their public school systems. The New York State Department of Education has announced that it plans to award a $27 million no-bid contract to Wireless Generation, a News Corp. subsidiary, to gather the academic and personal information of students throughout the state in order to track their academic progress. Local education activists have gathered hundreds of signatures on petitions urging State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli to nix the deal which they believe was facilitated by Joel Klein, the former NYC schools chancellor who recently went to work for News Corp. as vice president for educational technologies.

Manny Jalonshi is author of Hustlers and the Idiot Swarm.

NO YELLOW JOURNALISM IN THIS RAG!

Subscribe today for $29 per year
By Ari Paul

ISMAILIA, EGYPT — For 26 years, Mohammed Gharib Abdullah has been proud to be a mechanic at the Timsah Shipbuilding Company on the Suez Canal, a symbol of Egyptian economic and engineering might. He works in Ismailia, a desert city of 750,000 inhabitants near the midpoint of the 101-mile-long Suez Canal that connects the Mediterranean and Gulf of Suez. In early July, however, Abdullah stood outside the gates of his idled factory. He and 8,500 other ship and port infrastructure builders were on strike, claiming that a cronу of ousted President Hosni Mubarak reneged on a wage increase they won a few months ago. “Most of the laborers love their work,” he said. “All that we dream of is to live at a basic level of dignity.”

These workers are employed by seven separate subsidiaries of the Suez Canal Authority (SCA), which is headquartered in Ismailia. Unions may receive on average one eighth the wages of the more than 10,000 workers who are directly employed by the authority, which facilitates the passage of nearly 20,000 ships a year, or 8 percent of world shipping traffic. SCA workers and their families also enjoy government-paid private healthcare facilities and heavily subsidized education, benefits denied to subsidiary employees.

Emboldened by their critical strike during the pro-democracy uprising that ousted President Hosni Mubarak in February, the workers struck again in April demanding parity with SCA workers, Suez Canal Authority chief Ahmed Fadel agreed to a 40 percent increase in wages and a 7 percent bonus, noting that the funds were already in his budget. But on June 1, the agreed date of implementation, Fadel reneged without explanation even though SCA revenues are projected to increase by 11 percent this year, to $5 billion. The subsidiary workers walked off the job, while the SCA workers, who are members of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), rallied to support their colleagues. The ETUF has more than 200,000 members, while the SCA employs around 5,000.

The canal workers are not the only ones discovering that despite the strong popular movement that ended three decades of Mubarak’s U.S.-backed rule, the Egyptian revolution is far from finished. Labor organizing is on the upswing in Egypt but workers are frustrated by the fact that economic elites have moved swiftly to counter independent worker organizing and the governing military council is cracking down on labor protests. In Abdullah’s opinion, “Nothing changed at all. It’s almost like a counter-revolution.”

STRIKE BREAKERS

The strike in the Suez is one such example. Far from displacing solidarity, Egyptian Trade Union Federation workers were allegedly paid by the authority to attack striking workers, according to the news website Ahram Online. On July 4, 2,000 soldiers clashed with protestors, a strategy used by the military council to break a strike at a Cairo garment factory in mid-July. When protesters felt threatened by air when workers approached the SCA office to voice their grievances. “Why are peaceful protesters being met with live rounds?” asked Mohammed Faramawy, a mechanic at the Timsah Shipbuilding Company.

Fadel is widely known as one of the many corrupt officials under Mubarak who retains his position of power, but he’s only part of the system that is still in place. For a true economic revolution to take place in Egypt, as Hosam el-Hamawy, one of the country’s most famous bloggers, has written that these types of “workplace Mubaraks” have to be thrown out by the class they repress. Egypt’s history of labor unrest goes back to 1170 BC when tomb builders laid down their tools after Pharaoh Ramses III withheld their rations. Fast forward to the 1952 revolution led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers, that in post-Mubarak Egypt the labor code remained the same, “with all the rights for the employers and few for the workers.” A female worker at the Turkish-owned Mega-Textile recounted how a manager ascribed a striking comrade in April. Dozens of workers said that while they are eager to form independent unions, the foreign company owners threaten them with termination, demotions and transfers as scare tactics. According to the U.S.-based Solidarity Center, which is part of the AFL-CIO, independent unions are virtually nonexistent in the zones and workers are regularly forced to sign unfair contracts that are inserted into work sites this is true, but the major hurdle is culture. Labor and education reforms to undo decades of legacy: There have been instances where factory owners threaten them with termination, demotions and transfers as scare tactics. According to the U.S.-based Solidarity Center, which is part of the AFL-CIO, independent unions are virtually nonexistent in the zones and workers are regularly forced to sign unfair contracts that are used if they engage in job actions.

A TAXING UNION

In Cairo, independent unions, including 55,000 real estate tax collectors (which in 2009 formed the first independent union outside state control since 1957) and primary and vocational school teachers, have formed a new labor federation to challenge the ETUF. The upstart federation’s political demands are direct: End legal roadblocks to forming new independent unions, raise the minimum wage (it is around $18 a month for public sector workers, although many teachers do not receive even this paltry salary), and seek for collective bargaining rights for these new unions.

Abdel Hafiz Tayel, the co-founder of the teachers’ union, insists on a broad set of labor and education reforms to undo decades of liberalization. This includes ending the use of private schooling, which he argues has led to the education gap between rich and poor in the country, forcing anyone outside the economic elite to low-wage industrial or service jobs. Vocational schools need more investment, he said, in order to train workers for more skilled, and thus higher-paid, work. But achieving these political goals seems out of reach. With a myriad of Radical and left parties competing for power in the fall elections, the views of workers are not taken seriously. In general, revolutionary groups currently engaged in dramatic standoffs with the police and military are more focused on a speedier transition to formal democracy and trials for former officials.

Kamal Abbas, the lead coordinator of the once-banned Center for Trade Union and Workers’ Rights, responded, “The ETUF’s monopoly on organizing and forming a strong counterweight to the economic elite were of greater importance.” “We don’t say we won’t work with a political party,” he said during an interview at the center’s office in south Cairo. “We can work with them, but not make them a part of our independent movement.”

That’s all well and good said Joel Beinin, a professor of Middle Eastern history at Stanford University and an expert on Egyptian labor, but there is still a gulf of opinion between the labor movement and people like Ahmed Mair and the April 6 Youth Movement. “The ETUF is a reluctant partner that doesn’t want to compete and thrive. What they want is a piece of the global pie that has been kept out of their reach. The New York Times in July, for example, described how young entrepreneurs who stayed in Egypt after the uprising instead of going abroad are receiving start-up funds from the U.S. State Department and Agency for International Development.

In fact, veteran Middle East journalist Thanassiss Cambanis has reported that there is already a split inside April 6, with breakaway leader Tarek El-Khoury accusing Mair of countering international investors. The labor movement, on the other hand, is dissatisfied with a lack of support and sees an economic safety net and workplace protections. Beinin says they want a system that “is going to guarantee social benefits [and a] reasonable livelihood.”

HURDLES AND ROADBLOCKS

New unions have been able to form since Mubarak’s ouster, but the Ministry of Manpower and Migration puts up bureaucratic hurdles. The ETUF also throws up roadblocks by telling employers they shouldn’t recognize new worker groups. Above all, there is nothing new in the labor code that could force bosses to raise wages, implement better safety protocols or concede more benefits. Kamal Abbas said this is part of Mubarak’s legacy: There have been instances where factory strikes have resulted in wage demands being met, but they are few and far between.

Meanwhile, a key problem standing in the way of a new workers movement is internal division, especially when it comes to the canal workers were not considering coordinating a general strike with other manufacturing workers. One textile worker, who identified himself as Mohamed, trembled as he told the New York Times in July, for example, described how young entrepreneurs who stayed in Egypt after the uprising instead of going abroad are receiving start-up funds from the U.S. State Department and Agency for International Development.

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WHERE DO I GET MY COPY OF THE INDIPENDENT ?

U.S. Money Spurs Spread of HIV Criminalization Laws

By Julie Turkewitz

A collection of new laws in African countries has opened the door to imprisoning people with HIV who practice safe sex, mothers who transmit the virus to their children and even those who have HIV but are undiagnosed.

In recent years criminalizing HIV transmission and exposure have been enacted or are pending in regions all around the world. Supporters of these laws say they are designed to address concerns about the rapid spread of the virus. But organizations ranging from Human Rights Watch to the United Nations warn that criminalizing either transmission of or exposure to the virus undermines public health efforts and endangers the lives of already vulnerable individuals.

Many public health experts are critical of these laws. “Criminalizing is not prevention,” said Federica Stines, Africa program officer at the International Women’s Health Coalition, a U.S.-based nonprofit that works with women’s health groups in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Stines, who has spent more than a decade promoting sexual health rights in Africa, added: “Now there wants to know their status if they could be arrested?”

A decade ago, not a single African country had a law that specifically criminalized HIV exposure or transmission. Now, at least 27 African nations have legislation that punishes it.

Funding for the development of these laws can be traced to the U.S. Agency for International Development. In 2003, USAID allocated $34.7 million to launch the Action for West Africa Region (AFWARE-HIV), a five-year project aimed at “contributing to the control of the HIV epidemic in the West Africa region.”

USAID tasked AFWARE-HIV/AIDS with reducing HIV infection and improving the health of Africans living with HIV. The program was managed, implemented and evaluated by the North Carolina-based FHI (formerly Family Health International). In 2004 FHI, whose work is heavily concentrated in West and Central Africa, convened a workshop in Chad’s capital of N’Djamena. The purpose was to adopt a legislative template that would protect Africans against HIV infection and encourage testing and education. Representatives from government AIDS bodies from 18 West African countries attended.

(According to Forbes Magazine, FHI is one of the 200 largest charities in the United States, with $369 million in revenue in 2008, more than 80 percent of which came from government support. According to its website and various reports, FHI is a 40-year-old organization currently active in 60 countries, almost all underdeveloped, and has expanded from its initial focus on public health care to include development, education, civil society and the environment. FHI also includes a for-profit subsidiary, Novella Clinical, “a Clinical research organization focused heavily on oncology and medical devices,” with projected revenues in 2010 of more than $100 million, following the Triangle Business Journal.)

DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

In just three days, the Chad group convened by FHI produced a model law that African governments quickly adopted. Today, at least 14 African countries have laws based on the U.S.-funded template, according to Daniel Grace, a doctoral candidate at the University of Victoria, British Columbia who is writing his dissertation on the creation of the model law.

Grace criticized the speed with which the template was created and disseminated. "Processes of legislative consultation and the meaningful engagement with civil society and country stakeholders take time and institutional commitment," he said. "But too often the important contributions of civil society, including publics infected and affected by HIV, are marginalized to tokenistic forms of participation."

The template contains a number of questions of diagnosis. In countries where HIV-positive status can subject a person to social isolation, exile, physical abuse or death, this provision has dangerous implications. Stines said women will be the main victims of this criminalization trend. They are more likely than men to know their HIV status; more likely to be the victims of rape; more likely than men to know their HIV status; and less likely to be able to insist on condom use.

"These laws do nothing to protect human rights," said René Bennett-Carlson, an attorney at the NYC-based Center for HIV Law and Policy. Punishment regardless of precautions taken to stop transmission.

Second, the model law penalizes partners who do not disclose HIV status to a "spouse or regular sexual partner" within six weeks of diagnosis. In countries where HIV-positive status can subject a person to social isolation, exile, physical abuse or death, this provision has dangerous implications. Stines said women will be the main victims of this criminalization trend. They are more likely than men to know their HIV status; more likely to be the victims of rape; more likely than men to know their HIV status and less likely to be able to insist on condom use.

"These laws do nothing to protect human rights," said René Bennett-Carlson, an attorney at the NYC-based Center for HIV Law and Policy. "The discouragement of condom use, the failure to disclose HIV status, according to the Center for HIV Law and Policy, Punishment ranges from a fine of a few thousand dollars to imprisonment for as long as 40 years.

"Laws do not just happen," said Grace. "It is important to hold actors accountable and to make visible the processes by which dangerous and dangerous has been passed across the African region."

Julie Turkewitz writes a blog about AIDS and social justice issues for the nonprofit Housing Works at julieturkewitz.com.
There is one simple truth about the discussion of the looming U.S. debt crisis: it is largely a compendium of half-truths, distortions, myths and outright lies. For example, it is true that the U.S. debt is unsustainable, which is why so many economist and budget-cutting fever? Far from it. While U.S. debt is at one of its highest levels ever in terms of gross domestic product, the interest payments in 2011 on the $14.3 trillion public debt will be a mere $386 billion. This is barely more than the $364 billion paid way back in 1998. In real terms, the U.S. economy has grown nearly 30 percent since then. Rock-bottom interest rates on U.S. government debt account for the low payments today, but the practical effect is that servicing the debt as a percentage of GDP is the lowest it’s been in decades.

Or what about hysterical headlines like “U.S. Debt Default Looms” (courtesy of NPR) unless Democrats and Republicans agree to raise the debt ceiling? They are completely untrue. Richard Wolff, professor of economics emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, says, if there is no agreement by Aug. 2 to allow the U.S. Treasury to borrow more funds, then “the government instead would choose among cutbacks on various expenditures such as social welfare, stronger labor rights and aid to local governments. But this would mean redistribution of wealth down-wards instead of upwards. Therefore, saying recession makes it sound part of the normal boom-and-bust cycle, one we will overcome through the magic of the market as we have so many times before.

HAPPY CREDITORS
If no deal on the debt ceiling is reached this week, the rest of us, such as the millions depending on their portion of the $2.3 trillion in Social Security payments scheduled for Aug. 3. But the creditors will be kept happy, and there will be no default because that is how government works in a capitalist economy. And even if the impasse dragged on, the feds could dip into $550 billion in reserves, including more than $400 billion in gold at current prices, to keep making debt payments.

One blatant lie is that Republicans and Democrats, the Congress and the White House are serious about reining in budget deficits to reduce the long-term debt. They are not. Of course, the standoff is based on the default because that is how government works in a capitalist economy. And even if the impasse dragged on, the feds could dip into $550 billion in reserves, including more than $400 billion in gold at current prices, to keep making debt payments.

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Cocaine, the drug fueling the trade that’s left thousands dead in Mexico and Central America since 2007 and which 1.4 million Americans are addicted to, originated with two species of the coca plant grown in the South American Andes. Ninety percent of the U.S. market for cocaine is fed by Colombia, with the rest largely produced by Peru and Bolivia.

An estimated 310 to 350 tons of refined cocaine were trafficked out of Colombia last year, enough to make a rail of nose candy that would encircle the earth twice. Along with exporting cocaine northward, Colombia has become a laboratory for failed drug war policies that are finding their way to Central America and Mexico.

In July 2000 President Bill Clinton signed Plan Colombia into law, initiating the anti-drug production and trafficking operation that has cost U.S. taxpayers more than $7.3 billion to date. U.S. military bases have been established in Colombia under the plan, as have extensive air patrols, pesticide spraying and surveillance. Because of the violence, some 2.5 million Colombians have been displaced.

“The lessons of Colombia are being ignored in many ways. You’ll have mainstream analysts saying Colombia is the model to win the drug war. If Colombia is winning then what are the Colombians trafficking?” drug war expert Sanho Tree, a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C., told the Independent.

“Basically, our policy is to fracture and to break up the drug organizations, making them smaller, weaker and less manageable,” Tree said. “And it’s folly. Breaking up those big monopolies ... created a huge vacuum for smaller operators to fill, and we can’t track small operations, much less disrupt them.”

Prior to the escalation of the U.S.-backed drug war, large traffickers, such as the Medellín Cartel led by Pablo Escobar in the 1980s, ran much of the drug trade.

Now, smaller outfits have filled that void. Just as busting up the big “drug monopolies in Colombia ended up democratizing the drug economy,” Tree explained, “if you end up weakening and fracturing the big fish in Colombia, including the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), which claimed more than 15,000 combatants a decade ago, works closely with the Colombian military and wealthy landowners by attacking guerrilla forces and dissidents. At least 1,000 soldiers and police charged with human rights abuses joined the AUC over the years, supplying the outfit with intelligence and guns. An official demobilization of paramilitaries began in 2003, but the paramilitary and successor groups continue to operate. They are protected from extradition to the United States despite their involvement in the drug trade, and stand accused of thousands of extrajudicial assassinations. In addition to the drug trade, paramilitary orchestrate violent land seizures against small farmers and have moved into cultivating African palm trees for biofuel production on the stolen land, colluding with high-ranking military officers and in a few instances receiving funding from the U.S. government, according to The Nation magazine.

UNDERCOVER

“At the beginning of Plan Colombia, campesinos would plant out in the open, but those were sitting ducks, and it was easy pickings for the fumigation planes. Now it’s shade grown and intercropped with other crops, and the plants are also adapting in other ways that result in better yield per kilo of leaf,” Tree explained. The United States is focusing less on fumigations these days, in part because it’s harder to locate these smaller hidden plots of coca.

While a handful of indigenous tribes legally produce a tiny amount of coca for government-sanctioned cultural purposes, most of the coca grown in Colombia is used to produce cocaine.

For peasants in Colombia, farming coca is generally more lucrative than growing fruits or vegetables. Part of this is due to the fact that coca and paste are easier to transport than other agricultural products, especially for isolated farmers far from roads.

Tree explained that many coca farmers have a small “lab” behind their house to transform the coca into paste cocaine. The lab consists of a wooden floor with a black plastic tarp over it, a 50-gallon drum of gasoline and ammonia. The coca is often chopped up by a weed-wacker, and processed with the chemicals into paste, which is later turned into cocaine to be sold in the U.S. markets.

In a country of 46 million, Tree speculates, hundreds of thousands of small, rural cocaine growers are turning from coca farming and coca paste production. The people who grow coca are “the expendable ones,” he said, “they are fixed targets for law enforcement and military efforts, whereas the traffickers are more mobile.

“If you’re a coca farmer you can be wiped out, and the traffickers can buy from another peasant.” The farmers play a crucial, but risky role in the business, receiving a fraction of the money the trafficker receives. Snuggling the drugs carries own obvious risks, but traffickers tend to get compensated in proportion to the dangers they face, since once cocaine gets across the U.S. border, its price increases dramatically.

The drug war both in the Andes and in Mexico and Central America has resulted in displacement of poor communities and expansion of U.S. regional power. Since 2006, Mexico’s drug war has left more than 46,000 dead and displaced some 230,000.

Drug interdiction efforts in Mexico and Colombia have transformed Central America into a key hub linking South America to Mexico and the United States. According to the L.A. Times, in 2010 more than two-thirds of U.S.-bound cocaine shipments passed through Central America, tripling in four years. Traffickers are also shifting production facilities. In March of this year, a major cocaine processing lab was discovered in Honduras, whose government fell to a U.S.-backed military coup in 2009. Central America has become one of the deadliest parts of the world, with approximately 79,000 homicides committed annually, a figure that is growing.

The “paramilitarization” of the conflict in Mexico and Central America is also replicating Colombia’s experience. Paramilitaries have been used to carry out a dirty war on behalf of the Colombian state, and the “Paris,” as they are known, now run much of the drug trafficking there. Tree said, “People in Mexico are saying we need paramilitaries to chase down drug trade leaders and this runs the risk of repeating the same nightmare as in Colombia.”

The right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Central America have transformed Central America into a drug production and export hub that is linked to the world’s cocaine markets.

By Benjamin Dangl

GREEN GOLD: Coca leaves are an important cultural symbol in the Andean region, but they are also the source of the coca trade.

CULTURE WAR

Another casualty in the war on drugs has been the criminalization of the coca leaf and its growers. As Bolivian coca grower Leonilda Zunata told me in 2012, “If coca is a grape and through a long process you make wine. It’s the same with coca. Coca is coca and through a long process you can make cocaine.”

Cocaine is derived from the coca leaf, but there is a big difference between the natural plant and the refined drug. It is one of the main arguments of coca farmers against the eradication of their crop. Coca leaves have been used in the Andes for millennia to relieve hunger, fatigue and sickness, to increase oxygen flow to the brain at high altitudes, and as a religious and cultural symbol.

Across Bolivia, people chew the small green leaf like tobacco and drink tea made from it. Dried leaves are sold in small bags across much of Bolivia and Peru. The U.S. Embassy in La Paz, Bolivia, which has historically been a backer of coca eradication efforts in the country, suggests chewing the leaf alleviates altitude sickness. Besides its traditional uses, coca has been an ingredient in anesthetics, cough syrups, and, more recently, energy drinks like Coca-Cola.

(Continued on page 12)

THE STORY BEHIND PLAN COLOMBIA

By Afrin Gupta

Plan Colombia is at heart a joint campaign between the Pentagon and Colombia’s military. Up to 1,400 U.S. military personnel and mercenaries at a time have worked hand-in-hand with Colombian forces on surveillance, interdicting drug trafficking, fumigating and eradicating coca cultivation and raiding makeshift workshops that produce the cocaine.

In 2009, two RAND Corporation analysts concluded, “strategic cooperation and large amounts of U.S. aid failed to stem the production of narcotics. Nearly two-thirds of global cocaine continues to be produced in Colombia.” They note the real success of Plan Colombia has been against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a guerrilla army that controlled large swaths of Colombian territory in the 1990s, shutting down much of the country’s oil production.

Coffeepot administration officials blamed the rise between the drug war and counterinsurgency. Gen. Barry McCaffrey, who oversaw U.S. forces in Latin America prior to heading the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy in the late 1990s, labeled the FARC “narco-guerillas.” Yet human rights groups and journalists have documented for years the Colombian military’s alliance with paramilitary death squads that were manufacturing and transporting cocaine and heroin or were in the pay of drug cartels. U.S. officials dismiss this as isolated incidents from a distant past, but in 2010, John Quirama, a Colombian soldier in a counterinsurgency unit, provided testimony on how the military works with drug cartels by protecting smuggling routes and carrying out raids and murders at the behest of drug cartels. Quirama also accused a Colombian army colonel of running his own cocaine production facility.

U.S. military aid has been used to beef up Colombia’s ground forces by 60 percent and create elite counternarcotics units, fumigation teams, and protect oil facilities. Washington has also supplied Colombia with advanced communications equipment, naval warships and hundreds of aircraft and helicopters, which are managed by the Narcotics Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Bogota.

The main result has been a weakening of the FARC, which is estimated to have 9,000 fighters, half the numbers they had a decade ago. Paramilitaries continue to kill peasant, indigenous and union leaders, but Colombia’s oil is flowing again, with production reaching 884,000 barrels a day in March, as guerrilla attacks on pipelines have declined from 270 in 2001 to a couple dozen a year. For its part, the United States has cemented its hold on Colombia, gaining access to seven new bases in 2009 that will allow it to conduct “full-spectrum operations throughout South America,” as explained in a U.S. Air Force document.
Hondurans Pay the Price for Failed War

By Ryan Devereaux

B

y the squeezing the illicit drug trade from below in Colombia and above in Mexico, U.S. policy has caused violence to balloon throughout Central America, destabilizing a region that has long been subject to American meddling.

During a March 30 Pentagon briefing, Gen. Douglas Fraser, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, described the “Northern Triangle” — comprised of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — as “the deadliest zone in the world,” outside of conflicts like Afghanistan. The Northern Triangle boasts a murder rate four times that of Mexico and 10 times the United States.

As of June 2011, El Salvador had already logged 17 official massacres. In Guatemala, officials estimate that drug cartels have free rein in as much as 60 percent of the country. The mid-May discovery of 27 murdered farm laborers near Guatemala’s border with Mexico — allegedly killed by the Los Zetas cartel — prompted President Álvaro Colom to declare a state of siege in the area for the second time this year. Civil liberties were curtailed and the military was granted the right to arrest without warrant anyone it suspects of conspiring against the government. In Honduras, where armed forces have been drafted into the counter-narcotics efforts, Fraser said the murder rate is the highest in the region, at 77 deaths for every 100,000 inhabitants.

LAND, SEA AND AIR

Pressure from the militarized drug wars in Mexico and Colombia has caused Mexican-based drug trafficking organizations to diversify their trade routes in part by exploiting the institutionally weak nations of Central America. They take advantage of porous borders, such as the disputed Petén region in Guatemala, a 600-mile-long boundary with just eight formal checkpoints. Clandestine airstrips are sprouting in remote jungles. In Honduras, the U.S. government reported that drug flights skyrocketed following the June 2009 coup that forced out President José Manuel Zelaya. In addition to land and air routes, traffickers use boats and even specially constructed submarines to move drugs from Colombia to Central America and Mexico.

According to the U.N. 2010 World Drug Report, some 200 metric tons of cocaine moves through Central America and Mexico annually, earning regional cartels at least $6 billion each year. An estimated 84 percent of the cocaine consumed by Americans last year passed through Central America, up from 23 percent five years ago.

The recent U.S. push into Central American began in 2007 with the Merida Initiative, purportedly a program to improve law-enforcement communication, support institutional reforms and protect human rights. Critics say Merida underwrites President Felipe Calderón’s war on drugs in Mexico, which has cost the lives an estimated 46,000 people since 2006. Mexico received $1.3 billion in U.S. funds from 2008 to 2010, while security spending under Calderón has increased 99 percent to $9.3 billion by 2009, according to the Washington Post. Around $260 million was set aside during the same time frame for Central America — most for security services — through a separate aid package known as the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARI).

For both 2011 and 2012, the Obama administration has requested an additional $100 million for Central America under CARI, mainly for weapons, security equipment and counter-narcotics training. But during a meeting in Guatemala City in June that brought together the seven Central American presidents as well as those from Mexico and Colombia, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said all U.S. security aid to Central America would be upped to $300 million for 2011, a $40 million increase over 2010. The Economist reported that international donors also promised lavish security packages. The Inter-American Development Bank, which already funds police training programs, prisons in Costa Rica and mobile phones for Honduran police, pledged $500 million more over two years. To put this in context, all of Central America spent $4 billion on security services in 2010 (which itself is a 60 percent increase in nominal dollars since 2006).

NEOLIBERAL CRIME CONTROL

Dollar amounts may illuminate the militarized U.S. counter-narcotics effort in Central America, but it does not explain why the general population lacks any semblance of security or stability. How society is affected by the drug war can be seen through the lens of Honduras, which continues to suffer the repercussions of the U.S.-supported coup in 2009. Anthropologist Adrienne Pine, author of Working Hard and Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras, claims U.S. security funding is “basically neoliberal crime control that implies the criminalization of poverty, the criminalization of dissent and the militarization of police forces shielded by local authorities.

According to Bird’s research, approximately 400 hired guns operate out of the Honduran military’s Rio Claro base, home to the Honduran Army’s 15th battalion. There the private militias receive training and support from U.S.-backed Honduran forces and reportedly wear police, military or civilian uniforms when carrying out assassinations, kidnappings and forced evictions.

Bird documented 21 killings in the Aguan in 2010, but says, “I’m sure that it’s much higher.” The victims are often outspoken community members defending their land and denouncing abuses by palm oil producers.

Campesinos are often ganned down while walking or riding a bicycle along a roadway, says Bird. They are also shot at “passing cars that belong to the palm oil planters and have palm oil security and sometimes police in them.” In other cases, individuals are snatched out of the community and tortured, their bodies eventually dumped elsewhere. Bird tells of one individual who escaped and accused palm oil guards, police and military officers of abducting and torturing him.

Reporters in Honduras are likewise in the crosshairs. The Committee to Protect Journalists has documented the killing of 12 media workers since March 2010. It issued a special report last year alleging a pattern of “bottched and negligent investigative work into the killings.” In the latest incident, Nery Geremías Orellana, a correspondent with Radio Progreso and a resistance member, was shot in the head in July as he rode his motorcycle to work in the western state of Lempira. The International Federation of Journalists notes that last year one third of all journalists killed in Latin America died in Honduras, making it one of the most dangerous places in the world to cover the news.

SPILLING SECRETS

Just weeks after the coup, the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa sent a secret cable to Hillary Clinton on July 24, 2009. Published by Wikileaks, the cable declared that in the forced removal of Zelaya, “there is no doubt that the [Honduran] military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup against the Executive Branch.” Nonetheless, the Obama administration backed the coup-leaders by leaving in place almost $200 million in aid programs (though it did suspend $16.5 million in military aid) and by claiming that State Department lawyers could not determine if the coup met legal requirements for U.S. action, despite the unambiguous embassy cable.

The U.S. government is also well aware of the links between Honduran security forces and politicians and drug and weapons trafficking. A 2008 cable released by Wikileaks noted that U.S. supplied arms, including
By Michael McCaughan

MEXICO — The scale and cost of America’s failed war on drugs is painfully evident to Mexicans as the death toll since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderón sent the army into battle against drug cartels, has topped 46,000. The four main drug cartels have morphed into an ever-shifting array of allied and feuding groups now numbering 12. They have become household names — Los Zetas, La Familia and the Gulf and Sinaloa Cartels — and have extended their reach beyond Mexico’s borders; they are suspected of beheading more than 2,000 Mexican citizens last year in northern Guatemala in May. The rising violence has created openings in the upper ranks of the cartel, and new leaders spend less on ostentatious lifestyles now and more on buying the complicity of soldiers, politicians and police. State institutions are increasingly corrupt, with perhaps 25 percent of cops on the cartel payrolls, an alarming figure given that Mexico has half a million police, the third highest in the world per capita.

The rot extends to Mexico’s National Migration Institute, the body charged with aiding migrants. It has purged 550 employees, some 15 percent of its workforce, as many were facilitating the “sale” of hundreds of migrants, mainly Central Americans, to drug gangs who in turn sell women into prostitution or ransom them. Families often cough up thousands of dollars for the release of a kidnapped relative. It’s a golden business opportunity, considering the estimated 500,000 people who cross the Guatemala-Mexico border each year. Migration officials have an endless supply of desperate men, women and children who cease to exist once they enter Mexico in clandestine conditions. More than 300 mass graves have been uncovered, ranches close to the U.S.-Mexico border this year.

Mexico is one the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, with 12 deaths in the past year.

RETRIEVE INTO SILENCE

Statistics don’t tell the full story, however. The casual brutality and the impunity enjoyed by its perpetrators have diminished trust and provoked an existential crisis. Citizens live in a state of defenselessness as violence now threatens everyone. Mexicans in affected areas retreat into silence just as Chileans during the Pinochet dictatorship. The media have toned down coverage of drug gangs with some newspapers taking the drastic step of publishing only drug cartels’ uniform choice. The governor said he was “enormously worried” at how disaffected youth were seduced by the glamour of expensive brands, adding that he wished they would wear clothes with images of national heroes like Emiliano Zapata.

The irony of this was not lost on the Zapata remembrance, led a national patriotic crusade, deliriously likening him to Winston Churchill leading the fight against the Nazis. There is no comparison. Calderón declared war on an invisible enemy without calculating the consequences or determining what victory might look like. Nor did he make an adequate survey of the battlefield or measure the moral and military capacity of his troops. Calderón is fully committed to a war in which the rising body count is taken as evidence of success in a macabre dance of death.

The key problem, as Sicilia noted, is that the enemy is “inside as well as outside.” One of the main obstacles to securing the peace is Calderón’s righthand men, Genaro García Luna, the country’s supercop who runs the Ministry of Public Security. During the previous administration of Vicente Fox, García Luna created and ran the Federal Investigative Agency, which was disbanded in 2006 after being thoroughly infiltrated by the drug cartels. García Luna took up his current post in 2006 and has remained in charge despite repeated allegations of links to the Sinaloa drug cartel based on recorded telephone conversations and emails. Discontent has grown within the ranks and security officials have accused García Luna of naming corrupt police to top positions; a journalist investigating his sudden ascension of wealth received death threats.

In June, Javier Sicilia, the moral conscience of a weary nation, led a national mobilization through 12 states. The objective was to launch a six-point Agreement for the Peace and Welfare of the Nation, launched by the Zapatista’s Zapatista’s otona campana, its effort in 2006 to unite Mexico from below, which met with little success.

MANAGERS OF MISFORTUNE

Sicilia has urged the government to acknowledge that the country has been devasted by a “futilely planned and poorly executed” war. He has laments the government’s perverse attempt to criminalize victims of violence by insinuating they were not innocent. A similar logic allowed Argentinians to look the other way when thousands of young people were kidnapped, tortured and murdered by security forces in the 1970s. The government has become, says Sicilia, “managers of misfortune,” lacking initiative and imagination.

In his landmark open letter to politicians and criminals, Sicilia linked the rise in drug trafficking to the ideology of self-interest, competition and “limitless consumerism.” He has called the political class to set aside petty differences and the pursuit of power to forge an alliance around a coherent plan of action. With elections looming next year, Sicilia urged parties to agree on a candidate of unity to create a new political life.
The drug legalization debate continues to rage on, with arguments for and against it abound. In the United States, the War on Drugs has been a multi-decade endeavor, aimed at reducing drug use and the associated social harms. However, critics argue that this approach has been largely unsuccessful and has had unintended consequences, such as increased incarceration rates and a rise in the illegal drug market.

**LexisNexis: Drugs Are the Love I'm Thinking Of**

In August I went to Burning Man festival. We drove for days in the desert, surrounded by a sea of thousands rising on a endless flatland. People from all over the world. Stories of survival, meeting old friends, drinking too much and waking up in a daze the next morning. I walked through the streets, led by strangers, and found myself in a land of imagination, where you can be anything you want. It was a trip that I would never forget.

**LexisNexis: Managing Addiction**

Laws have been passed to govern the use of drugs, and these laws have been in effect for decades. However, the effectiveness of these laws has been questioned, and many people believe that they should be reformed.

**LexisNexis: Managing Addiction**

In Portugal, decriminalization of drug use has reduced the social harms caused by drug use and not by that of nourishment. The country has seen a decrease in drug-related deaths and a decrease in the number of drug users. However, it is important to note that Portugal’s approach is not without its critics and that the effectiveness of such policies is still being evaluated.

**LexisNexis: Managing Addiction**

The legalization of drugs has been a controversial issue, with both supporters and opponents. Supporters argue that legalization would reduce the social harms caused by drug use, while opponents argue that legalization would increase drug use and lead to other negative consequences. However, the debate continues, and the effectiveness of legalization policies is still being evaluated.
Dag had been a rough one, and I was already feeling the effects of the nosedive into the prison of despair. Just as I was about to surrender to the darkness, I heard a voice... "You can't give up, Dag. You've got to keep fighting!"

I looked up and saw a figure standing in the light, a figure I had seen before, a figure who had been there for me in my darkest moments. It was my father, and he was holding a candle, a symbol of hope and light in the darkness of my soul.

"Dag, you've got to keep fighting," he said, "or you'll never find the light at the end of the tunnel."

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of the candle on my skin. And then, as if guided by some inner strength, I took the first step on the road to recovery, to the road of hope and light.

The road of hope and light... it was a long and winding road, filled with twists and turns, obstacles and challenges. But with each step, with each victory, I saw the light growing brighter and brighter, guiding me through the darkness.

And so I kept fighting, with hope in my heart and the light of the candle shining in my soul. For it was the light of hope that would lead me to the promised land, to the place where I could be free of the darkness that had once held me captive.
The green leaf also sustains Bolivians on a variety of levels, from miners risking their lives daily in tin mines to farmers in the altiplano, a high altitude plains region. Coca aids protesters in long, arduous marches, street mobilizations and hunger strikes. Bolivia’s most powerful social movements and political parties have emerged from the farmers’ fight to grow coca and resist militarization.

Much of the violence against coca and coca farmers in Bolivia ended when Evo Morales was elected president in 2006. A coca farmer or cocalero, Morales and his political party emerged from the coca union struggle against U.S.-led eradication. Under Morales, a different kind of control was achieved.

The Morales administration is continuing and expanding cooperative eradication efforts aimed at controlling the central region of Chapare in October 2004. In established coca growing zones in Bolivia, families are allowed to grow 1,600 square meters of coca. Cooperative eradication between security forces and farmers has created a much more peaceful environment than times when violent eradication was the norm.

The 1,600-square-meter limit is based on what the government calculates to be sufficient for subsistence, for traditional use and in meeting the national legal demand for the leaf.

Despite Bolivia’s efforts, cocaine production has increased according to Kathryn Ledebar, the director of the Andean Information Network, a drug policy think tank based in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Ledebar explained that coca growers in Bolivia have adopted techniques that originated in Colombia that are “less expensive, harder to detect and a lot more efficient.”

The new method involves using pulverized coca leaves with a high level of cocaine alkaloid, resulting in a more lucrative operation that requires less space.

“In Bolivia what you have is kind of a splintering into micro-trafficking organizations,” Ledebar said. “It doesn’t matter if you squash one small group, competition is so varied, it’s a great deal harder to detect.”

However, Ledebar said, there is “a less violent dynamic here, smaller level trafficking and no indication of the huge above-the-board corruption that has characterized Mexico, Central America and Colombia.”

The rise in anti-drug efforts stems from Ciudad Juarez in Mexico to La Paz, creating a pretext for intervention in other nations. It also provides an excuse for the suppression of indigenous and radical movements, as was the case in Bolivia.

In that impoverished Andean nation, the coca leaf is an indigenous and cultural symbol of resistance against Washington’s imperial and the violence of the war on drugs. As Leonidora Zurita told me, “This is not a war against narco-traffickers, it’s a war against those who are working to survive.”

Benjamin Dangl is the author of Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America, and The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia.

“Peace and the Reconstruction of the Country,” beginning in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico’s drug violence capital. The pact calls for demilitarizing the conflict, rooting out corruption, emphasizing education and participatory democracy, attacking poverty and the lack of jobs and defending human rights.

In addition, the document demands official recognition for the victims of violence, promoting “active memory” through public testimony and tributes in public spaces.

Sicilia met government officials in late July to begin dialogue on the peace movement’s agenda before submitting practical ideas and legislative proposals to congress in September.

The first issue under debate was the call for a truth commission on behalf of victims of violence, a proposal quickly dismissed by officials; “what is needed is a revision of the investigating procedures and accountability mechanisms which are already in place” countered Rubén Fernández, deputy minister for parliamentary affairs at the Interior Ministry. This negative response to one of the least radical measures sought by Sicilia’s movement is an indication that the government has little appetite for meaningful reform. As presidential elections loom in 2012, the outgoing administration appears determined to stick with the only policy it knows — bloodshed.

Michael McGaughan is a writer and researcher based in the Burren, Ireland. He is working on a biography of Mumia Abu-Jamal.
Legalization

Continued from page 11

IF YOU WANNA GET DOWN

Cocaine poses the most complex issues. Occasional users can do it relatively safely, but hardcore users often tend toward extreme binges rather than regular-dose addiction. That would make maintenance impractical.

“Is there a treatment for crack/cocaine?” asks Rivera. “In fact, there is no maintenance other than meds (licit and illicit), acupuncture, or some form of stress reduction to counter the dysphoria associated with over-depletion of dopamine receptors.”

But, she adds, “Disfunctional crack and cocaine use dramatically declined from the 90s without treatment.”

The British group Transform UK, in its 2009 study “After the War on Drugs: Blue Print for Regulation,” suggests trying to move the cocaine market to milder forms such as coca energy drinks and tea.

That’s not necessarily wishful thinking. A general principle of prohibition is that it makes the most potent forms of a drug the most value-for-weight profitable for dealers.

The loopholes available in this framework are limited. The Dutch coffeeshops are “not legal, but tolerated,” St. Pierre points out. They can sell cannabis openly, but they still have to buy it from illegal growers or smugglers. (The far-right Dutch government is trying to limit coffeeshops to residents only; Amsterdam’s mayor opposes that proposal.)

Ending prohibition would also mean downsizing its enforcement apparatus. Federal, state, and local governments spend somewhere between $40 billion and $70 billion a year to interdict drugs and arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate offenders. That money funds both police departments and the economies of rural towns where prisons are the biggest employers.

“I’m of the opinion that moving out of drug prohibition is dismantling it even an option?” says Joyce Rivera. “Discussions around models of regulation avoid the core question of, in whose interest? If you can punish the poor [user] for the pain of the middle class, then why would you change a system that is working pretty well for the profiteers?”

The other side of that coin is the illegal drug trade. Statistics about it are speculative and often inflated — estimates of annual U.S. marijuana sales range from $10.5 billion to more than $110 billion — but it certainly pumps up the economy in several parts of the country, from the ghetto crack and heroin markets of Baltimore to the marijuana-growing areas of the Emerald Triangle and Appalachia.

Clifford Thornton of Efficacy, a Connecticut-based drug-policy group, supports ending prohibition, but says it would do more harm than good without a “Marshall Plan” to employ the people who now work in the drug trade.

“How are we going to replace the illegal market created by Prohibition?” he asks. “We’re probably talking about hundreds of thousands of people.”

This could conceivably be funded by taxes combined with the savings on law enforcement prohibition — is dismantling it even an option?”

CRIME PAYS

Any country that legalized drugs would run afoul of a network of international treaties. The 1961 Single Convention requires prohibition, and a followup, 1988 Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, requires signatories to ban possession.

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This could conceivably be funded by taxes combined with the savings on law enforcement and consumption.”

Policy elements that reduce harm, says Rivera, would include “educate, educate, educate, as in ‘drug, set, and setting’; develop, regulate, and enforce quality standards; and tax foreign and domestic production, sale, and consumption.”

Legalization would be a major social experiment, says Sterling, so it would have to allow for testing different approaches.

“I am certain that I don’t know what model will work,” he says. “I don’t have the answer and I don’t know anybody who does. It would be nice if all of these were neat soluble packages. Unfortunately, they’re not.”

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$2-a-gram tax on marijuana would bring in $6 billion to $13 billion a year nationally. Any legalization system must also balance harm reduction and regulation with the nature of drug use. Heavy drug use often comes from a place more dionysiac than responsible — at best, a desire for sensory and emotional extremes; at worst, self-destructive patterns.

Eric Sterling suggests that psychedelic drugs, for example, could be handled like wilderness canoe trips or skydiving — permitted with a trained, licensed, insured guide. Many people seek danger and adventure, he says, but “you can’t make it foolproof.”

Any legalization system must also balance harm reduction and regulation with the nature of drug use.

Legalization system must also balance harm reduction and regulation with the nature of drug use. Heavy drug use often comes from a place more dionysiac than responsible — at best, a desire for sensory and emotional extremes; at worst, self-destructive patterns.

Eric Sterling suggests that psychedelic drugs, for example, could be handled like wilderness canoe trips or skydiving — permitted with a trained, licensed, insured guide. Many people seek danger and adventure, he says, but “you can’t make it foolproof.”
The Invention of Debt

By Irina Ivanova

P

undits like to point to an overreliance on debt as a distinguishing feature of our modern age. Right before the crash of 2008, U.S. consumer debt equaled the country’s GDP, representing the first time in history. In 2010, Americans’ total credit card debt was surpassed for the first time by the debt held in student loans. This year, the total value of those loans will pass $1 trillion.

Anthropologist David Graeber’s Debt: The First 5,000 Years is timely, but it would have been just as prescient during the colonization of the Americas or Ancient Rome. As Graeber masterfully demonstrates, debt has played an integral role in human relationships since time immemorial. Debates over debt forgiveness have defined societies, and the repercussions of those choices are visible today in our language, conventions and laws.

Graeber, a professor at Goldsmiths, University of London, has a reputation as a scholar with a great resonance outside the academic realm. As such, Debt is a re-freshing, revealing and often witty look at economics that places the “dismal science” firmly back in the context of human history. Graeber sat down with The Independent to discuss his new book and shed light on our troubles with money and the latest global upheavals.

IRINA IVANOVA: What’s wrong with the world? DAVID GRAEBER: We’re all brought up with this story: once upon a time there was barter, and that was inconvenient, so people had to invent coins, and then credit systems — this leads us to Wall Street and complex financial instruments. But this is backwards. Actually, credit systems came first. Coinage was invented thousands of years later. And barter really only occurs when [a society] used to have money and it goes away for some reason — Argentina, Russia, someplace like that.

II: So, though we talk about debt in modern times, why is there such reluctance to apply this morality to institutions?

DG: History has pivoted back and forth between periods dominated by virtual money — credit — and periods dominated by actual physical money, gold, silver or bronze coins. When money is assumed to be a social relationship or credit arrangement, it’s much harder to treat debt as a sacred principle, because money is a promise, and promises can be renegotiated. During these broad periods of history where most money is paper or promises, or sticks, or clay, there’s always social control to prevent credit crises from getting out of control.

What we saw in the current credit crisis is partly the effect of this hyper-charged neoliberalism, where people were told, everybody has to think of themselves as a corporation; everything is capital. Everything is an investment. In fact, financial corporations got to do things that even other corporations didn’t get to do, like make up money. I strongly suspect that if you look at why people were taking all these crazy mortgage loans they couldn’t possibly repay, on some level the logic was, okay, well if we’re all going to be little corporations, I’ll make up money, too.

II: The media has framed the recent debt crises as unprecedented — but you show that financial crises have existed for as long as we can remember.

DG: In ancient Mesopotamia, where they first invented interest-bearing loans, they would lead quite regularly — every generation — to extreme crises, where farmers grew increasingly indebted, to protests … Society would start to break down. And the reaction of governments was always debt cancellation.

In periods where gold and silver are the dominant form of money, virtually to be periods of great empires and slavery — they don’t forgive debts. In fact, debts become one of the major ways of turning most people into slaves.

II: You draw a connection between cash and violence.

DG: The first objects of exchange were people. It had been assumed that people were absolutely un-equivalent to anything else. If you marry my sister, you owe me a sister at some point, or if they have kids, one goes back to my clan — these sort of arrangements. But the idea that my sister would be equivalent to 27 gold bars is completely insane. You only make that leap when you have systems of slavery, which come from war. A great finding of the book is just how many of our economic, legal and political institutions go back to ancient warfare, and by extension, slavery.

Our law of property goes back to Roman law, and it’s unlike any other legal system in the world, because it assumes property is a relation between you and a thing in which you have total power over that thing. This idea only crops up at exactly the time that Romans conquered the Mediterranean and thousands of slaves came pouring in. And slavery is a relationship of absolute power between two people that, therefore, turns one of those people into a thing. In fact, that’s how slaves are defined — talking things.

II: How do you reconcile the fact we’re an empire whose money is entirely virtual — a situation that never appears in your book?

DG: Yes, there’s a problem, isn’t there?

My own prediction, if history runs true, is those empires are going to break down. Once we go back to an understanding that money is just a social arrangement — it’s just a promise, an IOU — there’s no intrinsic moral difference between that type of promise and any other promise people make. That’s exactly what people who are demonstrating in Greece and Spain are talking about.

We learned in 2008 that debts could be made to vanish if really important people want them to. Once you know that, they can’t play the same games they’ve always been playing. But at the very dawn of this new age of virtual money, the first thing they tried to do is create this giant global bubble, currency rationing — the IMF, the World Bank, and so forth — which were essentially built to protect creditors from ever having to face default from any debtor. There was a huge global movement that completely rejected that logic, and that’s the movement that has now reappeared in Europe. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s big response to the threat of the Arab Spring, other than beefing up security and raising salaries? Debt cancellation. Just like in ancient Mesopotamia.

That intimate relation between empire and financial structures and militarism is still with us. What will it take to make this imperial structure dissolve? Is it in the nature of capitalism that it can only work in a situation of large empires? Most of the defining features of capitalism strike me as things that won’t last too long in this age of virtual money. The idea of perpetual growth — that’s obviously hitting its ecological limits anyway, but it’s very much tied to an assumption that all money makes money.

For people for much of world history, if they came to see America today, they would assume that most people here are slaves. Aristotle would not seem to think there was much of a distinction between selling yourself as a slave and renting yourself, and if you look at the history of wage labor it tends to emerge as slave rentals. While we’ve gotten rid of formal slavery, we’ve put the slave in our laws and our ideas of freedom. If we get rid of that, institutions like wage labor, which define what we find objectionable in capitalism, won’t really last, and there’s every reason to believe we’ll move on to something else.

For the full interview, visit indydependent.org.
**Labor Wars**

*The Civil Wars in U.S. Labor: Birth of a New Workers’ Movement or Death Throes of the Old*

By Steve Early

Haymarket Books, 2011

**China’s Got Class**

“The Making of the Chinese New Working Class”

Ludlow 38
38 Ludlow St.
Through Sept. 4

By Mike Newton

Perhaps you’ve heard of this new, post-industrial economy we’re supposedly living in? It’s an appealing concept — a world based on ideas rather than things — but it doesn’t sync up with a rather shocking reality: the global, industrial working class is bigger now than it’s ever been. The exhibit “The Making of the Chinese New Working Class,” currently on display at Ludlow 38 through September 4, and a free, multilingual minibooklet available on ludlow38.org. The exhibit melds social-issue documentary, natural-history-style categorical display and postmodern art ideology — a triad of elements that fit together like old friends, but which can be surprisingly hard to come by. The curators have heroically stuffed a museum lobby’s worth of material into Ludlow 38’s unassuming storefront space (as you look around, see if you can avoid hinging into the glass display cases — I couldn’t). There are poignant photographs of families living together in cramped rooms — the flotsam of global pop/consumer culture (is that bed made out of Toy Story toy boxes?) sometimes peeking up amidst the yellowing end-products of what appears to be a case full of identity documents—passport, social security card, driver’s license—and the people who make our toys and computers, of a reality so tightly connected to — and yet so distant from — daily life in America.

Ludlow 38 is located in lower Manhattan, on the edges of Chinatown — a place where it’s not uncommon for Chinese immigrants to live in close quarters while working low-paying jobs, navigating the high Manhattan rents by cramming multiple families into tiny apartments. It seems a bit strange to mount an educational exhibition on the lives of migrant Chinese workers in a place where many migrant Chinese workers live their lives. But maybe that’s the point — solidarity and community, the sharing of space and ideas across large distances. Not a lecture and not a lesson, just life.
For those on the post-Seattle left, consensus decision-making, participative pol- icies and direct action have become de rigueur. Under banners such as “we make the road by walking,” much of the U.S. left focuses at least as much on process as on changing the world. While this model of prefigurative politics hearkens back to the old slogan of “building the new world in the shell of the old,” its current organizational form would be unrecognizable to anarchists from a hundred years ago.

In Oppose and Propose, activist-academ- istic Andrew Cornell traces the history of the contemporary (re-) adoption of prefigurative politics through a study of Movement for a New Society (MNS). A nationwide organization committed to the principles of democracy through a study of Movement for a New Society (MNS). A nationwide organization committed to the principles of nonviolence, MNS contributed to numerous social movements during the '70s and '80s (including efforts against the Vietnam War and the expansion of the nuclear industry), while also spending much of its energy building co-operative businesses, communal housing and other counter-institutions. Despite the tension between those focused on lifestyle politics and those inclined to storm the barricades, (some) members of MNS saw these institutions as not simply alternative models of living or working, but also as bases for further activity. Although it never gained critical mass or managed to become a multi-racial organiza- tion, it did provide a model for responsive and organizing, Cornell opens up space for discussion with former members of MNS rather than simply about them. In Cornell's discussion with MNS members, they even respond to and critique the short history of the organization that forms the first part of the book.

The term praxis refers to an organic link between theory and practice, where theoret- ical reflection leads to action, which serves as fodder for further reflection, which then informs additional action, and so on. In Oppose and Propose, Cornell puts praxis into practice, offering insights of relevance to those interested in changing the world and not merely interpreting it. Pocket-sized and beautifully illustrated, Oppose and Propose is worthwhile reading for all those interested in organizing for a better world.

The Cuban medical education model, so eloquently described in this book, has not merely transformed health care in much of Central and South America. It has shown doctors and medical students who work in the unjust and dysfunctional U.S. health care system that another world is possible. — Steffie Woolhandler, MD, MPH, professor of public health, CUNY; visiting professor of medicine, Harvard Medical School

“Venezuela and Cuba clearly show that the basic human right of access to medical and health care in time of need is not dependent on the level of economic development. They should be considered points of reference for poor countries that want to break with the underdevelopment of health.” — Vicente Navarro, MD, PhD, professor of health policy, The Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University; editor-in-chief, International Journal of Health Services

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Labor

Continued from p. 35 as well as the continuing California healthcare civil war with United Healthcare Workers West — the “mother of all trusteeships” as Early termed it.

Early’s Civil War pulls back the purple curtain and reveals an autocratic wizard (Stern) pulling the levers and wreaking havoc. It should be said, and Early agrees, that the SEIU is a vital institution that has lifted millions of low-wage largely Black and Latino service workers out of abject poverty through the benefits of union membership, while also advocating for better healthcare practices like patient to staff ratios. The union has a clear plan to organize the un- organized where most other unions are content to coast on a dwindling supply of dues money. The SEIU is also not as monolithic as Early thinks, and as any large organization goes, has factions both left and right. Early advocates for what writer Robert Fitch calls “union democracy”; the conflict between bottom-up member democracy and top-down bureaucracy.
Cairo Yarn

Scheherazade, Tell Me a Story
Directed by Yousry Nasrallah
Distributed by ArtMattan Productions

BY KENNETH CRAB

The title of Scheherazade, Tell Me a Story sets up a bold and fanciful frame of reference by relating its protagonist, Hebbu (Mona Zakki), the inerrant host of a popular TV talk show renowned for tackling touchy political subjects, to the famed storyteller of One Thousand and One Nights. Scheherazade was wedded to a king who married a new virgin each night and had her killed a king who married a new virgin each night. When dawn came, she left the tale hanging, and the captivated monarch allowed her to live until the next evening when she presented as a rite of passage — the scene where Karim (Hassan El Raddad), the deputy editor-in-chief of a government-owned newspaper, is unofficially told that he will be promoted if he can get his wife to soften the socially critical tone of her show.

Reluctantly, Hebbu agrees to “stick to things the government can’t be blamed for,” and she invites women to share some of their extraordinary personal experiences in front of the camera. The film is structured around three of these testimonies, which are rendered in straightforward flashbacks. Of course they contain revelations of prejudice, injustice and abuse that spill over in unacceptable political resonance and build up to the point when Hebbu’s own cathartic suffering — the scene where Karim beats her bloody is distastefully presented as a rite of passage — makes her part of the sisterhood. Host and guest, she gains access to the nirvana of reality TV; all Scheherazade ended up finding was love.

Notwithstanding their agenda, the filmmakers fail to create any genuine scenes of female bonding, most notably in the second flashback testimony, where they trace three sisters hysterically vying for the affections of a young hunk to its criminal climax over an account of the eldest sister’s fascinating cohabitation with the woman who used to be her guard in prison. The multiplicity of tales fosters superficiality of characterization rather than narrative complexity. The leads muster no credibility as journalists, all men are depicted as boorish and lecherous types instead of people, and the symbolism proves so heavily-handed it occasionally borders on the grotesque. (The opening credit sequence is visualized as a slow-motion Food Network commercial, with extreme close-ups and eye-popping close-ups of steely forks poking at moist, verdant produce.) Every now and then hints of melodrama in the style of the early works of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar peek through, but those remain far too tentative and clumsy to lift Scheherazade’s patchy expose anywhere near the discursive level of its illustrious namesake.

Reading Fitch’s union democracy essays in past issues of New Politics, I was struck by his metaphor that unions are “black boxes whose institutional contents — the relations between members and leaders and its legal infrastructure — can be ignored in explaining their behavior.” Fitch’s union critique burns even deeper than Early’s, and Fitch asks if the reason why Madison-type protests are so rare is a product of declining union roll and internal democratization misogyne, but their film feels and falls so flat it makes one wish they could have taken a few master classes in narrative expression with Scheherazade.

The premise is workable enough, if somewhat overwrought. Seven months into Hebbu’s marriage to Karim (Hassan El Raddad), the deputy editor-in-chief of a government-owned newspaper, he is unofficially told that he will be promoted if he can get his wife to soften the socially critical tone of her show. Reluctantly, Hebbu agrees to “stick to things the government can’t be blamed for,” and she invites women to share some of their extraordinary personal experiences in front of the camera. The film is structured around three of these testimonies, which are rendered in straightforward flashbacks. Of course they contain revelations of prejudice, injustice and abuse that spill over in unacceptable political resonance and build up to the point when Hebbu’s own cathartic suffering — the scene where Karim beats her bloody is distastefully presented as a rite of passage — makes her part of the sisterhood. Host and guest, she gains access to the nirvana of reality TV; all Scheherazade ended up finding was love.

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“The nightmarish tragedy that befell the Hickman family, as well as the actions of the dedicated activists who fought to save Hickman’s life by revealing the institutional foundations of that tragedy, are vividly depicted in Joe Allen’s important and moving history.”
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—Alex Heard, author of The Eyes of Willie McGee

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Hollywood’s Hard-on for War

Transformers: Dark of the Moon
Directed by Michael Bay
Distributed by Paramount Pictures

By Nicholas Powers

Director Michael Bay films a woman prancing up the stairs and cooing to a guy in bed, “My hero needs to wake up.” The next two and half hours of screen time, cars and jets transform into robots and blast Chicago into a shooting gallery. Welcome to Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon — a dumb, loud movie which would be forgivable if it was only stupid.

A closer look reveals the film is a sexist, racist, nationalist Pentagon commercial that feeds off of male anxiety. It promotes vitality through war and reaffirms white supremacy. It uses women as tokens of male potency. It universalizes American foreign policy. And it just plain sucks. But is the film’s over-the-top military masculinity reprehensible?

The first goal of a narrative is to have the audience identify with the protagonist. When we first see Sam Witwicky played by Shia LeBeouf, he is out of work, a recent college graduate who is given lunch money by his girlfriend. He goes on job interviews, learns that evil robots are planning to again seize the planet and enslave humanity. He transforms from mundane paper-pusher to global savior and rejoins his Autobot allies. His male anxiety of being impotent is released into a cathartic fight against the enemy. Running to war he tells his girlfriend, “I just want to matter.”

The troubling thing is how that enemy is perceived. When you look closely the Autobots aren’t aliens, they’re Americans. They act out American foreign policy by blasting a secret Middle Eastern nuclear plant, which obviously stands in for Iran. Decepticons aren’t aliens, they’re Arab, African or wild animals. We first see Megatron, the Decepticon master-villain, as a refugee-terrorist in the North African desert with, hold your breath, a rag on his head. He growls and runs like an enraged Bob Marley. They are uniformly black.

Almost every Decepticon is ethnic. In the first battle scene, Decepticons chase the Autobots on the highway. One has dreadlocks and runs like an enraged Bob Marley. They are racially homogenized by a surface layer of militaristic racism. Black men are valued only as comrades in arms. Black women don’t exist in this world. The one Latina is a stereotypical hurricane of Spanish who wears a “hoochie-outfit” and is called a Latin melt-down. The one good woman in the camera’s gaze is Witwicky’s girlfriend Carly Spencer played by English model Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. She’s not just white, she’s Anglo-Saxon white, blazingly white, originary white. She is so white that after running through a giant alien robot war that turned downtown Chicago into grimy rubble; her face and her clothes are still white.

Her beauty is often studied in slow motion as are the Transformer acts of violence. Slow motion is cinema’s money-shot because it is when the narrative tension between characters is released in sexual display or graphic brutality. As the movie plods on the major villains are killed by the Autobot leader Optimus Prime in gruesomely scowling scenes of robot decapitation. At the end Witwicky also gets his hands dirty by killing the rival for his girlfriend, the oily, double-crossing Gould. In Bay’s world, war answers everything. It’s as if the film was directed by German proto-Nazi Ernst Junger.

Hollywood teaches male audiences that war cures anxiety and the enemy is not only wrong but often is not even human. With every Hollywood movie that glorifies war and military hardware, our nation is nudged a degree closer to fascism. Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon has aroused millions of movie goers with the spectacle of violent carnage in slow motion. As the movie plods on the male display or graphic brutality.

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