

# *The Utopian*

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# *Talking Economic Blues*

By Ron Tabor  
February 17, 2018



The recent volatility in the US stock market and in financial markets abroad has raised the question of the health of the US and global economies. As is their wont, a slew of economists and financial professionals have reassured us that economic “fundamentals are sound.” And yes, according to a variety of measures, the US economy appears to be very healthy, while the international economy, for the first time in some years, is expanding. Official unemployment in the United States is at a record low of 4.1%. (It was only a few years ago that 5% unemployment was considered “full employment.”) Consumer spending is robust. Inflation is modest (although there are signs that it is increasing, which was the likely cause of the plunge in stock prices). Corporate earnings are strong. And the stock market, even after the recent sell-offs, is at or near historic highs.



Yet, somehow, we are not quite reassured. It's hard to dismiss the drop in the stock indices as a mere "correction," let alone a "salutary" one. In addition, some may remember that in the run-up to the Great Recession of 2008-09, then-President George W. Bush also insisted that the "fundamentals are sound," while during the prelude to the collapse of the dot.com bubble and recession of 2000, after the longest economic expansion in the post-World War II period, we were told that things couldn't be better.



A closer look at the current US economy reveals some troubling questions. While official unemployment is way down, the labor participation rate – that is, the percentage of the potential workforce that is either working or looking for work – is also at a record low: 62.7%. This means that whatever the government may say, real unemployment is much, much higher than the official statistics indicate. To put this more graphically, in various parts of the country - among them, Appalachia and other rural areas, parts of the Rust Belt, and the inner cities outside the Rust Belt – a great many people are without jobs, without hope of finding one (either unwilling or unable to move to where the jobs are or lacking the skills to do them), and very likely to be addicted to opioids and/or other mind-altering substances. And this is not to mention those who are struggling to make ends meet on one, two, or even three poor-paying, part-time jobs. At the same time, several sectors of industry are complaining about a shortage of semi-skilled and skilled workers. Beyond all this, the growth in labor productivity has been worryingly slow, the rate of business investment has been tepid, and the "wealth-gap" between the rich and everybody else is continuing to grow. Finally, it's worth noting that while consumers are currently spending at robust levels, the savings rate is

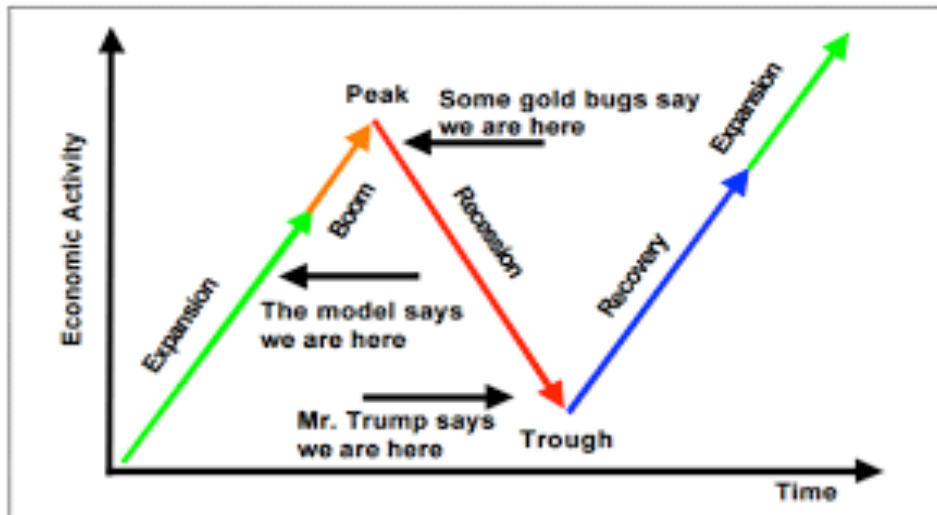
extremely low. In other words, people are spending everything they earn (and even borrowing to finance their purchases) and are not putting any money away for a rainy day. If/when the currently optimistic economic picture starts to get cloudy, let alone becomes downright dark, people are likely to curtail their spending very rapidly.



Despite the economists' confident prognostications, the reality is that nobody really knows what causes the ups and downs in the economy (the so-called "business cycle"), let alone is able to predict precisely when economic upturns and downturns will occur. There are a myriad of competing theories out there, none of which has ever been empirically confirmed, while detailed analyses of economic crises over the years (even over the centuries) reveal that no two business cycles have ever been the same.

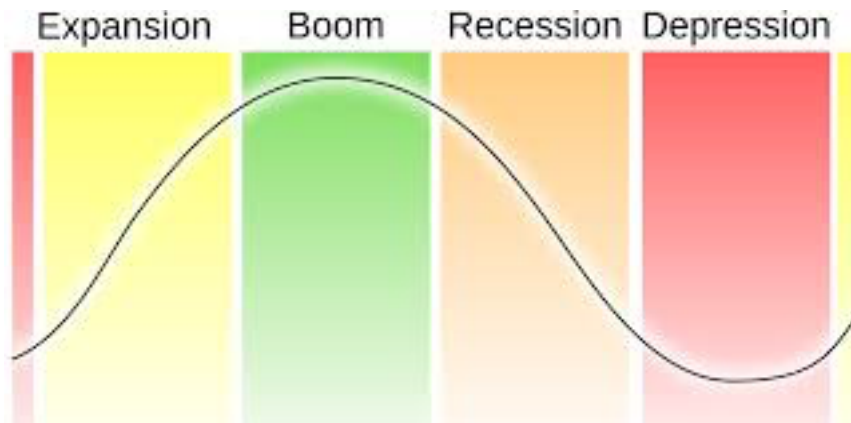
In fact, at the highest, most abstract level of economic theory, the business cycle is not supposed to happen at all. In this realm, the fundamental assumption is that when markets are free, that is, operate without monopolies, oligopolies, and other obstructions, they are fully transparent - that is, at any given time, prices give complete and accurate information about economic conditions - and all participants in the market - businesspeople big and small, workers, consumers, bankers, investors, etc. - act on the basis of full and accurate knowledge and in a rational manner. In such a situation, the market and the economy as a whole will always be in "equilibrium," and no such thing as a "business cycle" will ever occur. The absurdity of this conception, as well as its complete irrelevance to the real world, should be obvious (except to those whose minds have been completely addled by political ideologies

and mind-numbing abstractions). Most obviously, markets are not always free, people do not always act on the basis of complete knowledge of market conditions, and they do not (duh!!!) always act rationally.



“Neo-classical” economists have modified this view in some ways but have retained its essence. Thus, the “monetarists,” such as Milton Friedman and other members of the “University of Chicago School” of economic theorists, insist that economic crises and the business cycle as a whole are purely monetary phenomena, caused by there being either too much or too little money in circulation. In their view, if the central banking authorities – in the US, the Federal Reserve Board – were to ensure a slow and steady increase in the supply of money, economic growth would occur smoothly and uninterruptedly, and no crises would occur. One of the fallacies of this view is that, in the real world, the central bankers do not at all times have accurate knowledge either of the amount of money in circulation or of its “velocity” (how fast it changes hands). With the massive expansion and intricate elaboration of the credit/financial markets that are characteristic of the modern capitalist economy, no such knowledge is possible. Beyond this, the conception is completely tautological. When an economic crisis does occur, this is deemed to be because the monetary authorities did not perform their task competently. (It’s like the New Age belief that you can do whatever you want as long as you truly believe you can. Thus, when you jump out of a window and, instead of flying, break your neck, this is because you didn’t really believe you could fly.)

To their credit, the Keynesians recognize that economic cycles and crises are endemic to the system, but their view of the cause of such crises – that as people become wealthier as the economy expands, they tend to spend proportionally less of their incomes – is too vague to be of much use in explaining, let alone predicting, the economic cycle (although it has led them to understand that when crises do occur, the government needs to act quickly to stimulate “effective demand”).



Marxists also understand that economic crises are a fundamental characteristic of capitalism, but Marx himself never developed a unified and consistent theory of the business cycle, and to this day, there is no more agreement among Marxists than among mainstream economists on what actually causes such cycles and their concomitant crises. The simplest and most basic of these explanations is that the capitalist economy, because it results from the spontaneous and disconnected activities of large numbers of people (that is, is unplanned), is intrinsically characterized by what Marx called the “anarchy of production.” Over the course of a given economic cycle, the different sectors of the economy do not develop at precisely the same rate. The result is the build-up of “disproportionalities,” which sooner or later cause the economy to crash. To put this in more modern terms, the equilibrium among the various facets of the economy that is necessary to sustain the economy’s smooth and continuous expansion is a fragile one; it is easily disrupted and cannot be sustained indefinitely. Over time and in various ways, the economy gets further and further removed from this optimum. Eventually, this causes the economy to abruptly slow down (“crash”) and enter into a recession or worse.

As an aside, it is worth noting that some economists who have studied the business cycle in detail, such as Joseph Schumpeter, claimed to have discerned as many as four distinct cycles or "waves", ranging from 3-4 to 50+ years, whose complex interactions lie behind and explain the oscillations of the economy.

Of these, the cycle/wave I believe is most relevant today is the one that appears to occur over roughly eight-to-ten years. (This was the focus of Marx's theorizing.) The expansions (and the recessions that followed them) of the 1960s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s reveal such a cycle fairly clearly, whatever its precise causes. Each expansion was characterized by an explosion of credit, which financed the over-development of certain economic sectors relative to the others. Eventually, in each case, the credit bubble burst and the economy entered a recession.

If this pattern holds, we can reasonably expect a downturn to occur within the next year or so. As I see it, the main "disproportionalities" that have come to characterize the current economic upturn are three: (1) the massive increase in stock prices, with "price-earnings ratios" (one measure of the relative values of stocks) at close to historic highs; (2) the more recent burst in consumer spending, in part motivated by the run-up in stock prices and the euphoria this has created, financed to a great degree by borrowing; (3) the bottleneck in the labor market (millions of people not working combined with shortages of qualified workers), which may soon lead to a spike in wages in key sectors of the economy. (Some or all of these, along with a significant increase in interest rates as the Federal Reserve acts to contain inflation, may well be the triggers that cause the next downturn.)

Precisely how long the current expansion will continue and when the next recession will begin is anyone's guess. The expansion is already the second longest of any since World War II. Since it was, for a variety of reasons, very slow to pick up momentum, it may well continue for some time. However, given the short-term "disproportionalities" mentioned above and the more fundamental "structural" problems of the economy (among them, the failure of our educational system to prepare the poorer layers of the working class to find work in the contemporary economy, the wide and increasing gap between the 20% at the top of our society and everybody else, and the decay of the country's infrastructure), I



don't see how a recession can be avoided in the relatively near future.

By way of conclusion, let me say that, in my view, integrally involved in attempting to analyze economic fluctuations is the question of human psychology, including our tendencies to think linearly, to run with the herd, to value economic losses at a higher level than gains, and to panic when things don't go as we expect them to. This accounts, to a great degree, for the ultimately unpredictable nature of economic developments.

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## Discussion and Debate

# ***Whither Global Capitalism?***



February 14  
Friends,

See recent reports on US and world economy. Shows effects of semi-monopoly capitalism, with trends toward increased inequality, stagnation, and instability.

Subject: NYT on "World Inequality Report"

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/14/business/world-inequality.html>

Wayne

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February 14

Wayne,

Haven't we been here before? I mean: no competition; stagnation; da-da-da-da -- then under the auspices of Messrs. Baran and Sweezy. Then whoops -- along came the microelectronics revolution, and small fry starting up businesses in their homes and garages that swelled to gigantic size. Some -- e.g., Apple, with its world-leading stock market valuation, are now the very monsters now cited as strangling competition. I don't think that we're witnessing the end of history -- i.e., I anticipate that there will be new breakthroughs (technological and otherwise) and renewed growth (although likely there will be one or more bubble burstings in the interim).

Jack

P.S. When I get a chance -- maybe this weekend -- I want to write a reply to Ron's short document on the economy. I largely agree with it, but want to especially comment on a few areas that Ron didn't discuss much -- e.g., China; robotization; web commerce.

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February 15

Jack,

I do not share the faith in the health of the capitalist economy/society, which you have, and others have. You not merely claim to *not know* whether things will get worse or not, but *you believe that they will get better*, writing, "*I anticipate that there will be new breakthroughs...and renewed growth....*" (You do not add that increased technological growth is exactly what threatens the world ecology.)

Sure there have been ups and downs. As Ron pointed out, capitalism's disproportionalities (if nothing else) cause it to move in lurches. Even at the height of the 30-year post-WWII boom, there

were downturns. And even after the end of that boom, there are upturns. But overall, the system has been going downwards since about 1970 or so, as is generally accepted I think. The post-Great Recession recovery has been slow, shallow, and vulnerable.



To be sure, the continuing trend toward centralization and concentration of capital has not, and will not, end competition. Monopolization and competition have a reciprocal relationship. Not that we can know the day and hour when the next crash will come; the system rolls on (overall downward) until global warming gets too hot for the current civilization to survive without collapse or at least drastic changes, or until there is a nuclear war. Or a workers revolution. Whatever.

Recently Ron wrote that "economics" was not a "science." I am not sure what a real science of economics would look like--but I believe that we can commit to applying scientific method to economic behavior as best as we can. Meteorology is regarded as scientific, although predictions are still highly probabilistic. Geology is a science but no one can be sure when the next really big earthquake will shake California. Unlike human studies, the weather and the tectonic plates do not have free will, yet our knowledge of them is probabilistic at best. Why? Because they are very complex, with many variables about which we know so little. This is true even more so about human behavior, individually or in mass. Plus there are vested interests, which interfere with disinterested human study (psychological taboos, self-interested institutions, ruling classes). It is remarkable that any sort of prediction, even very probabilistic ones, can be made. Of course, a belief in anti-authoritarian socialism is a moral decision, but it doesn't prevent us from

examining what forces are likely to prevent or support a socialist reconstruction of the world.

Wayne

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February 15  
Wayne,

Please explain the enormous expansion of Chinese industry and the Chinese working class as consistent with your belief that "the system has been going downwards since 1970 or so." To pick just one glaring hole in what you're presenting, apparently, as "scientific."

Do you really think that economics is on a scientific footing? Which flavor of economics might that be? Bourgeois? Marxist (if the latter, which variety? Surely not Picketty. Bob Brenner? Michael Roberts? Anwar Shaikh? Baran and Sweezy? David Harvey? Nikolai Bukharin? Lenin? Luxembourge? ...They violently disagree with each other.)

I am not arguing that capitalism is good for the planet, the environment, species, etc. I am arguing that it has not been stagnating since 1970. The size of the world economy, the size of the world proletariat, etc argues against that. You do agree that China is capitalist, don't you? And Singapore. And South Korea. And Malaysia. And Taiwan. Etc. Not to even touch on microelectronics and how it has changed the way we work and live. Stagnation? Really? Please.



Also: Marxists have been predicting the imminent demise of capitalism for nearly two centuries. But capitalism has,

unfortunately, proved to be more resilient than the economic "scientists" predicted. I don't rule out the system breaking down soon. But it doesn't have to happen, at least not now, and I don't think that it will.

As far as comparing economic modeling with meteorology: yes, meteorology's predictions are probabilistic. As is all scientific modeling. But astrologers make predictions too. The fact that economists make predictions does not make economics a science. For one thing, it has never been able to adequately account for human behavior / human nature -- although Keynes himself posited it as critical, as do acclaimed neo Keynesians like Robert Shiller (the housing index guy). Anyone can predict.

Jack

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February 15

It might not be that the capitalist system breaks down but that it breaks the living system that sustains it, and therefore itself.

Robin

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February 16

All,

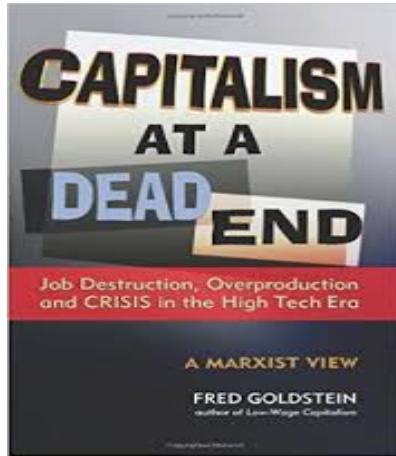
Regardless of the level of competition and innovation (there will be more), capitalism in the U.S. still looks sick on its own terms. In particular, the rate of stock buybacks is increasing. So far this year 61 corporations have announced \$89 billion in buybacks. Last year at this time the figure was 58 companies and \$40 billion. This is not what capitalism's apologists tout; that is, invest capital, hire workers, make and sell useful products, reap profits, and then turn around and re-invest, produce, sell and reap again and again at higher levels. Instead, the companies are using substantial sums to buy their own stock. This raises earnings per share--and executive salaries and bonuses--but produces absolutely nothing socially useful.

Peace,  
Bill

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least on the left, from liberals to Marxists. That is: overall. There *has* been very unbalanced development. China has grown its economy, including its working class, by various means, *including a massive attack on its environment and the health of its people*. The limitations and bottlenecks in Chinese development are also well known. Meanwhile the U.S. has developed the Internet and smart phones for almost everyone--while rushing to destroy the ecological foundation of society.



I have written about these topics elsewhere. Some of the books you mention are worth reading, including Bob Brenner, Michael Roberts, and even the Monthly Review people.

Wayne

P.S. I would add: the original articles that began this discussion were not by any Marxist, anarchist, or other far-out-niks, but reports in the NY Times from reputed bourgeois scholars.

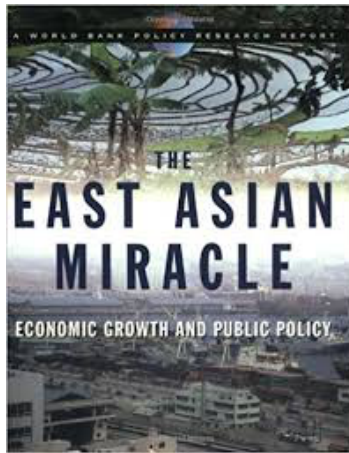
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February 16  
Wayne and all,

Thank you Wayne for calling attention back to the article that you posted. The article, as I read it, focuses on the global increase in inequality -- not about global stagnation. The former doesn't imply the latter. Indeed, the article says the following about China:

China's economic miracle was an unprecedented feat: in one generation, an unproductive communist nation of farmers transformed itself into a manufacturing export colossus, a giant of

capitalism. Since 1980, its share of the world's income has grown to 19 percent from 3 percent. Its income per person has grown almost 15 times as fast as that of the United States and Canada, and almost 19 times as fast as that of the European Union — to 90 percent of the world average, from 15 percent. Once at the bottom of the world's income distribution, Chinese are now much more broadly represented across the spectrum of the world's income.



Nor, despite the authors' phrasing, is China alone in such growth. The South Korean economy went from one of the poorest in the world in 1962 to where it is today -- the fourth largest economy in Asia (behind only China, India, and Japan). Indeed, its spectacular growth has been called "the miracle on the Han River." Since 1970 - - i.e., since the end of the postwar boom in the west -- the South Korean economy has grown by a factor of roughly 40 (and nearly 100-fold since 1962 -- from \$2.7 billion to \$230 billion; note that in 1965, South Korean GDP was lower than North Korea's). South Korea is now one of the world leaders in several major areas, including among others shipbuilding, electronics / microelectronics (consumer and industrial), and auto manufacturing.

Nor are China and South Korea the only instances of rapid economic growth since 1970. There are Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and several others. Indeed, in the growth of the working class overall and of the industrial proletariat in particular; in the growth of GDP, of income, of education levels across a multi-national populous region, the best comparison I can think of is with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century -- but of course on a much larger scale, at least population-wise. (Parenthetically: the 19th century Industrial Revolution savagely despoiled the environment.)



I think that those who, in your words, "generally acknowledge" that "the system has been going down since the early 1970s" do so by ignoring the tremendous growth in the East Asian economies. I think that many leftists -- and some others -- do so because they don't think that China (for example) is part of "the system", but rather they think that it is some form of progressive, or at least preferred, post-capitalist society. There's another possible explanation: a Eurocentric view of the world (or, perhaps, a Euro-and-U.S.-centric view of the world). Some put forward both explanations. But we agree that China is capitalist; we reject Eurocentrism; so we should not make such mistakes.

There's a lot more that I would like to say, but in my opinion the above -- the post-1970 enormous industrial and overall economic growth in, especially, East Asia -- is key to why I reject the thesis that capitalism has been stagnating since 1970.

Jack

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February 19

Jack and fellow utopians,

The first NY Times article is by Eduardo Porter (a well-known bourgeois economic reporter). He focuses on the growth of semi-monopolization, the decrease of competition, and the increase in profits from "rent." While not denying that competition still continues--fiercely in some areas--he points to the growing concentration of businesses as a major cause of low productivity, low wage growth, inequality, overvaluation of equities (stocks, bonds, housing, etc.--fictitious capital in effect), and a vulnerability, as he sees it, to an crash.

What about China? asks Jack. Chinese economy is booming, so it is euro-&-north-american-centric (also Japan-centric) to see world capitalism as doing poorly over all. It is not I but world capitalism which is euro-&-n.a.-centric. The big capitals of the U.S., Europe, & Japan still dominate the world. China's state has done well for itself by buying and selling on the world market, becoming a middleman in the global system of production, and renting out its working class. If Europe, the U.S., and Japan were to collapse, or even to have a hard downturn, it would gravely wound China. At the same time, the Chinese economy has some tight bottlenecks, which get

worse as it develops. One, especially, is its destruction of its own environment and the health of its people. But all modern capitalism is stuck in a deep contradiction: industrial growth is essential for the health of capitalism but catastrophic for the health of the world environment on which civilization depends.

I highly recommend Richard Smith's essay, "China's Drivers and Planetary Ecological Collapse," Real-World Economics Review, no.82, 13 December 2017

<http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue82/Smith82.pdf>

or:

<http://www.richardanthonysmith.org/articles-1>

Solidarity,  
Wayne

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February 25  
Hi all,

Wayne says,

China's state has done well for itself by buying and selling on the world market, becoming a middleman in the global system of production, and renting out its working class. If Europe, the U.S., and Japan were to collapse, or even to have a hard downturn, it would gravely wound China.

This view of China as essentially a mercantilist state is, in my opinion, simply wrong. An increasing amount of production in China is for its domestic market, this has increased markedly over the past decade, and the trend, the plan, and projections are for this to increase markedly. As far as renting out its working class, we are increasingly seeing the opposite. Here are just a few examples: the new eastern span of the San Francisco Oakland Bay Bridge was contracted to a Chinese company, Shanghai Zhenhua (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/business/global/26bridge.html>) which built and largely assembled the new span in its giant Shanghai manufacturing complex, then "rented" American labor for the final installation; Chinese have bought up much of Italian

manufacturing, so much so that it has become a major national issue (see <https://fashionista.com/2013/02/as-more-chinese-factories-pop-up-in-italy-what-does-it-mean-for-the-made-in-italy-label> ); China is investing heavily in auto production, with its goal being domination of global auto and parts manufacturing ( <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-aims-to-take-over-car-industry-one-part-at-a-time-1500370204> ). And these are just a few examples -- China is investing heavily in Central Asia, in Africa, in Latin America. If, as Wayne posits, Europe, the U.S. and Japan were to suffer a major downturn, I expect that the Chinese would rely still more on their large and expanding domestic market as well as to their investments outside of the West, and I expect that other Asian countries would look more towards China. Indeed, a sharp downturn in the West may well result in China displacing the U.S. as the leader of the world economy, with South Korea, Japan, Pakistan, and many others strengthening ties to China at the expense of the U.S.

China is not a small East Asian cape. Its population, nearly 1.5 billion, is equal to that of the entire Western Hemisphere PLUS all of the European Union COMBINED. Its "unprecedented economic miracle", the largest industrial revolution in the history of the world, dramatically increased production and labor productivity, while increasing the Chinese labor force by hundreds of millions and its urban manufacturing work force by tens of millions. According to the United Nations, the number of people living in poverty in China fell by 627 MILLION PEOPLE between 1981 and 2005 -- from 835 million to 208 million. (In other words: in 1981, 60% of China's people lived in poverty; by 2005 fewer than 15% did. It has fallen still further since 2005.) South Korea, although much smaller than China, has made similar gains in production and similar reductions, proportionately, in poverty -- and in the process, this nation of only 50 million has gone from extreme backwardness (per capital GDP below North Korea) to the fourth largest economy in all of Asia. And other Asian states -- Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, India -- have made huge leaps in manufacturing production. Globally, on the order of one billion people have been lifted out of poverty. The Asian working class has grown enormously -- and most enormous of all has been the increase in the number of women workers and in their militancy.

The above are a sampling of reasons why I reject the assertion that global capitalism has stagnated and been in decline since 1970, and why I think that -- unless one doesn't think that China is capitalist - - such a view must be Eurocentric.

I'm going to leave it here, at least for now.

Jack

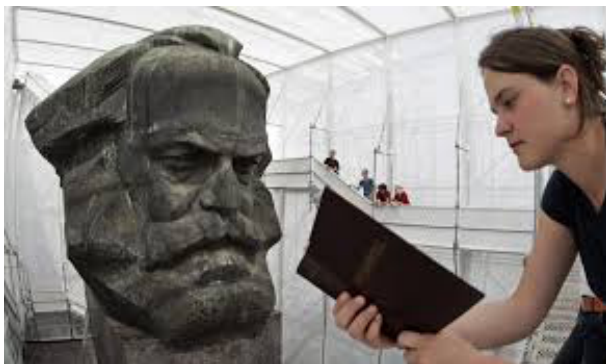
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February 26

Friends and Utopians,

In response to Jack's last comments. First, to be clear, *Jack does not challenge* my statements that capitalism in the centers of the North-American-European-Japanese major economies (with ups and downs) has been generally stagnating, increasing in inequality, overvalued (bubbling), and increasingly vulnerable to another crash. He does not deny this, but argues that capitalism is ok because China, and also South Korea, is booming. But this fails to look at capitalism as a world system. He also does not respond to the article by Richard Smith on the ecological catastrophe which is unrolling in China, as a major cost of the boom.

I wrote to Loren Goldner to comment on this topic. Loren is a Marxist economist of a left-communist/libertarian-Marxist persuasion, with various political problems, but he has studied Asia closely (he has a job in South Korea). He responded:



*I would basically say that the boom in East Asia has to be offset against rollback and austerity in the US, Europe, Russia, Eastern Europe (including the Balkans) the non-oil Middle East, Africa and Latin America. I don't think the expansion of workers and workers'*

*incomes in East Asia compensates for the decline in all those places. Things are not so rosy in China either: 1 million people a year die of diseases related to pollution and the environment; whole previous cultivated regions have been desertified. The "middle class" in China is only 10% of the population: true, that's 140 million people, but about 500 million are still trapped in the countryside, and another 280 million make up the transient population searching for work.*

Let me end with **a broader comment about the Utopian tendency**. In the 70s, Ron Tabor and the rest of the RSL used Marxist political economy to describe capitalism as having ended the post-WWII boom. This included (we said) the way capitalism had misused the environment to promote the boom but was now going to have to pay for its ecological destructiveness. We said that the world economy would be going downhill overall, with ups and downs, with an eventual danger of a major collapse at some point. When events would happen was not specified--it was a probabilistic prediction.

This analysis and prediction turned out to be pretty much true. *This is especially clear currently*. Yet at this time, former RSLers have decided that the analysis was wrong, that predictions cannot be made (even probabilistically), that even if things get bad for a while, they can be expected to improve, and the Marxist economic analysis is no good (it is too tied to totalitarian aspects of Marxism). In my opinion, this development is all too bad. I have affection for all you folks, former RSLers and friends, and continue to learn from things you write and say--but I am disappointed in this development. Not that you owe me anything, but that is how I feel.

Wayne

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February 26  
Everybody,

Wayne is certainly entitled to his opinion. I am sorry he is disappointed in the Utopian tendency, merely, it seems because some of us have expressed opinions with which he disagrees.

As far as the issues are concerned, I believe we were generally correct in 1970 and thereafter to argue that, while other people thought that the post-World War II prosperity was a permanent state of capitalism, we argued that it was (for a variety of reasons, including the vast expansion of debt, government and private) temporary, that at some point in the relatively near future, capitalism would experience a serious crisis, and that there would be the emergence of mass fascist movements and a substantial increase in the class struggle. Despite this, I think I was wrong in several respects. (I will try to summarize my own personal views, to avoid implicating others in positions they may not agree with):

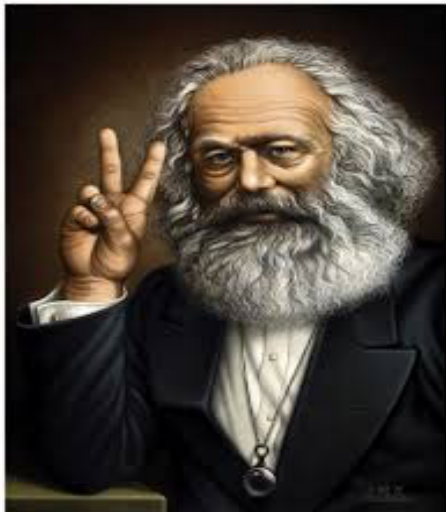


1. The crisis was staved off for much longer than I expected, eventually occurring in 2008.
2. The crisis, although serious, was not as deep as I expected.
3. The crisis did not lead to a drastic increase in the class struggle, although it has led to a significant growth of far-right and outright fascist organizations.



4. I was wrong to believe that this crisis was emblematic of what Leon Trotsky called the "Epoch of Capitalist Decay."

I no longer accept Trotsky's analysis of the Epoch, which was his attempt to apply Marxist concepts to his era. (Neither Marx nor Lenin ever explicitly articulated the notion of such an epoch, although Trotsky's position was a reasonable extension of their positions.) I do not believe capitalism is in decline. I believe it will continue to expand and grow until or unless it destroys itself or is overthrown. As I have tried to explain over the past few years, I do not think it likely that capitalism will destroy itself by destroying the environment. I believe it is highly likely that global warming will wreak considerable havoc, causing a great deal of environmental and human damage, but I do not believe it will wipe out the human species nor throw us back to some pre-industrial age. I believe that there is a risk of nuclear war, but I do not think such a war is likely. The world's leaders seem to have figured out that that is not in anybody's interest. Nor do I think any kind of socialist transformation of society is on the agenda for the foreseeable future, not least because I see very little sign of revolutionary socialist consciousness in any sector of society, including the working class.



I believe that it is essential that those of us who consider ourselves to be libertarian revolutionaries look reality in the face and not allow ourselves to be imprisoned in theoretical constructs. I believe Marxism is such a theoretical construct, and as the title of my book on Marxism (The Tyranny of Theory) implies, I think it has become a prison in which much, perhaps most, of the left has become

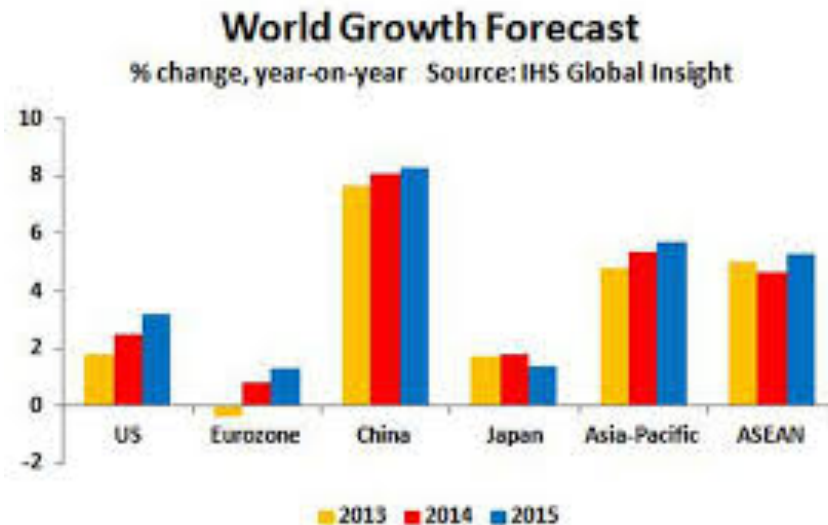
ensnared. The vast majority of the left, including some large chunk of the anarchist movement, is incapable, for both intellectual and emotional reasons, of thinking outside the categories of Marxism. I think we need to recognize that a theory that was developed 170 years ago is not likely to be able to explain everything that is happening today.

If we look at global capitalism with open eyes, one of the most striking things about the past several decades to note is the emergence of China, and with it, other Asian countries, to global importance. In 1980, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, et. al., were economic backwaters, "basket cases" of "underdevelopment." Today, these nations are among the fastest growing, most dynamic, countries in the world. By some measures, China's economy is the world's largest, edging aside that of the United States. Has this development been without costs? Absolutely not, among others, vast environmental destruction, severe social dislocation, and vast human suffering. Are these societies without problems? No. Capitalism development has always been accompanied by serious environmental destruction, an increase in income inequality, human misery, and other grievous problems. But we cannot, and should not, blind ourselves to the fabulous economic growth that has occurred in this part of the world over the past 30-40 years, nor let ourselves be deluded that this is somehow temporary or artificial. According to several sources, more people have been lifted out of poverty (not only in Asia, but in Africa, and Latin America) than in all previous history!!! This is not an illusion, a sleight-of-hand, a trick of statistics, the result of some kind of bubble that is going to collapse because of the "contradictions" of capitalism. This is real, and we need to come to grips with it. Among other things, it explains, to a significant degree, the rise of Donald Trump, who represents a section of the US ruling elite, supported by broader layers of the population, who are deathly frightened of the prospect that the United States and its partners in western Europe are losing their position of global hegemony to the Chinese and other Asian elites.

They are right to be worried. If we look at history with a long view, I think it is reasonable to believe that we are in the midst of a highly significant historical change: the eclipse of Western Europe/North America and the emergence of China and other Asian



nations to global hegemony. European global dominance began in the early 16th century and has lasted for 400 years. Before that, for centuries, China was the most advanced civilization in the world. Remember Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who traveled to China in the late 13th century and stayed there for 24 years? Although Venice and the other Italian cities represented one of the most advanced areas of western Europe, Polo was overwhelmed by the magnificence, the wealth, splendor, and culture, of China in that era, then under the rule of the Mongol (Yuan) dynasty. So, the idea that China and the surrounding nations might, after several hundred years of European/North American domination, re-emerge as global powers is really not so strange, especially if we allow ourselves to think past/beyond the many categories that have defined our view of the world.



I am not afraid to admit that what I thought 45-50 years ago was wrong. I believe that I was right about some things and wrong about others. I accept this; I see it as part of my intellectual growth. One gets older, looks at things from a wider, longer, deeper, and (hopefully) wiser perspective, and perhaps learns some things. One of these is that theories/ideologies can obscure reality as much as, or even more than, they elucidate it.

As I said, I'm sorry Wayne finds the Utopian tendency to be disappointing. As part of his argument, he tries to utilize our/my earlier analyses to buttress his case against our/my current positions. Perhaps he might consider that, since we were right then

(even when he disagreed with us), we might be right now, even though we are saying something different. I, as an anarchist, believe in freedom, first and foremost, in the realm of consciousness and ideas. This means being willing to discard old ideas, old ways of looking at things, old constructs, and to look for new conceptions that better explain what is happening in the world. Reality is real. Theory is an attempt to explain it; it does not define it, let alone determine it (as Marx thought). To use a hackneyed but worthy expression, we need to start thinking "outside the box."

Ron

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February 27  
Ron and All,

I agree with Ron's comments to Wayne on past, present and future.

I would add that, while I expect capitalism to continue to grow (i.e., not experience any 'terminal crisis'), it is likely to have crises in the form of cyclical ups and downs, some of which may be severe. I do not expect that Ron disagrees with this, based on comments he has made previously on the economy. I would also add (and I think this is implicit in Ron's email), that continued capitalist growth in no way implies harmony, prosperity for all, a healthy environment, etc. Quite the contrary, the exploitation, degradation, violence and war that have always been essential features of capitalism will continue to be present.

Rod

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February 27  
Everybody,

I agree with Rod's caveat to my comments, that capitalist growth will continue to involve economic (and political, and environmental) crises of varying dimensions in depth and scope.

I would also like to make clear another point that is implied by my remarks. This is that, in contrast to the RSL and the IS, the Utopian tendency is not defined around agreement on theoretical issues. (I doubt, for example, that I could convince many people of

my views on materialism, idealism, the epistemological status of science, and other philosophical questions, although I have taken a stab at this in my book on Marxism.) Thus, people in and around our milieu may have a variety of views on theoretical questions, and this does not in any way determine whether they can be, or ought to be, part of our group. Participation is completely voluntary, and nobody is compelled to conform to any specific "line."

Ron

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February 28  
Jack and All,

I have learned a great deal from Jack's posts on economic development in China, and Asia more broadly. I was inclined to see capitalism as a surprisingly adaptive and resilient system without the detailed information Jack provided on Asian development, and am all the more persuaded of this by his posts.



I am curious how Jack sees Xi Jinping's move to be a 'new Mao.' Totalitarian dictators have been responsible for remarkable economic development—Stalin has the leading role in this (human cost aside)—but China went through devastating instability under Mao's various campaigns. I wonder how you, Jack, see this development affecting Chinese economic progress. With my limited knowledge, I have seen China as having had a remarkably 'steady hands at the tiller.' Is significant change afoot?

Rod

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March 1  
Everybody,

Jack is not the only one who has recently referred to Xi as trying to set himself up as the "new Mao." However, I think this is meant mostly in terms of Xi wanting to project himself as the God-like embodiment of the country, akin to the Chinese emperors of the past, rather than predictions about upcoming instability. This is in contrast to the image recent Chinese leaders have projected, that of a being "one among many," that is, as leaders of a "collective leadership" that embodies the collective wisdom of the Communist Party.



I think Rod's contrast between Stalin and Mao is only partially accurate. Much of Stalin's reign was also characterized by extremely destructive and destabilizing campaigns, such as forced collectivization (which resulted in a mass famine [10-20 million dead] and the destruction of Soviet agriculture) and the purge trials, which jailed, exiled, and killed yet more people and (temporarily) destabilized the ruling class. Throughout this, however, Stalin managed to keep himself firmly in control, unlike Mao, who was sidelined as a consequence of the Great Leap Forward (which resulted in 45 million dead) and launched the "Cultural Revolution" in an unsuccessful attempt to regain his former status and power.

Finally, I wish to indicate my full agreement with what Jack has recently written and to thank him for that.

Ron

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March 1  
Ron, Jack and All,

I appreciate the distinction Ron has made between Stalin and Mao, which seems primarily to be that one of the two, Stalin, maintained a firm grip on power (even if in his possible-to-likely clinical paranoia, he didn't always think his grasp was firm), while Mao's lost significant power as a result of the Great Leap Forward. My point, however, was not about power, but about stability, particularly as it affects economic growth.

It strikes me that both China and Russia experienced enormous (and wasteful) instability under these two 'Great Helmsmen,' though Stalin, no doubt, 'got the job done' (if our measurement is how ready was the USSR for Hitler by 1942). It is my impression that the CCP, under its more collective form of (single-party) leadership, has had a fairly lengthy period of stable, centralized rule, that has contributed significantly to the conditions in which China's "economic miracle" has taken place. My question to Jack (perhaps an overly speculative one) was how he assessed the possible shaking up of a steady and stable approach that Xi's move might represent. If I read you right, Ron, you're saying you think Xi's power grab (based in large measure, I would think, on this stability and economic growth) is less substantive and problematic than I might be suggesting.

Rod

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March 1

A few thoughts.

I'm glad that Rod and Ron got something from my exchange with Wayne. But to be honest, although I have tried to follow China -- off and on -- for more than 40 years, I only have tentative thoughts on the current situation.

I do have to say: I don't recall referring to Xi as "the new Mao." I think that there's much more to consider. Mao on the one hand was a revolutionary leader -- not a socialist revolution, but an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal revolution that led in short order to a state

capitalist, authoritarian regime. Unlike Xi (although Xi's father was a close associate of Mao.) That's one of many considerations.

In trying to understand the current news from China, I try to keep a few things in mind:

First, regime change is problematic in all authoritarian statist regimes. The USSR after Stalin; Yugoslavia after Tito; China from 1956 to 1978 (and in some ways on down to the present) are cases in point. China seems to be handling this better than most, but....

Second, Xi has been purging opponents and potential opponents in the leadership for years, trying especially to secure the armed forces, the security forces, and the political committee.

Third, Xi's ending term limits doesn't really stand against the past, far or near. Mao held onto power for as long as he could, risking destroying the country to keep or return to power. Teng Hsiao-peng ran China for years after Mao. Xi is returning to this tradition.



Fourth, from what I can gather, Xi and his associates push Han nationalism vigorously, cracking down on minorities, especially the Uighurs. Such ethnic / racial nationalism frequently accompanies statist regimes, exalting the superiority of their national people type.

Fifth, I think that Xi's ambitious global economic campaign, centered on the Belt and Road initiative, is well beyond what were the capacities of Mao (or Stalin).

Sixth, despite China's impressive economic growth -- or perhaps as a byproduct -- inequality has increased. Billionaires on one side; on the other, state social benefits denied to undocumented workers from rural areas who migrate to the cities for work (about seven million of such migrants in Beijing alone). On top of this, the environmental destruction brought on by the push for accumulation.

Finally, China is / remains very fragile. I have stressed it's economic growth, but that has been accompanied by an enormous amount of dissent. We read about the suppression of intellectuals, but not as much about the thousands of strikes and other job actions and protests that go on every month, despite the brutal regime, despite the denial of the right to organize and the right to strike. I suggest looking at the China Labour Bulletin (published in Hong Kong), and at articles by Eli Friedman). That fragility, and the protests, could at some point undermine Xi, but at this point I think that they actually serve his interest by convincing party leaders that a strong permanent hand is needed at the helm.

Jack

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## Perspectives

# ***Guns and Violence***

February 20

All,

Some form of high school (and perhaps middle school) student movement may be taking shape. Word at our school is that there will be a nationwide student walkout sometime soon (which our school will support). Whether this upsurge will be but a temporary blip, or have some greater staying power, remains to be seen.

In the possibility that something with some legs develops, it seems worth talking about. Without question, calls for gun control in one form or another will be part of this movement. Regardless of individual views within our milieu on the topic, it seems to me that it would be a grave error not to relate positively to such a movement. Young people are the most likely segment of our society

to look at the deeper issues involved in gun violence/school shootings. Comments from high school students that I have heard to date frequently raise questions about society's values, the apparent dysfunction, if not corruption, of government officials, the fact that young people are not afforded a meaningful voice, etc.



As a discussion starter (if the discussion winds up being worth having), I am advocating that we find a way to be in solidarity with such a movement. Our message would be that we have a culture of violence and injustice because we have a system that is inherently violent and unjust. That gun control is not the answer is part of this message. (Again, regardless of views on any specific gun 'control' issue, I doubt anyone in our milieu believes that more background checks, curbing the most deadly weapons and suchlike would change the culture of perpetual violence, mass incarceration, drug addiction, crime, including rape and assaults on women and gays, poverty, injustice, etc.

In short, I think it would be a mistake to allow the gun control issue to cut us off from being in solidarity with a youth movement, were it to develop. I welcome others' thoughts.

Rod

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February 20

All,

I agree we should support and begin by going to the root. That is, why are almost all mass shootings in the U.S.? What's with the obsession with guns? I think the answer is fear and lies in the



origins of the U.S.: fear of counterattacks by the people whose land was being stolen, fear of slave revolts, and later fear of organized workers and the rightful gains of Black and brown people, women, LGBTQ, &c. There is a strong correlation between 'gun culture' and racism and heteropatriarchy. I am against gun culture while at the same time I oppose the state deciding firearm ownership among working class and oppressed people. As to the students, it seems there is a strong undercurrent that the dinosaurs and their friends who control the state just won't listen to them; guns are only the tip of an iceberg that also includes inequality, racism, heteropatriarchy, injustice and the prospect of living precarious lives. Therefore, I've thought of a few maximal slogans: 'Down With Gun Culture! Down With Patriarchy and White Supremacy!'; 'Liberation, Not Annihilation!'; and 'Organize! The Government Won't Protect Us!'

Peace,  
Bill

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February 22  
Everybody,

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether we can and should intervene in the current student movement and how we might do so, I wish to indicate my disagreement with Bill's analysis of and attitude toward what he calls "gun culture." I think the term paints with much too broad a brush and plays into the hands of those who call for drastically limiting people's right to own weapons, including the rising chorus of voices who are calling for the outright repeal of the Second Amendment.



Is it wrong for someone who lives in a rural area (or anybody else, for that matter) to take a rifle or a shotgun and go traipsing through the woods to shoot some game, as long as the killing isn't wanton or wasteful (that is, people eat what they kill) and doesn't threaten any endangered species? Is it wrong for someone who owns a weapon to take it periodically to a shooting range for target practice? Is it wrong for Black people, Latinos, and other ethnic minorities to possess weapons in order to protect themselves from racist assaults? Is it wrong for people who live in high-crime areas to own weapons to protect themselves and their families from burglars and others, such as kidnapers and serial killers, who might try to invade their homes (especially when calling the police may well mean being shot by trigger-happy cops)? Is it wrong for women, LGBT people, and others vulnerable to being raped or otherwise assaulted on the street to carry weapons to protect themselves? And is it really so terrible if some friends wish to go out into the countryside and engage in mock guerrilla warfare? Is all this simply to be denounced as participating in and promoting something repulsive called "gun culture?"



I see no reason why these and other activities involving weapons should be indiscriminately dismissed as politically and morally unacceptable and all those who engage in them written off as right-wing fanatics hell bent on defending American imperialism, white supremacy, and the hetero-patriarchy. As I see it, this is what focusing our attention on and opposition to "gun culture" really means. This is how the anti-gun liberals pose the issue, and it is an attitude I do not share. Even on narrow pragmatic grounds, how can one hope to unite the working class in order to overthrow

capitalism (as far-fetched as this may seem right now) while promoting such a position?

It may difficult to do so in the current political climate, but I think we need to find ways to differentiate between the legal ownership and use of weapons, on the one hand, and the grotesque and gratuitous violence of those who carry out the horrible massacres we have recently been witnessing. It is not "gun culture" that we should be analyzing and denouncing but the interrelated cults of violence, status, success, and celebrity, along with the implied notion that the worst thing to happen to someone in life is to be a "loser," that are promoted and worshipped by contemporary US society. We should be talking about the concrete circumstances in which so many working-class people find themselves in, struggling merely to survive and to get some minor pleasures in life, while the rich and powerful continue to enjoy their wealth and exercise their power, while refusing to accept any blame for what happens. In my opinion, it is very unfortunate that the vast majority of the left has capitulated to the liberal gun-control advocates on this issue, while leaving the defense of legitimate gun ownership and use to the NRA and other right-wing organizations.



I do not know whether it will be possible to intervene in the current movement among high school students, given the fact that it already seems fully committed to the program of the gun-control advocates, beyond issuing maximal statements that attempt to put the shooting in the context of a sick social system. Like so many of the other mass shootings we've experienced, the recent massacre could likely have been prevented had existing laws and procedures actually been followed and some basic security measures taken. At least one person had called the FBI before the Parkland shooting

and notified them that the shooter might be a danger to himself and to others. I believe the local sheriff's department had also been warned about him, not once but many times, and we know that a social worker interviewed the shooter but decided he was not a threat. The FBI and police have large numbers of people under surveillance at any given time. Would it have been so hard to have this individual watched? Were the surrogate parents even notified that something was amiss with their charge? Also, how did someone openly carrying a rifle walk on to a high school campus without being seen or stopped? Were there no security guards present? Tactically speaking, I would be willing to support a call for expanding background checks, streamlining and professionalizing the entire procedure, and instituting waiting periods, in order to be able to unite with the movement, even though I doubt that any of that would have prevented this shooting from occurring.

Ron

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February 22

I agree Ron. And the best of the students should understand the need for self-defense among a huge part of the population. It would be interesting to see what the Redneck group has to say about all this.

Roni

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February 27

All,

I have a couple of comments on the " gun culture ", recent high school student reaction "movement " discussion on our list, plus another point or two.

I was disturbed with the one-dimensional characterization of the prominent place of the question of firearms in our society as rising solely (that's how it reads) from the US's slave holding colonial settler past. The unstated logic of such a remark implies that the overwhelming numbers of those who oppose so called gun control are either overtly or in a de facto fashion racist. I do not deny that this dark side of our past is a tributary/ influence and part of the present mix but there are other traditions and present concerns

heavily in the mix as well. I will not run through a list here but one could characterize such unidimensional thinking as Eurocentric and at root liberal to my mind. I fear some of us have no feel /experience of the wide range of diversity and positions in the wider movement(s) and amongst individuals passionately holding to and practicing the right to bear arms.



My reaction to the student movement arising from the Fla. killings is less enthusiastic and somewhat troubled by its naively calling on the state to take simplistic measures to save" us". An understandable response to some degree but more troubling as part of wider movements among sections of youth demanding of authorities protection, censorship etc. around a range of issues that are important but much less terrifying than acts of mass gun violence. While these are very young folks I am a bit leery of their somewhat constant self- characterization of themselves as "children" not young adults. Beyond the conservative liberalism of this I can also see potential seeds of state capitalist solutions.

Sharply restricting or closing off access to firearms especially semi-autos as a solution is delusional. There are currently 300 million out there, at least 3million assault rifles. Yes many politically problematical types have their hands on a lot of these. But also a good number that could prove to be future allies. Should we arrive at a point where racist, right wing or state forces cohere as a truly weighty threat lots of decent people wanting to obtain serious tools for defense will be hard put to acquire them. Short of this a restricted state of affairs will only ensure a black market in arms in and around which criminal and politically dangerous elements will generate an ongoing lower level but continuous stream of

frightening occurrences and loss of innocent life. These innocents left to largely rely on an overstretched, inept or indifferent array of police forces.



In I believe 1892 Ida Wells wrote something like: Every Black family should give a place of pride in the home to a Winchester rifle. She did not say a shotgun but a Winchester, which could be said to be analogous to an AR-15 today.

Mike

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March 1  
Everyone,

I think Ron's recent short document on gun control represents an advance. This is because it recognizes that mass shootings in publicly accessible places (schools, nightclubs, movies, concerts) are a real and alarming social problem. The advance comes most specifically at the end, where Ron mentions several points on which he'd be willing to act in a united front with gun control advocates (even though he rightly notes how limited the results might be) and, more generally, simply in recognizing the existence of a real problem. In the past, Ron has generally seemed to suggest that the problem lies in the fact that people are proposing gun control, rather than in real violence going on in the world.

Unfortunately I think Mike's more recent post is a step backward, toward a denialist position. Except for a couple of phrases, Mike's

whole emphasis is that the only real problem is that some people think there is a problem (and that he doesn't like some of the rhetoric current activists are using). One problem with this position is that people who think there's a real problem, but see the antistatists basically denying this, will of course look to the state for solutions.

I am not at all against guns or gun owners. In upstate NY, where I used to spend weekends and still manage to get away for a month each summer, just about everyone owns some firearms. People might have a general utility handgun plus a shotgun and/or a long gun for hunting. One anecdote here concerns the former caretaker



of the place where I rented. There were five feral cats in the barn, whom he fed every day, and one of them got badly torn up by some larger animal and needed to be put down. The caretaker came with his pistol, but couldn't bring himself to shoot, and called his father, who came down and did the job. So I certainly agree that 90 percent of the people who own guns are just plain people, and the problem is the other 10 percent, or even 1 percent of the 10 percent.

That said, I personally feel the existence of risk, even though I'm fairly sheltered from it--I don't live in a dangerous neighborhood, for example. In the college where I teach, I had a student several years ago who had major authority issues combined with some mental-processing difficulties that left him unable to write clearly phrased papers, etc. He would blow up frequently. I finally spoke to the relevant dean, even while worrying that doing so would itself set the student off. Fortunately this ended well--after being called in by the dean and offered some therapy references, etc., the student

felt grateful that I had been concerned for him. But it could have been the other way around. And of course I, as an older male, don't face some of the authority challenges that young female professors do.

I don't have a program or solution to offer. But I don't think we can be living after Columbine, Sandy Hook, Aurora, Orlando, and so many more and not pay some attention to a real social problem, so I think we should begin to discuss this issue seriously. I am happy that Ron's document takes a step toward doing so, and hope the group follows up.

Chris

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March 1  
Everybody,

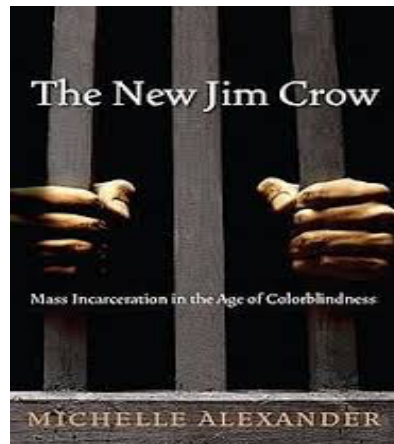
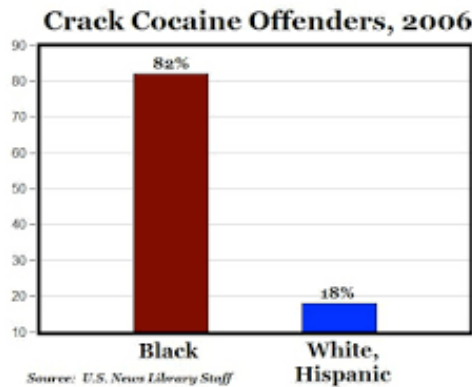
I am glad Chris feels my recent post represents an "advance" on gun control, not least because it recognizes that mass shootings represent a serious social problem. In fact, I have always felt that mass shootings have been and continue to be a serious social problem. Yet, I have felt, and still feel, that gun control is a false



solution. If people remember the origins of the "War on Drugs" that began a few decades ago and that is still going on, that too was meant as a solution to a real social problem, that of highly addictive drugs, then crack cocaine, later other drugs, that were devastating Black and other poor communities. Much of the demand for that crackdown came from members of the Black community itself, a fact that is often forgotten today. And it was largely put in place by liberal politicians, among them, then-president Bill Clinton. But, as we now know, it did not end the proliferation of addictive drugs.



It did result in a further destruction of poor Black communities, caused by, among other measures, minimum sentencing guidelines, "three-strikes-you're-out", and the resultant mass incarceration of young, mostly male, Black people. People seem to think that passing laws that outlaw particular substances and items results in their disappearance. Instead, it merely forces the undesired substances and items underground, resulting in a vast black market, the proliferation of extremely violent criminal gangs, and a significant escalation of invasive and violent police/state repression.



There was a prior exemplification of this dynamic. I am referring, of course, to Prohibition, the outlawing of the production, distribution, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages. The War on Booze was also a response to a very real social problem, that of widespread alcohol consumption and the social devastation that it brought with it, such as rampant alcoholism, alcohol poisoning, domestic violence, the destruction of families, public drunkenness, brawling, and similarly destructive effects. While Prohibition did result in an overall decline in the consumption of booze, it also resulted in a huge escalation of criminal activity, providing the "material basis" for organized crime (the Mafia/Mob), the corruption of police and politicians, gang warfare, mass shootings, and, of course, the production of illegal alcoholic beverages, often poisonous. The vast network of criminal gangs that Prohibition engendered had a decisive impact on US life for decades afterward. Likewise, the War on Drugs. Most of us do not directly experience the criminal gangs that this "drug control" engendered, but they, too, have wreaked havoc on poor, Black, and Latino neighborhoods, and even entire nations, such as El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and other Latin American countries.

I worry that the present mass cry for gun control will have similar results. While bans on semi-automatic rifles and other weapons may reduce the incidence of the mass shootings somewhat, I doubt they will succeed in suppressing them altogether. (We may, instead, get more bombings.) However, I think it highly likely that they will provide greatly expanded opportunities for the criminals. If the public/state response to the opioid epidemic now devastating rural and semi-rural areas is to ban opium-based drugs, such a ban, along with bans on semi-automatic weapons, will result in the further devastation of those communities, since many of the owners of semi-automatic weapons live in those very communities.



I put forward my willingness to consider some of the measures that are now being proposed (such as an extension of background checks to private sales, an increased waiting period between sale and delivery of weapons, raising the age at which people can legally purchase certain types of weapons) as a desperate tactic to enable us to talk to people currently being swept up in the gun-control hysteria, and as a way to try to resist the drive to impose even more repressive measures. I am very worried that the current gun control mania will in fact lead to a War on Guns, which will have similar results to the War on Drugs and the War on Booze.

I believe that some very simple measures could have prevented the vast majority of the mass shootings that have occurred. Many schools in Los Angeles and nearby Glendale are fenced in, so that the only way to enter or exit the campus is through one or two main entrances. In some schools, during class hours, one must be buzzed in through a steel-meshed gate to gain access. Such

measures can and should be taken in other areas. Currently, many/most nightclubs have serious security procedures that prevent people with weapons entering those premises. Where was such security at the Orlando, Florida club? Hotels and casinos, which have large security squads, mostly devoted to spotting cheaters and card counters, can and should devote at least some of those resources into scanning the luggage of their guests as they enter. And we know that in Parkland, the FBI had a least one clear warning about the shooter, and that the county sheriff's department had somewhere around 20, some very graphic, and in hindsight, very insightful, warnings. Why wasn't something done to have him put under surveillance, or at the least, to warn the school's administration?

I have always felt mass shootings are a serious social problem. I continue to feel that gun control is not the answer. What is new is that, under the current circumstances, I am willing, out of desperation, to take a "united front" approach to the movement for gun control, if only to avoid cutting ourselves off entirely from some serious, socially-concerned people. However, the thrust of what I wish to say to such people can be summed up in two slogans: (1) "Be careful what you wish for"; and (2) "Remember the War on Drugs."

Ron

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March 1  
Mike,

Thanks for your thoughts on gun issues. I find what you raise both informative and provocative. My thoughts:

1. I believe there is a 'culture of violence' in the United States. I distinguish that from a 'gun culture.' My evidence for thinking there is a culture of violence centers on the level of daily citizen-on-citizen violence, cop-on-citizen-violence, levels of incarceration and frequent (seemingly senseless) mass shootings. There are, of course, places in the world where violence takes place at an even higher level, if we specify local and regional wars, genocides, etc. But, looked at from the vantage point of a country not at war (at least on the surface), not facing mass starvations and related deprivations, and 'well off' (compared to much of the world), I think

asserting that there is a 'culture of violence' is a fair point. Contrast the US to Canada...and a long list of comparable countries.



2. I think that the US culture of violence stems from a combination of the violence of the US state and its hypocritical nature. There can be many explanations as to why people in this country commit egregious violence against one another. More provocatively, I would say that people's outlook and actions cannot simply be 'blamed' on something or someone else. People have responsibility for what they do, at least at some level. Nonetheless, I think the fact that this state (yes, all the way back to slavery) has been the most hypocritical purveyor of violence in modern history has great bearing.

3. By implication, any solution to the 'culture of violence' does not lie in adjusting this law or that.

4. I share your view that there is a great deal of prejudice, much or most of it stemming from the liberal wing of the US political spectrum, toward people who, a:) defend gun rights; and/or, b) enjoy and use guns; and/or, c) recognize that gun ownership is important to their own (and their family's) personal safety. Both you and Ron have made the case for this sufficiently clear that I don't feel I need to repeat the arguments. I will say that I agree that saying that 'guns are the problem,' or that 'gun culture' is the problem completely misstates the reality.

5. You state, correctly, that among something that could be termed a 'gun culture,' there are people who are racists/nativists /homophobic/misogynists (I am putting words to what you wrote,

but I think it is the essence). You are right, I think, that this is a distinct minority. And, among the liberal wing of political spectrum are imperialists, racists, exploiters of workers, committers of violence against women...etc. So, lets be careful about tar and brushes.



6. Your comments on the student movement are harsh, in some sense, but true in many senses. I would only add that each 'spark' or 'upsurge' of a new movement (post-Trump election; Women's March; actions against anti-immigrant policies, 'Black Lives Matter, this new initiative) brings with it the possibility that it will radicalize, move past acceptance of the 'shell game,' etc. In this sense, I am in alignment with Ron's desire to find some united front approach, while recognizing that a narrow movement for gun control (and the inevitable corollary--elect Democrats) is a dead-end. I suspect you agree with this, even if it wasn't en explicit focus of your email.

7. Your statement that "sharply restricting or closing off access to firearms especially semi autos as a solution is delusional" was compelling, particularly when backed up by the facts you presented (specifically, that there are 'currently 300 million out there, at least 3 million assault rifles.'). The liberal/progressive movement doesn't want to face inconvenient truths.

8. You didn't talk about things that we could, or should do. I know it wasn't the purpose of your email, but it seems to me that a perspective is incomplete without it. I think you and I agree that a 'maximalist/abstentionist' route is not the way to go. So, we need to search for ways that we can take a united front approach: 'yes, this, that and the other thing would be a small step forward, but it won't last, won't solve the problem, which is.... I would be

particularly interested, given your insights to on this issue, to know what that might look like for you.

Thank you again for your contribution to the discussion and my own understanding.

Rod

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# Who We Are

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To look for Utopia means providing a vision for the future – of a world worth living in, of a life beyond what people settle for as experience clouds their hopes. It means insisting that hope is real, counting on human potential and dreams.

Utopians do not accept “what is” as “what must be.” We see potential for freedom even in the hardest of apparent reality. Within our oppressive society are forces for hope, freedom, and human solidarity, possibilities pressing toward a self-managed, cooperative commonwealth. We don’t know if these forces will win out; we see them as hopes, as moral norms by which to judge society today, as challenges to all of us to act in such a way as to realize a fully human community.

We can describe some of these possibilities: worldwide opposition to the imperialist domination of the global economy; struggles against dictatorship in China, Syria, Egypt, and Venezuela; fights for national liberation in Ukraine, Kurdistan, and Palestine; cultural movements for the defense and recovery of indigenous languages and histories; changes in society’s acceptance of homosexuality, trans-gender freedom, and women’s equality, campaigns to defend the rights of immigrants and racial and religious minorities. The organized labor movement and the Black movement in the United States have – we hope – new utopian phases ahead.

But beyond these specifics, we are talking about something familiar to everyone, although difficult to get a handle on. In small ways, every day, people live by cooperation, not competition. Filling in for a co-worker, caring for an old woman upstairs, helping out at AA meetings, donating and working for disaster relief – people know how to live cooperatively on a small scale. What we don’t know, and no one has found a blueprint for, is how to live cooperatively on a national and international scale – even on the scale of a mass

political movement. Nobody has described how the society we want will look, or how to get it, though we know what it will be – a society where people are free to be good.

This is a good time to be publishing a journal dedicated to utopianism, revolutionary socialism, and anarchism. The left is no longer in retreat. The struggles of organized labor, the Black and Latino communities, women, lesbian/bisexual/gay/transgender people, indigenists, and environmentalists are gaining strength. Within the world of the organized left, the influence of anarchists and libertarian socialists has greatly increased.

But these are perilous times as well. The fabric of the post-World War II world system—a “democratic ideal” for Europe and the United States masking elite control and international domination—is fraying. In the U.S. and Europe we see ideals of openness and inclusion in collision with xenophobia and race resentment. The parties of reform – the Democrats in the U.S., the Social Democrats in Europe, the Christian Democrats in Latin America, the old nationalist parties in Africa and Asia (where they still exist) – have abandoned the idea of social reform and freedom from international capital; yet, at least in the U.S., the Democratic Party has lost none of its ability to absorb, blunt, and demoralize radical efforts at change from within. While the collapse of the Soviet bloc and China’s adoption of a capitalist economic system under a Communist political dictatorship have tarnished Marxism’s idealist image, they have also discredited, for many, the very idea of changing society fundamentally. As never since the early nineteenth century, many believe that market capitalism is the only path to human progress.

A highly problematic new phenomenon in recent years has been the rise of Islamicist or Jihadist religious fanaticism, which exploits radical hopes for escape from western domination as mass support for a tyrannical, socially regressive, and exceptionally brutal war against non-Muslims and the great majority of Muslims. This development is a response partly to the collapse of secular anti-imperialism in Africa, the Arab world, and Asia since fifty years ago, and partly to continuing European domination in these areas, now made worse by the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim backlash in Europe itself. The road forward, clearly, lies in rebuilding a democratic, radical anti-imperialism, but how this may occur we don’t know.



Moreover, with a few exceptions, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist groups remain small and their influence limited. Various kinds of reformism and Marxism still attract radical-minded people. Both these ideologies and their corresponding movements accept the state, capital-labor relations, conventional technology, and political authoritarianism.

But these are reasons why it is important to continue to work for freedom and speak of utopia. This racist, sexist, and authoritarian society has not developed any new charms. It remains exploitive and unstable, threatening economic collapse and environmental destruction. It wages war around the globe, while nuclear weapons still exist and even spread. Even at its best -- most stable and peaceful -- it provides a way of life that should be intolerable: a life of often meaningless work and overwork; hatred and oppression within the family, violence from the authorities; the continuing risk of sudden violent death for LGBT people, women, and Black people; the threat of deportation of undocumented immigrants. The very major reforms of the last period of social struggle, in the 1960s, while changing so much, left African Americans and other minority populations in the U.S. and around the world facing exclusion and daily police (state) violence, literally without effective rights to life. The videos we see every day (in which new technology makes visible what has always been going on) reveal, like sheet lightning, the reality of the system we live under. For this society, from its inception, to call itself "democracy" is a slap in the face of language.

This paradoxical situation -- a society in obvious decay but without a mass movement to challenge it fundamentally -- is, we hope, coming to an end. As new movements develop, liberal-reform and Marxist ideas will show new life, but so have utopian and libertarian ideas. We work with this in mind. We have to do what was not done during the last period of really radical social struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other things, revolutionary anarchist and libertarian socialist theory very much needs further development, including its critique of Marxism, and its ideas about how to relate to mass struggles, democratic and socialist theory, and popular culture. And we need to reinvigorate the ideals of anarchism/libertarian socialism and the threads in today's world that may, if we can find them and follow them, lead to a future worth dying for and living in.

This future, we state clearly, is an ideal, not a certainty. The lure of Marxism, for many, has been its seeming promise that a new world is objectively determined and inevitable. This idea is not only wrong but elitist and brutal: if the new society is inevitable then those who are for it are free to shoot or imprison everyone who stands in the way. That is the key to Marxism's development from utopia to dictatorship, which everyone except Marxists is aware of. Nor do we believe in an inevitable collapse of the present system—capitalism can push its way from crisis to crisis at its usual cost in broken lives and destroyed hopes. We believe people have to make ethical choices about whether to accept life as it is or to struggle for a new society, and then about whether the society they are for will be democratic or authoritarian. The only key to the future is a moral determination to get there, a dream of a world in which those who were obscure to one another will one day walk together. We do not know where this key may be found, but we know the only way to find it is to search for it.

That is who we are.

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