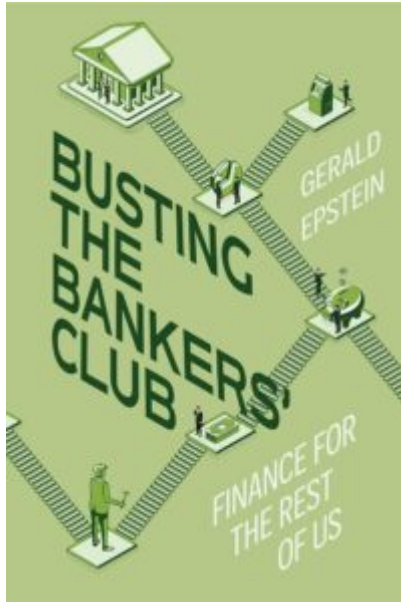


SEC's Approval Of Bitcoin Markets May Set The Stage For Financial Disaster



01-10-2024 ~ *Irresponsible banking and deregulation are putting the world economy at risk.*

Over the past several decades, there have been rapid and fundamental changes in the finance and banking sectors. The banking reforms of the New Deal, which endured up until about 1980 and provided a relative degree of banking and financial stability, were reversed by the neoliberal counterrevolution with an eye toward increasing profits and shredding social responsibility. A new book by world-renowned progressive economist Gerald Epstein, [*Busting the Bankers' Club: Finance for the Rest of Us*](#), shows us the result: a financial system dominated by megabanks and shadow financial institutions prone to instability and crises that at the same time rely on government bailouts.

The neoliberal financial system, controlled by what Epstein calls “The Bankers’ Club,” benefits exclusively powerful people and institutions, is linked to the growing inequality of wealth and income, and is a net drain to the U.S. economy. Nonetheless, bankers not only see themselves as “essential workers,” a view that Epstein shreds into pieces, but as former Goldman Sachs Chief Executive Lloyd Blankfein claimed, many think they do “God’s work.”

The latest development in the evolution of the modern financial system is the Securities and Exchange Commission’s approval of bitcoin exchange-traded funds

last month, concluding a decade-long fight and marking a turning point for cryptocurrency. This may be a game changer for the global money system but could also very well lead us to another financial crisis.

In this first of a three-part exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Epstein discusses the ascendance of financialization, the dangers of cryptocurrency and his pathbreaking book *Busting the Bankers' Club*. Epstein is professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

C. J. Polychroniou: Financialization, a process by which financial markets and financial incentive increasingly become the predominant forces in domestic and international economies, dates back to the early 20th century but has intensified over the past five decades. Your new book, Busting the Bankers' Club, explores virtually all the major features and aspects of financialization, divulges the staying power of finance while exposing at the same time the failures of the current banking and financial system, and offers concrete pathways toward building a system of finance that works for the average people. Let's start by asking you to talk about your description of the financial system as having a Jekyll-Hyde personality. What is good and what is bad about the financial system?

Gerald Epstein: In the first chapter of *Busting the Bankers' Club* I refer back to the old Robert Louis Stevenson story, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In this tale Dr. Jekyll, an upstanding member of the community, also contains within himself a hidden other: the murderous criminal Mr. Hyde. Jekyll is sometimes tempted to turn himself into Hyde to indulge his perverse pleasures, but sometimes wants to resist the evil urges of the Hyde side of his personality in order to remain on the right side of society and the law. This is a good metaphor for finance. On the one hand, finance is a positive and even necessary force in our society: It facilitates the payment system so we can sell and buy things; it provides a safe place to hold and augment our savings; financial institutions can lend us money to enable us to buy important big-ticket items, like houses and educations, or to open businesses; and financial institutions provide us with insurance against accidents, health disasters and other life traumas. But the Hyde face of finance is always lurking in the background, driven by capitalist greed and excess. And if it is unchecked by laws and regulations (and, perhaps, moral fortitude), reckless and destructive finance can dominate our financial system, and at times, our economy. We saw the havoc that finance could create with the

great financial crisis of 2008-2009. But such finance can also undermine our economy on a daily basis: overcharging for basic financial services like asset management and payments services; excluding some groups from financial services altogether; and perhaps most dangerously, engaging in high-risk speculative ventures that, if they crash, the top financiers will expect to get bailed out by the government.

Over the course of time, the world has witnessed virtually countless financial and banking crises, but there also have been periods with no such crises. For instance, you point out in your book that there was “a long period of financial tranquility” in the U.S. economy between World War II and 1980. What was different in the operations of the financial system during this period, and does the absence of financial and banking crises mean that the system had no failings and was in no need of reform?

In the U.S., the big banks and highly speculative financial institutions were widely perceived as having greatly contributed to, if not caused, the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Roosevelt administration implemented a set of New Deal financial regulations that greatly helped to stabilize the U.S. financial system for more than 30 years. Since the U.S. economy was the biggest economy in the world following WWII, these — along with the Bretton Woods Institutions created in 1944 and other factors — helped stabilize the global economy as well. The New Deal financial reforms focused on cutting the financial institutions down to manageable sizes (the Glass-Steagall Act separated investment from commercial banking); limiting bank runs by implanting deposit insurance; restricting speculation and predation by limiting leverage and what assets financial institutions could buy and sell (including limiting obscure products such as complex derivatives); and imposing social missions on various segments of finance — e.g. commercial banks would take deposits and make short-term loans to business, savings and loans would offer mortgages, investment banks would underwrite securities for businesses and state and local governments, etc.

The financial structure has often been called a system of “boring banking.”

Of course, these regulations were not perfect. Far from it. The financial structure formally and informally embedded the highly discriminatory aspects of U.S. society. The financial system excluded people of color, especially Black Americans, from getting mortgages and other financial services; women were

dependent on their husbands or fathers to obtain financial services; and the poor and working class were generally underserved by these financial institutions or charged exorbitant prices. Still, this New Deal financial structure was relatively stable and did provide credit for businesses and some households, and did facilitate the economic growth of the early post-World War II period.

The postwar financial regulatory regime, which had been created during the 1930s under the New Deal, begins to break down between the late 1960s and early 1970s. What caused the breakdown of the New Deal financial structure, and why do we end up with the full liberalization of the financial and banking system instead of improvements to the regulatory framework?

The breakdown of the post-WWII New Deal monetary regime was due to both domestic and global financial, economic and political factors. Worldwide, there was increasing globalization and the revival of major economic and financial competitors to U.S. dominance, including Japan and some countries in Europe. U.S. banks and financial institutions wanted to break out of the strictures of the New Deal regulatory regime, including limitations on asset portfolios and on interest rates they could pay on deposits, in order to compete with foreign rivals, especially with respect to providing business services for U.S. and other multinational corporations. Second was the increasing inflation caused first by increased U.S. spending on the Vietnam War and military buildup connected with the Cold War and then by the OPEC oil price increases in the 1970s. This inflation harmed U.S. banks, which could not sufficiently increase interest rates on deposits to compete with new unregulated financial institutions like money market funds created by asset managers like Fidelity. In the face of these structural problems, the New Deal system had to be reformed in order to provide more flexibility for the banks subject to their strictures. It is very likely that such reforms could have been implemented. But the big banks such as Citibank, Bank of America and Chase Manhattan Bank used these disruptions as an opportunity to gather together their allies, both inside and outside of government, to push regulators, the Federal Reserve and Congress to destroy the old New Deal System entirely. I call this group "The Bankers' Club."

You point out in the book that the changes that were brought about allowed the banks to create a new business model, which you label "roaring banking." How does roaring banking work, and who are the primary beneficiaries of this new business model?

The current financial system is dominated by huge “universal” banks that combine deposit taking, lending, bond and derivatives trading, underwriting and even commodities trading. Banks like Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, etc. have virtually no financial boundaries and are so huge that if they get into serious trouble, they are too big to rescue, and their failures, like that of Lehman Brothers, might create a major panic. We saw these concerns in Spring of 2023 when even medium-sized banks were teetering. Their major business model is to use high levels of leverage to take risky bets on speculative assets of all kinds; and to use their quasi-monopoly power to intersperse themselves in order to capture business by municipalities, federal governments, companies, pension funds and households to take a slice of a huge percentage of financial transactions not only in the U.S. but also throughout much of the world.

But in addition to these behemoths are massive asset managers such as BlackRock and State Street. Then there are huge hedge funds, which “are alternative investments that use various methods such as leveraged derivatives, short-selling, and other speculative strategies to earn a return that outperforms the broader market,” according to Investopedia. The biggest of these include Citadel, Bridgewater Associates and D.E. Shaw. Also key players in the world of “roaring banking” are increasingly powerful private equity firms, which, according to the brilliant work of [Eileen Appelbaum and Rosemary Batt](#), employ enormous amounts of debt to take over important companies in retail, medical, real estate and nursing home industries, among others, as well as impose draconian work conditions on employees and saddle the companies with debt, so that the key owners of these private equity (PE) firms can extract maximum short-term profits. These PE firms include Blackstone; KKR, an infamous leveraged buyout company from the 1990s; and the Carlyle Group.

This nexus of financial behemoths has very little regulation and is able to extract enormous wealth from customers and employees. With favorable tax treatment and bailouts from government, it is able to garner such enormous wealth that they help generate the most unequal income and wealth distribution the U.S. has had since 1929.

Bailouts have become the norm under the deregulatory financial and banking regime. Who should get bailed out and why?

Government bailouts are one of the main forces that keeps this system of roaring banking going. The Dodd-Frank Financial Reform Act passed in 2010 and signed into law by President Obama was touted by the administration as ending “too big to fail” and bailouts. But in fact, the bailout problem has remained and possibly gotten worse. As we saw from the near-global financial market meltdown in March of 2020 when the World Health Organization declared the COVID pandemic, the Federal Reserve and the U.S. Treasury (as well as other major central banks) poured trillions of dollars into the financial markets to stabilize them, and even took measures to bail out some hedge funds and other non-bank institutions. And when Silicon Valley Bank went bankrupt and several other medium-sized banks trembled in the spring of 2023, again the Federal Reserve intervened to virtually guarantee the entire U.S. system of bank deposits. By doing this, a major run on the financial system was avoided, but the episode pointed to enormous regulatory problems still facing our financial system.

There are three major problems with these kinds of bailouts. One is that they eliminate the incentives for the financiers to stop taking excessive risks because these risks pay off for them, if not for the rest of us. Second, they keep the same elites in power, undermining chances for more democratic control of our economy. And third, people understand that these bailouts are unfair and undemocratic. It makes them angry and helps them fall prey to demagogues such as Donald Trump.

Should there ever be bailouts? And if so, of whom? Good question. The late economic historian Charles Kindleberger [surveyed](#) hundreds of years of capitalist financial markets and pointed out that lender of last resort actions, i.e. bailouts, were endemic and frequent. I tell my students: Even if we sometimes need to bailout the banks, we do not need to bailout the bankers. I think this is the important point. Sometimes we need to maintain the viability of institutions that by their nature are subject to risks. But we do not want to reward the bad behavior of those who will exploit them and us to keep their lofty status in the class hierarchy.

During the COVID pandemic, we heard a lot about essential workers. Are bankers essential workers?

Well, many of the top bankers think they are. Lloyd Blankfein, former chief executive of Goldman Sachs, [famously said](#) after Goldman helped crash the

economy in 2009 and received massive government bailouts that, “We’re very important. We help companies to grow by helping them to raise capital.... This, in turn, allows people to have jobs that create more growth and more wealth. It’s a virtuous cycle.” In fact, he told [The Times](#) of London that as a banker, he is doing “God’s work.”

But as my former graduate student Juan Antonio Montecino and I show in *Busting the Bankers’ Club*, “roaring banking” is a net drain on the U.S. economy, compared to what a modern system of boring banking would be. Far from being essential workers, these mega bankers, hedge fund operators and private equity executives are reducing the rate of economic growth and extracting wealth from the majority of people in the economy.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) recently gave a stamp of approval to bitcoin exchanged-traded funds. How significant is this development?

This approval could be quite significant, especially if it sets legal and/or regulatory precedents that lubricate the downward slope of integrating crypto assets into that traditional financial architecture. In some ways, this event gives me a “déjà vu all over again” feeling, reminding me of some of the early decisions on deregulating derivatives and credit default swaps in incremental ways in the run-up to the Great Financial Crisis. A number of these dangers were highlighted in a detailed and passionate [dissent](#) to the decision written by SEC Commissioner Caroline A. Crenshaw. The core of Crenshaw’s critique is that these bitcoin exchange-traded funds are based on bitcoin assets, which themselves are largely unregulated and traded on dark platforms in many parts of the world. There is little transparency as to what determines the prices of bitcoins and there is a lot of evidence that they are manipulated and subject to fraudulent practices, often without recourse. This provides many opportunities for illegal activity such as money laundering as well as arms and drug financing and trade. The basic critique is that, like with predatory subprime mortgages and problematic asset-backed securities, you can dress them up with fancy packaging and complicated bells and whistles, but the underlying garbage still stinks. Crenshaw knows how precedents get set in the regulatory business. And just as derivatives and other complex securities were slowly but surely allowed to be sold in the run-up to the financial crisis by incremental [nose-under-the-tent](#) procedures (“Well, this new thing is just like the old thing that you already approved”) Crenshaw and other critics, such as those at [Americans for Financial Reform](#) and [Better Markets](#), are

rightly worried that once again we are headed down a slippery slope. Crenshaw rightly asks: “When FTX [Sam Bankman-Fried’s company] imploded ... many of us breathed a sigh of relief that the downfall of one of the most central players in the crypto market had little impact on global markets more broadly. Will approval of today’s products provide the previously attenuated nexus to traditional markets [that is, break down the previous barriers] that allows crises in largely non-compliant crypto markets to spill over? These questions are not considered in today’s Order.”

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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).

Prepared Learning: What Are Humans Hard-Wired For At Birth?



02-10-2024 ~ Do living beings learn and pass on to future generations some behaviors or predispositions more easily than others--and if so, how? So-called prepared learning is a question psychologists and other scientists have studied for decades, developing a series of new hypotheses about learning and experiments to test them.

The concept of prepared learning is also known as “biological preparedness” or “associative conditioning.” The basic idea is that living beings evolved a predisposition to more easily learn the kinds of behavior that help them survive and reproduce in their environment.

Thus, humans and other animals learn responses to some environmental stimuli, such as dangers, more readily.

These survival-favorable behaviors are thought to have been passed on to future generations by natural selection. This is the evolutionary process whereby organisms that adapt to environmental changes are the ones more likely to survive and reproduce successfully.

Just as humans gradually developed bipedalism to aid their survival, they have innate responses to circumstances and tendencies that guide their behavior. Exactly how the learned behavior becomes incorporated into the genome and thus heritable is a mostly unanswered question.

Because most of the research on prepared learning concerns fear and phobias, there is also the question of how other kinds of behavior evolved that are not related to fear reactions.

From Unicellular to Multicellular Organisms

What is the mechanism of prepared learning, and can it be passed on?

Recent research has found that unicellular organisms such as amoebae can respond to associative conditioning and modify their behavior in response to specific changes in their environment. In [a set of laboratory experiments reported in *Frontiers in Microbiology* in 2021](#), three species of freshwater amoeba cells were conditioned to move in a new migratory pattern in response to environmental changes.

The researchers studied the movements of more than 2,000 different cells of *Amoeba proteus*, *Metamoeba leningradensis*, and *Amoeba borokensis* “under three external conditions.” All three species were able to develop a new migratory pattern that lasted about 40 minutes and was remembered for long periods of their cellular cycle, although it was ultimately forgotten.

The researchers suggest that their findings could represent an evolutionary mechanism for these organisms to increase their fitness to their environment, and [may](#) “have essential implications in the origin of primitive forms of cognition and the role of convergent evolution in biological cognition.”

Similar [experiments with fruit flies](#) demonstrated that prepared learning—in this case, responses associated with where eggs were deposited and reliably hatched—could be tracked over successive generations. In a 2014 paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), researchers describe how they modeled the evolution of prepared learning in different lines of *Drosophila*.

Female fruit flies were exposed to the color-quinine or the odor-quinine before being given a choice between two places to lay their eggs.

The researchers found that the fruit flies “learned” over 40 generations to lay their eggs in the places that were associated with pre-exposure to the odor-quinine or the color-quinine *and* egg survival. The flies laid their eggs in the place that proved most reliable for success.

Reliability is the key factor in prepared learning, the researchers suggest.

Pavlov's Influence on Preparedness Research

These unicellular amoeba behavior studies and many multicellular experiments follow the experimental conditioning concepts established by the Russian-Soviet researcher Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936).

Pavlov's theory of learning, however, is broader than conditioned associations. He proposed that trial and error was also part of learning, and that behavior learned through this process was longer lasting. Pavlov thought that organisms follow innate instincts, such as hunger, stimulating neurons in the brain to form associations. These associations, between an action and its consequence, take shape over time to become knowledge.

Subsequent prepared learning research tried to test and quantify how this process of association works. Most experiments focused on fear and phobias, such as fear of snakes, wild animals, or heights, which are considered important in helping both animals and human beings survive in the world. They addressed two main questions: Are animals and humans prepared to learn some behaviors, particularly phobias, more readily than others, and what does this process have to do with evolution?

Phobias and Preparedness

Theoretical and experimental work on phobias blossomed after a 1971 article by psychologist Martin E.P. Seligman titled "[Phobias and Preparedness](#)," which suggested that phobias connected to evolutionary survival, such as fear of dangerous predators, are more quickly learned in the laboratory, are very "resistant to extinction," and are noncognitive.

The laboratory tests of Seligman's theory over the years studied how quickly human subjects could be conditioned to fear spiders, snakes, and faces of angry men, and how these fears could be undone. For the most part, however, the results were not conclusive.

Harvard psychologist Richard J. McNally has a useful review of the prepared learning research in the decades after Seligman in a [2016 article in the journal Behavior Therapy](#). McNally reviews critical elaborations of prepared learning put forward by other researchers, such as selective sensitization, expectancy theory, and nonassociative theory, along with the experiments to test them.

The evolutionary aspect of how this learning might be inherited is also investigated. McNally describes the "evolved fear module" theory, which holds

that early on, primates developed a neurocircuitry in the brain's amygdala shaped by evolved fear of predators that was outside of "higher cognitive processes." In other words, fear is an automatic response.

Experiments to test all these theories are ongoing.

Research Beyond Fears and Phobias

Providing an interesting perspective on human behavior is Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky, who is the author of the book *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* (2023). Sapolsky [writes](#) that it is a result of "the cumulative biological and environmental luck, over which we had no control, that has brought us to any moment," according to an article on his work in [Stanford magazine](#).

Sapolsky says that we have no choice in how to react and respond to a situation. According to him, there is no such thing as free will, Sapolsky [argues](#) that "Put all the scientific results together from all the relevant scientific disciplines, and there's no room for free will."

The lack of free will, he says, means that people are not accountable for their good or bad behaviors, a perspective that has attracted some skepticism.

"If we 'freely' choose to do something but there was never a possibility of choosing something else, we're not free. And if we're not free, Sapolsky says, there is no more reason to castigate a killer than to punish a broken machine. Killers should receive medical and psychological treatment to address the larger issues that caused the problem," Stanford magazine [states](#) about Sapolsky's concept of the absence of free will in humans.

Human Responses That Challenge Prepared Learning

Does this mean that humans have no control over their emotions and how and when we express love, anger, hate, etc? A 2017 research article in PNAS suggests [otherwise](#): "[E]motions aren't a response to what our brain takes in from our observations, but, rather, are intrinsic to our makeup."

Another interesting example that challenges the principles of prepared learning is of deaf children who have not learned sign language but have found a way to communicate using gestures. "The properties of language that we find in these gestures are just those properties that do not need to be handed down from

generation to generation, but can be reinvented by a child *de novo*,” a 2010 [study](#) proposes.

What Does It All Mean?

How humans learn--and unlearn-- is an important subject today in psychology and psychiatry, and all areas of education. Panic disorder, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other crippling emotional conditions all require an understanding of how they developed in order to treat them. Making education effective and interesting for students is important for a functioning society. How are positive associations with school best fostered?

Outside of the clinical situation, the concept of prepared learning affects people in many ways. Advertising can use aspects of preparedness and association to promote a particular product or a person; it can target information to influence specific groups of people. Cults and political groups can use this kind of learning as a way of controlling a group of individuals. Brainwashing can also use conditioning methods for unsavory purposes.

In the laboratory, after decades of research, the jury is still out on why some behaviors are more easily learned than others, whether human beings have an inherited predisposition for certain phobias, and how much of human behavior is attributable to nature and how much to nurture.

Experiments are now more sophisticated than Pavlov's conditioning of dogs, but there is still wiggle room. We can see the experimental results, but much is still assumed and not yet proven. Human beings continue to surprise, despite prepared learning.

By Marjorie Hecht

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Marjorie Hecht is a longtime magazine editor and writer with a specialty in science topics. She is a freelance writer and community activist living on Cape Cod.

Source: Human Bridges

Credit Line: This article was produced by [Human Bridges](#).

For Crisis-Hit Pakistan, Elections May Not Lead To A Meaningful Alternative



Map of Pakistan - Source:
nl.wikipedia.org

02-09-2024 *The ongoing crisis in Pakistan cannot be resolved simply by swapping one political party for another. Whether it is the arrest and conviction of Imran Khan or economic issues, Pakistan has a long road to recovery.*

Scheduled for February 8, the upcoming elections for Pakistan's National Assembly and provincial assemblies hold significant importance against the backdrop of numerous upheavals in the country. Notably, the recent arrest and conviction of the former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, adds a layer of complexity. On January 31, Khan received a [14-year prison](#) sentence, adding to his existing [three-year jail term](#) for corruption. In addition, last month, he was handed a [10-year prison](#) sentence in a separate case filed against him, accusing him of leaking classified state documents.

The nation finds itself entangled in a complex web of economic difficulties, with

inflation, unemployment, and a pressing capital crisis casting a shadow over its prospects. The specter of poverty looms large, exacerbating social inequalities and hindering the overall well-being of the population.

How Are Representatives Elected in Pakistan?

Under a parliamentary system of government, Pakistan operates with a two-chambered parliament, consisting of the National Assembly and the Senate. The upcoming elections will decide the composition of the National Assembly and the four provincial assemblies—Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan.

The National Assembly, comprising 336 seats, has 266 directly elected through single-member constituencies using the first-past-the-post system. Additionally, there are 60 seats reserved for women and 10 for minorities. The distribution of women's reserved seats among parties is proportional to their provincial seat tally, while minority seats are allocated based on each party's overall seat count.

Following this, members of the provincial assemblies elect 100 members of the Senate, which serves as the upper house of the Pakistani parliament.

The party or alliance securing the majority of seats in the National Assembly gains the privilege of electing its leader, who subsequently assumes the position of prime minister.

Key Parties

The political landscape in Pakistan is marked by [several prominent parties](#), each led by influential figures. The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) is under the leadership of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, while the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is headed by former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. Imran Khan leads the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Maulana Fazlul Haq leads the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Pakistan (Fazl).

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has refused to grant the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) its designated electoral symbol, the cricket bat. Consequently, a majority of its candidates are now compelled to participate in the election as independents. Imran Khan, the leader of PTI, has been disqualified from participating in the ongoing elections. He is barred from holding any public office for the next decade.

Military Has Its Role and History

Once a figure endorsed by the Pakistan army, Imran Khan has transformed into their primary adversary. The discord originated with the military's appointment of Lieutenant General Nadeem Ahmed Anjum as the ISI chief against Khan's wishes along with Khan's visit to Russia. The latter showed Pakistan's aggressive neutral position at the beginning of the Ukraine-Russia war, which could have upset the US. Later, Khan's supporters vandalized one of the generals' residences after his arrest. The generals aimed to remove him, and now they have accomplished their objective.

However, Pakistan's political class and its military have historically experienced a complex relationship of collaboration and conflict. Throughout Pakistan's history, military interventions have been a recurring theme. A pivotal instance occurred in [1958 when President Iskander Mirza](#) declared martial law, nullified the constitution, and shuttered the national and provincial assemblies. General Mohammad Ayub Khan assumed control, marking the onset of military rule. Since then, Pakistan has experienced multiple military interventions.

According to the Pakistan Army Act, the armed forces' duties include protecting the nation from outside threats and aggression as well as supporting civil authority when necessary. On policy topics, however, differences between the civilian and military governments have frequently occurred. The military has taken power on several occasions by using opposition parties as tools.

Pakistan consistently spends a significant portion of its budget to defense, with the 2022 allocation reaching [17.9 percent of GDP](#). This is a significant figure, particularly for a country where the per capita income in 2022 stood at [\\$1588.9, equivalent to approximately \\$4.35 per day](#).

Key Concerns: Issues Shaping the Election Landscape

In Pakistan, the current economic landscape is characterized by a stark reality as inflation has surged to unprecedented levels, exceeding [30 percent and reaching a 50-year](#) high in the year 2023. In January 2024, it stood at [28.3](#) percent. This economic turbulence is further underscored by the country's position in the region, where its GDP, per capita income, and GDP growth are among the lowest. Persistent challenges in terms of [high unemployment](#) and inflation rates contribute to the overall economic strain.

According to the UNDP's Human Development Index, Pakistan is positioned at [161st out of 191 countries](#), indicating low achievements in crucial areas such as health, knowledge, and living standards. This places Pakistan among the 31 countries globally with the lowest human development levels. The poverty rate in Pakistan was at [39.4](#) percent in the year 2022.

The situation was further aggravated by the devastating floods experienced in the country in 2022. The floods not only caused widespread damage to agricultural land and critical infrastructure but also had a cascading effect on the overall economy. The aftermath of the floods triggered a surge in inflation, particularly impacting food prices, and increasing the economic hardships faced by the people.

The Interconnected Challenges of Neoliberal Capitalism in Pakistan

The escalating cost of living, rising unemployment, and the specter of stagflation—all intertwined with the limitations of growth—are symptoms of a larger crisis rooted in neoliberal capitalism. This predicament is not exclusive to a particular regime; rather, it stems from the overarching influence of a neoliberal framework that hinders effective crisis management by successive governments. The structural issues at play persist regardless of shifts between political parties or military dictatorships.

The challenges at hand are embedded in Pakistan's position within the global political economy of neoliberal capitalism. Pakistan finds itself struggling to compete, leading to a significant socio-economic toll.

Pakistan is increasingly becoming the working-class backyard of international capital, with its ability to produce a workforce destined to work abroad, making products that the domestic working class can barely afford. With an annual exodus of over [800,000 individuals](#) seeking employment abroad, a new underclass is emerging within the nation, comprised of individuals keen on obtaining employment that the country is not able to offer.

A significant aspect contributing to Pakistan's economic challenges is its heavy reliance on foreign loans, often acquired at high interest rates. The country currently operates on these loans, facing the formidable task of repaying a substantial debt amounting to [\\$80 billion within the next three years](#).

The ongoing crisis in Pakistan cannot be resolved simply by swapping one

political party for another. It is intricately tied to deep-seated issues of inequality, concentrated power in the hands of a few, and a lack of commitment from leaders to present a viable alternative. The ability of a new political entity to overcome these challenges remains uncertain. Nevertheless, these elections carry significant weight as the population is enduring hardship, skepticism towards the electoral process is widespread, and the nation appears to be spiraling into an uncertain future with no clear path of recovery.

By Pranjali Pandey

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Source: Globetrotter

Cashing In On Racist Bail



Sonali Kolhatkar

02-09-2024 ~ Cash bail is racist. No wonder the GOP loves it and is relying on expanding it as a cynical election-year ploy.

Most Americans have not considered “cash bail” as critical to equality and freedom. The term is an esoteric one but is increasingly central to the ongoing battle over racial capitalism, policing, and mass incarceration, especially in an election year as critical as 2024.

Here’s what cash bail means: When arrested by police on suspicion of committing a crime, everyone in the United States has the right to due process and to defend themselves in court. But in a cash bail system, when judges set bail amounts, those who cannot pay the full amount remain jailed indefinitely—a [clear violation of their due process rights](#)—while the rich pay their way out of jail.

Now, Republicans in cities and states around the nation are [rolling back efforts](#) to reform cash bail systems and Georgia’s GOP-dominated legislature is the latest to do so. The state [Senate](#) and [House](#) recently passed a bill expanding cash bail for 30 new crimes, some of which appear to be aimed at protesters, such as unlawful assembly. Further, it criminalizes charitable bail funds that have bailed people out when they cannot afford to do so, restricting such funds, and even individuals, to bailing out no more than three people per year or facing charges themselves.

In Georgia, this is especially significant because of [a mass movement](#) that has arisen to oppose Atlanta’s “Cop City,” a massive police training project that is symbolic of everything wrong with our systems of policing, courts, and incarceration.

Marlon Kautz, who runs the [Atlanta Solidarity Fund](#) called the system of cash bail “[a loophole](#)” in the criminal justice system, allowing courts to indefinitely jail people without charges if they cannot pay exorbitant bail amounts. Kautz, whose organization is a bail fund of the sort that Georgia is targeting, pointed out that the GOP-led bills to criminalize bail funds and expand cash bail “exposes that the loophole is not an accident, it’s the intended purpose of the bail system.”

Kautz added, “Police, prosecutors, and politicians want a bail system which allows them to punish their political enemies, poor people, and people of color without trial.” He’s right. A police officer could theoretically arrest anyone they wanted, and if a judge requires cash bail that is beyond their financial capacity, the person would remain detained indefinitely while awaiting charges and a trial. In fact, Kautz was one of three people affiliated with the Atlanta Solidarity fund to be arrested on what appear to be [clearly politicized charges](#) of fraud and money

laundering in June 2023.

Given how [racist](#) American policing is, the system of cash bail is intended to ensure that people of color who are disproportionately arrested are also disproportionately detained in jails without due process. A 2022 [report](#) by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights examined the impact of cash bail and found that between 1970 and 2015, the number of people jailed before trial increased by a whopping 433 percent, and there are currently about 500,000 such people stuck in jails across the nation who have not been tried or convicted of any crimes.

The report also found “stark disparities with regards to race” in who is impacted. Unsurprisingly Black and Brown men were the group most subjected to higher bail amounts.

There is a growing movement to address such a systemically racist trend. In 2023, the state of Illinois became the first in the nation to [entirely abolish](#) cash bail. The state legislature initially passed its cash bail ban in 2021 but implementation was held up by lawsuits from county prosecutors and sheriffs. Now, having survived legal challenges, the cash bail era in Illinois is officially over.

Other states, such as New Mexico, New Jersey, and Kentucky, have [almost entirely ended cash bail](#) requirements in recent years. In California, [Los Angeles County](#) has also similarly eliminated cash bail for all crimes except the most serious ones. The trend has been a positive one in a nation that has one of the [most racist and punitive criminal justice systems](#) in the world.

And then came the Republicans’ regressive push-back. Reversing progress on bail reform is a new flashpoint in the GOP’s culture wars intended to scare voters into choosing them at the ballot. The [Associated Press](#) captured this in a single sentence near the end of an article about Georgia’s cash bail restrictions, saying that “it could be a sign that Republicans intend to bash their Democratic opponents as soft on crime as they did in 2022.”

That [same AP story](#) paraphrased Republican state representative Houston Gaines, of Athens, Georgia, as saying “people let out of jail without bail are less likely to show up for court than those who have paid to get out of jail.” But the AP added “national studies contradict that claim.” When in doubt, the GOP can be relied upon to lie its way into justifying harmful policies, and Gaines was adamant in falsely claiming that cash bail reforms in other states have been “an unmitigated

disaster.”

His Republican colleagues in states such as Indiana, Missouri, and Wisconsin have introduced numerous bills [expanding the use of cash bail](#). Expanding the racist criminal justice system is a cynical GOP election-era ploy, one that isn’t even terribly original.

Recall George H. W. Bush’s 1988 presidential election campaign ads centering on a Black man named [Willie Horton](#) who, a year before the election, was furloughed while being incarcerated, and escaped. He went on to rape a woman and stab her fiancé, offering Bush the perfect poster child for Democratic failures on crime. The Willie Horton ads are considered a quintessentially racist dog whistle that were intended to generate fear of Blackness among white voters. They helped Bush defeat his opponent.

Sharlyn Grace, an official at the Cook County Public Defender’s office in Illinois [said](#), “It is exceedingly rare for someone who’s released pretrial to be arrested and accused of a new offense that involves violence against another person,” and that “[f]ears about public safety are in many ways greatly overblown and misplaced.” But all that the tough-on-crime crowd needs in order to make the case of rampant crime is that single exception to the general trend.

Republicans in Wisconsin found their modern-day Willie Horton in a Black man named [Darrell Brooks Jr.](#) who drove a car into a 2021 parade in Waukesha, killing six people. Brooks had been arrested just prior to the fatal crash for domestic violence and released on a relatively low bail amount of \$1,000. The Wisconsin GOP [featured Brooks in 2022 campaign ads](#) showing how they are “tough on crime” compared to Democrats. It wasn’t enough that Brooks was eventually sentenced to more than six consecutive life sentences although he says he didn’t intend to drive his car into the parade. His example has served as the ideal foil for election-year fears of people of color and [Republican efforts](#) to expand cash bail and win political power.

Election years are a scary time for people of color in the U.S. They are marked by race-based voter suppression [efforts](#), a rise in [racist political rhetoric](#), and even a surge in [racist hate crimes](#). The expansion of cash bail laws is yet another attack on Black and Brown communities—one that must be exposed and confronted.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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How Long Has Humanity Been At War With Itself?



Deborah Barsky

02-08-2024 ~ Is large-scale intra-specific warfare *Homo sapiens'* condition or can

our species strive to achieve global peace?

The famous American astronomer [Carl Sagan once said, “You have to know the past to understand the present.”](#) But can we ever know the history of human origins well enough to understand why humans wage large-scale acts of appalling cruelty on other members of our own species? In January 2024, [the Geneva Academy was monitoring no less than 110 armed conflicts globally](#). While not all of these reach mainstream media outlets, each is equally horrific in terms of the physical violence and mental cruelty we inflict on each other.

[Chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, are known to partake in violent intra-specific skirmishes, typically to preserve privileged access to resources in response to breaches in territorial boundaries](#). But only humans engage so *extensively* in large-scale warfare.

Do massive acts of intra- or interpopulational violence conform with [Darwinian precepts of natural selection](#), or is this something we do as a competitive response to the stresses of living in such large populations? Looking back in time can help us find answers to such questions. Evidence preserved in the archeological record can tell us about when and under what conditions the preludes to warlike behaviors emerged in the past. Scientific reasoning can then transform this information into viable hypotheses that we can use to understand ourselves in today’s world.

As archeologists continue to unearth new fossil evidence at an increasing rate, so too are they piecing together the human story as one of complex interactions played out by (a growing number of) [different species of the genus *Homo*](#) that lived during the tens of thousands of years preceding the emergence—and eventual global dominance—of our own species: *Homo sapiens*. In fact, scientists have recognized more than a dozen (now extinct) species of *Homo* that thrived over the millennia, sometimes sharing the same landscapes and occasionally even interbreeding with one another. Millions of years of hybridization is written into the [genomes](#) of modern human populations.

Although we know very little about what these paleo-encounters might have been like, progress in science and technology is helping archeologists to find ways to piece together the puzzle of interspecific human relationships that occurred so long ago and that contributed to making us who we are today. In spite of these

advances, the fossil record remains very fragmentary, especially concerning the older phases of human evolution.

First consider *Homo*, or [*H. habilis*](#), so-named because a significant increase in stone tool-making is recognized following its [emergence some 2.8 million years ago in East Africa](#). The evidence for the beginnings of this transformational event that would set off the spiraling evolutionary history of human technological prowess is relatively sparse. But such ancient ([Oldowan](#)) toolkits do become more abundant from this time forward, at first in Africa, and then [into the confines of Eurasia by around 1.8 million years ago](#). Throughout this period, different kinds of hominins adopted and innovated stone tool making, socializing it into normalized behavior [by teaching it](#) to their young and transforming it into a cutting-edge survival strategy. We clearly observe the positive repercussions of this major advancement in our evolutionary history from the expanding increases in both the number of archeological sites and their geographical spread. Unevenly through time, occurrences of Oldowan sites throughout the Old World begin to yield [more numerous artifacts](#), attesting to the progressive demographic trends associated with tool-making hominins.

Tool-making was a highly effective adaptive strategy that allowed early *Homo* species (like [*H. georgicus*](#) and [*H. antecessor*](#)) to define their own niches [within multiple environmental contexts](#), successfully competing for resources with large carnivorous animals. Early humans used stone tools to access the protein-rich meat, viscera, and bone marrow from large herbivore carcasses, nourishing their energy-expensive brains. The latter show significant increases in volume and organizational complexity throughout this time period.

But were these early humans also competing with one another? So far (and keeping in mind the scarcity of skeletal remains dating to this period) the paleoanthropological record has not revealed signs of intraspecific violence suffered by Oldowan peoples. Their core-and-flake technologies and simple pounding tools do not include items that could be defined as functional armaments. While a lack of evidence does not constitute proof, we might consider recent estimates in [paleodemography, backed by innovative digitized modelization methods](#) and an increasing pool of genetic data that indicates relatively low population densities during the Oldowan.

Isolated groups consisted of few individuals, organized perhaps into clan-like

social entities, widely spread over vast, resource-rich territories. These hominins [invested in developing technological and social skills, cooperating with one another to adapt](#) to new challenges posed by the changing environmental conditions that characterized the onset of the Quaternary period some 2.5 million years ago. Complex socialization processes evolved to perfect and share the capacity for technological competence, abilities that had important repercussions on the configuration of the brain that would eventually set humanity apart from other kinds of primates. Technology became inexorably linked to cognitive and social advances, fueling a symbiotic process now firmly established between anatomical and technological evolution.

By around one million years ago, Oldowan-producing peoples had been replaced by the technologically more advanced [Acheulian](#) hominins, globally attributed to [*H. erectus* sensu lato](#). This phase of human evolution lasted nearly one and a half million years (globally from 1.75 to around 350,000 years ago) and is marked by highly significant techno-behavioral revolutions [whose inception is traced back to Africa](#). Groundbreaking technologies like fire-making emerged during the Acheulian, as did elaborate stone production methods requiring complex volumetric planning and advanced technical skills. Tools became standardized into specifically designed models, signaling cultural diversity that varied geographically, creating the first land-linked morpho-technological traditions. Ever-greater social investment was required to learn and share the techniques needed to manipulate these technologies, as tools were converted into culture and technical aptitude into innovation.

In spite of marked increases in site frequencies and artifact densities throughout the Middle Pleistocene, [incidences of interspecific violence are rarely documented](#) and no large-scale violent events have been recognized so far. Were some Acheulian tools suitable for waging inter-populational conflicts? In the later phases of the Acheulian, pointed stone tools with signs of hafting and even [wooden spears](#) appear in some sites. But were these sophisticated tool kits limited to hunting? Or might they also have served for other purposes?

[Culture evolves through a process I like to refer to as “technoselection” that in many ways can be likened to biological natural selection](#). In prehistory, technological systems are characterized by sets of morphotypes that reflect a specific stage of cognitive competence. Within these broad defining categories,

however, we can recognize some anomalies or idiosyncratic techno-forms that can be defined as potential latent within a given system. As with natural selection, potential is recognized as structural anomalies that may be selected for under specific circumstances and then developed into new or even revolutionary technologies, converted through inventiveness. Should they prove advantageous to deal with the challenges at hand, these innovative technologies are adopted and developed further, expanding upon the existing foundational know-how and creating increasingly larger sets of material culture. Foundational material culture therefore exists in a state of exponential growth, as each phase is built upon the preceding one in a cumulative process perceived as acceleration.

[I have already suggested elsewhere](#) that the advanced degree of cultural complexity attained by the Late Acheulian, together with the capacity to produce fire, empowered hominins to adapt their nomadic lifestyles within more constrained territorial ranges. Thick [depositional sequences](#) containing evidence of successive living floors recorded in the caves of Eurasia show that hominins were returning cyclically to the same areas, most likely in pace with seasonal climate change and the migrational pathways of the animals they preyed upon. As a result, humans established strong links with the specific regions within which they roamed. More restrictive ranging caused idiosyncrasies to appear within the material and behavioral cultural repertoires of each group: *specific ways of making and doing*. As they lived and died in lands that were becoming their own, so too did they construct territorial identities that were in contrast with those of groups living in neighboring areas. As cultural productions multiplied, so did these imagined cultural “differences” sharpen, engendering the distinguishing notions of “us” and “them.”

Even more significant perhaps was the emergence and consolidation of symbolic thought processes visible, for example, in cultural manifestations whose careful manufacture took tool-making into a whole new realm of aesthetic concerns rarely observed in earlier toolkits. By around 400,000 years ago in Eurasia, [Pre-Neandertals and then Neandertal peoples were conferring special treatment to their dead, sometimes even depositing them with other objects suggestive of nascent spiritual practices](#). These would eventually develop into highly diverse social practices, like ritual and taboo. Cultural diversity was the keystone for new systems of belief that reinforced imagined differences separating territorially distinct groups.

[Anatomically modern humans \(*H. sapiens*\) appeared on the scene some 300,000 years ago in Africa](#) and spread subsequently into lands already occupied by other culturally and spiritually advanced species of *Homo*. While maintaining a nomadic existence, these hominins were undergoing transformational demographic trends that resulted in more frequent interpopulation encounters. This factor, combined with the growing array of material and behavioral manifestations of culture (reflected by [artifact multiplicity](#)) provided a repository from which hominin groups stood in contrast with one another. At the same time, the mounting importance of symbolic behaviors in regulating hominin lifestyles contributed to reinforcing both real (anatomic) and imagined (cultural) variances. Intergroup encounters favored cultural exchange, inspiring innovation and driving spiraling techno-social complexity. In addition, they provided opportunities for sexual exchanges necessary for broadening gene pool diversity and avoiding inbreeding. At the same time, a higher number of individuals within each group would have prompted social hierarchization as a strategy to ensure the survival of each unit.

While much has been written about what Middle Paleolithic inter-specific paleo-encounters might have been like, in particular between the Neandertals and *H. sapiens*, solid evidence is lacking to support [genocidal hypotheses](#) or popularized images of the former annihilating the latter by way of violent processes. Today, such theories, fed by suppositions typical of the last century of the relative techno-social superiority of our own species, are falling by the wayside. Indeed, advances in archeology now show not only that we were [interbreeding with the Neandertals](#), but also that [Neandertal lifeways and cerebral processes were of comparable sophistication to those practiced by the modern humans they encountered](#). Presently, [apart from sparse documentation for individual violent encounters](#), there is no evidence that large-scale violence caused the extinction of the Neandertals or of other species of *Homo* thriving coevally with modern humans. That said, it has been observed that the expansion of *H. sapiens* into previously unoccupied lands, like Australia and the Americas, for example, [coincides ominously with the extinction of mega-faunal species](#). Interestingly, this phenomenon is not observed in regions with a long record of coexistence between humans and mega mammals, like Africa or India. [It has been hypothesized that the reason for this is that animals that were unfamiliar with modern humans lacked the instinct to flee and hide from them, making them easy targets for mass hunting](#).

If large-scale human violence is difficult to identify in the Paleolithic record, it is common in later, proto-historic iconography. Evidence for warlike behavior (accumulations of corpses bearing signs of humanly-induced trauma) [appear towards the end of the Pleistocene](#) and after the onset of the [Neolithic Period](#) (nearly 12,000 years ago) in different parts of the world, perhaps in relation to new pressures due to climate change. Arguably, sedentary lifestyles and plant and animal domestication—hallmarks of the Neolithic—reset social and cultural norms of hunter-gatherer societies. Additionally, it may be that the amassing and storing of goods caused new inter-relational paradigms to take form, with individuals fulfilling different roles in relation to their capacities to benefit the group to which they belonged. The capacity to elaborate an abstract, symbolic worldview transformed land and resources into property and goods that “belonged” to one or another social unit, in relation to claims on the lands upon which they lived and from which they reaped the benefits. The written documents of the first literate civilizations, relating mainly to the quantification of goods, are revelatory of the effects of this transformational period of intensified production, hoarding and exchange. [Differences inherent to the kinds of resources available in environmentally diverse parts of the world solidified unequal access to the kinds of goods invested with “value” by developing civilizations and dictated the nature of the technologies that would be expanded for their exploitation](#). Trading networks were established and interconnectedness favored improvements in technologies and nascent communication networks, stimulating competition to obtain more, better, faster.

From this vast overview, we can now more clearly see how the emergence of the notion of “others” that arose in the later phases of the Lower Paleolithic was key for kindling the kinds of behavioral tendencies required for preserving the production-consumption mentality borne after the Neolithic and still in effect in today’s overpopulated capitalist world.

Evolution is not a linear process and culture is a multifaceted phenomenon, but it is the degree to which we have advanced technology that sets us apart from all other living beings on the planet. War is not pre-programmed in our species, nor is it a fatality in our modern, globalized existence. Archeology teaches us that it is a behavior grounded in our own manufactured perception of “difference” between peoples living in distinct areas of the world with unequal access to resources. A social unit will adopt warlike behavior as a response to resource scarcity or other

kinds of external challenges (for example, territorial encroachment by an 'alien' social unit). Finding solutions to eradicating large-scale warfare thus begins with using our technologies to create equality among all peoples, rather than developing harmful weapons of destruction.

From the emergence of early *Homo*, natural selection and technoselection have developed in synchronicity through time, transforming discrete structural anomalies into evolutionary strategies in unpredictable and interdependent ways. The big difference between these two processes at play in human evolution is that the former is guided by laws of universal equilibrium established over millions of years, while the latter exists in a state of exponential change that is outside of the stabilizing laws of nature.

Human technologies are *transitive* in the sense that they can be adapted to serve for different purposes in distinct timeframes or by diverse social entities. Many objects can be transformed into weapons. In the modern world plagued by terrorism, for example, simple home-made explosives, airplanes, drones, or vans can be transformed into formidable weapons, while incredibly advanced technologies can be used to increase our capacity to inflict desensitized and dehumanized destruction on levels never before attained.

Meanwhile, our advanced communication venues serve to share selected global events of warfare numbing the public into passive acceptance. While it is difficult to determine the exact point in time when humans selected large-scale warfare as a viable behavioral trait, co-opting their astounding technological prowess as a strategy to compete with each other in response to unprecedented demographic growth, there may yet be time for us to modify this trajectory toward resiliency, cooperation, and exchange.

By Deborah Barsky

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Amrus Natalsya: The Last, Farewell And Thank You



Amrus Natalsya - Image: YouTube

02-03-2024 ~ Legendary Indonesian artist Amrus Natalsya passed away at the age of 90 on January 31, 2024, at 7:30 p.m. The artist, who came of age just as his country emerged from colonialism, leaves behind nearly seven decades of creative work. His work bore witness to the tumultuous history of Indonesia's independence and unfinished revolution, and the long-held aspirations of the Indonesian people.

Amrus was born on October 21, 1933, in the North Sumatran town of Natal (from which his name "Natalsya" was taken). In 1954, after graduating high school, he entered the Academy of Fine Arts of Indonesia in Yogyakarta and began his lifelong commitment to his craft of painting and wood sculpting.

His artistic career was never an individual pursuit but was molded by the situation of his country, which had just gained formal independence on August 17,

1945. As the young Amrus was learning to create new worlds out of paint and wood, so too was the young nation of Indonesia trying to build an independent path out of the ravages of centuries of colonialism.

At a student exhibition on Javanese culture, Amrus's wooden sculpture entitled "A Forgotten Blind" was purchased by President Sukarno himself. Indonesia's first post-independence president is perhaps best known for convening the 1955 Bandung Conference. At Bandung, while Amrus was still at the Academy of Fine Arts, leaders of 29 newly or soon-to-be independent countries representing half of the world's population stood up together against imperialism.

Seeing the [August Revolution of 1945](#) as an incomplete one, many young artists like Amrus set themselves to the task of building an anti-imperialist and independent national culture that would pave the way to a socialist revolution. This was a period when organizations of Left artists were thriving. [Lekra](#) (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* or "The Institute for People's Culture") was one of these organizations, founded on August 17, 1950, just five years into Indonesia's independence.

Lekra was likely the largest cultural organization not affiliated with a country to have ever existed. As the cultural front of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI), it would grow over the next 15 years to over 200,000 members and, including its supporters, 1.5 million—until its life was cut short by the 1965 coup. The latter was the pretext for the persecution and killings of [millions of communists and sympathizers](#) in the months that followed.

Amrus was one of the many artists who were arrested in 1965, only to be released in 1973. Four years before his arrest, he had helped establish the Sanggar Bumi Tarung collective. Joining him were like-minded leftist artists, including Misbach Tamrin and Djoko Pekik. Forming part of Lekra, the collective and its members not only produced new artworks but also developed theory around their creations. One of the key principles that Lekra developed was *Turun ke bawah* or *turba* ("descend from above"), which was concretized in the first national congress of Lekra as a theory to guide the artist's work. This meant going down to the grassroots to work, eat, and sleep alongside laborers, landless peasants, and fishermen. They believed that only with the sharpened feeling and understanding of the life of the people—or *rakyat*—can an artist adopt a *kerakyatan* approach, which means creating artwork that serves the people.

Amrus was a firm believer in and practitioner of *turba*, which he saw as both a source of knowledge and an inspiration for creation. He lived among Central Javanese peasants. In one instance, after learning of a local land dispute that resulted in the deaths of eleven peasants, he created one of his most famous wood sculptures. The work was more than a beautiful object, it became a record of an event, an analysis of class struggle, and an embodiment of the Lekra principle *kreativitas individual dan kearifan massa* (“individual creativity and the wisdom of the masses”).

Most importantly, Amrus, like other political artists of his generation, defied the belief that art could be separated from politics. For Lekra artists, “politics was in command,” meaning that the foremost creative task was to create artwork that opposed imperialism and advanced the Indonesian revolution. But, for them, politics must always find its careful balance with artistry and aesthetics, and, like Amrus, an artist must be tirelessly committed to building his or her craft.

Amrus held his last solo [exhibition](#) in Jakarta in 2019. The rooms were filled with his signature “wood paintings,” which are intricate, colorful, and captivating. He created worlds with wood, three-dimensional scenes of everyday working-class life—a street market, a festival in Chinatown, a fishing village—where ordinary children, families, and people were always represented in multitudes. Every human being became a protagonist in the collective scenes that Amrus sculpted. As it was his last exhibition, the show was befittingly entitled, “*Terakhir, selamat tinggal dan terima kasih*” (“The last, farewell and thank you”).

Amrus’s passing marks the final chapter of over seven decades of making artwork that served his people and an Indonesia whose revolution never saw its completion. Likewise, it has been nearly six decades since the horrors of 1965, when both the PKI and Lekra were effectively erased from political life and living memory. A Lekra poet, Putu Oka Sukanta, said, “Formal organizations can disappear; party organizations can be abolished, but the spirit lives if it is right.” May the spirit of Amrus, of Lekra, of Bandung live on for the artists of today, still seeking the path of making artwork that serves the people.

By Tings Chak

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