

The Washington Socialist
Articles from the April 2014 Issue
Archived October 2016
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[Welcome to the April 2014 edition of The Washington Socialist](#)

Wednesday, April 2nd, 2014



Welcome to the April edition of the *Washington Socialist*, the monthly newsletter of Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America. The issue was finalized several days into the month to accommodate coverage of, and perspective on, the April 1 DC primary election, which you can read immediately below.

There are several time-sensitive events to be noted:

Midwest Academy veteran Steve Max, a DSA vice chair, facilitates a DSA Webinar next Monday, April 7 at 7 p.m. and again at 9 p.m. The topic is “Talking About Socialism” and the mission is developing quick-response answers to questions about democratic socialism and about DSA. It’s the “elevator speech” but with variations depending on how many floors you have. Any member in good standing can RSVP to engage with this webinar on a personal computer at <http://www.dsausa.org/calendar>

DC Metro DSA’s general membership meeting is at 1:30 p.m. Saturday, April 12 at the West End Library, 1101 24th St NW, Washington, DC. The closest Metrorail station is Foggy Bottom. The Steering Committee meets there earlier, at noon, and members are welcome to attend. Visit our [Meetup page](#) for any updates. Our “Socialist Salon” discussion group meets at 6:30 Thursday evening, April 17 at Hunan Dynasty on Capitol Hill, 215 Pennsylvania Avenue SE. It’s also on our Meetup page, above.

Economist Thomas Piketty, whose new book *Capital in the 21st Century* has stirred plenty of interest on the left (see reviews in “Good Reads,” below) will present on his findings at the Economic Policy Institute Tuesday, April 15 from 9:30-11 a.m. A panel of economics thinkers will respond to his presentation. If you’re interested, check the [EPI website](#) to RSVP.

IN THIS ISSUE

Bill Mosley reports on DC Councilmember Muriel Bowser's capture from Mayor Vincent Gray of the Democratic nomination for mayor – in this overwhelmingly Democratic city, considered tantamount to election. The role of money and its corrupting influence may have doomed Gray and probably has not been removed from the discussion with Gray's exit. [Read complete article](#)

Metro DC DSA endorsed and raised funds for the real progressive in the race, businessman Andy Shallal, His issues and agenda – continued widespread deprivation in a prosperous (for now) and gentrifying city where developers have more clout than ever – emerged to dominate the discourse and progressives plan to work to keep them there. [Read complete article](#)

Andy Feeney examines a new report on climate change that models past collapsed societies and implicates inequality in their demise; with consequences for our huge but precarious modern global society's future as resources are affected by climate. [Read complete article](#)

Kurt Stand reviews a one-man play about Paul Robeson that rocked Arena Stage recently, with analysis of what the play did and didn't tackle about this giant of the twentieth century. [Read complete article](#)

Dan Adkins looks at Russia's startling violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, what might have brought it on and what a democratic socialist foreign policy might bring about in this Cold War revival moment. [Read complete article](#)

Books: We take a look at two books with remarkably self-explanatory titles. Woody Woodruff reviews the new anthology *Imagine Living in a Socialist USA*. [Read complete article](#)

Andy Feeney reviews Andrew Levison's *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. [Read complete article](#)

As the Maryland legislature approaches its final rush to finish in early April, Woody Woodruff examines a bill that could have brought industrial policy and public economic planning to a place at the table in the Free State – a bill that spooked the top leaders of the House and Senate so badly that they took extraordinary action. [Read complete article](#)

In "Good Reads" we feature the UN's latest IPCC reassessment of the impact of climate change, reviews of Thomas Piketty's new book (above) and an example of how *not* to think outside the capitalist box, among other tidbits. [Read complete article](#)

[Can the Left Regain the Support Of the White Working Class?](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Andy Feeney

Book Review of Andrew Levison: *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*, Democratic Strategist Press, 201 pages.

Since Marx coined the phrase in the 1840s, socialists have urged the “workers of the world” to unite despite national and other differences. Here in the United States, labor activists have often found it damnably difficult to follow this wonderful advice. At certain times and in certain places, American radical organizations like the old IWW and the Communist Party in its “Popular Front” days have won remarkable – though temporary – successes in getting workers to unite across lines of religion, race, national origin, and even (to a lesser degree) sexual and gender differences. But under other circumstances, racist and nativist movements and clashing religious beliefs have led many American workers to support reactionary politicians who lent credence to the famous boast of 19th century robber baron Jay Gould: “I can hire half the working class to kill the other half.”

Today, some historically important barriers to working class unity in this country seem to have fallen, or at least abated, as demonstrated by the strikingly multi-racial and cross-cultural coalition that supported Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential run. Still, the 2008 Obama campaign only won the backing of 40 percent of white working class voters. Two years later, in the 2010 midterm elections, white workers gave the Democrats just 33 percent of their votes, while the Tea Party surged and the Republicans recaptured the House of Representatives.

As 2014 midterm elections approach, can progressive or even moderate Democrats enjoy enough white working-class voters to keep control over the Senate? Or will the disaffection of these voters in conjunction with widespread political gerrymandering help to give the Senate, too, back to the Republicans? And over a much longer term, can the left either inside or outside of the Democratic Party ever win a majority of working class whites to the ideals of democratic socialism??

In *The White Working Class Today*, progressive researcher Andrew Levison makes a case that liberal and moderate Democrats, at least, can indeed regain the support of many working class whites, whom Levison defines generally as white workers with no more than a high school education who are employed in a wide spectrum of occupational categories doing basically blue-collar labor.

Levison argues further that progressives urgently need to regain the allegiance of such workers, for in his view, working-class whites constitute one of the most important groups of swing voters in US politics. Although the nation’s changing demography means whites command a steadily dwindling population majority, and are projected to become a minority in a few decades, it will be many years before progressives can afford to write off the approximately 31.7 million white men and estimated 12 million – 20 million white women (the numbers depend on how certain intermediate jobs are counted) who currently earn their livings from working class occupations.

If white working class support for Democrats falls back to 33 percent in the presidential election of 2016, Levison warns, if it merely matches what occurred in 2010, the country could see a Republican president in 2017 – a disaster for American progressives and the many different causes we represent.

In *The White Working Class Today*, Levison draws on a wealth of opinion polling data and around six dozen scholarly studies of working class life to inform readers about how white workers as a group have changed since the 1950s and how progressives need to understand their values and circumstances in order to communicate with them. His conclusion is that moderate progressives can find ways to appeal to these workers, but not through exactly the same kinds of rhetoric that might have worked with unionized factory workers in, say, the industrial heartland a few decades ago.

Levison's polling data offers much less hope for socialists, at least for the immediate future. One key finding is that for the most part, white working class Americans are cultural traditionalists who strongly support evangelical and mainstream Christian churches, the US military and capitalist "free enterprise" as they understand it. They are deeply cynical about government as an institution and indeed harbor intense anger towards it; and they have little remaining belief in Keynesian deficit spending as a stimulus for economic growth.

However, Levison argues, white working class support for "free enterprise," which some surveys put in the range of 80 percent or more, primarily reflects admiration for small business, which accounts for an increasing important fraction of working class jobs in the wake of large-scale corporate layoffs and the flight of factory jobs overseas. Many formerly unionized factory workers also have been forced by circumstances to become small contractors in the construction business, and have thus themselves become small business owners. As such, they often hire close friends and associates who are known to be skilled, hard workers in order to form teams that can compete successfully for jobs on residential and non-residential construction projects.

Consequently, workers in the construction business often lack the hostile feeling towards "the boss" that might have been common in unionized factories as recently as the 1970s. Rhetoric about class warfare has little appeal to them, and they do favor free-market capitalism as small business owners practice it.

However, white workers have far more negative feelings about large corporations, especially in the communities of the so-called Rust Belt, and many feel great anger over corporations' destroying large numbers of American jobs through layoffs, factory relocations, automation and outsourcing.

One reason that hatred for government has almost become a kind of "new class consciousness" among white workers, Levison notes, is that they believe – accurately – that the government and the political system at large have been captured by corporate money and corporate lobbying power.

White workers also perceive – again accurately – that the corporations along with the super-wealthy are able to get out of paying their fair share in taxes. And while the workers are angry at

upper-class greed, they are even more furious with politicians and the government for letting it go unchecked. This offers potential hope to progressives and socialists working on, say, measures to raise taxes on the wealthy or to overturn the Supreme Court's "Citizens United" ruling, since making the corporations play by the rules is something many white workers favor.

Levison adds, however, that the data show many white workers also hating and distrusting government because of irksome regulations it has placed on small businesses, because it sometimes champions such "alien" values as racial affirmative action, and because they see government as being corrupt and generally ineffective. Given these circumstances, white working class Americans generally reject Keynesian deficit spending, seeing simply it as a matter of government being undisciplined and running out of control. They don't see how deficit spending might help to create jobs, and they worry about the government's debts being inherited by their grandchildren.

On the other hand, polling data suggests that with the exception of a hard core of conservative "true believers," accounting for about 25 percent of white workers, most working class whites believe that pure unregulated markets are unworkable, and that government must sometimes intervene to correct the market's mistakes. A majority of white workers apparently also support government investment in the future health of the country.

Thus a 2011 survey by the progressive group Democracy Corps found that 57 percent of those who answered favored "a plan to invest in new industries and rebuild the country over the next five years," while at the same time 52 percent supported "a plan to dramatically reduce the deficit over the next five years." When asked about the government both cutting the deficit and "making growth-producing investments in American industry and small business," 57 percent of white working class respondents were in favor.

The numbers suggest that when President Obama, to the fury of many socialists, proposed a few years ago to cut the federal budget while simultaneously having the government support various measures to help the middle class, he was probably on sound political grounds. To intellectuals on the left, the economics of Obama's position were contradictory and self-defeating, but to many white working class voters that Obama and the Democrats needed to attract, they may have seemed like common sense.

There are a wealth of other findings in this book that also may be of practical and/or theoretical interest to progressive readers. For example, Levison points out that widespread support for the Army among white workers is likely based on the fact that since the end of the draft, the Army in its front-line troops has become an overwhelmingly working-class institution. White workers thus tend to view controversies over military issues from the perspective of front-line troops. Generally this means they need to believe that "the Armed Forces are doing the right thing."

However, among white workers there is an important split between those who believe in the military imposing American values on other societies by force and "a cautious view that wants to avoid foreign wars unless genuinely necessary for the security of the United States." Thus an unpublished survey from 2010 found 47 percent of the respondents favoring a gradual drawdown

of US troops in Afghanistan and just 46 percent wanting the US to “stay the course and finish the job in Afghanistan.”

The divisions within the white working class over the more extreme forms of US militarism echo what Levison finds about attitudes toward several other issues of interest to liberals and progressives. On many questions, a significant minority or even a majority of white workers favor the right wing option. However, a small minority of these workers are progressives themselves, and a significant fraction of moderate swing voters occupy the political middle. Liberals can reach many of these voters in the middle and get them to support progressive positions, Levison argues. But this is possible only through arguments that appeal to the workers’ common sense and by avoiding angry or dogmatic rhetoric in favor of a balanced, “on the one hand, on the other hand” approach to discussing the issues.

For example, the polling data indicate strong support for religion among working class whites; however, a majority do not support an exclusive form of Christianity that finds all other religions to be suspect. Similarly, while a large majority of white evangelical Protestants surveyed a few years ago strongly opposed both homosexuality and abortion, almost a third of the evangelicals polled said homosexuals should be accepted by American society, and 26 percent favored the legality of abortion in “most” circumstances. To recruit support for progressive politics among white workers, Levison concludes, Democrats need to recruit these moderate swing voters.

Turning to immigration, another hot-button issue, Levison’s data found large majorities of working class whites opposed to “illegal” immigration, and deeply offended by the notion of immigrants breaking the law to enter the US. Many working class whites also believe that an irresponsible government is giving favored treatment to undocumented immigrants – in terms of welfare payments, for example – and find this outrageous. A substantial number of anti-immigration respondents also have viciously racist feelings against Latinos, Levison states; he doesn’t specify just what fraction.

Yet there are contradictory feelings of empathy for individual immigrants among some working class people who oppose undocumented immigrants as a group. Many white workers who have worked alongside immigrants in the construction industry also express admiration for their hard work and loyalty to family – both crucial values for working class whites. When given the choice by pollsters, Levison notes, most working class whites want tougher border enforcement” and an eventual path to citizenship for immigrants – an arguably contradictory stance that angers many immigrant rights activists, but one the Obama administration is apparently echoing.

To gain significant support among white working class voters, Levison concludes, progressives need to pay careful heed to the political divisions within this group, then use balanced, common-sense appeals to win the moderate middle fraction of these workers to basically tolerant positions. What progressives must not do, he argues, is take the basically arrogant tone that liberal author Thomas Frank, for example, used a decade ago in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* (2004). In that book Frank suggested that Kansas voters were being seduced by merely cultural politics into ignoring their “real” self-interest, which Frank portrayed as almost exclusively economic. If progressives want support from white working class Americans, Levison argues, we actually need to listen to what they think is important, and find ways to respond to it.

The points above are only a few highlights of what recent research as Levison recounts it shows about white working class attitudes. The book also has intriguing things to say about the differing political implications of Christian radio and country music radio, for instance, and some detailed discussion of the rather complex attitudes that white workers bring to politics and economics. A few ambitious chapters focus on how progressive groups, like the AFL-CIO's associate group Working America, can best do outreach to moderates and even a few Republicans in the working class. The book also offers sobering evidence about white working class attitudes toward most college-educated professional workers, whom many working class respondents portray as as "cold," "arrogant" and overly obsessed with money and career at the expense of family.

How democratic socialists should or will respond to Levison's findings is probably a matter for debate. Meanwhile, many readers will probably notice one huge hole in Levison's documentation of white working class attitudes. Except for a few brief remarks about immigration, and except for noting that white workers in the South are generally much more conservative than those elsewhere, Levison includes virtually no data about how white workers today think about race and racism, especially relating to African Americans. This is unbelievably large omission for any serious study of how white Americans of any class think about society. With that caveat, however, *The White Working Class Today* seems like a careful examination of the attitudes that a critical part of the US electorate brings to politics. It should be of interest to many DSA members.

[Crossing the River to the Future: Heartbreak and Hope in the 'Tallest Tree in the Forest'](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Kurt Stand

Slavery is a word simple to say, yet a concept difficult to grasp – owning another human being, owning someone's children for life, being able to sell people on the market like cattle and doing so publicly with an air of moral acceptability; it all speaks to the abject cruelty that is a part of our country's origins. That slavery – racial slavery — was a central feature of the birth and development of the United States makes the inequality and level of division and distrust it fostered that much harder to overcome. And while slavery is in the past, its continuing impact on our society is a reminder that this past is not so very distant.

Paul Robeson was the son of a slave, a reality important to remember if his full measure as a human being and as an advocate for peace and justice is to be grasped. For the nature of that struggle, the vision of a democratic heritage and a possible democratic future that was embodied within his life, is a reminder that beauty and love, equality and justice are part of our past and can be our future too. We lose much if all we remember of the past is defeat and suffering. The quality of resistance can create its own bonds that counter oppression by embracing the worth of each. Robeson writes of this in his autobiography, *Here I Stand*:

“It was in Britain – among the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish people of that land – that I learned that the essential character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind. If in Britain there were those who lived by plundering the colonial peoples, there were also the many millions who earned their bread by honest toil. And even as I grew to feel more Negro in spirit, or African as I put it then, I also came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love.

“This belief in the oneness of humankind about which I have often spoken in concerts and elsewhere, has existed within me side by side with my deep attachment to the cause of my own race. ... I do not think, however, that my sentiments are contradictory; and in England I learned that there truly is a kinship among us all, a basis for mutual respect and brotherly love.” (pp 56-57).

The varied sides of Robeson’s conviction – pride in being black, in his African roots, his sense of connection with all working people irrespective of race or nationality, joined by his opposition to those who live by off the labor of others – are given voice in the *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*. A one-man tour de force, written and performed by Daniel Beaty, it was staged at the Arena Stage this winter. The play’s narrative is a series of flashbacks, with Robeson as an old man, wounded in spirit and physically frail, looking back on his life of achievement and commitment. Beaty enacts in one scene the two influences upon Robeson as a child that he would unite as an adult: the brother who physically resists racism even in a time when lynching was not unknown, and his father who taught him the classics so that he could make the heritage of the world’s learning his own

Robeson went on to be a star athlete at Rutgers in the 1920s, when a black athlete allowed to play college football was still a rarity. He then went to law school at Columbia – but the law profession held no future for him when neither a white judge nor white clients would listen to a black lawyer. But it was the era of the Harlem Renaissance, and Robeson, who had grown up hearing and singing spirituals, found his calling in the songs he sang; his outstanding voice infused his music with the spirit of resistance and hope. Beaty sings Robeson’s songs powerfully, allowing us to grasp their yearnings. Robeson’s explanation of one such song’s meaning is especially poignant:

From the days of chattel slavery until today, the concept of travel has been inseparably linked in the minds of our people with the concept of freedom. Hence, the symbol of a railroad train recurs frequently in our folklore – in spirituals and gospel songs, in blues and ballads – and the train is usually “bound for glory,” and “heading for the Promised Land.” And there are boats, too, like the “old Ship of Zion” and the “Old Ark” that will take us over the waters to freedom and salvation.

Poignant for those words were written when Robeson – like W.E.B. DuBois — had his passport lifted and was denied the right to travel. Even in the McCarthy era there were no grounds to charge him at trial, so the blacklist imposed at home was reinforced by denying his right to go abroad where people were willing and eager to hear him perform.

Poignant and political. During Robeson's travels abroad in the 1930s he achieved a success and stature not yet possible in the still deeply segregated United States. Encouraged and supported – and prodded and cajoled – by his wife Eslanda Goode Robeson he became an actor as well; the limited roles open to him on Broadway were greatly expanded on the London stage. And during the dozen years abroad his inchoate sense of rebellion and assertion of dignity in the face of the unrelieved racism of US society was given a political content. His encounters with Welsh miners, engaged in their own resistance to poverty and degradation through collective action and through song, became a pathway to understanding the oneness of all people's search for dignity. A trip to Germany enabled him to see the face of fascism – the face of the mob manipulated by the powerful in assaults on Communists, socialists and unionists, on artists and those who don't fit in, and on Jews. Robeson's deep hatred of racism led him to a strong affinity with Jewish determination to resist anti-Semitism, a bond that would last his whole life.

He went to Spain during the civil war; he saw in the Spanish people's resistance to fascism, saw in the international brigades of volunteers taking up arms to defend liberty, a model of the brotherhood of resistance all peoples fighting for a true democracy he sought for in life. His encounters of people from Africa – a continent then still almost entirely enchained as European colonies — gave him an appreciation of the independence struggle he soon made his own with his leadership of the Council on African Affairs. And from all these his interest in the Russian revolution, in the Soviet Union grew – and in his travels there he found an acceptance as a human being that he never found in the US or in London, found a path of development that embraced equality that he felt was the path of the future and which cemented his socialist convictions. *The Tallest Tree in the Forest* recounts this past and with it Robeson's decision to put to use the celebrity he achieved by returning to the United States and fully engaging in the struggle for social justice in his own land.

And there he achieved a position of acclaim, becoming one of the most widely known and honored people in the US, a leader in the civil rights movement, a speaker and singer at numerous union conventions, demonstrations and rallies, a voice for the war against fascism and for giving that war content by fighting all forms of discrimination and injustice at home. And, in a few years, he went from being a political leader and a popular performer into a pariah, denounced by many who once welcomed him, listened to him; until he was driven into such isolation that Robeson became virtually unknown. It is a story that serves as a reminder of the power of the system to repress those it opposes — the fears stoked by pseudo-patriots as the Cold War commenced, the anti-communist witchhunts of the McCarthy-era and the power of racism all combined in an unforgiving assault to drive Robeson from the public arena. The two signal events – a speech Robeson gave at the Paris World Peace Conference in 1949, in which he denounced US racism and the growing danger of war against the Soviet Union, was distorted into a statement that US blacks would not fight in such a war. The alleged statement became an excuse to cause his ostracism, including from civil rights organizations and unions for whom he had spoken many times in the past. And with that came threats of violence that turned into action at Peekskill, New York when a mob whipped up into a frenzy of action, motivated by the trio of racism, anti-Semitism and anti-Communism, attacked the crowd of thousands who came to hear him perform. The threat of such violence led to the cancellation of every other of the hundreds of concerts Robeson had scheduled, led to the withdrawal of all his records from radio play or record store sale, and so completed his isolation. Robeson's name, photo, awards, were

removed from Rutgers' record books, his name was stricken by the NAACP from the list of its honorees – he became an “unperson,” in his own homeland.

Attacks which took a toll on him as a human being; the complications of his support for the Soviet Union as it engaged in its own wave of repression – and anti-Semitism — that caught some of Robeson's own friends in its web is not neglected in the play nor is the personal side of Robeson's life – the whole is looked at from his point-of-view as an older man who wears on his countenance the blows reigned upon him in those years. Beaty tell the story not only in Robeson's voice, but in that of other characters as well and gives a sense of the walls closing in on him. So it is that he tries to give depth to his portrayal of Robeson, through playing the role of Essie too — using her unfairly at times as a foil, as the counter-argument to bring into relief Paul's growth and development. By the end of the play, however, Beaty gives full credit to her courage and depth of understanding. Both are evident in the following passage from her book, *African Journey*, written after a trip through the continent in 1945:

Walls have been built against us, but we are always fighting to tear them down and in the fighting, we grow, we find new strength, and all their weaknesses.

We have not built any walls to limit our world.

We look at slavery – personal, economic and social slavery – and we know that it has done us grave injury. But we have always fought that slavery, resisted it everywhere, continuously; and in the fighting, in the resistance, we have survived and grown strong.

In fighting a just cause, in resisting oppression, there is dignity.

We look at those who have enslaved us, and find them decadent. Injustice and greed and conscious inhumanity are terribly destructive.

Yes, I am glad and proud I am Negro. (pp 151-152)

Those convictions were hers – and his, and, again, give added meaning to the denial of his right to travel, the attempt to enclose in walls a life devoted to breaking the barriers that deny freedom.

There are, however, two weaknesses in the play. First, the context of Robeson's life and politics is not given sufficient weight. Robeson was in every respect an exceptional human being, yet he was also a person of his times – who worked in concert with numerous others. He was part of the left-wing of the New Deal, part of the hundreds of thousands, of the millions who tried to stay true to those values when repression set in and so served as a bridge to the arising movement of the 1960s (even when he was not personally remembered). Even in defeat, he was never alone – a fact which should not be forgotten and downplayed.

The other weakness is in a lack of a challenge to the audience – the end of the play rightly notes the progress made since Robeson's days, but does not note how much more progress there needs to be before there we are a land of equality and justice. We, as audience members, empathize with Robeson, feel critical of those who abandoned him, honor him for helping blaze a trail that

did result in remarkable changes in recent decades – yet are never made to feel a connection between the history told on stage and our present.

It is not enough to sympathize or empathize, rather – it is also important to act, to take a stand, when it is hardest and most difficult to do so. It is wonderful to be reminded of a life as beautiful and committed as Robeson's but nobody in the audience should have walked away thinking that this was all in the past. Victories have been won: Robeson – who died in 1976 — applauded the progress of the civil rights movement; but racism remains, neo-colonialism remains, wars continue, the division and exploitation of workers remains – and powerful forces of repression remain to silence those who speak out. And audience members should have been made to feel challenged to do more than they have to end the injustice all around us in the here and now.

Though criticisms don't take away from the *Tallest Tree in the Forest's* strengths – or politics. The second act opens with Beaty as a “professor,” explaining what causes the state to target an activist. Speaking out for racial justice can mark a person as a threat to the system, speaking out for workers rights can do so too. But those who are advocates for workers rights and racial equality are the people those in power most hate, fear, attack. And few people embraced those values as passionately as did Robeson.

Robeson expressed his beliefs in “Ballad for Americans.” It is a song that speaks to the underlying commonality of all people while celebrating their distinctiveness. It roots the strength of our country in the varied forms the labor of working people takes – and defines that as the content of the democracy to which we should aspire as society, a democracy at the root of his conception of socialism. It is a vision expressed in lines Robeson quotes to end his autobiography, a verse from Pablo Neruda's *Let the Rail Splitter Awaken*:

Let us think of the entire earth

And pound the table with love.

I don't want blood again

To saturate bread, beans music:

I wish they would come with me:

The miner, the little girl,

The lawyer, the seaman,

The doll-maker,

To go into a movie and come out

To drink the reddest wine ...

I come here to sing

And for you to sing with me.

Sources:

The Tallest Tree in the Forest, Written and Performed by Daniel Beaty, Directed by Moises Kaufman; Arena Stage, January 10 – February 16.

Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*, Othello Associates, 1958

Eslanda Goode Robeson, *African Journey*, The John Day Company, 1945

Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, Alfred Knopf, 1988

[Eco-Collapse Is a Greater Risk for Class-Divided Societies, Suggests New Study by U-MD Modeler](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Andy Feeney

The *Guardian* newspaper would undoubtedly have displeased conservatives anyway when it publicized results of a recent computer study concluding that a fairly large number of “advanced” civilizations throughout history have fallen victim to large-scale collapse. Anthropologist Jared Diamond argued as much in his best-selling 2007 book *Collapse*, which linked the collapse of the statue-builders of Easter Island and the eventual disappearance of the Viking settlements in Greenland to the failure of these societies to recognize environmental limits. *Collapse*’s clear implication was that the advanced society of the United States, too, is probably whistling past the graveyard. However, some other anthropologists challenged some of Diamond’s methods, and anyway, the basically neo-Malthusian implications of his book are ones that conservatives have become comfortable ignoring.

The main highlights of the new computer modeling study that recently attracted the *Guardian*’s attention, however, were shorter and perhaps easier to read than Diamond’s longish book. Also, the study, with mathematician Safa Motesharrie of the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy serving as lead researcher, and U-MD atmospheric researcher Eugenia Kalnay serving as co-author, focused on two factors that Diamond had mentioned much more obliquely in his work – inequality and social class.

The study, “Human and Nature Dynamics (HANDY): Modeling Inequality and Use of Resources in the Collapse or Sustainability of Societies,” has been accepted for publication in *Ecological Economics*, published by the scientific publishing group Elsevier. In it, the joint authors wrote that while a popular Western belief holds that complex, technically sophisticated societies virtually never collapse, but can draw on their strengths to adapt to new challenges, in fact: “Collapses have occurred frequently in history, often followed by centuries of economic, intellectual, and population decline. Many different natural and social phenomena have been invoked to explain specific collapses, but a general explanation remains elusive. In this paper, we build a human population dynamics model by adding accumulated wealth and economic inequality to a predator-prey model of humans and nature.”

The details of just what the authors did are a little complex and the validity of the mathematical equations they used to build their HANDY model may be beyond the ability of most lay people to follow. But in essence, what Motescharrie et al., did was to construct models of how three different kinds of society might respond to the risks of civilizational collapse resulting from population growth and resource depletion, or at least since the rise of city states in ancient Sumeria several millennia ago.

Examples they cite briefly in the preamble to their study include the rise and fall of Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian and many later empires in the Middle East, up through the collapses of the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires; the development and decline of repeated Egyptian dynasties over many thousands of years; the rise followed by the obliteration of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean before the rise of classical Greco-Roman culture; the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the disappearance of the Hittite empire in Anatolia and the Harrappan civilization of the ancient Indus Valley; the later flourishing and disappearance of the Mauryan and Gupta empires in India; the coming and going of historic dynasties in China; and the “repeated and overlapping” collapses of major civilizations in Southeast Asia over a period of 15 centuries, culminating with the end of the Khmer empire of Cambodia in the 15th century AD.

The historic decline of Mayan civilization in Central America and a series of complex civilizations in Mexico, along with the evident collapse of ancient Zimbabwe in Africa, also indicate that the phenomena of civilizational collapse is not unique to Eurasia, the authors note. In fact, at least one scholarly study suggests that when settled agriculture was first introduced to Europe in Neolithic times, this was followed “by a boom-and-bust pattern in the density of regional populations.” Arguably, the wealth of research on the subject indicates that rather than civilizational collapse being an unusual event in history, it may be the rule — rather than the exception.

. The three ideal societies being modeled included (1) an “equal” society in which everyone is essentially a worker, and resources, income and wealth are equally shared; (2) an “egalitarian” society in which some people (for example, students) are not workers, but incomes are basically equal; and (3) an “unequal” society divided between “Elites” and “Commoners,” in which the Elites capture most of society’s wealth for themselves, leaving the Commoners earning bare minimum incomes just adequate for survival.

When the three model scenarios were run on the computer, the results indicated that all three kinds of society can suffer from civilizational collapse due to over-population and excessive

resource depletion. All three societies, when growth rates are optimal, can achieve a “soft landing” solution where population and resource use both adjust to the limits imposed by the environment, without major collapse or major population losses. All three societies also can “overshoot” environmental limits and suffer smaller to larger losses in population, yet then return to sustainable levels of resource use – although at lower population levels and lower levels of wealth than the “soft landing” societies achieve.

Yet class-divided, unequal societies in which the Elites command most of resources and wealth while forcing the Commoners to do all the work, the study suggests, are far more likely to suffer from long-term collapse than the other two model societies.

As the authors put it, their modeling indicated two different ways in which unequal, class-divided societies can collapse: (a) the Elites can appropriate so many resources at the cost of the Commoners that the Commoners starve or stop reproducing themselves, causing an eventually fatal labor shortage, or (b) the Elites can ensure that the society exploits too many resources and faces environmental collapse, decimating Commoners and Elites alike.

The authors note: “It is important to note that in both of these scenarios, the Elites —due to their wealth — do not suffer the detrimental effects of the environmental collapse until much later than the Commoners. This buffer of wealth allows Elites to continue ‘business as usual’ despite the impending catastrophe. It is likely that this is an important mechanism that would help explain how historical collapses were allowed to occur by elites who appear to be oblivious to the catastrophic trajectory (most clearly apparent in the Roman and Mayan cases). This buffer effect is further reinforced by the long, apparently sustainable trajectory prior to the beginning of the collapse. While some members of society might raise the alarm that the system is moving towards an impending collapse and therefore advocate structural changes to society in order to avoid it, Elites and their supporters, who opposed making these changes, could point to the long sustainable trajectory ‘so far’ in support of doing nothing.”

Summing up, the authors further state: “either one of the two features apparent in historical societal collapses —over-exploitation of natural resources and strong economic stratification— can independently result in a complete collapse. Given economic stratification, collapse is very difficult to avoid and requires major policy changes, including major reductions in inequality and population growth rates ... However, collapse can be avoided and population can reach equilibrium if the per capita rate of depletion of nature is reduced to a sustainable level, and if resources are distributed in a reasonably equitable fashion.”

These conclusions, of course, are only based on computer modeling, and computer models are notorious for being sensitive to the assumptions built into them. It’s not clear how much faith scientists should put in the study’s scenarios, nor how adequate the mathematical modeling for the scenarios really was. But the *Guardian*’s March 14 story about the report, which among other things noted that it was written with financial help from NASA, drew a furious reaction from some critics, and in the last few days NASA officials have distanced the agency themselves from direct responsibility for the conclusions.

Meanwhile the study has sparked a firestorm of debate in the blogosphere and the media, evoking sharp comments from such varying sources as *The Washington Times*, *Discover* magazine, progressive commentator Bill Moyers, the *International Business Times*, the left-leaning *Independent* in Britain, and a host of others.

Washington Socialist readers who are curious about the study and the controversy it has provoked may want to look at the original paper, here: <http://www.atmos.umd.edu/~ekalnay/pubs/2014-03-18-handy1-paper-draft-safa-motesharrei-rivas-kalnay.pdf>

The March 14 Guardian blog by Dr. Nafeez Ahmed that brought the study to the attention of the media is here: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/14/nasa-civilisation-irreversible-collapse-study-scientists>.

Dr. Ahmed's March 212 defense of the study and of his original blog about it can be read here: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/14/nasa-civilisation-irreversible-collapse-study-scientists>. Among other things, this latter blog quotes several prominent critics of the Motesharrie study and the HANDY model used to derive it; it also cites a defense of the model and its usefulness by a team led by Dr. Rodrigo Castro of the Department of Environmental Systems Science at ETH Zurich, Switzerland.

From a socialist perspective, what is fun to speculate about is to what degree the study and the controversy about it may influence the politics of the mainstream American environmental movement, and how. For much of the later 20th century, many militant environmentalists were inspired by the gloomy population theories of Rev. Thomas Malthus, whose famous 1798 *Essay on Population* was explicitly reactionary in its politics. Specifically attacking the utopian anarchist theories of William Godwin and the moderate French revolutionary the Marquis de Condorcet, who had speculated about the eventual establishment of a peaceful, egalitarian society through evolutionary means, Rev. Malthus in 1798 argued that "misery" or extreme poverty was needed to keep poor people from causing a demographic disaster through having too many children.

Malthus also argued that the twin institutions of "private property" and economic hierarchy are essential in staving off an over-population disaster.

But in their study, Motesharrie et al., have put forward a seemingly logical model of how excessive economic hierarchy and unequally distributed property should cause exactly the sort of environmental disaster that neo-Malthusian environmentalists have always wanted to avoid. Could this possibly push some traditional environmentalists toward eco-socialism?

[Ethics, race overshadow other issues in DC primary election](#)

Wednesday, April 2nd, 2014

The Washington Socialist <> April 2014

By Bill Mosley

Muriel Bowser's victory in the DC Democratic primary for mayor on April 1 can be largely attributed to District voters' continued anger at the string of ethics lapses among elected officials. Unfortunately, the chatter over whether defeated Mayor Vincent Gray is or is not a crook forced issues of critical importance to the District – education, affordable housing, the rise in homelessness, how to achieve statehood – to take a back seat.

Reflecting Bowser's victory was former Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner Brianne Nadeau's win over four-term incumbent Ward 1 Councilmember Jim Graham. Nadeau ran a largely one-issue campaign, focusing on Graham's involvement in a Metro development deal that was tied to a contract to run the DC lottery. Graham offered his support to a businessman for a contract to run the DC lottery if he would drop a bid to work on Metro projects, allegedly as a favor for a campaign contributor. In past years, Graham's behavior could be written off as the kind of routine wheeling and dealing one expects from elected officials. But with three DC councilmembers having been convicted of crimes over the past two years and a mayor who may join them, voters had zero tolerance for anything bearing even a whiff of scandal.

The allegations against Gray, on the other hand, cause Graham's actions to pale in significance. The secret "shadow" campaign conducted by recently convicted businessman Jeffrey Thompson tainted Gray's 2010 victory and cast a long shadow over the mayor's entire first term. Thompson, whose wealth depended on his company's securing contracts with the city, spent \$668,000 off-the-books dollars to help Gray defeat Mayor Adrian Fenty, and after the election the Gray administration paid Thompson's health-care company over \$7 million – not a bad return on investment. However, earlier this year Thompson's luck ran out when he pleaded guilty to criminal charges and said that Gray knew all about the secret campaign, notwithstanding Gray's claims of ignorance of the affair. U.S. Attorney Ron Machen has all but promised that an indictment of Gray is forthcoming.

Bowser has been justifiably criticized for lack of accomplishment during her seven years on the DC Council, not only by her opponents but by Council colleagues and the media as well. Her signature issue has been an ethics bill that she shepherded through the Council in 2012 as she eyed a run for mayor against a scandal-plagued incumbent. The jury is out on whether the bill is tough enough to restore the confidence of DC voters in their elected officials. But Bowser was a questionable choice for ethics champion, having chosen DC uber-lobbyist David Wilmot as the chairman of her 2012 re-election campaign. Wilmot also represented Wal-mart before the DC government, and it was surely more than coincidence that Bower subsequently voted against the Large Retailer Accountability Act, which would have required Wal-mart and other big-box stores to pay a higher wage than the DC minimum. In addition, Bowser joined the Council as the protégé of former Mayor Adrian Fenty, and supported his controversial takeover of the DC public school system and the teacher-bashing policies of Michelle Rhee, Fenty's appointed chancellor of DC schools.

That it was Bowser who emerged as the alternative to Gray, rather than three other councilmembers in the race or progressive businessman Andy Shallal, who got less than 4 percent of the vote, can be heavily attributed to race and class divisions in the District. If experience were the only consideration, Ward 2 Councilmember Jack Evans, with more than two decades on the Council, would have been the obvious choice. However, Evans was compromised by his coziness with DC developers and other business interests and drew only 5 percent of the vote. Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells, who finished third with just under 13 percent, failed to make his vision of a “livable, walkable city” compelling to more than a core of mostly white newcomers and progressives. Shallal, who was endorsed by Metro-DC DSA, gained the support of some progressives, but failed to gain traction as Bowser emerged as the candidate who could defeat Gray. Councilmember and perennial candidate Vincent Orange was a non-factor.

Indeed, the results show how race still plays a dominant role in the District, even with the African American population having slipped under 50 percent and Latinos increasing in number, if not yet in political influence. Bowser’s base of support was the mostly white western half of the city, notwithstanding that she herself is African American, while Gray drew from the heavily African-American eastern wards, although in smaller numbers than in 2010. This indicates that even white voters are leery of jumping on the bandwagon of a white candidate, either out of liberal guilt, concern that race relations could deteriorate under a white mayor in a city that has never previously elected one, or out of a strategic decision that a white could not win. Gray, on the other hand – a resident of heavily African American Ward 7 – tried to paint himself as yet another black DC officeholder being targeted by the federal government. His endorsement by Councilmember and former Mayor Marion Barry, himself targeted 24 years ago by the feds for cocaine use, was intended to make this connection clear to his base. Unfortunately for Gray, it was not enough.

Bowser moves to the general election campaign to face David Catania, a Republic-turned-independent councilmember. Catania jumped into the race in the hopes that a crippled Gray would win the nomination and be a relatively easy target in the fall. Bowser’s victory throws a wrench into that strategy, and he will undoubtedly cast his record on the council against hers. Yet Catania is asking DC voters to support a white, openly gay, non-Democratic candidate for mayor – all of which would be firsts. Catania is a formidable campaigner, but he has a steep hill to climb.

A mayoral campaign between Bowser and Catania is not one for progressives to look forward to. One can expect them to promise to address the critical issues facing the District but fail to present substantive solutions. DSA members and other progressives can take consolation that progressive Council Chair Phil Mendelson, who was endorsed by Metro-DC DSA, will face only token opposition in the fall. In addition, Catania’s leaving the Council to run for mayor makes his seat available for a possible campaign by a progressive third-party candidate or independent. With the general election still seven months away, there may be an opening, however slim, for progressives to have an impact.

GOOD READS for socialists, April 2014

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

>>Well, here's the bad news we have all been expecting. As socialists, we view the long-coherence of any society as being undermined by inequality. A new report spurred by NASA indicates that the relation of galloping resource consumption and climate change to inequality worsens both and makes social collapse more likely.

Here's a summary of the piece in the Guardian:

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/14/nasa-civilisation-irreversible-collapse-study-scientists>

and here's a link to a PDF of the quite wonkish original...

<http://www.atmos.umd.edu/~ekalnay/pubs/handy-paper-for-submission-2.pdf>

>>Andy Feeney has vetted the just-released latest assessment of our climate future by the UN's panel on climate change; here's his summary and links to the full document:

Impacts from global climate change are already evident on every continent of the world, according to a new report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and should intensify through the year 2100 in the absence of strong efforts to reduce human civilization's emissions of "greenhouse" gases. There is still some scientific uncertainty over just how severely projected climate change will affect different societies, yet the scientific consensus points to a "high level of certainty" that it will have a particularly negative effect on poor people, especially in Africa and southeast Asia. It should also cause disproportionate damage to different population groups as sorted by gender, with women likely to be hurt worse than men; and by age, with children, the sick and the elderly suffering more than healthy working-age adults.

The IPCC's Part 2 section of its Fifth Assessment report, the part addressing human impacts of climate change, does point to many societies that are undertaking efforts to adapt to climate change — a hopeful sign, according to the IPCC's team of authors. But there is "high confidence" that projected levels of change will subject different societies to several key risks, as well as "medium" confidence that it will have a host of other negative effects. The key risks for which there is "high confidence" of their happening include: Flooding of low-lying coastal zones and small islands by storm surges and sea level rise; inland flooding in urban areas; breakdown of infrastructure and government services during flooding, storms and heat waves; severe water shortages and consequent food insecurity in rural and, later, urban areas from

changing climate patterns (all these leading to increased endemic disease as well as incident mortality); and loss of biodiversity, habitat and food sources such as fisheries, including by ocean acidification.

New York Times reporter Justin Gillis on March 31 provided a hard-hitting, arguably somewhat one-sided account of how bad the IPCC expects the human effects of climate change to be. “Nobody on this planet is going to be untouched,” the Gillis story quotes IPCC chair Rajendra K. Pachauri as stating. The IPCC Part 2 report itself is somewhat less forcefully worded and more filled with qualifications than the *Times* story, but hardly a cause for great optimism.

For the IPCC’s “Summary for Policy Makers” for the Part 2 report, click here:

http://ipcc-wg2.gov/AR5/images/uploads/IPCC_WG2AR5_SPM_Approved.pdf

For access to the full report, organized on a chapter-by-chapter basis, click here:

<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/wg2/>

>>**Now this is a badread**... not awful in tone and intent, but exemplary of limited thinking. The writer brings us up to date on robotics and workplace automation and ... can only think of the outcome in terms of today’s corporate capitalist economy. How would you rewrite this one?

http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/22/robot-jobs-humans-used-to-do-fight-back?CMP=ema_565

>>Thomas Piketty’s new book on wealth and its consequences is getting lots of attention, for instance from [Paul Krugman](#). Here’s a review from a reliably radical source, Doug Henwood of *Left Business Observer*:

http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/021_01/12987

And (added April 3, 2014) here’s the review in the Spring issue of *Dissent* by Jamie Galbraith: <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/kapital-for-the-twenty-first-century>

Note that Piketty will speak at EPI in a morning session on April 15, followed by a panel on his presentation. You can RSVP to the event; see the intro to the newsletter...

>>The Blue-Green Alliance works the troubled seam between labor and environmentalism with an assumption that it can be reasoned out. Here’s a link to the latest (April 1) edition of their online blog, *The Source*: <http://www.bluegreenalliance.org/blog>

>>As usual, Sam Pizzigati’s “Too Much” keeps us up to date on the latest examples and outrages of inequality and the elite privilege that it brings... a guilty pleasure is the “Petulant Plutocrat of the Week.” Yep, it’s class warfare as if we didn’t know, and here’s the ammunition...

<http://toomuchonline.org/>

[I love imagining a socialist future, but the pesky how-tos keep getting in the way...](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Woody Woodruff

Imagine Living in a Socialist USA, edited by Frances Goldin, Debby Smith, and Michael Steven Smith. New York: Harper/Collins Perennial, 2014. Paperback \$15.99

This is a book that one roots for. The title's invitation "Imagine living in a socialist USA" hits the note for those among us who spend, we may feel, way too much of our time strategizing about how to get to that blissful condition and not enough time enjoying the thought of being there.

The writers in this anthology, who offer many good future memories of a socialist existence, nevertheless can't seem to wrench themselves from the same sticking points that bother all of us: What's wrong with capitalist society and what can we do to change it? That's certainly on our collective minds, and driving us out of them. But I hoped for more from this book.

Many episodes in this rich compendium do indeed find that sweet spot for us, and moreover are able to use the anatomy of our hoped-for utopia as an analytical tool. But there are many cases where the impulse to explain what's wrong puts a damper on the imagination of what could be. The writers, many well-known, appear to be (like many of us) wrapped too tightly in the struggle to dream as much as promised.

That, in turn, brings the reader to wonder about the book's audience. Is the already-convinced socialist activist going to learn new things and ideas about how to create that socialist future? Without a doubt, though maybe not a whole book's worth of new things and ideas. Is the person who is underinformed about socialism going to be educated and persuaded? Not so much, though there are several pieces that are unusually accessible, largely because their format escapes the stereotypical left-analytic. Most of the arguments here, though tightly written for the most part, already assume a reader's tilt toward socialism and some familiarity with the way the left's internal arguments are framed. So the audience is not the curious reader who has not dismissed socialism – yet – in part because that curious reader has heard little about it.

The editors advise us that the book has three sections: an indictment of capitalism; imaginative portraits of what a socialist USA might be like; finally, "how to get from where we are to where we want to be."

The first section contains only one article, Paul Street's "Capitalism: the real enemy." It mixes feature-style strategies – showing the destructive effect of capitalism on an individual victim with a face and name – with critical structural analysis. Like most of the articles in *Imagine Living in a Socialist USA*, it is solid work. The second section – imagining the experience of a socialist society – is not that different, alas. Specific attempts to create the future experience of socialism with respect to the economy, are hindered by the felt need to explain what is wrong with the present system. That refrain makes some of the essays duplicative even though they are individually solid work, also, and the chance to establish a different vision is dimmed by this pattern.

Women writers in this section, not surprisingly, break the left-analytic mold more often, and to good effect. Harriet Fraad and Tess Fraad-Wolff, as well as Renate Bridenthal, eschew structural analysis and provide coherent and lyrical paragraphs about a life without capitalist features: "Imagine feeling safe..... the luxury of time..... life without capitalist efficiency." And Bridenthal: "Imagine waking up looking forward to going to work..... that having children while holding a job is no problem." Blanche Wiesen Cook instead offers a tasty history of women who concretely lived "Dignity, Respect, Equality, Love" including less-known feminists like Crystal Eastman and Alexandra Kollontai. They prefigured socialist practice as well as promoting it. More of this approach would have given this section the flavor that was apparently intended.

The articles in the second, "Imagining Socialism," include powerful strategic arguments despite the section head; many could as easily fall into section three, "Getting There." Richard Wolff's economic critique notes pointedly that radicals apply their energies to factors outside the workplace when changing the conditions and relations inside that most unfree and undemocratic of US situations is a better bet. Wolff says "...socialists' critiques of capitalism over the last century have rarely focused on transforming that internal organization [the workplace] – which shapes how capitalism works or fails to work – to eliminate the exploitation it engenders." As he notes, in that workplace context the relations of production are always in formation – and more subject, perhaps, to radical action – whereas in the political and legal realm the dominance of capital is already institutionalized. Democracy within the workplace could have more bang for the buck than democracy outside it. Wolff, of course, has elaborated on the theory and the "actually existing" democratic workplace in *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*.

A powerful indictment of US mass incarceration and alternatives to it including communal courts is provided by Mumia Abu-Jamal and Angela Davis in "Alternatives to the Present System of Capitalist Injustice" and co-editor Michael Steven Smith complements it with an account of how capitalism and its rulers came to be privileged in the US legal system. Frances Fox Piven imagines a society that not only abolishes poverty with public support but abolishes the degradation and loss of social status that has come to be associated with poverty – a public perception that maintains capitalism's grip and enforces class at the same time that it divides natural class allies.

Arun Gupta shows how food security, better supported by government regulation, is an avenue to a fully democratized "food sovereignty" and – because food security is so central to everyone's lives – a path to many other democratic determinations within the economy.

The final section, as noted, is often hard to distinguish from the middle section — articles in both tend to do the same work, setting a problematic capitalist condition, proposing alternatives. But some are distinctive. Kazembe Balagun provides the undertold story of socialist thought and expression within the black freedom struggle, which he calls the “unfinished chapter” of that struggle. The civil rights movement and the Occupy movement both, he said, provide “prefigurative spaces” that show what can be, and electrifyingly quotes C.L.R. James to the effect that they are “the future in the present.” Clifford D. Connor suggests the left needs to be prepared for transformational events, and implicitly raises the question: If the left wasn’t prepared to take advantage of the meltdown of 2008-09, will it be ready for the next such opportunity? Diane Feeley elegizes the Detroit that was and argues that the Detroit that is can revive the plant occupations of the ‘30s and intervene in cavalier plant closings and the financialist strip-out of urban resources through from-below popular audits.

Several offerings in the third section stand out as exemplars of socialism. Most engaging is the science fiction writer Terry Bisson’s “Thanksgiving 2077: a Short Story.” A family gathers in that future year to reflect on their roles in a socialist USA and their memories of how it happened. The table is presided over by grandpa, “an old union man (IWW 2.0)” who notes “if we had dismantled capitalism sooner, we could have stopped global warming. Or at least slowed it.” Now, he mourns to the grandchildren fresh from their jobs (many working off student loans with public projects) “half your work is damage control.” Fighting wildfires and evacuating areas being inundated by rising seas — including, apparently, much of Florida — are typical of the work of socialism in the latter part of the 21st century. But too, there’s “commons restoration” — returning land and infrastructure from private to public ownership — and landfill mining for recyclable plastic “now that petroleum is under UN interdiction.”

In Bisson’s story, the transition to socialism was not easy — the narrator’s parents were killed “in the fighting in Philly” and one at the meal lost an eye in the “Baltimore Courtroom Assault.” One of the Thanksgiving celebrants, a young scholar, is working on a project asserting, however, that “the transition to socialism was easier since the government was more involved with disaster relief than war.”

One thing Bisson’s story obliquely indicates is the price of delay. The USA of 2077 is not the USA the editors present as the most likely of all the world’s nations to be a successful socialist society because of its abundance of resources and skill. The USA of 2077 has lost much of that luster, and life is spare and limited by consensus — an outcome that can be seen in its seed in today’s hollowing out of the middle class, the degradation of education at all levels, and the concrete results of worsening inequality. Bisson’s future is not a fantasy but the best one can hope for given present trends. The worst is unimaginable. Michael Harrington used to tell audiences that socialism was the likely outcome of most futures, and the question was what kind of socialism — democratic or autocratic. Bisson’s future narrowly manages the former.

When the writers succeed — and they frequently do — in conveying the calm, unoppressed and fertile experience of a socialist society, it is fleeting. “Actually existing” examples are few. As Richard Wolff observes in his useful contribution, the “lack of a powerful, attractive and credible vision of socialism is a major block to social movements against capitalism, despite the inequality, waste and suffering that system has produced.” (43)

A theme that runs through many of the articles in this book, as it does through endless conversations in our own DSA organization, is the question of whether reforms are pathways to a viable socialism or side trips, dead ends. Joel Kovel dismisses reformist social democracy in both an article and a poem. "...socialism can no longer be the reformist social democracy that has betrayed its promise by seeking to perfect capitalism instead of going beyond it.," he says in the second section. And in a poem that ends the book, read to the Occupiers of Zuccotti Park, he says that "that "your space of occupation is both a site of resistance and a site of production/. You are not here to want what they want you to want:/ to help out the Democratic Party;/ to get a seat at the big table;/ to rationalize the deadly regime of accumulation... ."

In fact, the book's persistent metaphor is the Occupy movement, which most of the writers explicitly reference. The surreal fact of socialism existing evanescent in one square in the midst of its mortal foe is an almost musical refrain throughout, and can be seen as illustrating the possibility of a socialist life in the midst of the worst of its opposite, "the future in the present" as C.L.R. James was quoted above.

Depressingly but accurately, though, most of the writers emphasize the need for a struggle perspective if a future is to be won. Michael Zweig, speaking prose, tells the Zuccotti Park occupiers in "The Working-Class Majority" that MLK's well-known "arc of history.... does not bend by itself. That is our responsibility."

Imagine Living in a Socialist USA is a collection of excellent, sound work by thoughtful writers on the left, and most socialists (certainly this one) will learn an immense amount from its pages. Though there are individual articles and stories that fulfill the promise of the title, nevertheless, many are too far into the weeds on the vicissitudes of life under capitalism and pathways out of it to get successfully to the full richness of the goal of imagining a socialist future.

[Maryland Legislative Roundup: Mike & Mike Kill a Bill](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Woody Woodruff

Less than two weeks remain in the Maryland General Assembly's 2014 session. Many of the high-salience items for the left – the minimum wage and earned sick leave bills, for instance – are hovering. The minimum wage bill was badly roughed up during its passage in the House of Delegates – indexing and a corresponding raise for tipped workers were stripped out, notably. The administration's original bill is still under consideration in the Senate.

But one bill, which would have opened up opportunities for serious reform in the state's ability to plan its own destiny independent of corporate capitalism, has met an unusually foul end.

[The bill promoting a Maryland's Future commission](#) to develop plans for a post-military economy for the state was derailed in mid-March by the two top dogs in the Assembly – House speaker Mike Busch and Senate president Mike Miller. The Commission for Maryland's Future, [a project of Fund Our Communities and Peace Action](#), envisioned a legislative mandate for a study group that would plan for new tech and knowledge-based businesses, including alternative energy production, as a logical successor industry to building superfluous F-35s for Lockheed. In its inception it would have involved (gasp!) industrial policy, actual democratic planning, rather than allowing corporate capitalists to keep on calling the tune for Maryland. The members of the proposed commission would include academics, environmentalists and techies, labor and human needs activists and so forth – as befits a plan from Fund Our Communities, which seeks to wrest at least some of the Pentagon's hoard for state and local government and social needs.

Not a happy place for Mike & Mike, who had the CMF bill summarily killed. The House Economic Matters Committee, previously insulted by this correspondent as a “graveyard for good ideas,” provided an unfavorable report (death sentence) March 3. In the other chamber, it was nixed March 13 by a unanimous Senate Finance Committee (including by five co-sponsors of the bill, one of whom was the chairman). Reliable sources indicate that one of Lockheed's many registered lobbyists stirred that pot in the Senate committee.

In its place, and solely by fiat, the two Mikes decreed that there would be a “private sector commission” that would advise them, that is the two Mikes, on how to pursue “a joint legislative and business economic development agenda” that was apparently announced in January to no fanfare.

And who serves on that commission to advise the two Mikes? Twenty trusty establishment representatives, four of whom are women but all stalwarts of the private sector. Even the academics are steeped in the nonpublic sector; one's day job is to commercialize and monetize the research of one of the state's top research universities. There are six legislators, none likely to rattle any corporate cages, including one from the oft-lethal Senate Finance Committee as well as the chair of Economic Matters in the House. Someone's quid and someone's quo, as always. Environmentalists? Zero. Union reps? One, and no militant. Human and economic rights advocates? You've got to be kidding...

There's a tie-breaker, too, though it's hard to imagine these corporate cronies getting deadlocked on anything. The chairman and 21st member of this Potemkin study group is – Norm Augustine, a former defense undersecretary (Reagan era) and retired chairman of... Lockheed Martin .

It appears clear that the Commission for Maryland's Future, which had a great deal of momentum in the Assembly, was 'way too threatening to Maryland business interests to be spared intervention by those interests' best buddies in the assembly, Mike & Mike...

[Self-Determination for Crimea and Ukraine](#)

The Washington Socialist <> April 2014

By Dan Adkins

Self-determination of people was implied in the Declaration of Independence and was specified as US policy by Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. The US has followed this policy except when US business interests were involved or when the Cold War decided foreign citizens were acting against “perceived” US interests. The results of ignoring other peoples’ views has had the US supporting dictators, the Iranian coup, ignoring a Vietnam plebiscite, and other actions suggesting the US is bigger on talking than acting on our ideals.

Now we see a takeover of Crimea by Russian forces despite a treaty providing security assurance to Ukraine in return for its agreement to discontinue the world’s third largest nuclear arsenal in the 1990s. Russia continues to interfere in Ukraine’s internal affairs by sending armies to its borders and sending Russian ultranationalists into Ukraine to create problems for the new government, which simply desires to freely choose Western democratic values and economics. Russia may be dissed by former Warsaw Pact nations joining NATO but they had their reasons.

The coup instigated in Crimea was made by Russian Special Forces without insignias. The coup reestablishes the over 200 years of Russian control of Crimea. Although Russian democracy is less a reality than a formality, in this case, the current majority of the Crimean population seems to want to join the Russia Federation.

This action startles both the US and the European Union (E.U.) since it’s the first time since 1945 that land has been forcibly annexed in Europe. The fate of Ukraine is not clear. Russia has proclaimed that it will look out for Russians being discriminated against. That “tactic” was used before World War II by the Germans in Czechoslovakia.

The world got to this place because of several factors. Putin is playing the strong man, aligning himself with Russian history. The E.U. has dictated terms that Ukraine had to meet to become an E.U. member, thus forcing Ukraine to choose economically between Europe or Russia. Russia has a different opinion since many Russians consider Ukraine the birthplace of much Russian culture and Ukraine’s population has many self-identified Russians. The treatment of Russia by the US as a junior partner and a loser of the Cold War did not help.

What Now?

What would a democratic socialist foreign policy on the Russian-Ukraine dispute look like? It would include an understanding of history, not rushing to war, but probably preparing for actions from a position of common strength. It might support a plebiscite on Crimea's return to Russia supervised by the United Nations. One would attempt to use economic tools and play military options down, but not encourage adventurism from either side.

Russian history is a tale of a national security state and military that goes back eight hundred years and includes an almost two-century occupation by the Mongols or their cousins. The US has had a serious standing military force only since 1941. Russia, unlike the US, has been invaded by most of its neighbors. That history suggests that the ending of the Soviet Union and having the Warsaw Pact countries flip to NATO was a major change and shock for Russia and may have contributed to Russia's current views. Russia has historically needed and implemented a strong defense capability that was also used offensively to expand all the way to Alaska and Afghanistan. In World War II the US was the junior partner to the Soviets in fighting the Nazis. For every American war orphan there may have been 40 to 60 soviet war orphans. That had to have a psychological impact on the Russian mind. Russia has a corrupt elite of oligarchs that weakens its economic creativity and strength of its people and economy. In the US, our elites often use their riches to heavily influence elections and legislation. In Russia the oligarchs use corrupted officials and extra legal means to eliminate rivals in addition to using the US elites' tools.

The absorption of Crimea by Russia is a fait accompli and a round of sanctions by Europe and the US will result. So far only individual oligarchs are targeted. These sanctions will be at best inconveniences since there is still money to be made trading with Russia.

However the territorial integrity of the rest of Ukraine is not clear and the Russian moves are a shock to the security of Europe. Possible further moves on the Ukraine require options to be prepared. Serious sanctions would require blocking trade but much of Europe depends upon Russian natural gas.

Marshall Plan II

Reviving a Marshall Plan by the US and E. U. could be aimed at long-term loans to allow some NATO nations plus Ukraine to increase weatherization and other technologies to be less dependent on Russian gas. The U. S. loans would allow nations to buy US energy technologies and thus also be a stimulus to the US economy. The aim would be to speed the transition to renewables and permanently decrease the need for Russian natural gas. Creating American LNG exports would only continue demand and would be undercut by Russian gas when the crisis was over. Other aids may be needed in the form of education aimed at creating a less corrupt economy and political sphere in Ukraine.

The potential for armed conflict over Ukraine seems to be real and steps should be taken to make this option undesirable. NATO's militaries have been decreasing which may have enticed Russian moves. The world order before Russia's latest move assumed there would be no conventional wars or moves at least in Europe. NATO militaries are configured to have an expeditionary role in places like Afghanistan and Africa while having a symbolic conventional

role. NATO militaries have to change to meet this new challenge. However there is a way to balance NATO/Russia military strength without too much cost.

Lend-Lease II

The U. S. could loan NATO surplus armored vehicles (US has 8,000 tanks) to balance Russian arms that have been increasing lately. The aim is not to start a war but to make sure that Russia does not see NATO as disarmed.

The US and NATO have no treaty obligations to defend Ukraine, so it would be important to signal Russia that NATO is not moving into Ukraine or being a threat. The US and NATO need a discussion on what next steps should be taken if Russia does attack the rest of Ukraine. Serious sanctions could create a blow to the Russian economy. Balancing this blow would require Russia to reroute its pipelines to China which could take years.

Staying with the current world borders has allowed many governments to focus on economic development or internal corruption when the world needs to focus on climate change and development to raise people from poverty. A democratic socialist solution should minimize the possibilities of war and maximize sustainable development and democracy.

A creative diplomatic policy would forgo a winner takes all solution and treat Ukraine for what it has always been, a gateway between the Russia and Europe. However, having Russian armies on Ukraine's border does not lend to honest dialogue let alone creative thinking. Putin's call to Obama can be seen as an attempt to undercut Ukraine's sovereignty by creating a Russian-U. S. solution. Hopefully Obama will not fall for that. Currently we are left with a diplomatic war of maneuver and the hope it will not become hot.

This post was updated April 2, 2014; the final paragraph was revised to reflect more recent events.

[Shallal, DSA members discuss vision for DC](#)

***The Washington Socialist* <> April 2014**

By Bill Mosley

About 25 DSA members and friends gathered in Northwest DC on March 30 during a wintry storm to hear DC mayoral candidate Andy Shallal discuss his vision for the District of Columbia, whether or not he won the Democratic primary.

The meet-and-greet and fundraising event for the DSA-endorsed Shallal took place two days before the election that resulted in DC Councilmember Muriel Bowser winning the Democratic nomination.

Shallal and his campaign manager, Bob Muehlenkamp, spoke of how the Shallal campaign had “changed the debate” by forcing other candidates in the race to discuss issues they preferred to ignore, such as economic inequality, the need for more affordable housing, and how to raise the academic achievement of low-income and minority students. Shallal also spoke to a need for a forthright discussion of race and its impact on life in the District.

Shallal, owner of the Busboys and Poets restaurant chain, said he plans to remain engaged in DC politics in order to help build a progressive electoral movement in the District.

The event raised \$1,066 in last-minute cash for the campaign.