

*The Washington Socialist*  
Articles from May 2015 Issue  
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Editor: Woody Woodruff

[WELCOME TO THE MAY 2015 ISSUE OF THE WASHINGTON SOCIALIST](#)

Tuesday, May 5th, 2015

**Welcome to the May edition of the Washington Socialist, the monthly email newsletter of the Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America.**

May Days come and they go, always trying to wedge into the wider consciousness the notion that the day is dedicated to a celebration of worker rights and dignity everywhere – except, largely, in the US. It's a day with deep roots in the Euro-American Atlantic folk tradition, with the sizzle of festival and the undertone of upset – of the elevation of the low and the (temporary) toppling of the high and mighty. And this year, it's just doggone crowded.

**EVENTS IN MAY:**

**There will be an annual election for the steering committee at the Metro DC DSA membership meeting May 10 at the Shaw branch library.**

Any paid-up member of the local can self-nominate. Any paid-up member of the national organization can vote in the election. Candidates will be asked for an elevator speech.

The steering committee members set policy and program for the local, are the principal liaisons with the national organization, and monitor and manage the activities of commissions as well as of task forces that may be set up from time to time. The bylaws leave the number of members in the steering committee flexible, but it should be an odd number. It is led by two co-chairs, elected from within.

The meeting starts at 2 p.m. at the Watha T. Daniel/Shaw branch library, 1630 7<sup>th</sup> St. NW, 20001. It is across the street from the Shaw/Howard Metrorail stop on the Green and Yellow lines.

Any changes to this schedule will be posted on the local's [Meetup site](#).

This month's **Socialist Salon** will be on Thursday, May 21 at 6:30 p.m. The Salon generally meets at Hunan Dynasty, 215 Pennsylvania Ave. SE. The topic and speaker are in formation at the newsletter's deadline. Updated information will appear on the [Meetup site](#).

The DSA Book Club will be meeting in the Kogod Courtyard at the Smithsonian Portrait Gallery Museum on May 17 from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. to discuss “Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think” by George Lakoff. Lakoff, a linguist, has entered the popular consciousness through his discussion of how “framing” works to promote a dominant political culture, and suggestions on how to counter that effect.

The museum is located at Eighth and F Streets NW, Washington, D.C. 20001 across from the Verizon Center. Gallery Place and Metro Center are nearby Metrorail stops.

### **AND IN THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL SPHERE:**

Metro-DC Democratic Socialists of America is a supporter of **DC LaborFest**, a month-long festival of film, theater, history, poetry, music, books and art celebrating the U.S. labor movement past and present. This year’s LaborFest launches on Friday, May 1 with a full day of labor **arts, film, music and history events**.

The AFL-CIO will host a labor film poster exhibit and a free noontime DC Labor FilmFest preview screening. At 12:30 p.m, a wreath will be laid at the Mother Jones Memorial in Silver Spring. The University of Maryland Hornbake Library’s AFL-CIO Archives will host a Labor History Wikipedia Edit-A-Thon and a reception and tour in the afternoon. At 7 p.m., SAG-AFTRA, Pride@Work, Reel Affirmations and The DC Center for the LGBT Community host “Pride,” LaborFest’s opening-night screening.

Metro-DC DSA is a co-sponsor of one of LaborFest’s film offerings, “Northern Lights,” which will be shown on Wednesday, May 20, 7:15 p.m. at the AFI Theater in Silver Spring. The 1978 documentary, a winner of the Cannes Film Festival’s prize for best debut film, dramatizes the organizing efforts of the Nonpartisan League, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century progressive movement originating among North Dakota farmers.

[Click here for a complete LaborFest schedule.](#)

**The weekend of Mayday is in fact unduly jammed** with great events for progressives. Metro DC DSA activists will head to Philadelphia May 2 for a regional conference on DSA’s emerging revision of its strategy document, a twenty-first century vision of democratic socialism.

Meanwhile, back in This Town, a flotilla of progressive unions and scholars meet in “In Defense of the Public Square,” a [two-day conference](#) beginning this afternoon (May 1) at Georgetown University. Bob Kuttner and Jeff Madrick are on the Friday afternoon program and Deborah Meier and Marian Wright Edelman on Saturday. The Vietnam Peace Commemorative also has a [two-day conference](#) on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Vietnam antiwar movement, meeting at New

York Avenue Presbyterian Church [today and tomorrow](#). Out of town, Maryland United for Peace and Justice has its [annual conference](#) in Catonsville today and Saturday. Ray McGovern and Liz McAllister are on tap tonight and Phyllis Bennis of IPS tomorrow.

The upsurge of rage and hopelessness in Baltimore's oppressed communities brought by the death of Freddie Gray after his injury while in police custody brought postponement for a Saturday event keyed by the Institute for Policy Studies. The "[People and Planet First Agenda](#)" explores new models for economic and political culture, including commerce and agriculture, in Maryland for a transition from capitalism; Gar Alperovitz and Annie ("Story of Stuff") Leonard are featured. Originally scheduled at the downtown University of Baltimore campus, it will be rescheduled soon.

Baltimore's agony brought many responses around the nation; one was here in DC Wednesday, "DC Ferguson in Support of Baltimore's Uprising." Metro DC members David Duhalde, Coleson Breen and Luke Abel are shown in David's group selfie at that march from Chinatown to the White House.

### **ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE**

Some past May Days are quite linked to memories in **our radical tradition**, Kurt Stand [reminds us](#). The four decades since the end of the Vietnam War may have blurred our recollection of how some distinct events surrounding May Day conditioned the eventual end of that conflict. Yet all May Days are one, Lucy Duff [observes in a coda](#), and all bear some hope for better days.

The ripple effects of **two seismic events** – the election of Muriel Bowser as DC Mayor, and the recent death of Mayor-for-Life Marion Barry Jr. – brought still another election to the District Tuesday. Bill Mosley [outlines the results](#), which in the case of one special council election are still uncallable as the *Washington Socialist* closes out this month's issue.

The growth of consolidation verging on **monopoly in the telecommunications business** brought a surprisingly vigorous reaction from progressives and everyday users of cable and Internet service. Surprising, certainly, to Comcast, which was forced to walk away from a mega-merger with Time Warner Cable because regulators were about to down-check it. Carolyn Byerly, who follows this issue regularly, [shows just what a thumping Big Telcom got](#) at the hands of outraged customers and a near-spontaneous progressive uprising.

Metro DC members formed a pool-shooting team to help raise money for the **DC Abortion Fund**. M. C. Miller, who participated in Metro DC's enthusiastic but unsuccessful team, [shows the depth of connection](#) between oppression of poor women's reproductive rights and the economic inequalities that make them most vulnerable to that oppression.

Last month's Socialist Salon went to the movies, visiting Howard University for a screening of **The Stuart Hall Project**, a biographical account of the Jamaican émigré who became one of

Britain's best-known left academics and a founding editor of the *New Left Review*. Andy Feeney [reports on the film and its subject](#).

Bill Mosley returns from a recent trip to the **People's Republic of China** with evidence about the possibility of capitalist development in a largely authoritarian state. In short, [it seems to be working](#).

Dan Adkins, a student of **energy and climate**, [reports on recent technical developments](#) that are good for families and small group projects and are making the big power companies quite nervous.

Another annual session of the **Maryland General Assembly** wrapped up in mid-April, and despite its overwhelmingly Democratic membership and a series of skirmishes with a new Republican governor, Woody Woodruff reports, big-pocket [business interests hold all the cards](#).

Terry Pratchett, a **best-selling fantasy writer** who recently died, is probably not too well known to socialists. Andy Feeney believes his long-running Discworld novels offer both amusement and provocative stimulation to radical readers, and [provides an appreciation](#) and introduction.

Finally, **Good Reads** includes [links to useful articles](#) some may have missed.

**You can read these and other past articles in the *Washington Socialist* on our website where they are archived, [dsadc.org](http://dsadc.org)**

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**Our readers are our best writers.** Join that group and submit an article about activism you are doing or someone else is doing; reviews of important books you have read; think-pieces contributing to the left's perennial search for a better way to explain our crisis to its victims. ***You are part of this conversation. Submit contributions to The Washington Socialist at a number of levels — send us nominee for “Good Reads” (they should be available online so send links); send news and notices of activism; submit articles. Send to [woodlanham@gmail.com](mailto:woodlanham@gmail.com).***

[Comcast-TWC Merger Dies as Media Activists Flex Their Muscles](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

*By Carolyn M. Byerly*

News of Comcast's failed attempt to take over Time Warner Cable on April 24 is being cheered across the land by telecom consumers who saw nothing but rising prices and worsening service if the deal had been approved by the [Federal Communications Commission](#). Comcast dropped its

\$45.2 billion bid for TWC after growing public opposition and increased scrutiny of its effects by the FCC.

FCC Chairman [Tom Wheeler said](#) that Comcast's decision to drop its bid was "in the best interests of consumers," in that a merger between the Comcast and TWC would have created a company that dominated in the number of broadband and video subscribers, as well as programming options. Wheeler added, "The proposed merger would have posed an unacceptable risk to competition and innovation especially given the growing importance of high-speed broadband to online video and innovative new services." Wheeler attributed Comcast's decision to the "good working relationship" that had developed between Comcast officials and FCC staff.

But media activists can stand up and take credit for this one. The backstory that must be told if this historic outcome is to be understood is how well-orchestrated advocacy and public information campaigns mobilized an ever-wider network of people opposed to monopolistic tendencies in the telecom industries. Not unlike the pro-Net Neutrality decision that the FCC made a few weeks earlier, the death of the Comcast-TWC merger is the result of progressive groups and individuals in the media reform and media justice movements who articulated a clear analysis of the problem, made it relevant to ordinary folks (who already saw the reality in their escalating monthly bills from Comcast and the other cable and Internet providers), and emphasized the importance of telling the FCC not to approve the merger.

Note for instance the two leading groups' messages. [Free Press](#), the DC-based group instigated by [Bob McChesney](#) and [John Nichols](#) in 2003, kept a daily barrage of anti Comcast-TWC merger messages going out by email and through their lobbyists on the Hill from the moment Comcast filed its application in January 2013. The group acknowledges that defeat of the merger plan was the work of "[a large coalition](#) of organizations that pushed to stop Comcast – so many groups that we can't list them all here." They include more leftist orientated groups like [Center for Media Reform](#), based in Oakland, CA. The Center was an important player with its grassroots education and organizing efforts, particularly in communities of color. The Center has always understood more democratic media policy as a route toward "[fundamental communication rights](#)" and "universal media and technology access," in the struggle for racial justice and human rights.

Less obvious are the academic activists who weighed in with data and other research, entered through official comments to the FCC and in wider circles. Most prominent among them is the Georgetown Law Center's [Institute for Public Representation](#) whose team of lawyers has crafted the essential [legal arguments against media concentration and deregulation](#) for more than a dozen years. It was the IPR that worked hand-in-hand with lawyers from the now-folded [Media Access Project](#) that represented public interest groups in what became the [Prometheus Radio Project vs. FCC](#) rulings in 2004 and 2011. Those rulings blocked further de-regulation and required the FCC to revisit the matter of women and minority broadcast ownership, among other things – the latter (ownership) being something the FCC has refused to respond to even to the present time.

Also involved in building a base of opposition to the Comcast-TWC merger have been members of the [Howard Media Group](#), a student-faculty collaborative at Howard University,\* that uses

research to advance the communication rights of African Americans, women and other under-served groups. In its comment of [March 2014 to the FCC](#), HMG members took the position that this merger “poses a threat to freedom of speech by imposing financial barriers to disadvantaged with needs to connect for vital education and communication services.”

At the same time as the public becomes increasingly aware of the threat that huge media companies pose to their communication rights, there is the reminder of how tenuous these recent gains of a pro-Net Neutrality policy and a failed Comcast-TWC merger really are. If a Republican president is elected in November 2016, the FCC membership will tilt to Republican leadership as three of the five commissioners, including the chairman, will reflect the party in power. Should that happen, the newly activated citizens and the activist advocates who helped to get them conscientized and mobilized will all lose power and policy ground.

There is also a global dimension to consider. The horizontally and vertically integrated telecommunications industry is second only to the pharmaceutical industry in revenues worldwide, giving their CEOs and shareholders enormous political and economic power. An additional fact is that most of the largest conglomerated telecom companies are located in the United States, making them the standard bearers and primary voices of US-style capitalism. In this writer’s view, there has never been a better time for democratic socialists to grasp the issues telecom policy raises and to forge a strategy for intervention that would serve the common good within our own national borders and beyond them.

*\*Editor’s Note: Metro DC DSA member Carolyn Byerly, currently chair of Howard’s Department of Communication, Culture and Media Studies, has been an active member of the Howard Media Group.*

### [Even Battling A GOP Governor, MD Legislators Can’t Get Untangled From Business Interests](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

#### ***The Washington Socialist <> May 2015***

*By Woody Woodruff*

It was billed as a battle between a newly elected Republican governor and a deep-blue Democratic legislative branch, but when the tumult and the shouting was done, the Maryland General Assembly demonstrated just how deeply business interests control the levers of power among Democrats as well. Major progressive efforts failed in the established death traps of the House Economic Matters and Senate Finance committees, both stacked with pro-business members.

[The legislative roundup from the \(quite unprogressive\) Annapolis Capital April 18](#) said with satisfaction “[Republican Gov. Larry Hogan] got much of what he wanted out of this

session.” Their editorial notes that the budget contained no tax increases. Hogan’s bullying tirades on that trusty Reaganite issue had an effect during the campaign that lingered into the session. But the budget outcome is conditioned by the fact that the strong-executive Maryland system requires the assembly to appropriate no more than the governor’s budget proposes. Their only wiggle room is the possibility of moving money around under that ceiling. That, they did. Part of that strategy can include new tax revenues to cover vulnerable areas that lose money in the shell game of fund-shifting. Rebecca Lessner in *Maryland Reporter* [outlined](#) the tax-raising schemes, all of which apparently failed because of the scare-mythology that Hogan won the election on his mantra that taxes were too high. (In fact, most Democratic ops will argue, the Anthony Brown campaign was a botch from the start).

Taxes on chicken produced on the Eastern Shore (to support keeping chicken manure out of the Chesapeake Bay); on plastic bags and bottles to keep them in the waste stream instead of cluttering the landscape; and on tobacco all failed in committee. Repeal of the stormwater remediation fee, which Hogan demonized by calling it the “rain tax,” was passed with provisos that will actually weigh more heavily on the large counties. They will no longer be required to raise the money for stormwater remediation through a real estate tax. But they will have to report in detail about how they are remediating, and how they are paying for it. And their direct mandate from the federal Environmental Protection Agency to clean up their runoff before it gets to the Bay is not changed. The law, which was supposed to give local governments the cover of a state mandate for added fees, now leaves them vulnerable to their own dissatisfied taxpayers.

The budget machinations: the legislature was working from a plan that had already been deeply trimmed after their last session because revenues fell short. The [after-session report](#) by the Department of Legislative Services noted nearly \$300 million in cutbacks by former Gov. Martin O’Malley, including across-the-board agency cuts and painful trims in state higher education and aid to local governments. Hogan’s proposed cuts compounded the pain and brought a rebellion from the Assembly that was at first bipartisan. \$200 million in restored spending on K-12 education, employee compensation and several other categories remains in dispute; Hogan can’t use it for its original purpose but doesn’t have to spend it either. As part of his proposed cuts, Hogan had pursued his cheap-shot campaign against state employees by taking back a 2 percent cost-of-living raise already in effect. The legislators passed a bill forbidding Hogan’s gambit in future.

The 2014-15 surge of public awareness on police misconduct and killings, especially of black men, brought a positive batch of laws that passed in their first attempt. The *WaPo* wrapup:

“[Democratic Sen. Jamie] Raskin said that justice reform drew bipartisan support, especially as Republicans realized that the state could save money — and create the possibility of having more taxpayers — by incarcerating fewer people. ‘We’ve gotten past the obsolete discussion over tough-on-crime, and we’ve entered the much more fruitful discussion of smart-on-crime,’ he said. ... Sen. Joanne C. Benson (D-Prince George’s) said the national focus on Ferguson was one reason that bills about incarceration and law enforcement — many of which were embraced by the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland — seemed to have more success this year.”

A bill to shield nonviolent misdemeanors (some of them) from criminal records was aimed at making it easier to get jobs. Ex-offenders on probation or parole will be able to gain the vote. The [Job Opportunity Task Force/Working Matters](#) in Baltimore, a persistent campaigner, reported “After four years, the [Maryland Second Chance Act](#) finally won approval from lawmakers, opening access to jobs and housing for more than 200,000 people in our state. This, coupled with the last-minute repeal of a statute that prohibits expungement of a record if a person is subsequently convicted of another crime, is great news for the one in three adults dealing with the lasting impact of a criminal record.”

Certainly bills requiring officers to wear body cameras got big bipartisan margins, including a 47-0 vote in the senate. And the *WaPo* also noted that “There was a bill approved that would require a statewide accounting of civilian deaths at the hands of police officers, and another that sets policies for how police departments should use body cameras.”

From Nate Rabner, [Capital News Service](#): “Del. Alonzo Washington, D-Prince George’s, sponsored a successful bill that would require law enforcement agencies in the state to submit a detailed report to the Governor’s Office of Crime Control and Prevention for deaths involving police actions. **UPDATE:** Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, will sign the reporting bill, spokeswoman Erin Montgomery said.”

Rabner of CNS reported that two bills sought by Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake “died in committee.” One would have put a new “misconduct in office” statute on the books essentially increasing an officer’s liability to long jail time for a conviction on misconduct.

The CNS report said “Restorative justice and police accountability were dominant themes this session” and quoted Sen. Bobby Zirkin, a Baltimore County Democrat, saying that the drug policy reforms were a transition away from the “(President Ronald) Reagan kind of war on drugs, tough-on-crime approach to drug use” toward “targeting the education and targeting treatment and doing those things which actually work.”

JOTF/Working Matters’s other priority didn’t fare as well. “Unfortunately, the [Maryland Campaign for Paid Sick Days](#) was not as successful this year as lawmakers once again declined to act on the [Healthy Working Families Act](#).” This bill, for the third year in a row, failed in the House Economic Matters Committee. JOTF continued: “We recently [received instruction](#) to work with opponents during the interim as legislative leaders are committed to seriously considering this law in 2016.” An interesting development: environmental organizations have been slowly expanding their issue arrays to include public health, which they see as part and parcel of environmental justice. The Chesapeake Climate Action Network, among others, included the earned sick leave bill among their priorities and lamented its failure.

CCAN had a mixed bag of environmental hopes itself. In [the organization’s session wrap-up](#) the top news was a virtual three-year ban on fracking in the Marcellus Shale of Western Maryland, while regulations promulgated by Gov. O’Malley were studied for effectiveness. A bill that would have declared fracking processes too hazardous to be protected as trade secrets (including the toxic chemical compounds found in waste water) failed, however. A bill to study the hazards of oil transported by rail – cause of major fires and spills in the last year elsewhere – also failed.



Most importantly, a bill to strengthen climate change goals in the “renewable portfolio” – the percent of renewable energy power companies must use by 2020 – failed in its first try. It’s an issue that bears strongly on the question of Exelon Corp’s takeover of Pepco and almost certainly reflects heavy corporate lobbying – Exelon is a [nuke-heavy and renewables-averse company](#).

But another pro-environment bill that would also affect Exelon did pass – a pilot program to ease community solar power applications. In CCAN’s description, the bill “will set up a process for groups of Marylanders (i.e. not just individual homeowners) to split the credits for electricity generated by a shared solar installation. This will introduce a new model to Maryland that gives renters and low- and moderate-income residents access to the benefits of solar energy.”

A batch of bills proposed by the [Augustine Commission](#) were passed by the legislators, and some may be Trojan-horse bills that could give business interests even greater influence in the halls of Maryland government, if that’s possible. The one with the most potential for mischief sets up an Advisory Council on the Impact of Regulations on Small Businesses that can call a hearing at any time a bill seems to threaten a “significant adverse impact on small businesses.” This could be another hurdle for any progressive, pro-worker legislation. For instance the “fiscal note” attached to this year’s version of the ill-fated bill providing earned sick leave states that it will have a “significant adverse impact” on business.

Bills that survived the legislature [still must get Gov. Larry Hogan’s](#) signature – a potentially fraught process given the strained relations between Hogan and the legislators, and one that might bring the assembly members back for veto override sessions. Hogan said Apr. 24 – in the midst of considerable unrest at a death in Baltimore police custody — that he would sign a group of bills strengthening oversight of police. Significant progressive successes like the moratorium on fracking are still on the edge. And the \$200 million in dispute – which Hogan can spend (or refuse to spend) on K-12 education, reinstating state workers COL raise and other items – will likely be a focus of wrangling between sessions.

It’s easy for legislators to strike a posture extolling a progressive bill and then vote against it in committee or subcommittee, where votes are often not recorded. On the rare occasions that veto overrides come up, legislators can cave to pressure and horse-trading offers. In those nooks and crannies of the legislative process, businessmen and their campaign contributions still rule the roost.

[Good Reads for Socialists](#) May 2015

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

***The Washington Socialist <> May 2015***

Nudging US workers and consumers out of their apathetic acceptance of late-capitalist social and economic conditions is a big task for DSAers and our allies. Here’s a look at some early research

that's clarifying understanding of why people in the US are complacent in their inequality – though it offers few solutions: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/unequal-yet-happy.html?ref=opinion&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/unequal-yet-happy.html?ref=opinion&_r=0)

Erik Loomis has published a new book on corporate outsourcing strategies and outrages. His recent article in *In These Times* no doubt provides a good taste of the book's themes. Thanks to Louis Cooper for the tip.

[http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17833/holding\\_companies\\_accountable\\_sweatshops](http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17833/holding_companies_accountable_sweatshops)

News accounts of the Fight for \$15 events of April 15 (4-\$15) range from the Union City roundup [here](#) to WaPo columnist Dana Milbank's witness of that day's [union-led rally against the Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) corporate-favoring trade pact, which Congress is considering for fast-track consideration. See also veteran labor journalist David Moberg's [comprehensive account](#) in *In These Times*.

Alyssa Battistoni, one of our favorite *Jacobin* writers, takes on the “red imperative” in climate change. She declaims “forget socialism in one country — ecosocialism in one country is even less feasible. . . . sustainability will come only through global solidarity.” It's at <http://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/toward-cyborg-socialism/>

DC DSA members pitched in on a pool tournament to raise money for poor women who can't afford the kind of reproductive choice that the well-off can (article, this issue). The US's punitive policies toward women of color in poverty are well outlined in this article from the *Guardian*: [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/27/the-state-still-controls-womens-bodies-especially-brown-and-black-ones?CMP=ema\\_565](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/27/the-state-still-controls-womens-bodies-especially-brown-and-black-ones?CMP=ema_565)

It's always good to see how people who are basically non-socialists essentially bring the idea forth in the course of discussing the evils of capitalism. Here, in a recent speech in Australia, the author of *The Wire* makes that journey. The piece has the peculiar coherence of a Russell Brand effort, but as DSA revises the basic text of its outreach, analysis like David Simon's is useful. [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/08/david-simon-capitalism-marx-two-americas-wire?CMP=ema\\_565](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/08/david-simon-capitalism-marx-two-americas-wire?CMP=ema_565)

As the end of the Vietnam War 40 years ago is observed from various perspectives (see our article, this issue), there's a battle going on over the shape of history. Many would like to rewrite it to erase the war's worst memories of imperialism; others want to make sure that the US's penchant for convenient amnesia when it's time to start a nice new war is contested by the appalling, bitter record. Jon Weiner, in *The Nation*, is among the latter. <http://www.thenation.com/article/204465/vietnam-battlefield-memory>

## [How Should Democratic Socialists Code and Decode Stuart Hall?](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

A film review of *The Stuart Hall Project*, shown April 18 at Howard University, with the co-sponsorship of Metro DC DSA and the Howard Department of Communications, Culture and Media Studies

*By Andy Feeney*

To grasp all the major political and cultural cross-currents of 60 years of modern history in 90 minutes' worth of film imagery is obviously impossible. To explore the thinking of a pathbreaking leftwing intellectual who made his reputation trying to explicate and unravel those same six decades' worth of political change in a relatively brief film treatment is Quixotic as well. Yet the attempt to do so can be emotionally powerful and the images involved hypnotic, and I think that description fits John Akomfrah's film *The Stuart Hall Project*, which about 15 DSA members and supporters viewed in mid-April at a special showing arranged by DSA's Carolyn Byerly at the Howard University Department of Communications, Culture and Media Studies.

My subjective sense of the movie is that it was an enormously powerful evocation of the many overlapping political events and political crises that shaped the evolution of the so-called New Left in Britain as well as elsewhere from the 1950s through about 1999, and as a leftist who tried to keep up with the events of this era I found it thought-provoking and at times almost overwhelming in the complex issues it raises for the democratic left. Whether this or any other film treatment of a similar length could possibly begin to explore the political and intellectual contributions Stuart Hall made over the course of a long career is a different question, of course. And I wonder if the film's visual references to a number of pivotal social and political developments of the 1956-1990 period will be understandable to younger socialists (and other younger viewers, especially outside the UK and the Caribbean diaspora) who have not lived through the same stretch of history.

What the film does superlatively well, I think, is give us a provocative introduction to the life and ideas of a pivotal New Left thinker, and an impetus to go study his major contributions on our own. Whether we take up the challenge is at the option of the individual viewer. At least as I understand Stuart Hall's contribution to communications theory – which is not much, I confess – this aspect of the film may not be an accident. One of Hall's major contributions to communications research was the concept that communication is never a simple or one-way affair, but one involving the “coding” and “decoding” of what is said by the speaker and the intended audience. Those being spoken to bring their own cultural understandings to what the communicator is trying to convey, and their “decoding” of what has been coded may be conventional or unconventional, welcoming or antagonistic, a fact that militates against simplistic understandings of the entire process. What DSA members and other progressive audiences get out of the *Stuart Hall Project*, therefore, may depend as much on how we “decode” it as on what Akomfrah or Hall himself intended to say.

As the film portrays Hall, he was concerned throughout his career, and well before it, by questions of race, immigration and cultural identity, and for good reason. A Jamaican-born intellectual who made his political and professional mark in Britain, Hall was born into an upwardly striving family of mixed racial background, with his lighter-skinned mother being acutely aware of colonial Jamaica's finely graduated status system based in large part on skin color. Hall happened to be darker-skinned than anyone else in his immediate family, and one of his sisters encountered vehement disapproval from their mother when she fell in love with a much darker-skinned doctor on the island. Ultimately she suffered a nervous breakdown over the family conflict arising from the affair and underwent electroshock therapy that left her permanently somewhat impaired.

As a relatively young man, Hall sought to escape from the racial hierarchies of Jamaica by traveling to the UK to study at Oxford, where he worked on a Ph.D. thesis on the novelist Henry James and hoped, initially, for a professional career with the British academic elite. But he encountered enough racial prejudice at Oxford that he soon gravitated to involvement outside of academia with the local immigrant West Indian community, which was largely working class. This experience drew him into the orbit of the British left.

Then in 1956, the film indicates, Hall was appalled by two parallel events showing abuses of political and military power: the crushing of an attempted Hungarian Revolution by Russian tanks, on the one hand, and the British government's involvement in a neo-colonialist military attack on Gen. Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, on the other, in a war over Nasser's nationalization of the previously British-controlled Suez Canal. Along with several former members of the British Communist Party, who quit the party in protest over the Russian intervention in Hungary, Hall began to argue for the creation of a British "new left," essentially dedicated to democratic socialism, which would spurn both Soviet foreign policy and Soviet authoritarianism, on the one hand, and the capitalist imperialism practiced by supposedly "democratic" governments like Britain's, on the other.

By 1960, Hall became the first editor of the *New Left Review*, a publication whose contributors included such then- prominent British radicals as E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Ralph Miliband and Doris Lessing. He also soon became a voice for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), an organization that mobilized leftists, pacifists and other disaffected Britons in protests and acts of non-violent civil disobedience aimed at preventing the UK from acquiring nuclear weapons or allowing US nuclear weapons to be deployed on British soil.

Through the CND, Hall met his future wife, a white Englishwoman, and the two soon were married. But when Hall and his wife Catherine moved to Birmingham, where Hall took a leading role in the newly created Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, the two encountered open racist hostility when they appeared together in the streets. Within a relatively few years, they began to raise their mixed-race children, in an era when a growing white backlash against nonwhite immigration was fueling the reemergence of an openly neo-fascist movement in the UK. Yet when Hall went back to Jamaica on a visit to see his family, he would find his own mother expressing anxiety and disgust about "her" England being overrun by nonwhite immigrants – nonwhite immigrants who in some cases looked very similar to Hall.

One important theme that Akomfrah's film traces throughout Hall's career, accordingly, is that of his feeling out of place both in Jamaica and in Britain, and by extension feeling like something of a stranger everywhere. Over the years, the film suggests, Hall came to feel that his feelings of cultural estrangement were common to a growing number of people around the world, who were incapable of feeling truly at "home" and rooted as large majorities of people had traditionally felt in the past.

However, the film's imagery and its cross-cutting references to Hall's writings and speeches indicate that the problems of race, immigrant status and culture were hardly the only influences that shaped Hall's intellectual and political development over the years. The film includes images and historical footage of other events outside of the UK that also engaged Hall and other members of the New Left – the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the subsequent U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion of the island, for example; the Soviet-backed erection of the Berlin Wall blocking access to non-Communist West Berlin from the Communist East Berlin sector; the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa; British attempts at suppressing anti-colonial independence movements in Ghana and Kenya, and the growing U.S. military engagement in the Vietnam War.

Back in England itself, the film shows Hall trying to apply his studies on popular culture to understanding the sometimes violent cultural conflicts of middle-class "Mods" and working-class "Rockers" over the music and clothing fashions of the early 1960s. Meanwhile a general revulsion against the US role in Vietnam inspired a growing number of protests by young people throughout the UK and Western Europe, and in 1968 the left and the culture at large were rocked by a series of shocks – the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the US, the Soviet military intervention to block the creation of "socialism with a human face" in Czechoslovakia, and the near-revolution that disaffected French university students and large numbers of French workers nearly achieved in Paris that year.

In evoking the political challenges of the 1970s, the film touches on the 1970 election in Chile that put Socialist Party leader Salvador Allende in the presidency, only to be overthrown in 1973 in a brutal military coup which had unofficial backing from the US intelligence services under the Nixon administration. The film also alludes briefly to the Notting Hill race riots of 1977 in London and notes to coming to power of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as the Seventies ended and the Eighties began. Also raising new issues and new problems for the left, the film indicates, was the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Ayatollah Khomeini's launching of the Islamic Republic of Iran – an event that called into question the traditional leftist commitment to a politics of universalism and internationalism.

For me, anyway, John Akomfrah's footage evokes all of these unsettling historical events and suggests some of the insights that Hall brought to them. But the quotes from Hall's lectures and BBC presentations are necessarily brief, and it's hard to tell from the context exactly what Hall believed the British left and the British public as a whole should learn from them.

What is clear from the footage is that Hall remained committed to the validity of the West Indian immigrant experience to the end of his life, and that his marriage with Catherine survived the explosive emergence of the feminist movement on the left in the late 1960s, although Hall apparently found Catherine's new militancy unsettling at first. By the end of his life, the film

suggests, Hall had concluded that the feminist movement, by placing traditional Christian sexual roles in question, also had opened up cultural and political space for a much freer exploration of sexual options, including by the LGBT movement.

In terms of other influences that Hall had on the British left and the international left, I think this film is not very informative. A quick glance at Hall's Wikipedia entry and at some of the obituaries published following his death in 2013 shows other sides of Hall's influence that are only hinted at in the film. For example, a series of obituary essays in the *Guardian* suggests that Hall not only was considered the "godfather of multiculturalism" by some commentators, but also a theorist of a revised approach to Labour Party politics that eventually produced such leaders as Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair. At least one of the *Guardian* obituary writers adds that by the end of his life, Hall was rather critical of the "New Labour" party that Blair came to symbolize: it now longer seemed to stand for anything, the *Guardian* cites Hall as complaining, with the implication being that it now has little real chance of competing successfully against the Conservatives.

A 1985 critique of Hall and some other prominent British leftists by a Trotskyist writer named Alex Callinocos, writing in the *International Socialist*, identifies Hall along with the noted Communist historian Eric Hobsbawm as promoting a so-called Eurocommunist politics within the British left, as opposed to a more traditional Marxist approach that had stressed labor militancy on the part of a largely male-led industrial working class and the unions serving it. In contributions to the Communist Party of Great Britain's surprisingly lively and diverse journal *Marxism Today*, Callinocos says, Hall developed a theoretical basis for a more diverse and less openly "socialist" approach to leftwing politics through his analysis of "Thatcherism" as he and other *Marxism Today* contributors characterized it.

Thatcherism, in Hall's view, represented a form of "authoritarian populism" with real appeal to some sectors of the British working class, and combined a traditional Conservative or Tory party emphasis on the defense of traditional institutions – including the family and the State – with a "neoliberal" enthusiasm for pure, unregulated "free market" capitalism, of a kind that many Conservative leaders from Disraeli through Winston Churchill had basically rejected. By drawing on popular frustrations with bureaucracy, nonwhite immigration and the mistakes of previous Labour governments, Hall reportedly thought, Thatcher had created a new political synthesis in British life, a movement dedicated to "free markets and a strong State." In some ways Hall thought this represented a politics of rightwing "exceptionalism" analogous to the "exceptionalist" politics of fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s. Hall along with Hobsbawm recognized important differences between Thatcherism and fascism, the Callinocos article indicates. But seeing Thatcher's authoritarian populism as both extremely dangerous and likely to promote a rightward shift in British politics for years to come, they advocated that the left abandon traditional class-struggle politics in the Marxist style and turn instead to creating a "broad democratic alliance" somewhat analogous to the anti-Nazi "popular front" politics that Communist Parties around the globe practiced in the 1930s before the 1939 signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact.

From the perspective that Callinocos expressed in 1985, in other words, Hall can be seen as the formulator of a broadly democratic, Gramsci-style politics that essentially turned the British far

left away from its revolutionary and working-class roots and towards the basically empty politics of New Labour under Tony Blair. Yet from the perspective of others with more admiration for Hall's politics, his analysis was one that helped to free the left from an outdated and stale kind of working-class militancy that is being rendered obsolete both by the decline of the traditional industrial working class, with its base in heavy industry, and by the emergence of new political movements on the left ranging from feminism and pacifism to the ongoing struggle for immigrant rights and against white racism. For admirers of Hall, it seems, the best way to "decode" his career is to see him as a critic of an obsolete form of Marxism and a theorist of a new way of doing left politics that responds to the challenges of our times.

It is probably inevitable that debates like this, over the significance of Hall's life and legacy, are not explored in Akomfrah's film. But by introducing us to Hall as person and a thinker, and by evoking the tumultuous times in which he formulated his theories, the film challenges thoughtful leftist viewers to learn more about Hall and his complicated intellectual legacy. I hope that many DSA members, and particularly younger ones who are seriously committed to democratic socialism, will accept the challenge and determine for themselves what Hall's work does and does not mean for our struggle for democratic socialism in the U.S.

[May Day-Vietnam Legacies](#) AND two May Days

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

*By Kurt Stand*

Fifty years ago, Congress passed the "Gulf of Tonkin" resolution that authorized the massive introduction of US troops into Vietnam. Based on a lie — an alleged North Vietnamese attack on a US patrol boat — that resolution ushered in a decade of military escalation that left tens of thousands of US soldiers and over one million Vietnamese dead. The war destroyed the possibility of directing resources to overcome poverty and justice within our own society and left in its wake physical destruction and adverse health consequences that continue to impact on the daily life of the Vietnamese people.

Fifty years also marks the beginning of what grew to be a massive anti-war movement that helped shape and transform our political culture and contributed to finally bringing our troops home and the end of the war 40 years ago — an anniversary also being celebrated this year. A commemoration/conference will be held May 1-2 in Washington DC; led by anti-war activists of the 1960s. The purpose of the gathering is to pose a challenge to those in the government, media and military who are trying to rewrite the history of the war and of war opposition, and to explore what can be learned from that past relevant to today's struggles for peace and justice.

It is perhaps serendipitous that the end of that war and May Day coincide, yet that coincidence has meaning — the attempt to link labor solidarity across national borders with the struggle to end militarization has been an aspect of May 1 demonstrations throughout the history of the socialist and labor movements. A look back at moments in the history of the Vietnam War and of the Peace movement sheds some light on the challenge and necessity of making such connections.

### **Setting the stage**

*Tin soldiers and Nixon coming  
We're finally on our own  
This summer I heard the drumming  
Four dead in Ohio*

*Gotta get down to it  
Soldiers are gunning us down  
Should have been done long ago  
What if you knew her  
And found her dead on the ground  
How can you run when you know?*

Four Dead in Ohio ...

Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

Richard Nixon's election as President in 1968 was based, in part, upon his promise to end the war in Vietnam (albeit "with honor" i.e. based on an impossible-to-achieve "victory")) — the war, however, continued to drag on; so too did anti-war protests including 1969's National Moratorium which saw demonstrations, rallies and protests in cities and towns across the country followed by the National Mobilization, one of the largest demonstrations in Washington DC up to that time. The response by the White House was "Vietnamization," that is a gradual reduction of US military personnel from its high point of 549,000 and their replacement by US-armed and -supplied Vietnamese troops loyal to the South Vietnamese government. This did have one desired effect from the standpoint of the Nixon Administration — the size and scope of anti-war protests began to decline. It also had one undesired effect for our government — the South Vietnamese government, lacking all popular legitimacy, was losing more and more ground on the battlefield which no amount of weaponry and US field support could overcome.

The White House therefore took a fateful step and launched, on April 30 1970, a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. Beginning on that day, continuing on to May 1st and growing thereafter the scale and militancy of antiwar demonstrations, especially on university campuses, spread across the country. So too did repression as police and National Guard responded with violence — culminating in the shooting of 4 students at Kent State University in Ohio on May 4, while



days later six black protesters were shot and killed in Augusta, Georgia, after which police shot two black students at Jackson State, Mississippi.

In consequence, protest became more widespread — over 80 percent of all colleges across the country were on strike, and high school and junior high school students also began to strike in large numbers. But violence against protesters increased too, not only from government authorities but also from war supporters (and such public violence had been used against the peace movement from its inception). The most notorious of these took place on May 8 when construction workers — backed by their unions, backed by their employers, and given complete *carte blanche* by the police department — launched an assault on an anti-war march in lower Manhattan. This was followed by a large union-sponsored pro-war rally. Nowhere to be seen was the original spirit of May Day.

### **Changing times**

But nothing stands still — dramatic shifts were underway in the US, shifts that the war intensified. The Nixon Administration faced a crisis as the challenge to its legitimacy by popular movements coincided with a slowing of the post-World War II economic boom. Dragged down by military expenditures and other factors, US capital supremacy was facing challenges from Japan and Western Europe on one side, challenges posed by assertions of national economic sovereignty by Third World countries on the other. The government response included a series of behind-the-scenes attacks on political opponents that eventually led to the Watergate break-in. It also included a series of belt-tightening and anti-union measures such as a wage freeze which brought Nixon into conflict with the unions that were supporting the Administration's foreign policy. And it included an ever more aggressive "law-and-order" campaign that combined an appeal to racism and an attack on intellectuals that prefigured the shape the Republican Party would assume.

As for the US trade union movement, its dominant leadership's response to shifting sands of time was to dig ever deeper within a schizophrenic politics of supporting an Administration's foreign policy while confronting its domestic policy — and of defining itself in support of an established order being challenged by growing numbers within its ranks. The leadership failed to lead or understand what was happening as workplace confrontations during the years 1969-71 massively expanded — in 1970 alone, there were more than 5600 strikes. These ranged from an illegal, wildcat strike by postal workers to national strikes against some of the largest and most powerful corporations of the era: AT&T, General Electric, General Motors. Meanwhile, a Labor Assembly for Peace called in 1967, and initially comprising local union activists and left-led union bodies, found its call for change echoed ever more widely. Two weeks after the attacks on war protests, a Labor-Student rally for peace was held in New York City around the call to "End the War in Vietnam and Cambodia *Now*, Protest the Killings at Kent State, Augusta, and Jackson; Stop the Repression against Dissent and Protest." By 1971, the United Auto Workers, AFSCME, and the United Farm Workers had called for the war's end, as had the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, the United Electrical Workers, Hospital Workers Local 1199, Distributive Workers District 65, and locals from the Teamsters, Steelworkers, Bakery Workers and many others across the country.

This was not only a change in leadership or a change in perspective — war weariness, war opposition was growing. Although given its most vivid expression amongst students and in counter-cultural communities, the spirit of disaffection and rebellion also found its way within the traditional working class. Moreover, the emergence of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, alongside the strength of anti-war sentiment and action amongst Black, Chicano, and Puerto Rican workers made its influence felt with labor organization. The formation of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and of the Coalition of Labor Union Women were indicative of the way the confluence of union demands for equality and for peace were beginning to have an impact that was to become transformative. Thus although George Meany, the AFL-CIO Executive Council majority, the building trades union leadership and others of similar reactionary perspectives never wavered in their support for war and denunciations of anti-war protestors, their real influence declined.

Meanwhile the peace movement — never monolithic — was undergoing another metamorphosis as frustration replaced hope due to the fact that the size and scope of protest actions was unable to stop the war, as witnessed by the US-led invasion of Laos in February 1971. The response of one section of activists was to directly tie demands for peace with broader demands of social activists organizing against poverty, discrimination and oppression, and so was born the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice which was to oversee a new range of protests in the months ahead.

## **May 1971**

Modeled on civil rights actions, those protests combined a wide range of differing means and methods — ranging from the People's Peace Treaty in which activists negotiated directly with Vietnamese around the terms of a US withdrawal, the People's Lobby in which thousands mobilized to address, argue and confront members of the House and Senate, finally culminating, under the aegis of the “May Day tribe,” a day of non-violent direct action throughout Washington DC in an attempt to shut down the city, an attempt to prevent business as usual. Police and military were prepared, attempts to disrupt traffic and shut government buildings were quickly halted and more than 1000 were arrested and detained in the Washington Coliseum. It was the biggest single action of civil disobedience in our country's history.

Although a “failure,” in the literal sense that the government continued to function, and business proceeded as usual, the actions succeeded as a literal demonstration that action and disruption would continue as long as the war continued. And, indeed, alongside the confrontations in Washington DC, memorials were held for the murdered students at Kent State, Jackson State, and communities across the country... In New York City, more than 10,000 gathered to hear labor leaders and Vietnam veterans denounce the war, while 50,000 gathered in Boston and a larger gathering was held in San Francisco. At the same time, GI-led demonstrations were organized at Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Fort Bragg, Fort Lewis and other military bases in the US and overseas. Nixon's Vietnamization had proved not only incapable of “winning the war,” it had also proved incapable of quelling domestic dissent. Not only were actions continuing, disparate protests and issues were starting to link up in a process of radicalization which seemed unstoppable at the time.

A sign of change not obvious at the time was that there were fewer and fewer vigilante type attacks on peace rallies (though police and FBI repression remained and, in key respects, increased) — 1970 was the last year of mass popular pro-war mobilization. Conservative sentiment was still strong, as witnessed by the outpouring of support for Lt. William Calley after his conviction for the My Lai massacre in which US soldiers killed 347 civilians, old men, women, babies—for it was framed as a defense of soldiers in war not a defense of the war itself. Moreover such was not being led by unionists. The divide between labor and peace activism, so bitterly obvious in 1970, although far from healed, was beginning to be breached. Working-class and the anti-war movement were inching closer to each other, just as left-wing organizations were able to act with an openness in union meetings and in public events not seen since McCarthyism stifled all such speech. The May Day mass civil disobedience was a creative use of an old tradition, a new generation keeping the holiday alive by making it meaningful to the struggles with which they were engaged.

## **Aftermath**

*I hammer the pain of separateness  
into a statue to stand in the park.  
Below it I carve a horizontal inscription  
that reads: Soul of the Twentieth Century*

Tru Vu

Nonetheless the war dragged on. Protests were ever-present, but not strong enough to end the killing and bring the troops home. Nixon was re-elected president by a huge margin in 1972, defeating George McGovern who had run on an explicit anti-war platform. But Nixon won only by promising a quick end to the war — and indeed, after one last orgy of violence in a Christmas week bombing of Vietnam that exceeded all bombings heretofore, an agreement was signed early in 1973 that led to US withdrawal from the war. Nixon was himself soon out of office, the illegal actions which led to his resignation under pressure of impeachment largely driven by his attempt to covertly expand the war and undermine protest.

Other consequences included a staying of the hand of further US military armed interventions abroad which lasted nearly a decade until Reagan re-opened the floodgates with his invasion of Grenada. The draft was ended, 18-year olds won the right to vote, and peace and social justice movements learned that their causes could not be separated. So the internal process of change in organized labor could not be stopped, union activism against the Vietnam War was a direct precursor to union opposition to South African apartheid and to US-sponsored civil wars in Central America and that to the AFL-CIO's official opposition to the war against Iraq.

But like the May Day civil disobedience actions themselves, failure seems more apparent. Peace activism was unable to stop subsequent wars. To the contrary, we are now in an almost permanent state of war as invasions, bombings, covert actions and routine overseas killings are an almost unchallenged part of the national landscape. Labor's more progressive outlook today is expressed by a movement much weaker than that which existed in 1970-71; the confidence of strength that was expressed in rank-and-file militancy has been largely eroded. Demands for

civil rights have moved forward but largely divorced from economic justice and so what has been gained often feels empty — poverty is rampant, hunger and homelessness on the rise, while national security repression and police violence are as deeply ingrained as ever.

But like the disappointed hopes of other May Days past, the gains and truths of previous times remain with us even in an era of retreat. As we confront today's challenges, they serve as a reminder of what was done and what could be done. Remaining alive to what was, however, means widening our field of vision; the war and anti-war movement after all, did not concern the United States alone.

### **One other May Day**

Once US troops left, all the guns and weapons could not keep the US-supported South Vietnamese government in power. Although newspaper accounts in the US emphasize the tragedy and fear for those supporters of the Saigon government and members of their military who wanted to flee when National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon (today's Ho Chi Minh City) on April 30, 1975, for most Vietnamese it was a time of celebration. Huge numbers supported the new government — their victory against US arms would otherwise have been inconceivable, while even for people who stayed on the sidelines there was cause to cheer the end of decade of war. So according to one eyewitness, that May 1st became a “spontaneous people's holiday. No one gave orders. May Day was celebrated with no official programs, by hundreds of thousands of men and women who came from all over the city, by automobile, on Hondas, on foot, pouring into the center to ‘see the Revolution.’ ”

Of course, subsequent parades were more organized, just as hopes for the future had to confront the hard work of rebuilding a country devastated by war and foreign occupation. The road to change and development first had to deal with US sanctions and isolation, conflict with China, the collapse of the Soviet Union. Leftover bombs and mines extracted a price, as did the war wounds and birth defects left behind when our soldiers came home. Attempts to move forward quickly through centralized plans failed of their purpose; the subsequent development by opening a market allowed rapid growth and reduced poverty — but at the expense of the goal of equality that had been so central to the entire Vietnamese struggle for liberation. Yet that legacy is not entirely forgotten and frames contemporary debates and discussions as many in Vietnam have not given up on trying to find a way forward that will allow for economic growth that will also allow for greater public participation in the running of society and the meeting of still unmet needs.

Under vastly different conditions and social system we still can see a connection between our two countries, building on the legacy that sought and seeks to replace a world of war and injustice with a life worthy of all who live. Such an understanding contains the truth that puts to shame the lies that brought us to war in 1965 and has repeatedly brought us to war in years since, contains the truth of all those who took part in the Moratorium, mobilizations, protest rallies and teach-ins that aimed to bring to birth a world of peace and justice. And it is the truth that May Day ought to always express — and perhaps one day in this 21st century we might rid ourselves of the pain of separateness that defined the “Soul of the Twentieth Century.”



**The Long Resistance (1858-1975)** by Nguyen Khac Vien, Hanoi Foreign Language Press, 1975

**Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975**, by Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984

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[Two May Days](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

*By Lucy Duff*

On May 1 socialists observe International Workers Day, but of course that holiday overlies the ancient May Day, the celebration of nature's renewed fertility and beauty centuries before capitalism came to threaten their sustainability. The ties between these twin holidays are deeper than explained by the happenstance and convenience in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the workers' holiday began and gradually overtook the prominence of the pagan Roman-Germanic-Gaelic medieval rites of spring. Consider these connections-

The legend of Robin Hood places the death of the populist outlaw on May 1. In old England a performance of the story of Robin Hood and Maid Marian was long part of the traditions revolving around song, dance and games around the Maypole. The modern workers' holiday closely followed the Haymarket deaths of workers seeking fairer distribution of wealth and power -Chicago, May 4, 1886.

An element of the Christian appropriation of the pagan May Day was the setting of that date in the Catholic calendar as the feast of St. Joseph the Worker.

Among a multitude of textile-mill strikers in New England, 1912, young women paraded with a banner reading "We want bread and roses too." Their plea, for earnings enough to support a whole and satisfying way of life, inspired a stirring labor movement song.

Time turns, and now the old May Day more nearly resembles our late-20<sup>th</sup> century Earth Day. Yet now we see ever more clearly how Labor and Land – over-commodified Nature and Society– are caught in the same trap. Before continuing the struggle against trade pacts and mean public budgets, perhaps we had better take in the spirit of both May Days. Let us pause in remembrance of unspoiled nature and unalienated society, to celebrate what remains of them and renew hope and strength for restoring them whole.

## [Mayor Throws Her Weight in DC Special Elections](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

*By Bill Mosley*

Mayor Muriel Bowser treated the April 28 special elections to fill two vacant DC Council seats as an opportunity to expand her clout, and early returns showed her aggressive campaigning on behalf of her favorites was paying dividends.

In Ward 4, the seat Bowser vacated upon being elected mayor, her protégé and former aide Brandon Todd won by a nearly two-to-one margin over his nearest rival, Renee Bowser (no relation to the mayor), an advisory neighborhood commissioner and former labor lawyer. Meanwhile, in Ward 8, Bowser favorite LaRuby May was holding a slim 2-percentage-point lead over her nearest rival Trayon White, with the final outcome in the 13-candidate field pending the counting of special ballots.

While Bowser's influence weighed heavily in her home ward, the politician casting the biggest shadow over Ward 8 was the late Councilmember and longtime former Mayor Marion Barry, whose passing last November triggered the special election. May is a former Barry staffer and White, a former member of the Board of Education, worked on Barry's Council campaigns. Barry's own son Marion C. Barry also was seeking to fill his father's shoes but fell well short, finishing sixth in the 13-candidate race with only 7.2 percent of the vote.

Todd cruised to victory despite considerable backing for Renee Bowser in progressive quarters. She picked up a substantial amount of union support, including that of UFCW (her former union), AFGE and the Teamsters. Todd was the favorite of local AFSCME unions as well as the Laborers and Firefighters. With such a split in labor support, the Metropolitan Washington Council of the AFL-CIO elected not to make an endorsement for Ward 4.

There was no such split in Ward 8, where local labor, including the local AFL-CIO council, was solidly lined up behind May. She also gained endorsements from groups not traditionally aligned with labor or progressives: the DC Association of Realtors, the Apartment and Office Building Association (AOBA), and the DC Chamber of Commerce. Todd also was endorsed by the DC Chamber and AOBA.

Among other progressive-leaning groups making endorsements, DC for Democracy endorsed Renee Bowser in Ward 4 but took a pass in 8. The venerable Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, an advocate for LGBT rights, trod the establishment path in endorsing both Todd and May, as did the *Washington Post*. Metro-DC DSA made no endorsements in the races.

Clearly, the mayor's Ward 4 "Big Green Machine" – first assembled by former Councilmember and Mayor Adrian Fenty and inherited by Bowser – was too much for rivals in that ward to overcome. The mayor's penumbra, however, was much fainter in Ward 8, and all her campaigning and the other endorsements for May didn't prevent voters there from thinking for themselves – with many concluding that Bowser didn't deserve all the power she craved.

If May does win the Ward 8 seat, however, Bowser will be in an especially strong position to push her agenda through the DC Council. Given that she ran an almost issue-free campaign, and her still-evolving agenda doesn't indicate alignment with the most progressive voices in DC, this would not be good news for the left. On the other hand, it will be harder for Bowser to deflect blame for policies or legislation that prove unpopular. It appears that for the next four years, the buck will stop at the mayor's desk.

### [Not Your Chairman's China: Reflections on a Trip to the Middle Kingdom](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

#### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

*By Bill Mosley*

One could mistake the intersection of Wanfuging Dajie and Jinyu Hutong in Beijing for Times Square, or perhaps Tokyo's Ginza district. Splashy Apple, Samsung and Prada stores beckon customers to sample their wares, while bright plasma screens above them illuminate the night with advertisements to suggest how affluent Beijing residents might spend their money.

This is not your Chairman Mao's China.

My two-week trip to the Middle Kingdom was undertaken not for the purpose of observing the society's politics and culture, but rather to help chaperone an educational trip sponsored by my fifth-grade son's Mandarin immersion school. But I could not help comparing the sights before my eyes with the images and ideas I'd gleaned from afar during my lifetime – the bicycle-filled city streets at the time of President Nixon's 1972 visit; the ill-fated Tiananmen Square protest; and the prodigious output of China's factories, much of it by workers earning near-starvation wages.



The China I saw was much different than the picture in my mind's eye. In many ways it looked like America written in Chinese script: busy and modern, with traffic-choked streets, downtowns with high-end shops, and buildings reaching to the sky. But in the major cities – including the three I visited, Beijing, Chengdu and Guiyang – affluence and conspicuous consumption exist side-by-side with poverty and hardscrabble lives, the keepers of tiny shops barely large enough to turn around in, the beggars, the streetside food vendors. Again, not so different from the United States.



*Poverty in the midst of modern Beijing*

Photo by Bill Mosley

However, this is a China whose official ideology once condemned wealth and inequality, whose government treated “rich peasants” as criminals and trumpeted the necessity of individual poverty and self-sacrifice in the service of building socialism in the world’s most populous country. And yet today wealth is celebrated in China — as author Evan Osnos puts it in his book *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China* – much as it was in America’s own Gilded Age of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Yet while the substance of the old socialist faith has been thrown on the dust-heap, the party that once promoted a savage kind of equality – and then maneuvered a 180-degree turn to capitalism – remains firmly in power.



*Shopping district in Beijing*

Photo by Bill Mosley

And what of the architect of the old ideology, the great leveler, the enemy of wealth? What of Mao Zedong?

To answer that question, one need only to pass through the security checkpoints to Tiananmen Square, the site of the 1989 uprising in which hundreds of Chinese (the exact number remains in dispute) demonstrating for greater democracy in their society were gunned down by their own country's armed forces. On the north end of the square, a giant portrait of Mao hangs over the gate to Beijing's historic Forbidden City, home to the emperors that once were regarded as "sons of heaven." And on the south is the massive mausoleum that contains Mao's preserved remains for all to visit and pay tribute to.

All day, the faithful stream into the mausoleum bearing yellow daisies (sold by vendors at the entrance) that they lay before a marble statue of the late Chairman, prostrating themselves at the image. Then they stream past the body within its glass enclosure, almost close enough, were it not for the glass barrier, to touch the red flag pulled up to this chin. From somewhere in the chamber an amber light shines upon Mao's face, one that makes it appear that the Chairman himself is the source of the light. Even in death, Mao casts his brilliance upon China.



*Mao's mausoleum in Beijing*

Photo by Bill Mosley

Next, travel 1,000 miles to Zunyi in country's southwest. A small, provincial city by China's standards, Zunyi still is home to more than 1 million persons, although it lacks the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the great cities of China's East – here one rarely encounters a speaker of English and foreigners are the object of much curiosity. All around Zunyi one sees posters encouraging a visit to the two-story colonnaded building that is the city's claim to fame – the site of the 1935 conference in which Mao was elected chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Visitors stream through the humble, dusty building in which the remnant of the party's leadership, which had been decimated in defeats at the hands of the Nationalist government, met to rethink their strategy and leadership. At Zunyi, the party cast out the old "failed" leaders and their Comintern-appointed European advisors and elected to pursue a more Chinese-style revolution, with Mao as its leader. And the rest, they say, is history.

And for that history, one need only walk across the courtyard from the conference site, past the lady selling Mao-style fatigue uniforms as souvenirs – the outfits almost all Chinese wore at the

time of Nixon's visit but no one does today – to the hulking “Zunyi Conference Museum” that dwarfs the conference building itself. All of the exhibit descriptions are in Chinese, but the outlines of the museum's story are clear even to someone who reads no Chinese: When the success of the revolution was in doubt, Mao emerged to deliver the “correct” strategy and lead the people to victory. Through photos, maps, artifacts, dioramas and plenty of socialist-realist art, Mao is cemented in place as China's savior and inspiration. Outside the conference site, along “Red Army Street,” the faithful can walk in the footsteps of Mao, Zhou Enlai and other party leaders and visit historic buildings where they once lived and worked.



*The Zunyi Conference Site*

Photo by Bill Mosley

The image and memory of Mao is exalted while the substance of his ideas lies in tatters. How is this possible? Even the Party, during the reign of Deng Xiaoping – Mao's eventual successor and the architect of the country's hairpin turn to capitalism – judged Mao as 70 percent correct and 30 percent wrong. Nevertheless, the party finds maintaining the cult of Mao useful to legitimating its monopoly on power.

Yet the adulation of Mao at the mausoleum and the Zunyi museum are not mere creations of the party – no one is forcing people to lay daisies before Mao's image. To many Chinese, Mao represents something more than his Communist ideology: He is the symbol of China's unity and emerging power, its advancement to the forefront of the world stage. Before Mao came to power, China experienced war, division and dominance by foreign powers; since the revolution the world has been forced to respect, and at times fear, China. Mao's accession to power took place while many living Chinese had personal memories of the “century of humiliation,” the disastrous 19<sup>th</sup> Century in which China's self-image was shattered by Western invasion and domination. Older Chinese today harbor traumatic memories of the Japanese invasion. Now, in 2015, China is as impervious to foreign military domination as a country can be. But it has traded one kind of invasion for another – the invasion of the capitalist world market.



*Heroic imagery of the Zunyi conference*

Photo by Bill Mosley

Thirty-six years have now passed since Deng officially buried Mao's radical egalitarianism by proclaiming, "Let some people get rich first and gradually all the people should get rich together." Since then, many Chinese have gotten rich – although the vast majority has not. But only 26 years have passed since the Party's even clearer statement, written in blood in Tiananmen Square, that it had no intention of allowing economic liberalization to be accompanied by political reform. The subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union only confirmed in the minds of China's leaders that it had adopted the right course; no *glasnost* for us, thank you.

Analysts have long predicted that China's embrace of capitalism would inevitably lead to democracy, or at least democratization – if nothing else, increasing contact with the West should lead to a more free flow of information that would lead the Chinese to question the Party's monopoly grip on power. And indeed, today there is more information flowing through China than ever before – as Osnos notes, today the Chinese are the world's largest users of the Internet. However, it is an Internet without Google, Facebook or other sites blocked by the government as a bit too free-flowing for its comfort. Tiananmen did not erase dissent from China – countless people protest their treatment at the hands of a government that does not regard itself as obliged to consider the views of the governed. And yet, as observed by Osnos and others, the dominant ethos in China today is the individualistic quest for wealth and status – an ethos the government is only too happy to encourage.

After 36 years of China's experiment with capitalism, it seems safe to conclude that free enterprise and authoritarian government can live comfortably together. In fact, it is a model that could be profitably exported elsewhere. A country whose government is willing to suppress dissent, squelch independent unions and keep its low-wage workforce in a state of insecurity is an inviting target for foreign investment. Vietnam, for one, is embracing free enterprise within a "socialist" system. Is this also the future of Cuba?

It appears that if China is to ever become more democratic, it will not be due to its embrace of capitalism. One does not achieve freedom by demanding riches.

## [Raising Class Consciousness Through Abortion Activism](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

### ***The Washington Socialist* <> May 2015**

By *M. C. Miller*

On April 26, 2015, the Metro DC Democratic Socialists of America local participated in the [D.C. Abortion Fund's](#) (DCAF) annual billiards tournament to raise money for low-income women needing assistance in paying for procedures to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Despite a month of practice, DC DSA's team, unfortunately, did not move on from the first round. But the team members more than made up for their lack of skills with enthusiasm and a generous donation to DCAF. DSA's presence at the event also allowed members to network with others on the politic left and demonstrate their support for women's reproductive rights, an issue that highlights the intersections between gender and class in a way that many in the US might prefer to ignore.

Though abortion ostensibly remains legal in the United States, measures such as the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits the use of federal funds, including Medicaid, to pay for abortion procedures, as well as state laws forbidding health insurance companies from covering abortions, make access to abortion disproportionately difficult for low-income women. Additionally, the Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers, also known as "[TRAP laws](#)," often force local women's healthcare clinics to close, which makes traveling to those that remain more arduous and costly for working class women, who often must forfeit several days' pay to journey to clinics out of town or even out of state. The procedure itself in the first trimester alone can cost anywhere from \$300-\$950, though Sarah Erdreich's book *Generation Roe* includes accounts from women who paid nearly \$20,000 out of pocket for the procedure and for travel to out-of-state clinics.

Some middle-class women and certainly upper-class women will always enjoy the access to terminate unwanted pregnancies, regardless of abortion's legality, but low-income women are the ones who suffer the most when their reproductive rights are restricted. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg observed, "There will never a woman of means without choice anymore... We have a policy that only affects poor women, and it can never be otherwise." Abortion cannot truly be a "choice" for women until all women have equal economic access to that choice. And according to studies by the Guttmacher Institute, poor women are [five times as likely](#) to experience unwanted pregnancies, making their ability to access the [economic benefits of family planning](#), such as completing an education or establishing a career, all the more difficult.

Abortion is not merely a woman's problem—it is a class problem. Working-class women and their families face more barriers to acquiring abortions, and their difficulties in controlling their own bodies further restricts their life chances and opportunities for economic improvement. If abortion and reproductive healthcare generally were truly recognized as rights, then organizations like DCAF would not need to exist. Unfortunately, given the increasing restrictions our politicians are placing on abortion access, organizations like DCAF are necessary to ensure that women can receive the reproductive healthcare they need and to make the best decision they can for themselves, their bodies and their families. Given the current state of abortion politics, socialists may see some benefit to allying themselves to the abortion movement and using it as an opportunity to raise awareness about class consciousness. Abortion is just as much about class as it is about gender, and socialists and feminists together could create a productive dialogue that raises a larger cultural and social awareness of the inequalities not only of gender but also of class.

### [The Humanistic Genius and Sad Decline of Fantasy Novelist Terry Pratchett: A Eulogy](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

*By Andy Feeney*

I've been a socialist for far longer than I've enjoyed the fantasy novels of Terry Pratchett, a British writer who died in March from Alzheimer's disease. Over the years, I admit, I can't say I ever saw any evidence that Pratchett believed in socialism: At times, he seemed more shaped by libertarianism, at others, by a cheerfully cynical belief in enlightened despotism, like that proposed by Hobbes in *Leviathan*. Yet whatever Pratchett's politics, and whatever the limits of the genre in which he won fame, he also was a humanistic literary figure of genius, if a peculiar one. By his own account, Pratchett began as a fan of J.R.R. Tolkien's magical *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; as a child, he apparently also thrilled to Kenneth Grahame's whimsical fantasy *The Wind in the Willows*. Yet as an adult author (after he had served a stint as a teenaged newspaper reporter, then as press agent for the Central Electricity Generating Board, where he did public relations for nuclear power), Pratchett cheerfully set out to subvert the fantasy genre he loved, by pointing out its logical absurdities. To millions of readers, including at least a few socialist ones, that made him interesting.

To the dreamy realm of magical fantasy that entrances many younger readers today, and to the sometimes gloomier realm of swords-and-sorcery novels that parallels it, Pratchett brought the gleeful social satire of early Monty Python sketches along with (occasionally) an almost Marxist class consciousness. The literary results, although they could be cartoonish and somewhat muddled in places, were often both thought-provoking and very funny. English literary critic A.S. Byatt once compared Pratchett's humanistic acceptance of common people and our foibles to Chaucer's approach in the *Canterbury Tales*, and I think Byatt was right. I therefore hope at

least some other leftists will join me in celebrating the surprising artistry of this particular dead fantasy writer. On the other hand, I think it's best if they don't begin with Pratchett's last novel in the famous Discworld series, for it shows evidence of a brain degraded by Alzheimer's and by an equally deadly mental disease – capitalist neoliberalism.

I first became aware of Pratchett's talents, I recall, through a cheap paperback copy of *Interesting Times* (1994, 17<sup>th</sup> in the Discworld series), a rather complexly — some would say, nonsensically — plotted novel that essentially imagines what Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution might have looked like if its youthful Red Guards had never managed to shake themselves free from Confucian ideals of politeness and respect for elders. "We must organize ourselves to overthrow the forces of repression gently," Pratchett has one of their leaders say – a sure sign that their revolt will be doomed, unless it receives outside help. Pratchett provides that help in comic-opera fashion by having their country invaded by a barbarian horde that in its name recalls the Mongols who actually did invade China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but who also resemble the Gray Panthers – a small platoon of extremely senior warriors, one of them in a wheelchair, who prevail against much younger foes through cynicism, guile and military skills honed through long lifetimes of practice. In the creation of Genghis Cohen and his Silver Horde, Pratchett plays satirical tribute to the battle against age discrimination in the workplace, while making readers laugh in the process. But the plot to *Interesting Times* – which in its first few pages seems to be determined, like the Trojan War, by the actions of meddling gods — ultimately turns on the existence of a particular species of butterfly that, in Pratchett's world, has evolved an ability to defeat predators by flapping its wings to generate tiny hurricanes. This plot device ironically echoes some of what real-world champions of Chaos theory were saying about the "butterfly effect" shortly before this novel appeared, and it makes *Interesting Times* a deft scientific satire, as well as a political one.

As his example of the hurricane-generating butterflies suggests, Pratchett playfully juxtaposed scientific and magical ideas in his novels, sometimes in an absurd fashion merely aimed at generating laughs, but often in ways that made apparent logical sense. He generated additional humor by trying to tease out the logical social implications of any given magical situation, at least as he imagined them. This gave him a license to segue easily from magic story-telling in the Tolkien tradition to rather pointed observations about contemporary affairs. By making magical fantasy thoughtful and above all, by making it socially complicated, he succeeded for many readers in making it intellectually worthwhile.

Pratchett's prime literary invention is the Discworld – a small planet shaped like a flat disk, which (as in some ancient human myths) travels through the universe on the back of four enormous elephants. The elephants stand in turn on the shell of a giant turtle – the only turtle in the universe, Pratchett once noted, ever to appear on the Russell-Herzprung diagrams used by astronomers. This flat, circular world is circled by a tiny sun that travels across above the Discworld during the daytime and sinks below the horizon overnight to make a return journey below the planet to reach its starting place at dawn.

This magical and pre-scientific world, in Pratchett's imagination, is populated not just by humans, but also by Fate, the gods, their ancient foes the Ice Giants, and a host of other supernatural and/or magical creatures – dwarfs, trolls, elves, large and small dragons, medieval

golems, and also vampires, werewolves, gnomes, goblins, yetis and the like. The one supernatural character who makes an appearance in almost all the books is Death, who appears as a seven-foot skeleton wielding a sharp scythe, just as in some medieval European myths. Death always speaks in CAPITAL LETTERS. Many of the most powerful male humans are wizards; the most powerful human females are generally witches, and the chthonic ichor god Bel-Shamharoth, modeled after the horror tales of H.P. Lovecraft, lurks in an underground lair to eat the souls of unwary travelers.

On this obviously illogical planet, Pratchett postulated the logical social consequences of various magical conditions, and in doing so he cast a sharp eye on contemporary British society, in particular, and to a lesser degree humanity at large. In the very first Discworld book, *The Colour of Magic* (1983), for example, the planet's greatest city, Ankh-Morpork, is totally destroyed by fire because a well-meaning foreign tourist with no cultural knowledge has strewn large coins around recklessly to a cash-hungry populace. This same fool has introduced Ankh-Morpork's merchants to a foreign novelty – fire insurance. A corrupt tavern owner promptly seeks to collect on his new policy by torching his own premises; the flames spread instantly, and soon the entire city is ablaze. What has destroyed it, a rather scorched and weary refugee from the fire tells a visiting barbarian hero, is a new and foreign kind of magic that he suspects is even more powerful than the kinds normally wielded by local wizards. This new magic, the refugee adds, has an odd foreign name resembling “the reflected sound of underground spirits” – or in other words, “echo-gnomics.”

On Pratchett's Discworld, magic abounds, and some highly creative plots hinge on it. But the magic of “echo-gnomics” often trumps the other kind, and the conflicts and social forces of our own time and our own universe repeatedly intrude into an alternative reality that Pratchett has patched together from a host of different cultural sources. His magical world is constructed partly around themes taken from Tolkien's Middle Earth, partly from scenes and settings borrowed from Shakespeare and medieval fairy tales, partly with ideas taken from the *Wizard of Oz*, the swords and sorcery novels of Fritz Lieber, and the dragon world books of Anne McCaffrey, and partly from Dungeons and Dragons, snippets of Hollywood vampire movies, old Greek and Egyptian myths and selected Disney cartoons. All of these fantasy materials, which Pratchett apparently loved, are – well – almost magically transformed when exposed to important features of our own society and time. Thus in *Men at Arms*, for example, Pratchett imagined what happens to a world of swords and sorcery when it is introduced to firearms. In this and several other Discworld novels, the city of Ankh-Morpork struggles with the difficulties of affirmative action in a multi-species police force; in other novels, there is ethnic rioting between the city's immigrant dwarfs and trolls; and in the drawing rooms of the rich, class consciousness becomes evident as the city's wealthy aristocrats express their distaste for the city's newest immigrant groups and the lower class humans that the aristocrats are exploiting economically.

In Ankh-Morpork as in real life today, both the aristocratic rich and the disaffected poor sometimes plot to overthrow the government, and in a memorable book called *Sourcery*, the fat, generally sedate wizards of Unseen University in Ankh-Morpork are converted by a charismatic leader into a ruthless technocratic elite willing to raze all existing society to achieve a quasi-fascist utopia. In *Jingo*, Pratchett imagines the city being lured into neo-imperialist war, partly through the wiles of a foreign foe but partly through the bloodlust of common people, the



machinations of local arms merchants and the arrogant stupidity of the city's hereditary warrior aristocracy. In still other novels, Pratchett imagines Ankh-Morpork being transformed through the introduction of Hollywood movies (*Moving Pictures*, 1990), modern journalism (*The Truth*, 2000) and rock and roll (*Soul Music* in 1994). For readers who grew up with the Yuletide holiday traditions of the United States and the UK, Pratchett's novel *Hogfather* (1996) may be the funniest satire of commercialized Christmas shopping ever written.

Unlike Douglas Adams, author of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, with whom he was sometimes compared, Pratchett actually seemed to care for his characters, including many of his villains. His plots generally end with the good guys winning, and his satire is almost never mean. His plots sometimes hint at extreme violence happening offstage, yet almost never share descriptions of this with the reader. Pratchett's repeated insertion of jokes in his early books – jokes good, bad, awful, and sometimes quite ancient – indicates a writer of basically sunny disposition. Yet for all of Pratchett's humor and good nature, the Discworld has a disconcerting tendency of looking a lot like Earth, and every intelligent reader recognizes what *that* means.

Thus in Discworld as Pratchett portrays it, the gods customarily demand blood sacrifices, and occasionally strike atheists with lightning. More or less regardless of what the gods themselves may prefer, the Discworld's most zealous evangelical religion expands via ruthless military conquest and the torture of suspected heretics — although a bit like Christianity, it eventually undergoes a humanistic reformation. The city of Ankh-Morpork has a complicated guild system, a bit like medieval Florence, but also like Florence, it is ruled by an intelligent tyrant, Lord Vetinari (the name is a punning reference to the famous Medicis). A local wizard explains in one book that Ankh-Morpork has a political system of “one man, one vote” – that is, Lord Vetinari really is a man, and he definitely does have the vote.

A great deal like republican and imperial Rome as well as nineteenth century London, Ankh-Morpork has a history of invading and conquering most of its neighbors, although a good deal like modern London, it has largely abandoned wars of conquest and prefers to swindle foreigners instead in complicated business deals. The city's leading lawyer, Mr. Slant, is a zombie, with Pratchett's implication being that many lawyers are. Its best-known small businessman, a Mr. Dibbler, sells largely indigestible fast foods to people who have not learned to avoid him, and is something of a threat to public health. Two of Pratchett's favorite minor characters, who often provide a comic Greek chorus commenting on his plots, are cowardly and none-too-brilliant policemen, one of whom is a petty thief – with the implication, again, being that a number of policemen are like this.

Like modern London when I visited the place in the 1970s, Ankh-Morpork hosts some creative beggars, one of Pratchett's favorites being Foul Ole Ron, who simply stands near unsuspecting victims and overwhelms them with his powerful odor while screaming crazy obscenities into the air. Eventually, most people pay him to go away. Ankh-Morpork also supports a guild of prostitutes, although they call themselves Seamstresses, and a guild of professional thieves, who as a convenience to the public have arranged a subscription service so that one can pay a small yearly fee in place of being mugged. The city also contains a dangerous slum, the Shades, that is so horrible that even many criminals avoid it. And like London under Queen Victoria, the city is socially split between an upper-class residential sector that is the center of theater, culture and

government, on the one hand; and a lower-class industrial area on the other, where all physically necessary but disagreeable work is done. Separating the two halves of the city is a river, the Ankh, so grossly polluted that small bushes grow on its surface, and corpses thrown onto the surface of the water sometimes corrode before they sink. The smell of the Ankh and of the city's many private cesspits is all-pervasive; Pratchett at one point says it pervades the sinuses like a band saw cutting metal. This is gleefully exaggerated satire, of course, but the polluted Ankh is remarkably similar in some ways to the real-world Thames during the mid-Victorian age, when the river's surface sometimes did seem crusted over, and Londoners experienced four separate cholera epidemics spread by water contamination. On one memorably hot summer day, the reek of rotting human waste in the Thames just below Westminster forced the closure of both Houses of Parliament. The customary odor of Ankh-Morpork thus has more real-world historical precedents than many Pratchett readers may realize.

In his portrayal of the Discworld, in short, Pratchett does a great deal to make fantasy nearly as complicated and messy as real life; in a cartoonish, Monty-Python fashion, he uses his almost surrealistic imagination to paint a rather realistic if ironic portrait of the world we actually inhabit. As a Marxist (although a Marxist with an adolescent taste for fantasy and science fiction), I find this feature of Pratchett's universe enormously attractive. But although some friends and critics of Pratchett say that at heart, he was a world-be reformer, as many satirists are, most of the novels go beyond mere satire and pleas for reform. They are not pamphlets, but stories about characters that Pratchett himself seemed to like, and that he induces us to care about as well.

For all of his love for Tolkien's the *Lord of the Rings*, Pratchett differs sharply from Tolkien in making many of his best and strongest characters female. How much a male fantasy writer can presume to know about female psychology is debatable, yet several younger women I've met who have read Pratchett are particularly impressed by his witches, especially Granny Weatherwax, a powerful crone; Nanny Ogg, a cheerful and rather bawdy matronly witch with a huge family and many grandchildren; and Perdita and Magrats, two younger and rather conflicted witches. Taken as a group, Pratchett's witches represent the three phases of the Goddess as some modern Wiccans imagine her – the Maiden, the Matron and the Crone, who together are supposed to stand for the three major stages in a woman's existence. Another female Discworld character that one woman of my acquaintance likes a lot is Angua, a werewolf in love with a human prince, who displays power, intellect and professionalism in her day job – she is part of the multi-species Ankh-Morpork police force – but who also is prey to powerful and sometimes destructive passions under a full moon, and who struggles at times with deep feelings of jealousy and social insecurity. Still another powerful Discworld female is Susan Sto Helit, the adopted granddaughter of Death himself, who as a teenaged girl is forced to take on Death's responsibilities in one book and proves rather good at them.

Pratchett's most important male character, Sam Vimes, is a deeply conflicted cop with a complex family background. A distant forebear, rather like Oliver Cromwell in real-world England, executed the last sitting king of Ankh-Morpork, but Vimes initially grows up in poverty and develops an acute drinking problem as well as the instincts of a street brawler before he finds himself married to a very wealthy woman and rising – to his surprise – into the aristocracy. In most of the Discworld books, Vimes gives Pratchett an opportunity for cynical social

commentary, for as a former street brawler and policeman on the beat, Vimes tends to despise the rich and well born, even as he finds himself rising into their class.

Another important and lovable male character, albeit a minor one, is Leonard of Quirm, an eccentric artist and inventor whom Pratchett loosely modeled after Leonardo da Vinci. Like the real-world Leonardo, Leonard of Quirm is a talented weapons designer, repeatedly coming up with ideas for new kinds of horrifying killing machines, and for all of his innocence, he is quite dangerous: Lord Vetinari locks him up for this reason. But what's most telling about Leonard, I think, is that Pratchett makes him almost helpless in the face of his own intellect and creativity. The universe is constantly being bombarded by little particles of creative inspiration, Pratchett writes, and it is Leonard's doom to be open to most of them. He is constantly being distracted by stray insights, observations, and ideas for new inventions, so much so that he can hardly get anything done, and I suspect that in some of his earliest Discworld books, Pratchett found himself in Leonard's plight. Pratchett's sheer inventiveness, when he was a younger author, probably explains some of his overly complicated plots and seemingly irrelevant digressions, not to mention his bad puns, while adding to the richness of the world he was creating.

The one nearly constant character in all the Discworld books, as mentioned above, is Death. Sometimes the Grim Reaper appears only briefly in a story, and rather humorously – as in *The Light Fantastic* (1986), where a visitor to his realm sees him learning to play bridge with War, Famine and Disease, making a “fourth for bridge” for the traditional Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. In another early novel, we see Death on vacation and trying to have “fun” as humans somehow experience it, and at last succeeding in getting drunk in a nearly deserted bar. Like many drunks, he becomes gloomy, telling the bored bartender, “I HATE MY JOB.”

“Sure, sure,” the bartender says soothingly; he has heard this from a lot of customers.

NO, Death insists, I MEAN, I REALLY, *REALLY* HATE MY JOB. And of course, considering the work he does, this makes perfect sense. In yet another early book, Death says to a newly deceased murder victim, KNOCK, KNOCK.

“Who's there?” the murder victim replies; he is still hazy about just what's happened to him.

DEATH, is the answer. Then a pause, as Death tries to explain: I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT I SHOULD TRY TO MAKE THIS SOMEWHAT MORE ENJOYABLE.

Given his awareness of human mortality, Pratchett refused to engage in histrionics or self-pity when his doctors informed him, in 2007, that what he had thought was a small heart attack was instead evidence that he had an early-acting kind of Alzheimer's disease. As a writer who had imagined Death telling KNOCK, KNOCK jokes, Pratchett declared to his fans that he was still optimistic about continuing to write for as long as he could, and in subsequent years he published several additional Discworld novels, as well as a number of books for young adults.

Pratchett by this time had won numerous science fantasy and science fiction awards and had become one of the best-selling English language authors in the world, although J.K. Rowling of “Harry Potter” fame eventually eclipsed his record sales. In 2009 he was knighted for his

services to English literature; he also became a much-quoted spokesman for the right to assisted suicide and a champion of orangutan conservation, among other causes.

Among Pratchett's fans, many claim to believe his last several books are equally good as his early ones, or better. The latter books, it is true, include fewer bad puns, fewer Dickensian minor characters, fewer Monty Python-style comic routines — some of them failures — and fewer plots that are meandering or chaotic.

Some of the later books also address, in relatively straightforward fashion, very serious moral themes — the evils of slavery and genocide, the folly of making a modern banking system rely on the gold standard, the damage that childhood bullying does to victims, and so on. Gone are most of the humorous subplots involving smelly beggars; imperious, bawdy and/or gluttonous witches; cowardly and dishonest cops; the Ankh-Morpork Thieves Guild, and magical talking dogs with a penchant for cynicism. Gone is Leonard of Quirm, too, and Angua the werewolf and Vimes the cynical policeman make only brief appearances. Death, too, becomes a less frequent visitor in the books, and there are fewer authorial interjections about the oddities of human nature and scientific dogma. Instead, Pratchett in several of the later novels provides rather straightforward adventure stories with clear narrative lines, which probably appeal to readers who like their fantasy neat.

What Pratchett evidently lost to Alzheimer's disease, however, and what I think he lost due to his book sales hitting the 85 million mark and the Queen knighting him, were his appreciation for social irony, his flashes of class consciousness about the pitfalls of capitalism, and above all his Leonardo-style taste for complexity. In the earliest books, Pratchett is not completely sold on the merits of economic and social progress, and he revels in exploring some of its negative sides. In the later books, he seems entranced by a new kind of protagonist — the progressive, if rascally, capitalist entrepreneur, whose adventures and misadventures frame most of the plots. Thus his character Moist von Lipwig, a convicted con man and swindler, is deputized by Lord Vetinari to reform the Ankh-Morpork post office in *Going Postal*, and in *Making Money* Moist is ordered to fix the city's banking system, which he takes off the gold standard to the benefit of the local economy.

The final Discworld book (*Raising Steam*, 2013) has Vetinari ordering this ex-swindler, but currently successful banker, to organize the development of a modern railroad system linking Ankh-Morpork with a number of foreign locations, including the distant realm of a vampire queen and a dwarf king (each of them a Vetinari ally) in a place called Uberwald. In several previous novels, Vetinari has decided to block the commercialization of new technologies that he deems to be dangerous to the city, and for a few seconds he hesitates about approving the development of the railroad, which he realizes will inevitably destroy some existing businesses and eliminate some existing jobs.

But after some consideration, Vetinari decides that the railway will bring overwhelming benefits to the city's economy, and construction of the thing proceeds. The main force opposing it, as it turns out, is a group of religiously fundamentalist dwarfs who hate it as a sign of modernity and who also happen to have a highly misogynist culture, and are appalled that female dwarfs living in Ankh-Morpork have begun to take on what — for conservative dwarf culture — are sexually

daring ways. To block the railroad's expansion into Uberwald, the dwarf religious fundamentalists turn, basically, to terrorism. And Moist von Lipwig, an entrepreneurial-minded rascal who loves business partly because it gives him an opportunity to take exciting risks, pushes the railroad line to completion and engages in a thrilling battle against the terrorists on top of a moving train before *Raising Steam* reaches its conclusion. Dwarf society as a whole also experiences something resembling a feminist revolution, and at the end of the book, the fundamentalist terrorists are on the run.

In short, Pratchett's last Discworld novel shows every sign of embracing what many capitalist economists have taken to calling "creative destruction," the revolutionizing of existing life through constant technological and business innovation. The book was published before the exploits of ISIS and Boko Haram started making headlines, but the text suggests that Pratchett along with many other westerners had evidently decided, before it appeared, in favor of some kind of struggle against what the late Christopher Hitchens once called "Islamofascism." I'm not sure we should blame Pratchett for that.

But in this last book, lamentably, Pratchett seems to have lost most of his earlier taste for irony, nuance and social complexity and his cynical realism about the economic roots of much western foreign policy. Gone is most of the earlier realization that like many of Leonard of Quirm's machines, some kinds of capitalist technological progress are dangerous. Gone is the sense of moral and cultural relativism that marked such Discworld novels such as *Jingo* and *Thud*. In the place of the earlier, messier novels with their paradoxes and their complexities, we have in *Raising Steam* a basically pro-modernist, pro-capitalist adventure story, and not a very interesting one at that.

I wondered after reading this book if after all these years, Pratchett's rising income from having sold 85 million books over his career, coupled with his knighthood from Queen Elizabeth, might have gradually blunted the class consciousness and pacifism that marked some of his earlier works. But on reflection, I think Alzheimer's was probably more to blame. Perhaps as his mental abilities dwindled, and his ability to appreciate complexity declined, Pratchett returned to some of the simplistic libertarian certainties that he may have held to early in his writing career. It also seems that the book, with a dedication to "David Pratchett, Engineer," is in some part Pratchett's tribute to the memory of his own father. But in passages describing Moist von Lipwig's daring fight with the terrorists on top of a moving train, Pratchett makes it clear that for Moist, battling for the railroad represents one last daring adventure, one final risk of insane but exciting risk, as he faces the inevitability of advancing age. For Pratchett, increasingly aware of what Alzheimer's disease was doing to his mental capacities, *Raising Steam* also seems to have represented one last adventure, one last battle against old age and death.

If Pratchett's brain was too compromised toward the end to escape from the simplistic sense of economics and politics that he may have once learned as a young libertarian, I think even Marxist readers like me can forgive him for it. But the capitalist celebration of "creative destruction" via technological progress is simplistic, and the historic growth in fossil fuel consumption that the earliest coal-powered, steam-driven railway locomotives helped to ensure shows that creative destruction is often dangerous as well.

Similarly, the battle of western modernity against ISIS-style jihadism and Muslim fundamentalism may or may not be justified – democratic socialists in the United States seem rather divided over this issue. But conceptualizing the fight of *Jihad vs. McWorld* (as historian Benjamin Barber once phrased it) as one involving a simple battle of good against evil is simplistic as well. The younger Terry Pratchett, I think, would have been alert to the tricky complexities underlying both technological progress and modernist war, even modernist war fought against feudal misogyny. The Alzheimer's-depleted older writer of 2013 no longer had the mental strength to avoid the clichés. It's all quite understandable. But it's sad, I think, that the wildly creative writer of *Jingo*, *Thud!* and *The Colour of Magic* should have eventually come to writing capitalist morality plays like this.

### [Utilities Feel Threat of Sustainable Tech](#)

Thursday, April 30th, 2015

## **The Washington Socialist <> May 2015**

*By Daniel C. Adkins*

In popular culture it is said that you need to know just one thing. In the energy it was just a few fuels. Mother nature works differently by having thousands of ecological niches and now humans are beginning to find so many energy niches that utilities are beginning to fear for their relevancy – so much so they have sued a federal agency for relief. As renewables and new tech diffuse we are seeing the possibility of a much less centralized but more connected energy sector.

Rooftop (PV) solar and wind are beginning to have such an impact in some states that utilities are blocking initializations and charging increasing amounts for rooftop connections and slowing wind development. Part of the problem is that electric-power supply grids need to balance electricity production or the grid becomes unstable. Utilities have not made their grids smart enough and they are used to having to coordinate only a few power plants. Now the utilities need to be able to identify the power from home systems in real time but do not have a method to do it yet. It is doable by smart meters or sampling and modeling. So instead of inventing the future, utilities are trying to slow it down. We can only hope they can soon get over the cultural shock of their changing industry.

New techniques are being employed which expand wind energy's usability. Some of these involve storage methods that allow wind energy to be saved for peak demand hours. They include better batteries, as well as the use of ice to store energy when the demand is low at night. This stored energy would then be available during peak demand during the day. Batteries can provide energy directly during the day's peak demand and so can [Ice Energy's Ice Bear](#), which has worked with commercial, utility, and industrial partners.

The Ice Bear links to traditional air conditioning units by computers and liquid refrigerant. The Ice Bear uses electrical energy at night to move water from a liquid to solid phase when it requires less energy to do so. During the peak heat of the day, the Ice Bear transfers the cold to the air conditioner by a refrigerant liquid. This saves the electrical daytime energy that would be required to run the air conditioner's compressor.

Newly deployed commercial and residential batteries are now being used to work with micro grids. SolarCity Corp. has created software to keep peak costs down when used with batteries. SolarCity is using Tesla's new commercial batteries to eliminate power outages and peak electric costs in California, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Micro grids could be a solution for neighborhoods, universities, office parks, military bases, and mixed with renewables might become independent and self-sufficient.

Passive energy housing can significantly lower the energy cost of housing. A passive building is one that has no (or little) in the way of active heating or cooling systems. Some of these units are being built in New York City where buildings account for 71 percent of carbon emissions and the de Blasio administration is looking to use passive standards to decrease energy consumption. The passive system works by building an airtight envelope and ventilation to exchange interior and exterior air. Heavy insulation and triple pane windows are also used.

In Copenhagen the city is networking street lamps and streetlights to save the cost of lighting and petroleum. The new LED lights save energy, and motion sensors turn off the lights when cars are not present. Smartphone apps for trucks and traffic signals on the bike paths let truckers, buses and cyclists link their speed to match the changing street lights and thus minimize costly starts and stops, saving fuel. Copenhagen's goal of becoming the world's first carbon-neutral capital by 2025 looks promising.

Some of these techniques are currently being used by Southern California Edison, which has an excess of nighttime wind energy. If a utility bases its pricing on the time of day the energy is used, then these techniques are saving peak energy costs. An older way of meeting peak demand would be to use a jet turbine using oil or gas or have a dedicated power plant. A full-scale implementation of these and other techniques will decrease the need for a number of power plants that burn fossil fuels by dropping peak energy needs.

However, no good deed goes unpunished. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) created a policy lowering peak demand. The policy allows electric customers to unplug units to avoid high peak costs. This tactic has so frightened some utilities that the Electric Power Supply Association sued FERC claiming that retail customers should not have the right to follow interstate rules. A court ruled against FERC and we will see if FERC goes to the Supreme Court. The utilities claim that the only way to ensure no blackouts is with dedicated power plants. They would have a point if the agreement to turn power units off were not reliable or enforceable. So we have a choice between legal agreements or mostly unused power plants. The battle is between utility rights to sell fossil fuels versus residences and businesses that want to use energy efficiency to reduce their costs.

The energy environment battle is becoming clearer. It is a battle between fossil fuel industries and utilities that are fighting for the right to make money the way they always have and a cheaper, distributive, energy efficient, less polluting, and sustainable future.