

# Debt Forgiveness In The Bronze Age



*Michael Hudson - Source: michael-hudson.com*

*03-11-2024 ~ Whether in the realms of trade or agriculture, the operative principle was that debtors should not lose their economic liberty by being held liable for “acts of God.”*

When interest-bearing commercial and agrarian debt came to be incorporated into civilization’s economic structure in the third millennium BC, it was accompanied by clean slates that liberated bondservants and restored to debtors the rights to the crops and land that creditors had taken. By the second millennium BC in Babylonia these royal “restorations of order” became customary proclamations rescuing debtors whose family members had been reduced to bondage or who had lost their land to foreclosing creditors.

Anthropologists have looked at surviving tribal enclaves for ideas of how the Bronze Age takeoff may have been managed. But no tribal communities in today’s world possess the outward-reaching dynamics of Mesopotamia during its commercial takeoff, which occurred in many ways that are alien to modern ways of thinking. The documentation describes an approach operating on different principles from those that most modern observers assume to have been primordial and universal.

*The Character of Bronze Age Debt That Made Royal Clean Slates Necessary*

The dynamics of interest-bearing debt are different from those of tribal gift

exchange and related reciprocity obligations. Monetary credit arrangements bear a specific interest rate, and the date of payment is specified in advance rather than left open-ended. That requires debts to be recorded in writing and formally witnessed. Creditors may take foreclosure measures for non-payment, leading to the debtor's bondage or the loss of land rights.

Civilization's earliest written records, from Sumer in the third millennium BC, provide the best evidence for civilization's monetized debt relations "in the beginning." Two categories of debt existed, each associated with its own designated monetary commodity. Business obligations owed by traders and entrepreneurial managers were denominated in silver, above all those associated with foreign trade. The agrarian economy operated on credit denominated in barley units, assigned a value equal to the silver shekel in order to strike a common measure.

#### *Money Loans and Long-Distance Trade*

Rules for money loans described in scribal training exercises are found almost exclusively in the commercial sphere, especially in connection with long-distance trade. These loans were denominated in silver at the equivalent of a 20 percent annual rate of interest, doubling the principal in five years. Under normal conditions merchants were able to pay this rate to their creditors and keep a profit for themselves. Lenders shared in the mercantile risk, taking what in effect was an equity position. If caravans were robbed or ships and their cargoes lost at sea through no fault of the merchant, the debt was voided. There is no indication that payment of such mercantile debts led to problems requiring royal intervention.

Interest-bearing debt had initially arisen in the commercial sphere, taking the form of advances of assets by the large public institutions to entrepreneurial recipients, enabling them to make an economic gain in commerce and land management. But throughout all antiquity the most problematic debts disrupting the economy's fiscal and social balance were in the agrarian sphere. The original objective of charging interest to sharecroppers and other cultivators, however, can hardly have been to reduce them to bondage or to expropriate them from their self-support land. Their labor was needed for the agrarian economy to function.

#### *Agrarian Debt and Land-Rental Agreements*

Rural usury and the consequent widespread forfeiture of lands seem to have derived from advances of land, animals, and tools to sharecroppers (or their manager intermediaries) by temples and palaces. Sharecropping land and agricultural inputs were advanced for a rent of one-third of the (optimistically) estimated normal crop yield [1]. Interest was charged on arrears of this rent and other agrarian obligations not settled at harvest-time. The interest rate charged on these carry-over debts was the same as the sharecropping rental rate: one-third. Even arrears for unpaid debts for food or credit for other needs, such as priestly social services, were charged interest at the rate of one-third of the sum owed, simply mirroring the sharecropping rental return for creditors.

Arrears on agrarian obligations must have been infrequent, given the ever-present risk of crop failure preventing anticipated crops payments from being paid. Researchers [Alfonso Archi](#) and [Piotr Steinkeller](#) show that agrarian interest rates denominated in barley are attested by the middle of the third millennium BC. Officials, collectors for the palaces and temples, and merchants often acted in their own private capacity to make interest-bearing loans to cultivators in arrears for arrears of fees owed to the large institutions.

Rural usury thus emerged as well-to-do “big men” charged for arrears owed to the palace and temples, also lending food and other necessities to distressed cultivators. But agrarian interest-bearing debt, especially usury charged to borrowers in need, was always denounced as socially unfair. The question therefore arises as to just how such charges originated in the first place.

Few types of barley debt involved actual loans of money. What often are called “loan documents” should more literally be termed “debt records” or simply “notes of obligation.” Even in the commercial sphere with its debts denominated in silver, textiles, and other handicrafts that temple and palace workshops consigned to merchants for trade were recorded as debts. And when contractual work was to be performed, craftsmen gave customers tablets of obligation when they were given materials to make into a finished product.

The basic contractual formulae were well established by the end of the third millennium BC. Debt tablets state the sum owed, the due date, and the names of witnesses, with the appropriate seals. Additional stipulations might include the pledges involved, guarantees by individuals who stood surety, and the interest rate to be charged (often to accrue only if the debt were not paid on time). Some

documents were given a title citing the reason why the debt was established.

Agrarian debts mostly arose on rental agreements on land advanced by public institutions to intermediaries, who then subleased it to sharecroppers. Near East researcher [Johannes Renger describes](#) how land and workshops were administered directly by palace officials in Ur III (2111-2004 BC), but by the Old Babylonian period (2000-1600 BC) the palace franchised the management of its fields and date orchards, herds of sheep, brick-making workshops, and other handicrafts to “entrepreneurs” as *Palastgeschäfte*, “royal enterprises.” These managers were entitled to keep whatever they could produce or collect above and beyond the amount stipulated by their contract with the palace, but if the sums they collected fell short, their arrears were recorded as a debt and they were obliged to pay the difference out of their own resources.

The rate of interest payable by cultivators on such debt arrears was, as described above, one-third, being the same as the rate charged for advances of sharecropping land. Cultivators were also charged this one-third rate of interest for unpaid arrears of charges for advances to buy food or beer or meet emergency needs on credit. If they lacked the means to pay out of whatever assets they had, they had to work off the debt charges in the form of their labor service or that of their family members (daughters, sons, wives, or house-slaves), and ultimately they had to pledge their land rights.

### *How Agrarian Debt Transformed Land Tenure*

Barley debts had an annual character reflecting the crop cycle, falling due upon harvest. The accrual of such debts did not reflect a parallel growth in the cultivator’s ability to pay out of their harvest. Creditors obtained work at harvest-time by extending loans whose interest was paid in the form of labor service, as labor-for-hire was not generally available in this epoch.

In addition to their labor, debtors were obliged to pledge their family members as bondservants, followed by their land rights. Self-support land had traditionally been conveyed from one generation to the next within families, not being freely disposable outside of the family or neighborhood. Land transfers did occur when families shrank in size and transferred their cultivation rights to distant relatives or neighbors. But starting with rights to its crop usufruct, subsistence land was pledged and relinquished to outsiders after 2000 BC.

Debtor families initially were left on the land after they lost their crop rights, but were forced off the land as the new appropriators turned to less labor-intensive cash crops such as dates. Debtors often ended up as members of rootless bands or mercenaries after the middle of the second millennium BC. Instead of crop and land rights being lost only temporarily—being returned to their original owners by royal edicts that restored the *status quo ante* [2]—such forfeitures became irreversible by the first millennium BC, especially in Greece and Italy to the west.

### *The Logic of Canceling Rural Debts and Reversing Land Forfeitures*

An inability to meet obligations was inherent in the risks to which agrarian life was subject throughout antiquity: drought, flooding, infestation, or an outbreak of disease, capped by military disruptions. The problem confronting rulers was how to prevent debts from mounting up to the point where they threatened to expropriate the community's corvée labor and fighting force, dooming debt-ridden realms to defeat by outsiders. If the indebted rural citizenry were to survive along customary lines, priority could not be given to creditors.

Mesopotamian rulers countered the rural debt problem not by banning interest outright, but by annulling barley debts. To restore the means of self-support, rulers issued edicts "proclaiming justice," decreeing economic order and "righteousness." These proclamations date from almost as early as interest-bearing debt is attested, starting in Sumer with Lagash's rulers Enmetena circa 2400 BC and Urukagina and 2350 BC. Much as commercial debts were forgiven when the merchandise was lost through no fault of the merchant, [Hammurabi's laws \(§48\)](#) provided that cultivators would not be obliged to pay their crop debts if the storm-god Adad flooded their field and the crop was lost. The operative principle was that debtors should not lose their economic liberty by being held liable for "acts of God." And inasmuch as most barley debts were owed to the palace or royal officials, it was easy for rulers to cancel them. Letting officials and merchants keep the crops and labor of debtors would have deprived rulers of their ability to collect the customary royal fees and land rents for themselves and to obtain corvée labor and military service.

There was no modernist thought that the dynamics of interest-bearing debt might be self-stabilizing by letting "market forces" proceed unimpeded. There was no thought of [Adam Smith's Deist god](#) designing the world to run like clockwork, with checks and balances automatically maintaining equilibrium without any need for intervention by kings or priestly sanctions. Not even the wealthy voiced the

ideology of modern free-market fundamentalism arguing that society's wealth and revenue would be maximized by letting it pass into the hands of the richest and most aggressively self-serving individuals reducing hitherto free families to bondage.

*Notes:*

[1] Although not clear from the records, it seems likely that agricultural inputs were advanced as part of a "package" with the land for a total rental of one-third of the crop.

[2] The classic studies of these edicts are F.R. Kraus, *Königliche Verfügungen in altbabylonischer Zeit* (Leiden, 1984); Jean Bottéro, "Désordre économique et annulation des dettes en Mesopotamie à l'époque paléo-babylonienne," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 4 (1961): pp. 113-164; J.J. Finkelstein, "Ammisaduqa's Edict and the Babylonian 'Law Codes,'" *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, vol. 15 (1961): pp. 91-104; "Some New *misharum* Material and Its Implications," in *Assyriological Studies*, no. 16 (1965); *Studies in Honor of Benno Landsberger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday*: pp. 233-246; "The Edict of Ammisaduqa: A New Text," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale*, vol. 63 (1969): pp. 45-64; and the works of Igor Diakonoff and Dominique Charpin.

*By Michael Hudson*

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# The 2024 Election Is About The Rich Stealing From The Public



*Sonali Kolhatkar*

*03-09-2024 ~ A fight over extending provisions of Trump's tax cuts is at stake in November's election. Ultimately, the race is about money.*

There are many issues on the line this election year but one that gets little attention is former President Donald Trump's [2017 tax reform law](#) that cut taxes on the wealthiest Americans and corporations. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act permanently reduced the tax rate for big corporations from an already-low 35 percent to a ridiculously minuscule 21 percent. It also lowered tax rates for the wealthiest people from nearly 40 percent to 37 percent. Several provisions of that law are set to expire in 2025, making this November's Congressional and Presidential elections particularly [critical](#) to issues of economic fairness and justice.

A few months after Trump signed the bill, he [boasted](#), "We have the biggest tax cut in history, bigger than the Reagan tax cut. Bigger than any tax cut." It became a common refrain for him when touting his achievements. But, Trump, who was known for [breaking all records on lying](#) to the public while in office, conflated many different facts to come up with a positive-sounding falsehood in a nation already primed by the likes of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton to view taxation as anathema. Trump's tax cuts as a whole were the eighth largest in history. But his corporate tax cut was in fact the single largest reduction ever in that category.



Wealthy corporations have for years lobbied for and won so many carve-outs and loopholes to the U.S. tax system, and hidden so much money in offshore tax havens that their pre-2017 effective tax rates were already [far lower](#) than the official rates. Then, Trump lowered them even more. Imagine telling the American public that you are responsible specifically for the biggest tax cuts to the biggest corporations in U.S. history. It wasn't a good look. And so, he lied, saying that he signed history's biggest tax cut overall.

In the simplest terms, taxes are a way to pool collective resources so we can have the things we all need for safety and security. Progressive taxation is when wealthier individuals (and corporations) are taxed at higher-than-average rates because the richer one is, the less excess money one needs beyond one's basic necessities. Progressive taxation ensures that wealth inequality doesn't spiral out of control and helps ensure money that's being sucked upwards, gets redistributed downward. When wealthy elites pay fewer taxes, they are effectively stealing from the public.

Since the cuts have been in place, many studies have attempted to assess their impact on the U.S. economy. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities [concluded](#) in a March 2024 report that "[t]ogether with the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts enacted under President Bush (most of which were made permanent in 2012), [Trump's] law has severely eroded our country's revenue base."

Trump's law accelerated the [draining of our collective revenues](#) to fund the things we need. Even the fiscally conservative Peter G. Peterson Foundation [concluded](#) that, as a result of Trump's law, "The United States collects fewer revenues from corporations, relative to the size of the economy, than most other advanced countries."

Trump's tax cuts were quite literally [regressive](#), rewarding the already rich. A 2021 [ProPublica report](#) found that just one last-minute provision to the bill demanded by Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI) for so-called pass-through corporations benefited a handful of the wealthiest people in the nation: "just 82 ultrawealthy households collectively walked away with more than \$1 billion in total savings, an analysis of confidential tax records shows." It only cost about \$20 million in bribes to Johnson (i.e., donations to the Senator's reelection campaign) to enact this windfall.



It's no wonder that the [rich were thrilled](#) with Trump's presidency and that his virulent white supremacy and fascist leanings were not deal breakers.

It's also unsurprising that wealthy elites are [backing a second term](#) for Trump. They want an extension of those tax bill provisions that are expiring in 2025, and perhaps an even bigger tax cut, if they can get it. If those provisions are left to expire, people making more than \$400,000 a year—the [top 2 percent](#) of earners—will see an increase in taxation in 2025.

This is a demographic that is already prone to tax cheating given the [IRS's recent announcement](#) that 125,000 Americans making between \$400,000 and \$1 million a year have simply refused to file taxes since 2017.

If the GOP wins control of the Senate and the House of Representatives this fall, and if Trump beats President Joe Biden, those [cuts will become permanent](#). A GOP sweep in November will also usher in a new wave of threats to people of color, LGBTQ people, especially transgender communities, labor rights, and reproductive justice, as well as an [escalation](#) to the already-dire Israeli genocide in Gaza that [Biden is fueling](#). It's hard to believe but many Americans seem to have [forgotten](#) the horrors of 2016 to 2020.

But, at its heart, this election will be about money, for it will take a lot of money to fund the GOP's reelection campaigns in order for moneyed forces to ensure they retain control of *more* money—democracy, justice, and equity be damned.

For Trump, this is even more important given his legal challenges. He's relying on [small-dollar donations](#) from his base to cover his mounting legal fees and has had to [post a \\$91 million bond](#) to cover the fines he faces from a defamation lawsuit by E. Jean Carroll. The more desperate Trump gets in his bid to secure the White House, the more willing he and his party will be to sell the nation to the highest bidder. And, he will lie to the public by conflating tax cuts for the rich with tax cuts for all.

We ought to think of tax cuts in terms of public revenue theft. When the wealthy win lowered taxes, they are stealing money from the American public as a whole. As per the [U.S. Senate Budget Committee](#), permanently extending Trump's tax cuts will result in a loss of \$3.5 trillion in revenues through the year 2033. That's highway robbery.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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# The Great Archaeological Discovery Of Our Time

03-08-2024 ~ *An interview with renowned archaeologist Gary M. Feinman on the emergence of a global data set from our past that humanity can use to prosper—and avoid the biggest mistakes.*



The motives that drove archaeologists of the past included a thirst for glory, a

taste for treasure, and a desire to enshrine a new political era with the legitimacy of the ancient past.

Gradually, over the decades leading closer to ours, the discipline matured, gaining an ethical framework, and started asking questions about the societies and lifestyles of the people who had left their traces behind. Archaeologists began to compare their evidence to how we live now and increasingly started hunting for the origins of modern-day problems, from plagues and warfare to inequality. Archaeological research spread beyond the palaces and cities of a few civilizations to six continents, and the rapid growth of evidence in human origins produced a global outlook and a 6 million-year-long clock to record the gradual changes in the human story that led us to the present.

The diligent research of tens of thousands of archaeologists carefully documenting the past all over the planet has accumulated and crossed a new threshold leading to big implications: It's socially useful information that we can plug into improving our lives.

Our sample size of this greater past dwarfs by many magnitudes what we thought history used to be. Thanks to advances in technology, the data about the human story can integrate and interact with the records we keep today.

Many modern human problems are the result of "[evolutionary mismatch](#)"—our lifestyles are at odds with the biological capacities we developed and relied on for millions of years to get here—and range from [heart disease](#) to [various forms of addiction](#) and [ADHD](#). A synthesis of human origins research and our new understanding of human biology presents a powerful perspective and roadmap for dealing with some of our biggest challenges.

By combining that synthesis with the archaeological record's increasingly detailed knowledge of human settlement and state formations, from its origins to the present, we can build from a universalizing framework and global data set. This approach can better integrate the wider body of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews than the Western-based historical models and understanding of the human story that continues to hold sway.

One of the first to see the scale of this opportunity is archaeologist, researcher, and professor [Gary M. Feinman](#), MacArthur Curator of Mesoamerican, Central American, and East Asian Anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History in

Chicago. Feinman and a growing cast of colleagues have turned stereotypes about Mesoamerican societies on their heads—many were cooperative, relatively egalitarian—and they developed an impressive array of frameworks that allow us to compare different aspects of societies from various times and places, including ours.

Feinman has been a prominent advocate for developing better models to interpret the past and for the synthesis of information across time periods and regions of the planet. We are stronger when we can draw from a broader set of parameters, counterexamples, and nuances that prevent the common human instinct to take off on flights of fancy.

I thought readers could benefit from sharing our conversation about the great archaeological discovery of our time: the realization that this new data set is a powerful engine for the betterment of humankind.

*Jan Ritch-Frel:* Let's start with a great essay you wrote in 2023, "[Learning from History, If We Dare](#)." You wrote of a "treasure trove of information that just may guide us toward better futures." We're in an era, thanks to accumulations of evidence and technology, where humanity has a critical mass of history at its fingertips that it has never had before. Why is this significant?

*Gary M. Feinman:* As deep-time historians, we have finally gotten the volume and multiple scales of data that permit comparisons across different cultural periods, over long spans of time, and diverse social formations. In a real sense, through archaeology, we can now begin to assess a truly global historical record that is not narrowly restricted to just literate societies or the European past. For a long time, the classical Mediterranean world or medieval Europe—both known from texts—were used as proxies for humanity's past. Now, we know that is not appropriate, as our past as a species has neither been uniform nor linear.

At the same time, we now have models that help us identify and point ourselves toward understanding what underpins good governance, collective and cooperative behavior, as well as the causes of economic inequality and their alternatives. The social sciences have finally discarded 200-year-old approaches to understanding the past, such as the idea that the nations of Europe are the pinnacle and end-point product of steady human progress. A historical framework pegged to that framework makes useful comparisons across history almost

impossible.

*Ritch-Frel:* Do we have many examples of our leaders and governing circles daring to learn from anything other than cherry-picked history?

*Feinman:* The problem is that for centuries, scholars interested in drawing lessons from the historical past have looked principally to the classical world, Europe's recent past, or progressivist models that made unwarranted assumptions about human nature writ large. Many leaders who saw history through a straw have paid a heavy price.

More problematic are the scenarios that presume humans are perpetually selfish or that our leaders are always despotic or militaristic. These scenarios ignore the nuances of human nature, which include both the potential for selfishness and the ability to cooperate with non-kin at scales unsurpassed in the animal kingdom. Human behavior is always contingent on context, and alone, it cannot account for human history. Rather, we must look for the parameters, patterns, and variability in institutions and behavior that account for humanity's differences, diverse pasts, and changes.

Contrary to prevailing opinion, there is no end to the debates and lessons we can learn from history. Technologies change, but the basic socioeconomic mechanisms and relations that underpin human institutions have broad commonalities and structures. We know this in regard to scale and now another key dimension: the degree to which power is concentrated and distributed.

Of course, pure reliance on education and exposure to democratic institutions and good governance is not enough for these things to take hold. How institutions are financed makes a big difference, and if that does not change, then political realities will not either.

*Ritch-Frel:* Since we've never had so much history to learn from and make use of before, the reality is that the mechanisms for initiating better use of a more comprehensive history have to be produced. What are some of the key starting points?

*Feinman:* We first have to recognize that when explaining humanity's past, history itself matters. The path dependence, or sequence of changes, and existing structures matter. In other words, the social sciences are historical sciences—like

biology—but without general laws or mechanical explanations like there are in physics. Even though there are no universal laws of history, we can identify useful probabilities.

How do we do that? First, a comparative study of the past has to allow for variation in sequences, speed of development, and change. Then, as we compare different regional sequences of history, we can study the relations between historical factors and key variables under different parameters. One great advantage of history and archaeology compared to the recent past is that we know the outcomes. We already know what happened, and that gives us the opportunity to understand why.

As we build our understanding of humanity's global past, the strength of the relationships we see between institutions and factors such as population growth, nucleation, and scale will become stronger. Only through a broad comparative lens, made possible with archaeological data, can we construct a genuinely global archive of histories and heritage.

Then there's the social modeling question—a lot of historical error has been produced by seeing events as driven solely by the elites. High status generally may come with more clout than others have, but in social formations, there are many other groups and forces that have a hand in determining how events unfold. If we're interested in greater accuracy, we will include the vantages of the wider population and daily life.

Institutions are part of this mix: They perform functions based on earlier embedded history that people have to contend with and sometimes reform.

Most human settlements and social formations are open—population flow and change are near-continuous. This means that membership and affiliations in our communities and “societies” are generally in flux and have mechanisms that reflect that.

Cultural groups are not homogeneous, and cultural traits do not shift in unison. Some aspects of culture, like worldviews or visions of the universe, resist change. Others, such as how people organize politically or what they do for a living, may shift more readily.

This is where it becomes so critical that we can study the past in both granular

and scaled-up ways, using a range of new technologies we have available, from isotopes and DNA to satellite mapping.

The methodology of many research disciplines that use individuals as their key metric has continuously let us down the more our questions scale up—this applies to both behavioral ecology and classical economics. They are useful but conceptually inadequate when it comes to explaining the diversity and complexity of the deep past.

*Ritch-Frel:* Regarding the educational process for future leaders, where would you start?

*Feinman:* We need a curriculum for future leaders that broadens their perspective on human behavior and the global past. If we're going to enjoy the benefits of history, behavior in the contemporary West should not be isolated or considered distinct from the rest. A proper dose of a synthesis of anthropology, archaeology, and history will temper the curricula that prepare future leaders in ways that dampen modernist and Eurocentric biases.

The famous [Philosophy, Politics and Economics](#) (PPE) courses at Oxford and Cambridge, which have produced almost all the UK prime ministers for many decades, and the [Grand Strategy](#) courses taught at the elite campuses of the United States, are deeply imbued in these theories and presumptions.

*Ritch-Frel:* Do you think the PPE and the Grand Strategy crowd know they're holding onto an obsolete and reductive bag and will embrace history and biological sciences, or will this have to be a knife fight in the alley?

*Feinman:* In so many ways, recent policies and beliefs regarding inequality, globalism, democracy, and migration have been birthed from disciplines like economics, politics, and law, which are grounded in Eurocentric ideas and assumptions. These biases are not surprising since Western social scientific thought grew hand in hand with Euro-American colonialism and contemporary paths of economic development.

But now, our mission is to disentangle and refine our conceptual frames, drawing on and broadening it based on what we have learned. The data we have collected in archaeology, anthropology, and history demand an episode of “destructive science,” a new conceptual development that aligns with what we know, in which



we expand and integrate theoretical ideas drawn from economics and politics. And we can temper them with the diversity in practices and institutions that have been documented by archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists.

*By Jan Ritch-Frel*

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*Source:* Human Bridges

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# Empire Decline And Costly Delusions



*Richard D. Wolff*

03-07-2024 ~ When Napoleon engaged Russia in a European land war, the Russians mounted a determined defense, and the French lost. When Hitler tried the same, the Soviet Union responded similarly, and the Germans lost.

In World War 1 and its post-revolutionary civil war (1914-1922), first Russia and then the USSR defended with far greater effect against two invasions than the invaders had calculated. That history ought to have cautioned U.S. and European leaders to minimize the risks of confronting Russia, especially when [Russia felt](#)

[threatened](#) and determined to defend itself.

Instead of caution, delusions prompted ill-advised judgments by the collective West (roughly the G7 nations: the U.S. and its major allies). Those delusions emerged partly from the collective West's widespread denial of its relative economic decline in the 21st century. That denial also enabled a remarkable blindness to the limits that decline imposed on the collective West's global actions. Delusions also flowed from a basic undervaluation of Russia's defensiveness and its resulting commitments. The Ukraine war starkly illustrates both the decline and the costly delusions it fosters.

The United States and Europe seriously underestimated what Russia could and would do to prevail militarily in Ukraine. Russia's victory—at least so far after two years of war—[has proven decisive](#). Their underestimation stemmed from a shared inability to grasp or absorb the changing world economy and its implications. By mostly minimizing, marginalizing, or simply denying the decline of the U.S. empire relative to the rise of China and its BRICS allies, the United States and Europe missed that decline's unfolding implications. Russia's allies' support combined with its national determination to defend itself have so far defeated a Ukraine heavily funded and armed by the collective West. Historically, [declining empires](#) often provoke denials and delusions that teach their people “hard lessons” and impose on them “hard choices”. That is where we are now.

The economics of the U.S. empire decline constitutes the continuing global context. The BRICS countries' collective GDP, wealth, income, share of world trade, and presence at the highest levels of new technology *increasingly exceed* those of the G7. That relentless economic development frames the decline of the G7's political and cultural influences as well. The massive U.S. and European sanctions program against Russia after February 2022 has failed. Russia turned especially to its BRICS allies to quickly as well as comprehensively escape most of those sanctions' intended effects.

UN votes on the ceasefire issue in Gaza reflect and reinforce the mounting difficulties facing the U.S. position in the Middle East and globally. So does the Houthis' intervention in Red Sea shipping and so too will other future Arab and Islamic initiatives supporting Palestine against Israel. Among the consequences flowing from the changing world economy, many work to undermine and weaken the U.S. empire.

Trump's disrespect for NATO is partly an expression of disappointment with an institution he can blame for failing to stop empire's decline. Trump and his supporters broadly downgrade many institutions once thought crucially central to running the U.S., empire globally. Both the Trump and Biden regimes attacked China's Huawei corporation, shared commitments to trade and tariff wars, and heavily subsidized competitively challenged U.S. corporations. Nothing less than a historic shift away from neoliberal globalization toward economic nationalism is underway. An American empire that once targeted the whole world is shrinking into a merely regional bloc confronting one or more emerging regional blocs. Much of the rest of the world's nations—a possible “world majority” of the planet's people—are [pulling away from the U.S. empire](#).

U.S. leaders' aggressive economic nationalist policies distract attention from the empire's decline and thereby facilitate its denial. Yet they also cause new problems. Allies fear that economic nationalism in the United States already has or will soon adversely affect their economic relations with the United States; “America first” targets not only the Chinese. Many countries are rethinking and reconstructing their economic relations with the United States and their expectations about those relations' futures. Likewise, major groups of U.S. employers are reconsidering their investment strategies. Those who invested heavily overseas as part of the neoliberal globalization frenzies of the last half century are especially fearful. They anticipate costs and losses from policy shifts toward economic nationalism. Their pushback slows those shifts. As capitalists everywhere adjust practically to the changing world economy, they also quarrel and dispute the direction and pace of change. That injects more uncertainty and volatility into a thereby further destabilized world economy. As the U.S. empire unravels, the world economic order it once dominated and enforced likewise changes.

“Make America Great Again” (MAGA) slogans have politically weaponized U.S. empire's decline, always in carefully vague and general terms. They simplify and misunderstand it within another set of delusions. Trump will, he promises repeatedly, undo that decline and reverse it. He will punish those he blames for it: China, but also Democrats, liberals, globalists, socialists, and Marxists whom he lumps together in a bloc-building strategy. There is rarely any serious attention to the economics of the G7's decline since to do so would critically implicate capitalists' profit-driven decisions as key causes of the decline. Neither

Republicans nor Democrats dare do that. Biden speaks and acts as if the U.S. wealth and power positions within the world economy were undiminished from what they were across the second half of the 20th century (most of Biden's political lifetime).

Continuing to fund and arm Ukraine in the war with Russia, like endorsing and supporting Israel's treatment of Palestinians, are policies premised on denials of a changed world. So too are successive waves of economic sanctions despite each wave failing to achieve its goals. Using tariffs to keep better, cheaper Chinese electric vehicles off the U.S. market will only disadvantage U.S. individuals (via such Chinese electric vehicles' higher prices) and businesses (via global competition from businesses buying the cheaper Chinese cars and trucks).

Perhaps the greatest, costliest delusions that follow from a denial of years of decline dog the upcoming presidential election. The two major parties and their candidates offer no serious plan for how to deal with the declining empire they seek to lead. Both parties took turns presiding over the decline, yet denial and blaming the other is all either party offers in 2024. Biden offers voters a partnership in denial that the empire is declining. Trump promises vaguely to undo the decline caused by bad Democratic leadership that his election will remove. Nothing either major party does entails sober admissions and assessments of a changed world economy and how each plans to cope with that.

The last 40 to 50 years of the economic history of the G7 witnessed extreme redistributions of wealth and income upward. Those redistributions functioned as both causes and effects of neoliberal globalization. However, domestic reactions (economic and social divisions increasingly hostile and volatile) and foreign reactions (emergence of today's China and BRICS) are undermining neoliberal globalization and beginning to challenge its accompanying inequalities. U.S. capitalism and its empire cannot yet face its decline amid a changing world. Delusions about retaining or regaining power at the top of society proliferate alongside delusional conspiracy theories and political scapegoating (immigrants, China, Russia) below.

Meanwhile, the economic, political, and cultural costs mount. And on some level, as per Leonard Cohen's famous song, "Everybody Knows."

*By Richard D. Wolff*

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## **Speaking Papiamentu ~ On Re-Connecting To My Native Tongue**



03-07-2024 ~ It

starts at Schiphol, the Amsterdam airport. Before that, I am still immersed in my life in Jerusalem, busy with family matters and with grassroots activism against the Israeli occupation, while under pressure to finish grant proposals for the multicultural Jerusalem feminist center and art gallery where I work. I do not have time to connect emotionally to my trip, which still feels more like a yearly obligation to visit my elderly mother in Curaçao, when I would rather spend my precious vacation time trekking in Turkey or Nepal.

I usually have a few hours to kill, not enough to take the train into Amsterdam and visit old friends, which I do on my return trip when I have almost twelve hours between planes. And so, I silently wander around the airport, feeling a little like a spy, as I do in Jerusalem when I hear Dutch tourists speaking on the street, not suspecting that I, who probably look like a local to them, would understand. Not identifying myself as a speaker of Dutch, I take in the talk, smiling to myself, my little secret.

Here, in transit at the airport – a liminal space par excellence – I sometimes pretend to be a total stranger and address the salesperson in English. Perhaps that has more to do with the fact that I have not yet woken up my slumbering Dutch, or do not want to give away my unfamiliarity with the currency and other taken-for-granted facts of daily life in the Netherlands.

Or perhaps it is my resistance to being taken for an “*allochtoon*” – that polite way

they refer to the “not really Dutch,” who nevertheless hold Dutch citizenship – a category that groups together the mostly Moslem migrants and those of us, from the former Dutch colonies, blacks and whites alike. It is a label that had not yet been coined when my schoolteachers in Curaçao taught us to see Holland as our “mother country,” to sing *Wilhelmus Van Nassauwe*, the Dutch national anthem, on Queen Juliana’s birthday and to accept the Batavians, a Germanic tribe, as “our” ancestors. They say that when you count, you invariably give away your mother tongue – to this day I count not in Papiamentu, but in Dutch, so totally did I embrace the colonial language.

I was four when I learned Dutch in kindergarten. I remember the feeling of utter embarrassment when everyone expected me to speak Dutch with my cousins whose father was Dutch, and I ran away crying. I was losing the secure ground that Papiamentu provided, having to jump into the deep waters of a foreign language without a life-vest before I knew how to swim.

Very soon, however, I was speaking Dutch fluently, determined to excel in the language. I wanted to know it even better than the Dutch children whose parents came from Holland. I spoke Dutch with all my school friends, even though most of us spoke Papiamentu at home, including the handful of schoolmates from my own community, the Sephardic Jews who settled on the island in the seventeenth century, after fleeing the inquisition in Portugal and Spain.

In my elementary school days, the teachers forbade us to speak Papiamentu even in the schoolyard, claiming it was the only way to learn proper Dutch. And so, I read, wrote, and thought in Dutch – it became my first literary language, as Papiamentu was basically only a spoken language at that time. Now, as I write this in 2007, after forty-two years away from the Dutch speaking world, my Dutch gets rusty, until I find myself again surrounded by its sounds and it returns to me and becomes almost natural.





I roam around the halls of the airport's immense shopping center, not quite knowing what I am looking for. It is rather busy at the camera counter - I realize it is not a place to come with all my questions about which new camera to buy, my first digital SLR, after getting excited with the results of my digital point and shoot. Up to now, I had refrained from following the footsteps of all the other photographers in my family and never took my photography seriously. All that changed when I realized that editing my digital photos could finally give me the control over my images that I sought.

No, there is no point shopping here, I'd better look at cameras in Curaçao at a more relaxed pace, where the prices will certainly be lower. At least they used to be, when I was growing up and the island was still a duty-free paradise for American tourists.

Suddenly I remember that once, in these huge avenues of shops designed to entice travelers on the move, there used to be a stand with fresh, raw herring. I do not see it anymore, even though this is still the season of the celebrated first herring catch - the end of June. It fills me with longing, even though "new" herring was not something we ate at my home, it is what the "real Dutch" loved. Raw herring is a taste I developed later, and yet, it is so very much a taste from that past, perhaps from my acquired Dutch identity, and I feel that eating herring now would prepare me for my return.

I search for a shop that used to sell every possible variety of *drop* - salted licorice

- yet not daring to ask for it, perhaps so as not to expose my weakness, my secret addiction or not admitting it to myself. I have a good spatial memory - I remember you had to walk through a drug store to get to it, and it is a long way from the main shopping center with the largest stores. I find the drugstore, but now there is a cosmetics counter in the back. The millions of foreigners who pass through this airport obviously do not have the taste for the salty and pungent licorice, a taste that you only acquire if you grow up in Dutch culture, and so it was not profitable to maintain a shop that specializes in salted licorice.

Without quite making a conscious decision, I meander into a store where they sell Dutch delicacies - cheeses, fish, chocolates, biscuits. And there, on one of its shelves, I see a large box of salted licorice, which I buy immediately. I taste one, and as soon as it has melted in my mouth, I take another, and yet another. It is not that salted licorice reminds me, like the Proustian *petite madeleine*, of a lost childhood, rather, it reawakens my desire for more and more salted licorice. I can forget about licorice completely, go about my daily life in Jerusalem without knowledge or reminiscence of it, without even longing for it, in fact, I do not care much for sweets, and then, suddenly, as soon as I taste it again, I turn into a licorice addict. It is a lot easier not to eat it at all, than to eat it in moderation.

I start to move towards the gate, still sneaking my fingers into the box of licorice that is now in my backpack, hidden from my own conscience, as I suppress the certain knowledge that soon I will develop a bellyache. There is a long line outside the closed hall where a second hand-luggage check is held before you can enter it - much like the flights to Israel - but it is not weaponry that is being sought here, but drugs.

Most of the people in the line are Afro-Antilleans, seemingly living in Holland and going back to the islands for a family visit, sometimes accompanied by a Dutch spouse and children in all shades of skin color, wearing their best clothes. There is also an assortment of casually dressed Dutch tourists, mostly young couples out to spend their vacation in the tropics, invariably scuba diving at the magnificent coral reefs - something that I, as a native, never learned to do.

I begin to hear Papiamentu, a word here and there, a mother calling a child, snippets of a conversation. Somehow, I still feel a little like a foreigner, an outsider, an eavesdropper. But the reality of the past week, the tense work on the proposals is all gone, as if it never existed. Even my exasperation with the Israeli

occupation of Palestine has left me, as if a heavy burden has been lifted from my back. I am relieved not to have to think about it, for I am essentially an introspective person who realizes she must take a moral stand and become an activist, despite herself.

Slowly, my mouth full of licorice, I start to get that familiar sensation that I recognize from my previous border-crossings in Amsterdam. I cannot give it a name, it is a sense of strangeness, of looking at myself from the outside, this licorice-eating woman who is standing in line with other speakers of her mother tongue, when she lives in an everyday reality where nobody really knows her Papiamentu-speaking-self, where she has absolutely no occasion to let it out. I realize I am a stranger to those closest to me, and how this part of me, the woman-who-speaks-Papiamentu, is unknown to them, cannot be known to them.

There is a song by a popular Israeli singer who immigrated from Buenos Aires, that speaks of living his life in Hebrew and that he will have no other language – yet in the depths of the night, he still dreams in Spanish. I do not even dream in Papiamentu. This part of me is totally absent in my life in Israel, where I have nobody with whom to speak my language – as far as I know, I am the only Papiamentu speaking person in Jerusalem. And so, as soon as I return to Jerusalem, I stop living in Papiamentu. Nobody there knows that part of me.

When I asked a friend what it felt like to live in a country where French, her mother tongue, is not spoken, she answered that language is a home you can take with you to wherever you go. She has her French-speaking relatives and enjoys movies and books in French. For me, Papiamentu cannot possibly be a home away from home – without an expatriate community with which to connect, when my mother tongue has less than 300,000 speakers and none of them can be found in my immediate vicinity and when the phone connection to that distant country that nobody else here calls, has always been outrageously expensive.

I cannot even find solace in writing my mother tongue, living in a Papiamentu world of my own – since Papiamentu, at least for me, is not a written language. Its orthography was only formalized after I left the island, and I still find it strange to read, with its strict phonetic spelling, so that words originating from Spanish or Dutch are written in unfamiliar ways.

Feeling that Curaçao means nothing to those who have never lived there and who

do not know my language, I do not dwell on my background – I do not talk about where I come from. I am not willing to play the role of an exotic bird from a little island in the Caribbean. On the other hand, I refuse to be thrown into better-known categories, such as “Argentinean”, sharing little with South Americans – other than their music and dance – as I learned Spanish only in sixth grade, and unlike English, it always remained a foreign language to me.

And so, rather than allowing myself to feel the loneliness, I let that part of me go – I have erased it. It is a part of me that I do not speak *about*, if I cannot speak *from* it. I do not even miss my Papiamentu-speaking-self when away from the island. I do not live with a sense of loss, longing for a vanished childhood, for a hidden identity, for my language as a home – just like, in my daily life, I can completely forget about the pleasures of eating salted licorice. Until recently, I did not realize that I have been paying a price for the erasure of such a central part of who I am. Rather than being a stranger to those around me, I was a stranger to myself.

It is, perhaps, because I am not an exile that I do not feel that sense of loss – I have had the privilege to return to Curaçao almost every year since I have been living in Jerusalem. Or rather, I do not believe I deserve to indulge in a feeling of loneliness, after all, I left my native country voluntarily to study abroad, knowing I would never return to live there. I am not like the homeless, the displaced, the refugees who were forced to abandon their language.

Perhaps I can speak of a sense of self-exile, as I did not find my place in the complex colonial society of the island, with its racial, class and gender segmentation and hierarchy, its strict internal borders, where everyone had their place, and knew it. I did not want to accept the place I was assigned, as a female member of a privileged class, whose movements across these internal borders, unlike those of the men of that class, were heavily restricted.

At a young age, I became aware that each social group took for granted its own conception of the world, its own truth, which often was in contradiction to the others, and that kept them within their borders. And so, even when living on the island as a high school student, I had already learned to be an outsider – one who refused to see herself as embedded within the internal boundaries and tried to see beyond them.

I was like the *stranger*, a concept developed by the sociologist Georg Simmel

referring to someone who is both near and far, who is spatially inside a social group, yet at the same time, not quite a member of it – not committed to its norms, values, definitions of reality. It means being in liminal space between the groups, a position that frees you to take on a broader perspective, allowing you to be more “objective” (1). In other words, I was already a budding anthropologist, thriving on the threshold – the *limen* – between different ways of life.

It is this adaptability as an outsider that prepared me to cross cultural and language borders without experiencing culture shock – to adopt English with utmost ease, even before I went to college in the USA in the second half of the stormy sixties, where I found myself again in the liminal spaces of critical thought and the struggle for social justice, together with other foreigners and with students of color – a period that has consolidated my social consciousness.

A year or so after graduating, I had no difficulty adapting to life in Jerusalem, becoming fluent in spoken Hebrew when I moved here with the Jewish American man I met at the university in the Boston area and married, raising two children who have always insisted on speaking Hebrew with us.

My life in Jerusalem revolves around spoken Hebrew, while I also nourish my English, which has gradually replaced Dutch as my literary language. In fact, it is the only language in which I am able to write today. I never became proficient in written Hebrew and do not feel pressured to perfect it, another expression of my political ambivalence about living in Israel. I guess I take pleasure in being a perennial outsider.

I do not even have Israeli nationality, as the Dutch at the time did not permit dual citizenship, and that suits me well to this day. In 1970, when we first arrived in Jerusalem, I saw it as a bit of an adventure trip to a young, exciting country with an ethnically diverse, anthropologically intriguing society. The occupation of the Palestinians did not appear as malevolent as it became over the years. I am certain I would not have wanted to settle here today.



As I stand in line at the Amsterdam airport, catching a plane to Curaçao, I hear my mother tongue and smile at the people waiting to get on the plane, in acknowledgment that I understand. There is no sense of spying anymore; it is replaced by an eagerness to identify myself as a speaker of Papiamentu. I blend in with those waiting to be checked, voicing my agreement, of course, in Papiamentu, that the waiting is taking much too long.

Finally, on the plane, at my window seat, for which I always ask so I can see, and photograph, the island when we are landing, I realize I am shedding the layer of my everyday life in Jerusalem, like an overall, or rather a heavy spacesuit that cloaks my entire body and dictates my movement. It takes me a while to recognize that Papiamentu-speaking-self that is crammed inside, the way I think, twinkle my eyes, dance the *tumba* in Papiamentu. I regain a visceral quality, not just a language - all those things that get lost in translation.

An American friend, on hearing me switch to Papiamentu while on the phone with one of my cousins living in Boston, exclaimed in delight: “you become a totally different person when you speak Papiamentu!” It was a moment of deep recognition, of acknowledgement. She was the first person who was not from the island, who saw me, and her remark, like a paradigm leap, enabled me to see myself, and feel the person that I am, fully, with all my layers of language.

The flight is long, sometimes close to ten hours, or even more if there is a stopover in St. Maarten or Bonaire, two other Dutch islands in the Caribbean. I

try to sleep and seldom watch the movie, while I make a concerted effort to wean myself, temporarily, from my licorice habit. I speak Dutch and Papiamentu on the plane with the flight attendants or the people sitting next to me.

If I flew a different airline or route, say via Madrid and Caracas, the transition to my Papiamentu-speaking-self would be delayed. Perhaps it would be more abrupt. Would I then have time to reflect on this sense of strangeness that overcomes me at the Amsterdam airport? Perhaps, I would immediately adopt my Papiamentu-speaking bearing from the moment I land, as if I had never been away. I would not have the chance to see myself from the side, as a woman I do not know in my ordinary life. I would not feel the pain and loneliness of not being able to share such a vivid part of myself. I would not have come to writing this essay and realizing that this part of me is a stranger in my other life.

Who is this woman who becomes again a speaker of Papiamentu, when standing in line at the Amsterdam airport? There, I reconnect with an inner core that I have denied myself all those years. There is the music of the language – juicy words like *barbulète*, *kokolishi*, *warawara*, *maribomba* – just their sounds make me dance, take me back to a childhood rich in fantasy and folktales.

Yes, there is a sense of coming home when I speak Papiamentu – a mother tongue is, after all, a home, but not one I can take with me to places where there are no other speakers. It is a home in the sense that it makes me whole again, that fills me with the lifeforce of who I fully am.

From the airplane, I finally catch a glimpse of the island below. My heart begins to somersault, as more and more of my island becomes visible. Enthralled I begin to photograph. I have always loved to look down from airplanes, to see landscapes as gigantic, two-dimensional paintings. But most of all I love to look at Curaçao – seeing it not abstractly, but in its very physical manifestation – its large inner bays, shaped like fig-leaves with a narrow passage to the sea; the waves splashing against the rocks of its rugged north coast, and its flat plain of dry, red sands along the sea near the airport. I already feel myself there as I identify all the bays where I have been, or the hills I have climbed with my brother Fred. From the air, I get ideas for new places to explore, and of course, to photograph.





And now, a few years later, I realize that something is starting to happen to me when I photograph the island on my yearly visits to my mother. It is through my photography that I begin to look more closely at the island, becoming more and more connected. I discover that I can *transcend* the outsider stance that seems to be inherent in the act of taking pictures, meeting my subject on a deeper level without holding back, as I am thrown into the realms of the senses, the psyche, of history and memory.

And the more I open myself to the island's rhythms, sounds and textures through my lens, the harder it becomes to leave my language behind. To let the woman that I am on the island be erased.

Back in Jerusalem, I continue to work with the photos - enhancing the digital images and uploading them to my photo-website, while also creating photobooks. In other words, I am no longer cutting myself off from the island.

Sharing the images, I see that people really look, and I begin to realize that through my photographs, they can see a part of myself that I did not let them know before. I realize that with my photographs, I am speaking Papiamentu. That I am saying *kokolishi*, *maribomba*, *warawara*. And I am being understood.

#### *Notes:*

1. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger", Kurt Wolff (Trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950, pp. 402 - 408.

*Bio:*

*Rita Mendes-Flohr* (née Mendes Chumaceiro) is an ardent trekker, an exhibiting art photographer, and the co-founder, former director, and curator of a feminist art gallery. An eternal outsider, she was born in Curaçao, studied in Boston and lives in Jerusalem, feeling at home only in the in-between. Coming to writing at a later stage in her life, she has published a socio-architectural memoir/novel of her multicultural Caribbean childhood, (in Hebrew translation) inspired by her background in architecture and anthropology and writes introspective travel essays (in English) that she plans to publish as a book together with her photographs of those journeys. Her work can be viewed on her site: [www.ritamendesflohr.com](http://www.ritamendesflohr.com)



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# **The Remarkable Decline In The**

# Global North's Leadership



*Vijay Prashad*

03-05-2-24 ~ A group of young people in Paris are enjoying a drink in a café on an unseasonably warm evening. The conversation drifts into politics, but—as one young woman says—“Let’s not talk about France.” The others nod their assent. They focus on the U.S. presidential election, a slight bit of Gallic arrogance at play as they mock the near certainty that the main candidates will be President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump. Biden is 81 years old and Trump is 77. A Special Counsel in the United States has [called](#) Biden an “elderly man with a poor memory,” hardly the words required to inspire confidence in the president. Trying to defend himself, Biden made the kind of gaffe that is fodder for online memes and affirmed the report that he tried to undermine: he [called](#) President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt the “president of Mexico.” No new evidence is required, meanwhile, to mock the candidacy of Trump. “Is this the best that the United States can offer?” asks Claudine, a young student at a prestigious Parisian college.

These young people are aware enough that what appears to be comical on the other side of the Atlantic—the U.S. presidential election—is no less ridiculous, and of course less dangerous, in Europe. When I ask them what they think about the main European leaders—Olaf Scholz of Germany and Emmanuel Macron of France—they shrug, and the words “imbecilic” and “non-entity” enter the discussion. Near Les Halles, these young people have just been at a demonstration to end the Israeli bombing of the Rafah region of Gaza. “Rafah is the size of Heathrow Airport,” says a young student from England who is

spending 2024 in France. That none of the European leaders have spoken plainly about the death and destruction in Gaza troubles them, and they say that they are not alone in these feelings. Many of their fellow students feel the same way. The approval ratings for Scholz and Macron decline with each week. Neither the German nor the French public believes that these men can reverse the economic decline or stop the wars in either Gaza or Ukraine. Claudine is upset that the governments of the Global North have decided to cut their funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN Palestine agency, although another young person, Oumar, interjects that Brazil's President Lula has [said](#) that his country will donate money to UNRWA. Everyone nods.

A week later, news comes that a young soldier in the United States Airforce—Aaron Bushnell—has decided to take his own life, saying that he will no longer be complicit in the genocide against the Palestinians. When asked about the death of Bushnell, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre [said](#) that the President is “aware” and that it is a “horrible tragedy.” But there was no statement about why the young man took his life, and nothing to assuage a tense public about the implications of this act. Eating an ice cream in New York, U.S. President Joe Biden [said](#) that he hoped that there would be a ceasefire “by the beginning of the weekend” but then moved it to “by next Monday.” The meandering statements, the pledge for a ceasefire alongside the prevarication, and the arms deliveries do not raise the confidence of anyone in Biden or his peers in Europe. With the Emir of Qatar beside him, France's President Emmanuel Macron [called](#) for a “lasting ceasefire.” These phrases—“lasting ceasefire” and “sustainable ceasefire”—have been bandied about with these adjectives (lasting, sustainable) designed to dilute the commitment to a ceasefire and to pretend that they are actually in favor of an end to the war when they continue to say that they are behind Israel's bombing runs.

In London, the UK Parliament had a comical collapse in the face of a Scottish National Party (SNP) resolution for a ceasefire. Rather than allow a vote to show the actual opinions of their members, both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party went into a tailspin and the Parliament's speaker broke rules to ensure that the elected officials did not have to go on the record against a ceasefire. Brendan O'Hara of the SNP put the issue [plainly](#) before the Parliament before his words and the SNP resolution was set aside: “Some will have to say that they chose to engage in a debate on semantics over ‘sustainable’ or ‘humanitarian’ pauses,

while others will say that they chose to give Netanyahu both the weapons and the political cover that he required to prosecute his relentless war.”

Global desire for an immediate stop to the Israeli bombing is now at an all-time high. For the third time, the United States vetoed a UN resolution in the Security Council to compel the Israelis to stop the bombing. That the United States and its European allies continue to back Israel despite the widespread disgust at this war—exemplified by the death of Aaron Bushnell—raises the frustration with the leadership of the Global North. What is so particularly bewildering is that large sections of the population in the countries of the North want an immediate ceasefire, and yet their leaders disregard their opinions. One [survey](#) shows that two-thirds of voters in the United States—including majorities of Democrats (77 percent), Independents (69 percent), and Republicans (56 percent)—are in favor of a ceasefire in Gaza. Interestingly, 59 percent of U.S. voters say that Palestinians must be guaranteed the right to return to their homes in Gaza, while 52 percent said that peace talks must be held for a two-state solution. These are all positions that are ignored by the main political class on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The qualifications of “lasting” and “sustainable” only increase cynicism among populations that watch their political leadership ignore their insistence on an immediate ceasefire.

Clarity is not to be sought in the White House, in No. 10 Downing Street, or in the Élysée Palace. It is found in the words of ordinary people in these countries who are heartsick regarding the violence. Protests seem to increase in intensity as the death toll rises. What is the reaction to these protests? In the United Kingdom, members of parliament [complained](#) that these protests are putting the police under “sustained pressure.” That is perhaps the point of the protests.

*By Vijay Prashad*

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*Fragility of U.S. Power.*

Source: Globetrotter