

Neocolonial Debt Traps Are Forcing Poorer Countries To Rely On Fossil Fuels



Tess Woolfenden - Photo: Debt Justice

To break our global dependence on fossil fuels, we must take on neocolonial debt, researcher Tess Woolfenden says.

In the current age of climate emergency, many countries in debt are being forced by Global North elites and institutions to continue to rely on fossil fuels in order to repay loans taken from rich countries. This neocolonial debt trap creates a vicious cycle because — as a [new analysis](#) from the organization Debt Justice shows — revenues from fossil fuels are not enough to repay debts and instead leave countries even deeper in debt while at the same time worsening the prospects of achieving the goal of zero global emissions by 2050.

This debt trap is one of many ways in which colonialism continues to shape the current era. While dozens of countries gained independence through successful decolonization struggles after World War II, colonialism persists through the use of economic and political pressures to control “dependencies” as a means of reinforcing global capitalism.

In the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, Tess Woolfenden, senior policy and research officer at Debt Justice and the author of the aforementioned report, discusses the dynamics between debt and fossil fuels, highlights the consequences of fossil fuel colonialism and offers concrete policy solutions for breaking the cycle.

C. J. Polychroniou: Tess, it's a well established scientific fact that greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide (CO2) cause global warming. The burning of fossil fuels — coal, oil and gas — accounts for over 75 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and 90 percent of carbon dioxide emissions, making them the largest contributor to global climate change. Yet, fossil fuels still account for more than 80 percent of global energy production and the energy transition proceeds very slowly. In fact, it is [projected](#) that by 2023, "fossil fuels will still account for 78 percent of the global energy mix." Why is it so hard to phase out fossil fuels?

Tess Woolfenden: Very simply, the people with the power to phase out fossil fuels — governments, corporations and institutions — do not want to. The [fossil lobby is powerful](#), and with huge profits to be made ([\\$52 trillion since 1970 reportedly](#)), it is in their interests for the world to keep burning fossil fuels despite the devastating consequences.

For years, climate justice activists have fought to get the powerful global north [governments](#), institutions, corporations and [billionaires](#) overwhelmingly responsible for creating the climate crisis to transition to clean, renewable energy. But despite making various commitments over the years, phasing out fossil fuels is still not happening. For example, at COP26 governments committed to phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, yet just last week [research by the International Institute for Sustainable Development](#) showed that the world's richest governments put a record \$1.4 trillion into subsidising oil, coal and gas in 2022. Rich governments clearly do not see these commitments as binding.

In the case of many Global South countries, we also must consider their [long-standing dependency on fossil fuels](#). For decades, Global South governments have been reliant on their natural resources, including fossil fuels, to keep their economies going and to repay high debt burdens. This dates back to colonialism where, under European rule, countries' economies were transformed to focus on the export of raw materials such as oil and coal, to feed industrial growth taking place in Europe. The [ongoing extraction of resources](#) and inequalities in the

global trade, tax and financial systems have meant that Global South countries have not been able to diversify their economies, and remain reliant on commodity exporting even today — many refer to this as the “commodity dependency trap.” What’s more, Global North governments and Global North-dominated institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have extended this trap by [encouraging and enforcing Global South reliance on commodity exporting](#), through, for example, conditions attached to loans. This has kept countries poor and reliant on loans; it has also guaranteed cheap access to Global South countries’ natural resources. So, for many Global South countries, phasing out fossil fuels also requires us to dismantle deep long-standing inequalities etched into our global systems.

Debt Justice, a U.K.-based organization, has just released a report, titled “The Debt-Fossil Fuel Trap,” which you actually wrote, on the links between debt and fossil fuel production in Global South countries. But before we get into those links, what do you make of the argument that Global South countries should be allowed to continue relying on the burning of fossil fuels for development purposes while the Global North countries reduce their carbon footprint?

I understand this argument. It comes from a place of recognizing that the Global North has used up more than its fair share of atmospheric space and has been able to develop and profit in the process, while Global South countries bear the worst impacts of the climate crisis. Why should countries in the Global South now not be able to do the same?

But as many groups in the Global South highlight, to do so would lead us further down the path of climate catastrophe. It would also maintain Global South countries’ reliance on fossil fuels, extending commodity dependency and the economic injustices and challenges this presents.

Instead, in the global debt movement we call on rich, polluting governments, institutions and corporations to pay their “climate debt” — the debt they owe for the destruction of the climate crisis they caused — and to provide reparations. These are broad, expansive demands that would allow Global South countries to put an end to their reliance on fossil fuels and have the resources they need to transition to clean, renewable energy.

The analysis behind “The Debt-Fossil Fuel Trap” suggests that the developed

countries and major global institutions like the IMF and the World Bank have trapped many Global South countries into dependence on fossil fuels as a way of repaying their debt. First, can you talk a bit about the external public debt dynamics that the world's poorest countries have to deal with and how the climate crisis and further dependence on fossil fuel projects is driving them even further into debt distress?

An important starting point is to understand that debt in Global South countries is not an accident or necessity — Global South indebtedness has been [engineered by Global North elites](#) to pilfer wealth and maintain their position of power in a postcolonial setting.

Many Global South governments started their journey of independence in an economically weak position after centuries of colonial rule and had no choice but to borrow. Former colonial powers were happy to lend — not because they were generous or invested in the development of Global South countries, but because it benefited them, politically and economically. Global South governments have [spent trillions on interest payments](#) to wealthy Global North lenders since 1970, while at the same time, governments and institutions like the IMF and World Bank have used their power as lenders to [control and shape global south government policies](#), including forcing decades of austerity onto Global South countries and communities with [devastating consequences](#). Many lenders, but especially the private sector, have seen Global South countries' need to borrow as a [huge opportunity for profit](#), charging extortionate interest rates on their loans supposedly to cover the risk of lending. The result is recurring debt crises.

Thanks to these dynamics, and the economic impacts of the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19 and the Ukraine war (none of which the Global South bears responsibility for), Global South countries are once again in debt crisis. [Fifty-four countries are in crisis](#), while many others are struggling with high debt burdens. This means the resources that countries could be spending on addressing the needs of people, from health and education to addressing the climate crisis, are instead being spent on debt repayments to wealthy creditors. Our analysis shows that lower income countries are spending [five times more](#) on debt repayments than addressing the climate crisis.

But it's not just that debt is hampering climate action. The climate crisis is also making debt much worse, due to the refusal of Global North elites to adequately

and justly respond to the climate crisis they created.

On the one hand, Global South countries are being forced to pay for the costs of the climate crisis themselves, pushing many into more debt as rich governments, institutions and corporations [refuse to provide adequate, non-debt creating climate finance](#) to Global South countries. In Pakistan for example, after devastating floods in 2010, the country had to borrow [\\$20-40 billion more](#) than would have otherwise been the case. On the other hand, we have the reality that Global South governments are trapped in fossil fuel exploitation which also exacerbates debt, despite Global North governments' and institutions' claims to the contrary. As I mentioned before, Global North governments and institutions like the IMF and the World Bank have long pushed commodity dependency in the Global South, including extracting and exporting fossil fuels, [seeing this as a way for Global South countries to develop, grow and repay debt](#). Not only has this caused devastating human and environmental harm to Global South communities and land. But also, the financial benefits of such endeavours often [do not materialise and can push Global South countries further into debt](#).

In Argentina for example, the government and IMF are pushing the development of fracking in the Vaca Muerta oil and gas field, in part to [generate revenue to repay debt](#). Activists have been highlighting that, because of the huge investments needed for this project, it will likely [exacerbate debt levels](#) rather than reduce them. In Mozambique, government guarantees on liquified natural gas (LNG) projects could [exacerbate the government's already unsustainable debt burden](#), while the expected profits from LNG projects — which are yet to materialise — reportedly [enabled the government to take out huge loans](#) from the private sector which pushed the country into a debt crisis. In Ghana — a country already in debt crisis - contracts which force the government to buy gas and other fossil fuel supplies at a set price and volume which far exceeds the country's needs have reportedly added [\\$1.2 billion to the country's debt burden](#).

The reality is that high debt burdens are severely hampering Global South countries' ability to address the climate crisis. Meanwhile, the failure of Global North elites to adequately respond to the climate crisis is exacerbating the debt crisis — a crisis which is already in full swing and causing significant harm to Global South countries and communities. We have to break this cycle if we want to avoid total climate catastrophe.

With debt as a prime example, we can see that colonial legacies continue to shape the contemporary global political economy. And the same goes with fossil colonialism, which refers to the exploitation of fossil fuels in the Global South by companies and governments from the Global North. In fact, even the German and European Union green hydrogen projects in Africa follow colonial patterns, [according to critics](#). So, what solutions are there for the Global South countries, and can there be climate justice without debt justice?

As a starting point, we urgently need debt cancellation. But this is not happening currently, largely because of a lack of political will. There is a G20-led process in place to support countries seeking debt relief from their external bilateral and private creditors, but it has failed. Only four countries have applied, and only one finalised a deal with both its bilateral and private creditors — Chad. But this deal [didn't actually provide any debt relief](#) and instead locked the country [further into fossil fuel exploitation](#) by including oil revenues as part of the country's debt repayment deal to commodities trading company Glencore (a challenge [Suriname is also facing with its private creditors](#)).

Part of the reason this process is failing is because powerful creditors in the private sector — like BlackRock — have not been forced to participate in the process. While being one of the biggest investors in fossil fuels in the world, BlackRock is also one of Global South countries' largest bondholders and could make huge profits from the debt it holds. For example, [BlackRock could make profits of 110 percent if repaid in full by Zambia](#). We need to force these creditors to the table, and the best way to do this is legislation. Nearly all Global South external debt owed to the private sector is governed under English or New York law, so the U.K. and U.S. have a special responsibility to act and introduce new laws that would force private creditors to participate in debt relief.

But debt cancellation is only part of the story. As we have seen in the past with the mass debt cancellation that took place in the early 2000s, debt cancellation without wider reform that addresses the injustices and inequalities embedded in debt and financial systems will just see debt levels build up time and time again.

That's why many of us in the debt movement are also demanding reparations — a broad set of demands that seek repair for the harms of injustice already experienced and realized over centuries, and that ensure those harms cannot happen again. From a debt perspective, this includes many elements, from

regulating creditors and their predatory behaviour to ending Global South countries' commodity dependency and reliance on borrowing to meet people's needs. It also means recognizing that debt is one tool of injustice and exploitation among many and must be recognized as deeply connected to other struggles, including, of course, the climate crisis.

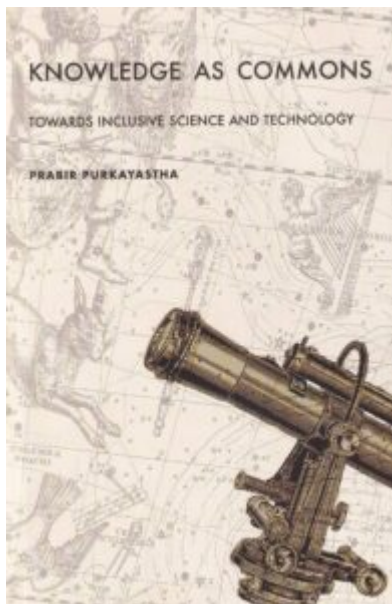
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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Is Intellectual Property Turning Into A Knowledge Monopoly?



The twentieth century saw the emergence of public funded universities and technical institutions, while technology development was concentrated in the R&D laboratories of large corporations. The age of the lone inventor—Edison, Siemens, Westinghouse, Graham Bell—had ended with the nineteenth century. The twentieth century was more about industry-based R&D laboratories, where corporations gathered together leading scientists and technologists to create the technologies of the future. In this phase, capital was still expanding production. Even though finance capital was already dominant over productive capital, the major capitalist countries still had a strong manufacturing base. In this phase of development, science was regarded as a public good and its development was largely concentrated in the university system or publicly funded research institutions. Technology development was largely regarded as a private enterprise. Science was supposed to produce new knowledge, which could then be mined by technology to produce artifacts. The role of innovation was to convert ideas into artifacts. The system of intellectual property—patents and other rights—arose to provide protection to the useful ideas embodied in artifacts. From the beginning, patents also had a public purpose—the state-granted monopoly for a certain period was meant to ensure the eventual public disclosure of the invention: the quid pro quo being full public disclosure in lieu of a limited-term monopoly.

The transformation of this system that had existed for several centuries came about as a result of two major changes in the production of knowledge. The first relates to the way in which, under the neoliberal order, the university system of knowledge production has been transformed into a [profit-making commercial enterprise](#). Secondly, the distinction between science and technology has blurred considerably and the two are more closely integrated than before. For example, an advance in genetics can almost seamlessly lead to an artifact—a drug, a diagnostic tool or a seed—that is both patentable and marketable. Similar is the case of innovations in the field of electronics and communications. Many disciplines of science and also research output in universities, are, in consequence, driven closer to the systems of production. The conversion of the university system into a system producing knowledge directly for commercial purposes has happened in tandem with the destruction of the R&D laboratories that were so much a part of the industrial landscape of the twentieth century. Finance capital controls university science, not just through “investment” in R&D, but also the purchase of “knowledge”. Its monopoly is exercised through buying the patents that university research produces. This monopoly in turn allows finance capital to dominate over industrial capital.

The end of the twentieth century revealed the rupture of finance capital and productive capital. Today, global capital operates far more as disembodied finance capital, controlling production at one end with its control over technology and markets at the other. In this phase, where capital increasingly lives off speculation and rent, there is also a marked separation of knowledge as capital from productive or physical capital—plant and machinery. Foxconn/Hon Hai Precision Industries manufactures Apple products but cannot claim a major share in the profits from their sale, since Apple holds the intellectual knowledge and property rights. Roughly, Apple gets 31 percent of the profits from an iPhone sale, Foxconn less than two percent.

The transformation of capital to rent seeking, by using its monopoly over knowledge—patents, copyrights, industrial designs, etc.—characterizes the current phase of capital. With this, the advanced capitalist countries have increasingly become rentier and “service” economies. In essence, they dominate the world by virtue of controlling the global financial structure, new knowledge required for production, and distribution through retail and global brands.

Even as universities are captured by capital and turned into what is termed as

[University Inc](#), the new knowledge they produce is still publicly funded. This is true alike of advanced capitalist countries and those like India. The direction of scientific research is dictated by private capital, which takes over any successful outcome, and yet this transformation of science did not come about through being privately funded. The cost of fundamental research is high and only a few of its research outputs may have immediate benefits in terms of advancing technology. This is where the state, whether in electronics or in genetics, takes care of the costs while the patents are handed over to private capital. A hallmark of the neoliberal system is the socialization of risk and privatization of rewards.

The understanding that science needs to be restored as an open and collaborative exercise has given birth to the commons movement. By a curious sleight of hand, capitalism sees the finite commons—the atmosphere and large water bodies such as lakes, rivers and oceans—as infinite, and demands the right to dump waste in these commons. Yet it regards knowledge, capable of being copied infinite number of times without loss, as finite and demands monopoly rights over it!

Never before has society had the ability it does today to bring together different communities and resources in order to produce new knowledge. It is social, universal labor, and its private appropriation as intellectual property under capitalism stands in the way of liberating the enormous power of the collective to generate new knowledge and benefit people.

Byline:

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Another War Breaks Out In Northern Ethiopia, As The Threat Of Disintegration Looms



Regions of Ethiopia - Map:
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“The worst-case scenario is unfolding in Ethiopia,” Gabriel Bizuneh tells me, as he organizes in the Ethiopian community in Washington, D.C. Once again, the federal government is at war with another region in a federal system where regions are demarcated on ethnic lines. Moreover, each region in Ethiopia has its own police force, special units, and local militia. This time, the federal government is at war with the Fano and Amhara special forces, which fought against the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) and have been protecting civilians from the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)/ ONEG Shene attacks. “We have been pleading for so long for this conflict not to escalate further,” Bizuneh adds, “but Henry Kissinger’s policy of dismantling Ethiopia based on ethnicity, which the TPLF was an anchor for, remains in place.”

The U.S. State Department supported TPLF, which recrafted the state on ethnic lines and is hostile toward the Amhara, who are a dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia. The Amhara dominance is deeply linked with the rule of Emperor

Menelik, who was able to consolidate the modern state by expanding its borders in the south. Identity and culture are complex and evolving, but a colonial and Eurocentric interpretation of rigid identities that shaped the labor process, and controlled the natural resources and wealth, was effective in fermenting enmity and divisions. In Ethiopia, "[the seeds of genocide](#)" were sown by Italy, which after its decisive defeat in the 1896 Battle of Adwa (by a united front led by Menelik II and Empress Taytu), [introduced the idea of Ethiopia as a case of African colonialism](#).

While TPLF has been an effective tool to deepen this ethnic division, Kissinger can be credited as the originator of the State Department policy to support this agenda. Kissinger had identified Amhara as a dominant group (informed by analysis gathered from scholars such as Levine). He drew on an ethnic lens to interpret (or more accurately misinterpret) "[\[I\]ndigenous political change](#)" that resulted in the Dergue, the ruling military junta, turning sharply toward the USSR. Within Cold War geopolitics, Ethiopia had been receiving military aid from the United States ([even after Emperor Haile Selassie's overthrow](#)) until the Carter administration's strategic deployment of human rights to advance U.S. interests converged with Ethiopia's [Red Terror](#), and led to the emergence of the Soviet-leaning faction as the dominant force in the Dergue.

But it was not that simple. TPLF had debated these questions and concluded on pursuing an autonomous Tigray that ultimately remained within Ethiopia, while the Eritrean Liberation Front rejected it.

The Amhara have been targeted in massacres over decades without any systematic response to defend civilians. The massacre in Mai Kadra, Tigray region in November 2020, where [around 600](#) ethnic Amhara were killed overnight, was just one horrific instance. During the Tigray war, there was also an escalation in targeted killings and massacres of ethnic minorities in the region of Oromia. This persists, [with two massacres having taken place in 2022 in the Wollega zone of the state alone](#). Tensions resulting from these incidents, and the federal government's declared intent to demobilize militia and Regional Special Forces under the National Defense Forces, have escalated fears of exposure to further attacks. The situation has become worse as a result of popular protests, and the assassination of a senior Prosperity Party (PP) official and his entourage. But the disproportionate response by Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's PP, which carried out drone attacks in August 2023 that led to [a high death toll](#) in civilian

areas, has been atrocious. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has [raised alarm over the resumption of conflict](#) in the Amhara region, but this has not triggered as much global pressure as the war on Tigray.

The Pretoria Agreement excluded any broad-based representation across all affected interest groups including Afar and Amhara. It was effectively a truce between warring factions of the previous coalition government. Getachew Reda, spokesperson of the TPLF during the war, is now president of Tigray. There has been no accountability for violations by any side. The inclusion of the [geopolitically significant areas](#) of Welkait and Raya in the Tigray region in 1991, whose peoples identify as Amhara, remains a central flash point. Delegations of elders from Welkait have traveled to Addis Ababa and at times resorted to armed resistance, but to no avail.

An open alliance between the OLA and TPLF has escalated these threats, which was questioned by the Oromo singer Hachalu Hundessa in his [last public statement](#), before he was killed in June 2020. How could there be a common agenda with TPLF? Nationwide protests after his tragic assassination saw ethnic minorities, including the Amhara, strung up and lynched in Addis Ababa and Shashamane, the homestead of Rastafarians who had relocated to Ethiopia in the 1950s. Meanwhile, Ahmed's PP has had [closed-door negotiations with OLA/ONEG Shene, the outcome of which has not been disclosed](#). Ahmed has also refused to reverse the TPLF/ Kissinger ethnic federalism.

Instead, in August, the Addis Ababa City Peace and Security Administration Bureau cracked down on "[institutions where homosexual acts are carried out](#)," a populist move, adding vulnerable queer folk to nationwide mass arrests under a state of emergency. A [UN situation report](#) also highlights a cholera outbreak, locust and army worm invasions, and dengue fever affecting different parts of the country alongside rising numbers of displaced people. The latter includes people escaping conflict in Sudan.

Former President of the Amhara region Gedu Andargachew, in a [failed attempt to reject](#) the state of emergency decree, advised that the government must stop the dehumanization and persecution of Amhara across the country. Andargachew added that the government must not mobilize other regional governments to attack the Amhara region. Failure to do so risks state collapse in Ethiopia.

But there is still hope; People can join the calls to end the government attacks on the Amhara region; end the state of emergency; and release all political prisoners and those targeted for their ethnicity. Dialogue and independent investigations into violations spanning decades, across the country, and the prosecution of perpetrators for all violations are urgent. Failure to support these efforts may mean the Balkanization of the second-most populous country in Africa.

Byline:

[Tikur Netsanet](#)

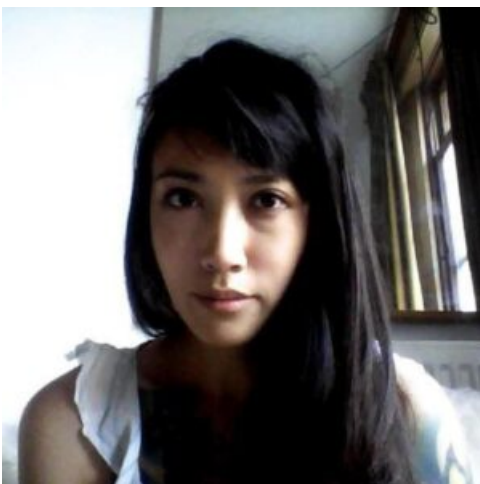
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The Korean War Continues With Biden's Renewal Of Travel Ban To North Korea



Amanda Yee - Photo:

Liberation News

The draconian travel ban prevents as many as 100,000 Koreans in the United States from visiting family members in North Korea.

On August 22, the U.S. State Department [renewed](#) its ban on the use of U.S. passports for travel to North Korea. This travel ban prohibits as many as [100,000](#) Korean Americans living in the United States from visiting their relatives in North Korea. The ban was first set in place by the Trump administration in 2017, and—in spite of Korean American activists’ repeated calls to lift the draconian ban—has been renewed annually since.

During his presidential campaign in 2020, Joe Biden had promised to “[reunite Korean Americans separated from loved ones in North Korea for decades](#),” but has extended the travel ban each year he has been in office. This current ban will [remain](#) in place until August 31, 2024, at which point it will either be lifted or extended again.

Families Separated by the Travel Ban

Kate Youngjoo Shim, an activist with the women’s peace organization [Korea Peace Now!](#), is one of the many Korean Americans the travel ban impacts. Born in Korea, Shim moved to the U.S. at the age of 15. Both sides of her family are originally from North Korea, and the ban now prevents her from visiting cousins and other close relatives there.

Shim pointed out the hypocrisy of the U.S. government lecturing North Korea on human rights while keeping so many Korean family members separated.

“The biggest human rights violation to me is not letting people see their family,” said Shim. “The U.S. government is always trying to say things about [North Korea’s] human rights conditions, but if you’re not letting people meet their mothers, their children, their immediate families... there’s no excuse.”

Things were not always this way. Shim’s grandmother was separated from her oldest son—Shim’s uncle—during the Korean War. After decades of trying to track him down while living in South Korea, her grandmother moved to the U.S. at the age of 65 in the 1980s in the hopes that it would improve her chances of finding and reuniting with him. The task had proved difficult for her in South Korea due

to the political situation between the North and South at that time. Even after decades of not knowing where he was and against all odds, Shim's grandmother remained hopeful that she and her long-lost son would meet again. After moving to the U.S., she even started working at a factory so that she could afford to bring him back gifts once he was found.

Eventually, Shim's family was able to track down her lost uncle in North Korea, and her grandmother was finally reunited with her son after 37 years. While there, Shim's grandmother also met her brother after decades of separation. She would return to North Korea again to attend her grandson's wedding.

Shim's grandmother died more than 10 years ago. If she were alive today, she would no longer be able to visit her own child or other family members because of the travel ban.

The ban is a cruel expression of U.S. imperialist policy, and as the generation of Korean War survivors are now aging well into their 80s, lifting it is a matter of urgency now more than ever.

"My grandmother was one of the lucky ones," said Shim. "There are so many unlucky people who cannot even see their family members. Or maybe a mother has her children there. Now it's been 70 years [since the signing of the Armistice Agreement], so people are dying."

Trips to North Korea Were 'Life-Changing'

And it's not only Korean Americans barred from visiting family members in North Korea—the travel ban prohibits any U.S. passport holder from traveling there, effectively prohibiting any kind of [cultural exchange](#) between American citizens and Koreans in the North. These exchanges are essential to challenging the U.S. propaganda campaign that dehumanizes North Koreans in order to justify sanctions.

Gloria La Riva, an organizer with the [ANSWER \(Act Now to Stop War and End Racism\) Coalition](#), called her travels to the North in 1989 and 2015 "life-changing experiences."

"I saw people and a country that is the opposite of the hysterical, demonizing images we see in the West," La Riva recalled. "I met people who were thoughtful

and kind to visitors. That is what struck me most of all. When we boarded a full train, people immediately offered us their seats, smiling—the best language of all.”

“That is the *real* reason the U.S. government bans its citizens from visiting North Korea,” she continued. “It is the same reason the U.S. travel ban to Cuba has existed for more than 60 years. The U.S. fears that we will see the Korean people as our friends, not our enemy. The travel ban is a denial of our right to see North Korea for ourselves.”

End the Korean War

The crimes that Washington has inflicted on Korea cannot be overstated. It was the U.S. that divided Korea along the 38th parallel in 1945 and separated millions of families, occupied the South, and dropped [more than 600,000 tons](#) of bombs over the peninsula during the Korean War. So extensive was the bombing campaign that [U.S. pilots even ran out of targets and would drop bombs into the sea to safely land](#). Over the course of the war, the U.S. military leveled “[nearly 90 percent of major cities and villages in North Korea](#),” killing a [staggering 20 percent](#) of its population.

On top of the murderous carpet bombing campaign, the entire Korean War itself was punctuated by U.S.-backed atrocities: the murder of more than [100,000 people](#) during the Bodo League massacre in 1950, which was committed by the government forces of U.S.-installed President of South Korea Syngman Rhee; the Sinchon massacre in which the U.S. military and South Korean anti-communist forces killed [more than 30,000 civilians](#); the No Gun Ri massacre where U.S. military forces opened fire on civilian refugees, killing around [300 people](#). Taken altogether, U.S. involvement in the Korean War was nothing short of genocidal.

While the [signing](#) of the 1953 Armistice Agreement brought an end to the fighting, it did not bring an end to the conflict. The U.S. refuses to sign a [peace treaty](#), and it, along with the South, remains suspended in an official state of war with the North. And even after the signing of the armistice, the U.S. government maintains a heavy military presence in Korea and continues to [ratchet up tensions](#) between the North and the South. South Korea remains under occupation: it’s home to the largest U.S. overseas base, and a total of [28,500 U.S. military personnel](#) are stationed in the country. South Korea also hosts the [annual Ulchi](#)

[Freedom Shield joint military exercises](#) with the U.S. These annual drills simulate the invasion of North Korea and include live-fire practice attacks from the air, land, sea, and space. The war games present a dress rehearsal for regime change in North Korea. And especially [since 2006](#), the U.S. government, along with the United Nations Security Council, have relied on a brutal sanctions regime to punish North Korea for defying U.S. imperialism. These sanctions have caused [food insecurity, malnutrition, and medical supply shortages in the country, leading to enormous suffering and thousands of preventable deaths.](#)

The travel ban for the U.S., then, is another weapon of war, part of its broader strategy to further isolate North Korea and inflame tensions between both halves of the peninsula. And with Washington forging stronger military ties with [Australia, the Philippines](#), and other countries in the “[Indo-Pacific](#),” as well as increasing its [militarization](#) of the South China Sea, the Pentagon’s ultimate goal is to secure South Korea as an ally in its road toward [major power conflict](#) in Asia.

“We’re in a period of extreme tension in Korea,” explained Ju-Hyun Park, an organizer with the nonprofit [Nodutdol for Korean Community Development](#), which advocates for reunification of the country. “The U.S. does not want to do anything to de-escalate that tension because the current situation benefits U.S. interests. The more conflict there is in Korea, the easier it is to corral South Korea and Japan into an alliance against not only North Korea, but ultimately against China and Russia as well.”

This path that Washington is leading North and South Korea down will only lead to more war and devastation for the Korean people. The U.S. government has never been interested in peace for the Korean peninsula. For more than 70 years, it’s done everything in its power to divide North and South, obstruct any and every path to lasting peace, and turn Koreans against each other. What the U.S. government owes to the people of Korea can never be repaid. But the path toward justice begins with lifting the travel ban to North Korea—along with signing a peace treaty to bring an official end to the Korean War.

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Twenty-First Century Socialism: What It Will Become And Why



Dr. Harriet Fraad & dr. Richard D. Wolff - Photo: harrietafraad.com

The real left is not the caricature crafted by the U.S. right. Alongside parallel right-wing political formations abroad, that caricature tries hard to revive and recycle Cold War demonizations no matter how far-fetched.

Nor is the real left what Democratic Party leaders and their foreign counterparts try hard to dismiss as tiny and politically irrelevant (except when electoral campaigns flirt with “progressive” proposals to get votes).

The real left in the United States and beyond are the millions who at least vaguely understand that the whole system (including its mainstream right and left) is the core problem. As those millions steadily raise their awareness to an explicit

consciousness, they recognize that basic system change is the needed solution.

On the one hand, the real left divides into particular social movements (focused on areas like ecological survival, feminism, anti-racism, labor militancy, and sexual rights). On the other hand, those social movements increasingly understand themselves to comprise components of a new unity they must organize. One key unifying force is anti-capitalism. Correspondingly, the different system they seek will likely be some new sort of socialism—with or without that name—particularly suited to 21st-century conditions.

The other big problem for the real left—besides unified organization—lies in its lack of a compelling “vision”: a clear, concrete, and attractive image of the social change it advocates. To succeed, a new socialism for the 21st century needs such a vision. Socialism in the 19th and 20th centuries had a very successful vision as evidenced by its remarkable global spread. However, that vision is no longer adequate. In 19th- and 20th-century socialism’s vision, militant unions and socialist political parties partnered to: 1) seize state power from the employer class; and 2) use that power to replace capitalism with socialism and eventually a minimally defined communism. Seizing state power could happen via reforms and electoral victories, direct actions and revolution, or combinations of them. Socialists spent immense energy, time, and passion debating and experimenting with those alternatives. Seizing state power from the employer class was to be followed by using that power to regulate and control private employers or to substitute the state itself (as representative of the collective working class) for private employers. Either way, the transition to socialism meant that the workers’ state intervened in economic decisions and activities to prioritize social welfare over private profit. Beyond replacing capitalism with socialism, possibly subsequent moves toward communism were mostly left vague. Communism seemed to be in and about the (perhaps distant) future while politics seemed to call for socialists to offer immediate programs.

So socialists everywhere over the last two centuries concentrated on seizing the state and thereby regulating markets, raising mass consumption standards, protecting workers in enterprises, and so on. Workers increasingly supported a socialist vision that foregrounded how socialist parties would use state power directly and immediately to help them. This vision fit well with socialist parties’ partners in labor union movements. The latter contested employers in enterprises, while socialist parties contested the employer class’s hold on state

power. Thus socialist political parties and labor unions formed, grew, and allied nearly everywhere in the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Together they built effective, lasting organizations. After one of them prevailed in the 1917 Russian Revolution, most socialist organizations and parties split to form coexisting entities (ideologically similar yet often competing): one called socialist and the other “communist.”

After 1917, the socialist parties (and most independent socialists too) articulated programs for “progressive” social reforms. The reforms aimed to control capitalism’s market structures—its labor, tax, housing, health care, and transport systems—and its cultural superstructure (areas like politics, education, and religion). Communist parties usually supported socialist reforms, but they went further than the socialists to favor state takeovers of capitalist enterprises. Communists viewed state-owned-and-operated enterprises as necessary not only to achieve but also to secure the reforms socialists advocated.

The socialists’ and communists’ shared programmatic focus on the state complemented their critiques of capitalism in its predominantly private form across the 19th and 20th centuries. As socialism and communism grew across those centuries, they became *the* great theoretical and practical oppositional forces to capitalism. The more moderate among them defined socialism as a state elected to control and regulate private employers and thereby lessen private capitalism’s hard edges, inequalities, and injustices. Scandinavians and other Europeans experimented with such moderate versions of socialism. In Soviet socialism, the state’s economic intervention went further. Its communist party leadership replaced private employers with state officials fulfilling a state-generated economic plan. In yet another version of socialism—China’s hybrid one—a mix of Scandinavian and Soviet socialisms includes large segments of private capitalists and state-owned-and-operated enterprises. Both are subordinated to a powerful communist party and state.

The common quality of all three socialism was the focus on the state. What most of the socialists involved in the three forms (Scandinavian, Soviet, and Chinese) missed was a shared omission. On the basis of admitting and overcoming that omission, a new socialism for the 21st century emerges complete with a compelling vision.

The state focus of 19th- and 20th-century socialists, besides being a source of

their greatest expansionary success, proved also to be a source of their greatest weaknesses and failures. Socialists' and communists' focus on the state combined with neglect of the internal structures of enterprises and households. But what if changing the *macro-level* relation of the state to the private economy from capitalist to socialist required also changing the *micro-level* of workplaces: both the workplace inside enterprises and the workplace inside households? What if socialism, to be achieved, needed interdependent changes at macro- *and* micro-levels of society? What if socialist changes in one level cannot survive without correspondingly socialist changes in the other?

Human relations inside factories, farms, offices, stores, and households were rarely transformed by what 19th- and 20th-century socialists achieved because they rarely were objects of their social criticisms and debates. Enterprises were internally divided after socialists took power much as they had been divided before. Employers continued to confront employees as buyers of labor power, directors of the labor process, and exclusive owners of the products. States continued to control dimensions of that confrontation—more in moderate socialism than in capitalism—but the basic confrontation persisted. In versions of socialism where state officials replaced private citizens as owners and operators of factories, farms, offices, and stores, the persisting employer-employee organization of human relations inside enterprises invited criticisms. Some socialists thus referred to such systems as types of state capitalism, not of socialism.

By theoretically *not* criticizing capitalism's signature employer-versus-employee internal organization of enterprises, socialists, and communists took a big risk they likely did not understand. When the socialisms they constructed left the employer-versus-employee relationship of enterprises unchanged, that relationship reacted back to undermine those socialisms. Where moderate socialists used state power merely to control capitalists—leaving them their private profits—those capitalists could use the profits to battle socialists and socialism. As socialism's history in Scandinavia and Western Europe exemplifies, capitalists have always done exactly that. They sought and continue now to seek increased private profits by reducing or removing whatever state controls constrain them. In that way, Scandinavian and European type socialisms undermined themselves.

Where socialist state officials function as employers, the oppositional impulses

arising among employees (strengthened by earlier socialist movements) will focus on the state. Worse still, employees struggling against employers in societies self-described as socialist may well come to identify their problem and adversary as socialism. In that way, such variants of socialism too undermine themselves.

The socialist and communist traditions largely neglected the internal structures of households as well as enterprises. Thus socialist experiments in constructing new societies mostly omitted the transformation of those structures. Employer-employee relationships inside enterprises inherited from capitalism largely remained: so too did the inherited spousal and parent-children relationships inside households. We say “largely” because there always were exceptions such as communal households, collective consumption, and larger communes. Yet they remained marginal to the main developments and rarely proved durable. For example, early in Soviet Russia (1917-1930), Alexandra Kollontai initiated major programs of state responsibility and direct support for children and housework. However, European-style nuclear family households, constructed in and for capitalism during the transition from feudalism (see Jacques Donzelot’s *The Policing of Families*), remained the basic household organization under socialist societies as well.

In the capitalist system’s prevailing household structure, men functioned as household “heads” responsible for disciplining and providing for subordinate wives and children. Wives were to offset the burdens of men’s labor in capitalist enterprises, prepare them for that work, and “raise” children to reproduce identical households. Such households should not only support families but also support the state with taxes (thereby reducing the employer class’s taxes) as well as soldiers. Efforts by households to obtain and secure state supports (schools, day care, subsidies, even veterans benefits) were systematically opposed or limited by the employer class. Even when won by mass mobilizations assisted by socialists such supports were never secure.

To this day, the employer class that dominates in capitalism blocks raising the minimum wage, mandating paid maternal and paternal leave policies, and funding an adequate public education system or adequate health insurance system. That employer class keeps the traditional household in place or else financially constrains individuals fleeing traditional households to serve the employer class’s needs. The authoritarian structure of enterprises (complete with CEOs as dictators inside corporations) reinforces parallel structures in households.

Socialists must recognize and act on the premise that the reverse holds as well.

The solution for socialism in the 21st century is to correct for the omission earlier socialisms made. Socialism now needs to add a critical analysis of capitalism's micro-level organization inside workplaces and households to its macro-level analyses. The focus of 21st-century socialism should balance the overstressed macro-level by a concentration on the micro-level: not as an alternative focus but rather as an additional focus deserving special attention.

The solution for socialism and communism in the 21st century is a new, non-state-focused vision. Socialism becomes the movement to transform 1) the top-down hierarchical organization inside capitalist enterprises (employers versus employees) into a democratic organization of worker cooperatives, and 2) the top-down hierarchical organization inside households into democratized alternatives.

Inside enterprises, each worker will have one vote to decide the major issues facing enterprises. Such issues include what, how, and where to produce as well as how to use the resulting products or, if products are marketed, what to do with the revenues. The difference between employers and employees disappears; the workers become collectively their own boss. Profits cease being the enterprise's top priority or "bottom line" because that maximization rule prioritizes employers' gains over employees' gains and capital's interests over those of labor. In democratized enterprises, profits instead become one among many democratically determined enterprise goals. Each worker has an equal opportunity to fill in the outlines of such a version of socialism with the creative imaginings of what such a transformed enterprise may make possible.

Inside households, socialism must stand for the freedom to construct different kinds of human relations. Kinship becomes only one of many options. Among adults, democratic household decision-making becomes the rule. Broad rights and freedoms are given to children. Responsibility for raising children becomes shared among parents, democratized households, democratized residential and enterprise communities, and a democratized government. The specifics of such shared responsibility will be among the objects of democratic decision-making by all. Whatever may remain of centralized and decentralized state apparatuses will support the new socialism's households generously as capitalism never did. The twin reproductions—of democratic households and democratic enterprises—will be equal social responsibilities: 21st-century socialism's notion of work-life

balance.

Such reorganizations of enterprises and households define socialism for the 21st century in a new way. Social change becomes a lived daily experience in each enterprise and household (more profound than mere changes from private to state-regulated, controlled, or owned enterprises). Such a redefined socialism can defeat the anti-socialist movements that have long contested state power versus individual power and that dogmatically endorsed the nuclear family against all alternative household structures. It revives elements of socialism's complicated history of alliance with anarchism.

Democratic worker cooperatives become a key institutional foundation of whatever state apparatus survives. Worker co-ops, democratized households, and individuals will be the state's three revenue sources and thus key sources of its power. They will democratically decide how to divide the provision of such revenue among themselves. Undemocratically organized institutions—such as capitalist enterprises or traditional households—will no longer undermine democratically organized politics. Instead democratic economic, political, and household organizations will collaborate, interact, and share responsibilities for social development and social reproduction.

Democratically transformed enterprises and households are socialist goals well worth fighting for. So too is a state controlled by and thus responsive to individuals within democratically organized households, residential communities, and worker-co-op enterprises. Together these goals comprise an effective, attractive new vision to define and motivate a socialism for the 21st century. One of its banners might proclaim, “No king or dictator in politics; no boss or CEO at work; no patriarch or head at home.”

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