

# Perceptions Of Social Dominance And How To Change Them



04-19-2024 - It's surprising that human infants [as young as 10 months](#) may be able to identify social rank. Research suggests that infants learn to distinguish who around them is dominant, using relative body size as a cue.

Experiments by University of Oslo psychologist Lotte Thomsen indicate that [infants may use the cue of body size to predict that a larger-sized object will prevail](#) over a smaller-sized object in a controlled visual representation. And, a Yale University research team found that [infants as young as three months seem to be able to recognize that voice pitch correlates with body size](#), with smaller organisms producing a higher pitch sound.

## *How Do We Know What Infants Think?*

Researching and evaluating infant perceptions is complex. Experiments assessing infant reactions involve familiarizing them with an animated visual object, such as a colored block, and then varying its relationship with another similar block.

When the expected relationship is reversed, in what's called a "violation of expectation," researchers measure how long the infant gazes at the anomalous image, as compared to the length of its gaze on an expected image. The longer gaze at the unexpected image is interpreted as meaning that the infant recognizes something is not right.

For example, to assess the perception of dominance, [Thomsen and an international team of researchers](#) showed infants animations depicting a small and a large block moving toward each other, where one or the other would bow and give way to avoid a collision. In a series of experiments, they found that the infants gazed longer when the larger object yielded to the smaller one, suggesting that this was not what the infant expected.

This line of research suggests that by one year of age, infants may be able to recognize that size is related to strength and dominance, that the bigger size will prevail in a conflict situation, and that this holds for other conflict situations. These experiments conclude that knowledge of cues about perceiving social hierarchy develops very early in the human organism, and continues to develop through childhood and adolescence.

### *Other Species Do It Too*

Studies comparing the hierarchical structure of human societies to those of other species suggest that “[there may be no fundamental discontinuities between social structure in humans and animals](#).” Social hierarchy in animal groups is nearly ubiquitous: Non-human primates, insects, birds, and fish do it.

Social groups of non-human species form hierarchies to help protect the group from predators, reduce aggression within the group, find and allocate resources, and ensure that those at the top of the hierarchy can reproduce successfully—all of which is thought to contribute to the well-being of the group as a whole.

Social grooming is important in holding primate groups together by encouraging bonding. Studies show that primate [grooming triggers the brain to release endorphins, which promote a sense of well-being and relaxation](#) and at the same time create a sense of mutual trust. Grooming among primates can also be used as [a form of conflict resolution and reconciliation](#). It’s suggested that the time-consuming grooming necessity limits the upper limit of primate group size to about 50.

Humans replicate the grooming effect of stimulating endorphins, Oxford University psychologist R. I. M. Dunbar suggests in a 2020 article, by creating a “form of [grooming-at-a-distance](#),” which includes laughter, singing, dancing, storytelling, and communal eating and drinking. With humans as with primates, the endorphin-releasing practices allow the group members to know each other and predict the future behavior of group members.

### *Neural Connections*

The neural connections to status and status perception are an ongoing area of research in both primates and humans. Temple University psychology researchers suggest that there is an “[evolved origin for attaining high status and recognizing status in others](#)” in both non-human primates and human adults.

Using MRI imaging, scientists looking at the brain areas related to the perception of social status and dominance have identified regions of the brain and neurotransmitters that are activated when humans or primates are involved in perception of dominance in a relationship. Research results vary by experimental setup, but the [studies have consistently identified the same specific brain areas, including the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex](#), as being part of the neural network involved.

Future research, perhaps aided by improved imaging and detecting techniques, is needed to create a more precise picture of how the brains of humans and primates are involved in social status perception, the researchers conclude. What is known is that the perception of dominance is learned in human infants and continues to develop in complexity as the individual ages and gains more social experience.

### *Good or Bad Hierarchy?*

If hierarchical organization is actually innate and even necessary for human institutions, the question is then how to make use of this reality.

Hierarchies can be characterized as benevolent or autocratic, based on whether they primarily benefit the general good, those at the bottom and middle, or the few at the top. Looking at human history, the hierarchical societies that come to mind are “bad” in the minds of most people. Think of dictators like Stalin or Hitler, or more modern ones.

But, as [one research team argues](#), “Equality is a mirage.” To function well, a large-scale society needs a system of organization that involves hierarchies, according to political theorists at the University of Hong Kong, Wang Pei and Canadian Daniel A. Bell. They point to the failure of China’s Cultural Revolution, as an example of failed “equality.” Instead, they propose:

“The choice is not between a society with no hierarchies and one with hierarchies, but rather between a society with unjust hierarchies that perpetuate unjust power structures and one with just hierarchies that serve morally desirable purposes.”

The question becomes not a choice between equality or hierarchy, but how to shape a hierarchical society into one that promotes more equality.

### *The Consequences of Inequality*

Equality is now a hot topic in society, whether talking about gender, religion, race, income, or education. Generally, the arc of political development is bending toward more equality, and away from traditional inequalities such as relegating women to a lower rank.

The question of equality isn't an abstract one. Perception of lower social status has consequences for mental and physical health and well-being, as well as life expectancy, for humans and animals. As a [2019 anthropological study of rhesus macaques reports](#), “[S]ocial adversity gets under the skin over long time spans.” Writing in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Sciences, an international team of researchers concluded that social adversity affects the immune system in female macaques, with some variation, such as type of pathogen, length of exposure, and degree of social adversity.

Scores of studies document the adverse effects of the *perception* of low socioeconomic status in human beings. For example, a [meta-analysis of 44 studies of teenagers 12-19](#), conducted by researchers at Concordia University in Montreal, found that lower self-perceptions of status correlate with worse health. Interestingly, the study suggests that objective indicators such as wealth were not as relevant to health as subjective perceptions of status.

[One very specific study published in Health Psychology in 2008](#) looked at the objective socioeconomic status and subjective perception of status and how each was affected by the common cold virus. The researchers involved 193 healthy U.S. adults, who were first ranked objectively and subjectively on social status indicators. After six weeks, the study volunteers were screened for any cold symptoms and if they had none, they were exposed to one of two varieties of a common cold virus. Over the next few days, the volunteers were monitored for cold systems.

The surprising bottom line: Subjectively perceived lower social status correlated with greater susceptibility to catching a cold. Objective lower social status did not have this association.

### *Toward Better Health and Happiness*

As [University of Toronto psychologist Marc A. Fournier explains](#), “Income inequality casts a pall over the quality of societal relations, such that everyone living in a more stratified society is less likely to trust others or become involved

in community life.” Further, those who subjectively rank themselves with lower social status, as many different studies show, are more likely to have lower levels of happiness.

The remedies for creating more happiness, and consequently better health, are not mysterious, just an ongoing challenge. Income redistribution is one sure measure, for example, through progressive taxation. [A few studies covering several countries](#) over a few decades have documented that this decreases income inequality and increases happiness.

Other measures also seem self-evident. Are there opportunities in society for advancing one’s status? How can public education systems foster such opportunities? How does the education system prepare young individuals to have more mastery over their lives? How do social institutions create more opportunities for positive community relationships?

Perceptions of dominance and social rank seem to begin very early in life, and later self-perceptions of lower rank, whether or not accurate, affect health and happiness. The open questions are how innate such perceptions are, and how society’s approach to equality can help change these perceptions for the better.

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# Nobody “Earns” A Billion Dollars. We Need A Wealth Tax



*James K. Boyce - Photo by Matthew Cavanaugh*

04-19-2024. *Economist James K. Boyce analyzes new data on US disparities and frames environmental degradation as a class issue.*

U.S. billionaires have [seen their wealth nearly double](#) since the Trump tax cuts took effect in 2017. In the meantime, the planet is getting hotter and the [richest 1 percent of humanity accounts for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66 percent](#). Indeed, the interconnection between climate change and economic inequality has emerged as a central theme in serious economic analyses and a focal point of climate activism.

In the exclusive interview for *Truthout* that follows, progressive political economist James K. Boyce — who has just received the inaugural [Global Inequality Research Award](#) from Sciences Po and the World Inequality Lab for his groundbreaking work in the field of economic and environmental inequalities — explains the main causes behind the broad trend of rising inequality in the U.S. and globally, and how it is linked to environmental degradation.

However, as Boyce makes clear, environmental degradation does not impact everyone equally. Environmental degradation is a class issue as it disproportionately affects the poor, and it is the rich that benefit from environmentally harmful activities. Nonetheless, in spite of the challenges facing us in addressing climate change and inequality, there are economic instruments

available to us that, if implemented, will create more equal societies and secure at the same time a sustainable future. This is especially critical as fossil fuel industry bosses are pulling out all stops to convince the world that it should [“abandon the fantasy”](#) of transitioning away from dirty energy.

[Boyce](#) is professor emeritus of economics and a senior fellow at the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is the author, among many other works, of [Economics for People and the Planet: Inequality in the Era of Climate Change](#).

*C.J. Polychroniou: I'd like to start by asking you to comment on the latest report by the nonprofit [Americans for Tax Fairness](#) showing that the combined wealth of U.S. billionaires has nearly doubled since 2017, hitting a record of \$5.8 trillion. In light of this report, why does a wealth tax make sense in the effort to reduce inequality?*

*James K. Boyce:* The first thing to say is that nobody “earns” a billion dollars. It’s simply not possible to make that much money by working for it, no matter how hard you work or how smart you are. So we have to ask, where does this enormous wealth come from?

In 2023 there were 735 billionaires in the U.S. (“[a mere 735](#),” as *Forbes* put it). If their wealth rose by \$2.9 trillion in the past six years, that means they each pocketed on average \$39 billion — more than \$6.5 billion apiece per year.

To which one might respond: *WTF??! How did they do this?*

There are three ways a person can accumulate enormous wealth. Winning the lottery is not one of them — the lottery is peanuts compared to the sums we’re talking about here. One way is by outright plunder: taking money and resources from other people, either by naked expropriation (like seizing control of lands and minerals) or monopolization (hence the U.S. term “[robber barons](#)”) or [grand corruption](#). The second is by [inheritance](#). If kids could choose their parents, we might say, ‘Well done, junior, you deserve to be rich because you made such a smart choice.’ But kids don’t choose their parents: the inheritors of great fortunes do nothing to deserve them. The third way is through the income spun off by wealth itself — profits, dividends, interest, rents, capital gains — what economists call “returns to capital” as opposed to returns to labor. The real problem is not that wealth grows over time. It’s that so few people have so much of it, while so



many people have so little.

The toxic concentration of wealth in the U.S. and many other countries is not only an economic problem. It is a political problem, too. Disproportionate wealth translates into disproportionate political power, and this corrodes democracy. As inequality widens, the ultra-rich become more able and willing to elevate their own self-interest above the public interest. One obvious way they do so is by cutting their own taxes while increasing taxes (and cutting benefits) for everyone else.

[Wealth taxes](#) could be a powerful tool to address rampant inequality. The idea here is to tax not just income (the annual flows of money a person receives) but also accumulated wealth held as financial assets, real estate, and so on, above the threshold level that demarcates the ultra-rich. In practice, only a handful of countries have wealth taxes, and the U.S. is not one of them. Moreover, where wealth taxes do exist, their rates are typically modest — less than 2 percent, less than the average return to capital. This slows the rise of inequality but does not arrest it. Considerably higher rates would be needed to have a significant impact.

In addition to the wealth tax, there are other policies to combat toxic inequality. We need well-designed and well-enforced laws against plunder, including plunder in its latest guise: corporate smash-and-grab operations once called leveraged buyouts, that now go by the more innocuous-sounding name of “[private equity](#).” We need laws against organized criminality that masquerades as legitimate business. We also need hefty inheritance taxes on outsized estates of more than, say, \$10 million. And we need to remedy the perverse situation today in which billionaires pay lower rates of income tax than people who work for a living (Exhibit A is our [tax-dodger-in-chief](#)). Among other things, it is bizarre that unearned capital gains are taxed at a [lower rate](#) than hard-earned income.

*Economic inequality has been shown to be extremely toxic to individuals and society. In the U.S. the [top 1 percent own more wealth than the entire middle class](#). What are the main causes of inequality in today's world, and why does the U.S. have such a high level of inequality?*

The snowball effect is a big part of the problem. In the upper tier of the economic spectrum, wealth generates income, and income in turn generates more wealth. The rich make money even when they sleep. Their economic advantages are



compounded by their political influence over the government. At the opposite end of the economic spectrum, the poor make money only when they work. Even then, they often don't make much. Unless some kind of countervailing force is present, inequality tends to widen over time — an accumulation of advantages and disadvantages.

If the economy were a self-contained perpetual-motion machine, economics would be a dismal science indeed. But it is not. Every economy operates within the broader sphere of society and politics, making it possible not only to hold inequality in check but also to reverse it. Examples of countervailing forces include public education and trade union organization as well as progressive taxation.

Countervailing forces are not just a hypothetical possibility; they are a core feature of the way that societies work. From the 1940s until the 1970s, for example, inequality declined in the United States, an era sometimes called the "Great Compression." This did not happen by accident, nor as a result of unfettered market forces. It was the result of political mobilization and public policies. But just as there is no iron law of history that inequality will increase inexorably, there is no law that it will be curtailed. Everything depends on the balance of power.

Many factors have contributed to the widening inequality seen in the U.S. since the 1970s. A concerted offensive mounted by the rich — foreshadowed by the infamous [Powell memo](#) written for the Chamber of Commerce in 1971 by soon-to-be Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell — was an important piece of the story. So, too, was the Vietnam War, which not only polarized the nation but also squandered money as well as lives, precipitating the nation's growing dependence on capital inflows from abroad. This in turn led to chronic trade deficits and a hollowed-out manufacturing sector. These changes were accompanied by the ideological ascendancy of free-market fundamentalism. We are still living with the consequences today.

*There is a school of thought in economics which insists that economic inequality isn't really a problem and that, in fact, it is a healthy thing. Is inequality some sort of a delusion? Is the battle against economic inequality based on biases and misconceptions?*

Inequality is no illusion — it is all too real. The school of thought to which you refer contends that inequality, however disagreeable, promotes efficiency, higher savings and investment, and faster growth, with benefits that “trickle down” to the middle class and even the poor. And because, in this view, you can never have too much of a good thing, the more inequality the better.

This theory never had much empirical support, but in the economics profession it was elevated to a dogma, particularly in the Reagan-Thatcher years, and it still plays a prominent role in propaganda on behalf of the rich. To its credit, the economics profession has largely changed its thinking in the past couple of decades. Today extreme inequality is widely considered to be a curse rather than a blessing, above all because it empowers the rich to pursue relentlessly their own self-interest at the expense of the public interest. This shift in thinking was propelled in part by the experience of East Asia, where thorough land reforms after World War II brought about a large-scale redistribution of wealth and power, and this set the stage for the region’s rapid and relatively inclusive economic growth. In part, the shift also reflected the sluggish economic performance and persistent poverty in countries like the U.S. where inequality was rising. It turns out that economists are not entirely impervious to the evidence that is before their eyes.

*Research has shown that inequality also harms the environment, and there are studies showing that global warming itself has also worsened global economic inequality. Can you discuss the inequality-environment nexus, since this has been the focus of much of your own work?*

Environmental harms do not impact everyone equally. And the benefits from actions that pollute the air and water, deplete natural resources, and destabilize the climate are not shared equally, either. The distribution of power — both political power and purchasing power — shapes who gets what, who reaps net benefits and who bears net costs.

Environmental costs are borne disproportionately by those who lack sufficient political power to resist having them imposed on their communities, and who lack sufficient purchasing power to move elsewhere or to insulate themselves from the damage by buying air conditioners, bottled water, insurance, and so on. Environmental destruction is not like rain that falls equally on everyone’s house. The harms are not randomly distributed. Instead, we find disparities that mirror

economic and political inequalities. In fact, they reinforce them by sapping the health, wealth and productive capacities of the victims.

Meanwhile, the benefits from environmentally harmful activities accrue disproportionately to the rich. There are two reasons for this. First, they receive an outsized share of corporate profits for the firms responsible for pollution, natural resource depletion and climate change. Second, they consume an outsized share of the goods and services whose prices are lowered by the exclusion of environmental costs.

Given the disjuncture between who benefits and who bears the harms, societies with wider inequalities of wealth and power tend to experience [more environmental degradation](#), for the simple reason that those on top are better able to pursue their self-interest at the expense of everyone else.

*Does this mean that environmental degradation is a class issue?*

Absolutely. This is not to say that it's only about class, especially if "class" is construed narrowly to refer to wealth or income or occupation alone. It is also about the other correlates of power. It's about race, ethnicity and gender. It is about regional and international disparities, as seen when the Global North propels pollution and resource depletion in the Global South. And it is about future generations who are not here to defend themselves: it is a moral issue, too.

*How can we jointly tackle climate change and inequality in a world where money and power set the policy agenda?*

I do not need to tell you or your readers that this is a difficult task. But that does not mean it is hopeless.

Along with historic challenges, the current historical juncture creates new opportunities to attack some of the key foundations of oligarchic rule. Both climate change and inequality expose the blatant disconnect between the priorities of ruling elites and the interests of ordinary people, and this fuels demands for change. The question is whether the resulting opening will lead to a more democratic distribution of wealth and power or instead to the rise of authoritarian leaders who promise heaven but deliver hell on Earth.

An example of the upside potential is the opportunity to transform the biosphere's

limited capacity to absorb carbon emissions from an open-access resource into universal property. Open access refers to a complete absence of property rights. At first glance, this may seem attractive to critics who equate property with theft. But as climate change shows, open access simply opens the door to another kind of theft: the exploitation and abuse of resources by the rich and powerful at the expense of everyone else.

[Universal property](#) would resolve this problem not by the conventional routes of privatization or state ownership, but instead by turning planet Earth's limited carbon-absorption capacity into inalienable property that belongs equally to all. In practical terms, this could be done by putting a hard cap on the use of fossil fuels that phases them out over time, auctioning the permits to bring the allowed amounts of fossil carbon into the economy, and returning the revenue from these auctions directly to the public in the form of equal per-person payments. This idea — sometimes called “cap-and-dividend” — is not a utopian fantasy. It has been incorporated in the U.S. in the [Healthy Climate and Family Security Act](#) introduced by Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Maryland) and Congressman Donald Beyer (D-Virginia). If and when it once again becomes possible to pass serious climate legislation in Washington, it could become a reality.

Other natural resources, like minerals and timber, could be turned into universal property, too — treated as gifts of nature that belong equally to all, with their use generating cash dividends for every member of society. The realm of universal property could also include assets we have created as a society. For example, financial transaction taxes could be another source of dividends, reflecting the value of the legal and institutional architecture that underpins banking systems. The basic principle governing universal property is that the users pay according to their use of the resource and the income is paid equally to all as co-owners.

In other important ways, as well, tackling climate change can reduce inequality. The shift to clean and renewable energy will undercut the wealth and power of the fossil fuel industry, itself a key locus of inequality. This is why oil and gas barons deride phasing out fossil fuels as a [“fantasy,”](#) even as studies of the “mortality cost of carbon” warn that their greenhouse gas emissions ultimately could cause [millions of deaths](#) worldwide.

Curbing fossil fuels also reduces emissions of nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxides, fine particulates, and other hazardous air pollutants that [kill and sicken millions](#) and

disproportionately harm low-income people and disadvantaged communities. Employment creation sparked by the clean energy transition can generate millions of new jobs, improving the incomes and bargaining position of labor. Universal property would add a powerful element to this mix by contribution to a more equitable distribution of assets.

None of this is impossible. But none of it is inevitable, either. The only way to curb climate change and reduce inequality is for people to organize to make it happen. That may seem like a tall task, but it is precisely how in past generations we won slavery abolition, public education, women's suffrage, civil rights legislation and democracy itself. We are not the first generation to face historic challenges, and we can take heart from the victories of those who came before us.

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# Property And Debt In Ancient Rome



*Roman Empire - Source:  
en.m.wikipedia.org*

*04-16-2024 ~ The Roman concept of property is essentially creditor-oriented. As Rome's power grew, practices quickly became predatory.*

Traditional societies usually had restrictions to prevent self-support land from being alienated outside of the family or clan. By holding that the essence of private property is its ability to be sold or forfeited irreversibly, Roman law removed the archaic checks to foreclosure that prevented property from being concentrated in the hands of the few. This Roman concept of property is essentially creditor-oriented, and quickly became predatory.

Roman land tenure was based increasingly on the appropriation of conquered territory, which was declared public land, the *ager publicus populi*. The normal practice was to settle war veterans on it, but the wealthiest and most aggressive

families grabbed such land for themselves in violation of early law.

### *Patricians Versus the Poor*

The die was cast in 486 BC. After Rome defeated the neighboring Hernici, a Latin tribe, and took two-thirds of their land, the consul Spurius Cassius proposed Rome's first agrarian law. It called for giving half the conquered territory back to the Latins and half to needy Romans, who were also to receive public land that patricians had occupied. But the patricians accused Cassius of "building up a power dangerous to liberty" by seeking popular support and "endangering the security" of their land appropriation. After his annual term was over he was charged with treason and killed. His house was burned to the ground to eradicate memory of his land proposal.

The fight over whether patricians or the needy poor would be the main recipients of public land dragged on for twelve years. In 474 the commoners' tribune, Gnaeus Genucius, sought to bring the previous year's consuls to trial for delaying the redistribution proposed by Cassius. He was blocked by that year's two consuls, Lucius Furius and Gaius Manlius, who said that decrees of the Senate were not permanent law, "but measures designed to meet temporary needs and having validity for one year only." The Senate could renege on any decree that had been passed.

A century later, in 384, M. Manlius Capitolinus, a former consul (in 392) was murdered for defending debtors by trying to use tribute from the Gauls and to sell public land to redeem their debts, and for accusing senators of embezzlement and urging them to use their takings to redeem debtors. It took a generation of turmoil and poverty for Rome to resolve matters. In 367 the Licinio-Sextian law limited personal landholdings to 500 *iugera* (125 hectares, under half a square mile). Indebted landholders were permitted to deduct interest payments from the principal and pay off the balance over three years instead of all at once.

### *Latifundia*

Most wealth throughout history has been obtained from the public domain, and that is how Rome's latifundia were created. The most fateful early land grab occurred after Carthage was defeated in 204 BC. Two years earlier, when Rome's life and death struggle with Hannibal had depleted its treasury, the Senate had asked families to voluntarily contribute their jewelry or other precious belongings to help the war effort. Their gold and silver was melted down in the temple of



Juno Moneta to strike the coins used to hire mercenaries.

Upon the return to peace the aristocrats depicted these contributions as having been loans, and convinced the Senate to pay their claims in three installments. The first was paid in 204, and a second in 202. As the third and final installment was coming due in 200, the former contributors pointed out that Rome needed to keep its money to continue fighting abroad but had much public land available. In lieu of cash payment they asked the Senate to offer them land within fifty miles of Rome, and to tax it at only a nominal rate. A precedent for such privatization had been set in 205 when Rome sold valuable land in the Campania to provide Scipio with money to invade Africa.

The recipients were promised that “when the people should become able to pay, if anyone chose to have his money rather than the land, he might restore the land to the state.” Nobody did, of course. “The private creditors accepted the terms with joy; and that land was called *Trientabulum* because it was given in lieu of the third part of their money.”

Most of the Central Italian lowlands ended up as latifundia cultivated by slaves captured in the wars against Carthage and Macedonia and imported *en masse* after 198. This turned the region into predominantly a country of underpopulated slave-plantations as formerly free peoples were driven off the land into overpopulated industrial towns. In 194 and again in 177 the Senate organized a program of colonization that sent about 100,000 peasants, women and children from central Italy to more than twenty colonies, mainly in the far south and north of Italy.

### *The Gracchi and the Land Commission*

In 133, Tiberius Gracchus advocated distributing *ager publicus* to the poor, pointing out that this would “increase the number of property holders liable to serve in the army.” He was killed by angry senators who wanted the public land for themselves. Nonetheless, a land commission was established in Italy in 128, “and apparently succeeded in distributing land to several thousand citizens” in a few colonies, but not any land taken from Rome’s own wealthy elite. The commission was abolished around 119 after Tiberius’s brother Gaius Gracchus was killed.

### *Civil War and Landless Soldiers*

Appian describes the ensuing century of civil war as being fought over the land and debt crisis:

“For the rich, getting possession of the greater part of the undistributed lands, and being emboldened by the lapse of time to believe that they would never be dispossessed, absorbing any adjacent strips and their poor neighbors’ allotments, partly by purchase under persuasion and partly by force, came to cultivate vast tracts instead of single estates, using slaves as laborers and herdsmen, lest free laborers should be drawn from agriculture into the army. At the same time the ownership of slaves brought them great gain from the multitude of their progeny, who increased because they were exempt from military service. Thus certain powerful men became extremely rich and the race of slaves multiplied throughout the country, while the Italian people dwindled in number and strength, being oppressed by penury, taxes and military service.”

Dispossession of free labor from the land transformed the character of Rome’s army. Starting with Marius, landless soldiers became *soldati*, living on their pay and seeking the highest booty, loyal to the generals in charge of paying them. Command of an army brought economic and political power. When Sulla brought his troops back to Italy from Asia Minor in 82 and proclaimed himself Dictator, he tore down the walls of towns that had opposed him, and kept them in check by resettling 23 legions (some 80,000 to 100,000 men) in colonies on land confiscated from local populations in Italy.

Sulla drew up proscription lists of enemies who could be killed with impunity, with their estates seized as booty. Their names were publicly posted throughout Italy in June 81, headed by the consuls for the years 83 and 82, and about 1,600 *equites* (wealthy publican investors). Thousands of names followed. Anyone on these lists could be killed at will, with the executioner receiving a portion of the dead man’s estate. The remainder was sold at public auctions, the proceeds being used to rebuild the depleted treasury. Most land was sold cheaply, giving opportunists a motive to kill not only those named by Sulla, but also their personal enemies, to acquire their estates. A major buyer of confiscated real estate was Crassus, who became one of the richest Romans through Sulla’s proscriptions.

By giving his war veterans homesteads and funds from the proscriptions, Sulla won their support as a virtual army in reserve, along with their backing for his new oligarchic constitution. But they were not farmers, and ran into debt, in

danger of losing their land. For his more aristocratic supporters, Sulla distributed the estates of his opponents from the Italian upper classes, especially in Campania, Etruria and Umbria.

Caesar likewise promised to settle his army on land of their own. They followed him to Rome and enabled him to become Dictator in 49. After he was killed in 44, Brutus and Cassius vied with Octavian (later Augustus), each promising their armies land and booty. As Appian summarized: "The chiefs depended on the soldiers for the continuance of their government, while, for the possession of what they had received, the soldiers depend on the permanence of the government of those who had given it. Believing that they could not keep a firm hold unless the givers had a strong government, they fought for them, from necessity, with goodwill." After defeating the armies of Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony, Octavian gave his indigent soldiers "land, the cities, the money, and the houses, and as the object of denunciation on the part of the despoiled, and as one who bore this contumely for the army's sake."

### *Empire of Debt*

The concentration of land ownership intensified under the Empire. By the time Christianity became the Roman state religion, North Africa had become the main source of Roman wealth, based on "the massive landholdings of the emperor and of the nobility of Rome." Its overseers kept the region's inhabitants "underdeveloped by Roman standards. Their villages were denied any form of corporate existence and were frequently named after the estates on which the villagers worked, held to the land by various forms of bonded labor."

A Christian from Gaul named Salvian described the poverty and insecurity confronting most of the population ca. 440:

"Faced by the weight of taxes, poor farmers found that they did not have the means to emigrate to the barbarians. Instead, they did what little they could do: they handed themselves over to the rich as clients in return for protection. The rich took over title to their lands under the pretext of saving the farmers from the land tax. The patron registered the farmer's land on the tax rolls under his (the patron's) own name. Within a few years, the poor farmers found themselves without land, although they were still hounded for personal taxes. Such patronage by the great, so Salvian claimed, turned free men into slaves as surely as the magic of Circe had turned humans into pigs."

### *The Church as a Corporate Power*

Church estates became islands in this sea of poverty. As deathbed confessions and donations of property to the Church became increasingly popular among wealthy Christians, the Church came to accept existing creditor and debtor relationships, land ownership, hereditary wealth and the political status quo. What mattered to the Church was how the ruling elites used their wealth; how they obtained it was not important as long as it was destined for the Church, whose priests were the paradigmatic “poor” deserving of aid and charity.

The Church sought to absorb local oligarchies into its leadership, along with their wealth. Testamentary disposition undercut local fiscal balance. Land given to the Church was tax-exempt, obliging communities to raise taxes on their secular property in order to maintain their flow of public revenue. (Many heirs found themselves disinherited by such bequests, leading to a flourishing legal practice of contesting deathbed wills.) The Church became the major corporate body, a sector alongside the state. Its critique of personal wealth focused on personal egotism and self-indulgence, nothing like the socialist idea of public ownership of land, monopolies, and banking. In fact, the Crusades led the Church to sponsor Christendom’s major secular bankers to finance its wars against the Holy Roman Emperors, Moslems, and Byzantine Sicily.

*By Michael Hudson*

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*Source:* Human Bridges

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# Where Did Vladimir Putin's Dream Of A 'Russian World' Come From?



Source: Independent Media Institute

04-15-2024 ~ Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by asserting the existence of a singular “Russian world” that needs protection and reunification. He set aside the secular socialist ideological rationales that the Soviet Union used to justify its expansion favoring the Tsarist Russia, rooted in religion and culture. But the history of political orders in the northern European forest zone, which stretches back 1,200 years, is not one of a unified Russian world.

Instead, there were a series of competing orders with rival power centers in Kyiv, Vilnius, and Moscow as well as powerful nomadic steppe polities like those of the Khazar Khaganate, the Mongol Golden Horde, and the Crimean Khanate to the south. Only at the end of the 18th century would they all be forcibly annexed into a single state by Tsarist Russia's Romanov dynasty. That unified state continued under its Soviet Union successor until it dissolved into 12 independent countries in 1991.

Ukraine and Lithuania in particular had been the centers of their own imperial polities with histories older than Russia itself and were instrumental in creating the Russian culture Putin is now so keen on defending. They achieved this in ways that did not require the protection of an autocrat.

### *Empires in The Forest Zone*

The forest zone spanning the Dniester River in the west and the Volga River in the east historically constituted a vast (more than 2 million square kilometers) but sparsely populated region. It would become the home of three long-lived empires: Kievan Rus' (862-1242), the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1251-1795), and the Grand Duchy (later Tsardom) of Muscovy (1283-1721). The surplus wealth that supported these empires came from international transit trade and the export of high-value furs, wax, honey, and slaves, often supplemented by raiding. After expanding beyond its forest zone home, Tsarist Russia declared itself the Russian Empire in 1721 during the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), but it took the rest of the century for it to gain control over its neighbors to the south and west, which was achieved during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762-1796).

States of any kind, let alone empires, were absent from the northern forest zone before the 9th century because it was then inhabited only by small and dispersed communities with little urbanization or political centralization. Engaged in subsistence farming, foraging, hunting, and animal husbandry, these communities interacted only with others like themselves or with foreign traders using its rivers to pass through the region. Dense forests and extensive marshlands presented serious obstacles to potential invaders, which were already few because the region had no precious metals to plunder or towns to occupy. This changed when the forest zone was drawn into the high-value commercial network that exchanged a flood of silver coins for furs and slaves, which were traded through a series of intermediaries. The demand for these goods and the silver to pay for them lay in the lands of the distant Islamic Caliphate and the Byzantine Empire, but it was the nomadic Khazar Khaganate (650-850), rulers of the entire steppe zone to the south, who dominated the trade routes. The Khazars exploited that position by projecting their power north into the forest zone where they imposed tribute payments in furs or silver on the communities residing there, creating a class of wealthy local leaders living in towns who were responsible for collecting the payments. They also established trading emporiums on the Volga River that attracted foreign merchants who paid a 10 percent transit tax on the goods they took in or out of the Khazar territory.

### *Kievan Rus'*

The flow of silver resulting from the fur trade attracted the attention of

Scandinavian maritime merchant/warrior groups known as the Varangians or Rus', whose shallow draft boats were easily portaged from one watershed to another. Initially seeking only local trading opportunities, they established their political authority in the north but soon expanded southward through the Dnieper and Volga river systems to reach the Black and Caspian seas where they engaged in raiding and trading. The Varangians replaced the Khazars as the dominant power in the forest region in the 860s. By the 880s, they had moved their center south to Kyiv where they established an empire, Kievan Rus', which encompassed 2 million square kilometers by the early 11th century. It was an empire that lasted almost four centuries and ended only after the Mongols conquered the entire region and destroyed Kyiv in 1240.

Although Kievan Rus' is seen as the foundation of later Russian culture, it did not assume its classic form until a century and a half after it was established when Vladimir the Great (r. 980-1015), a pagan polytheist, converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 988 and made it the state religion after marrying a Byzantine princess. He was also responsible for turning Kyiv into a true city with a population of around 40,000 people, erecting Byzantine-style churches there and supporting trade. It was a multiethnic state that developed its own common culture by drawing on a variety of sources. Eastern Orthodox Christianity brought with it a tradition of literacy and the Cyrillic alphabet, a hierarchical clerical establishment, and a Byzantine tradition of governance where state authority was based on laws and institutions. Rus' rulers also respected the authority of existing Slavic political institutions at the local level that included decision-making councils in towns and regions (*veche*), Indigenous local rulers (*kniaz*), and a class of aristocratic military commanders (*voevoda*). Although only the direct descendants of the Rus' founder Rurik could hold the top position of the grand prince and other high ranks, this ruling lineage intermarried with its Slavic subjects (Vladimir's mother was one of the offsprings of this kind of intermarriage), and eventually adopted their language.

Perhaps most significantly, Kievan grand princes did not wield absolute power. After the empire reached its zenith under Vladimir and his son Yaroslav the Wise (r. 1016-1054), constant wars of succession among the Rurikid elite weakened the central government to such an extent that by the mid-12th century it had devolved into a looser federation of autonomous regional polities (with Kyiv, Novgorod, and Suzdalia being the most prominent) whose leaders agreed among



themselves on who would become the grand prince. The government survived because it was a jellyfish-like state that absorbed enough resources to sustain itself without requiring either a strong imperial center or autocratic leadership, and where no single part was critical to the survival of the whole.

Lacking a brain, jellyfish depend on a distributed neural network composed of integrated nodes that together create a highly responsive nervous system. As a result, jellyfish can survive the loss of body parts and regenerate them quickly. Similarly, Kiev and its grand prince was only the biggest node in a system of nodes rather than an exclusive one. And because jellyfish regeneration is designed to restore damaged symmetry rather than simply replace the lost parts, a jellyfish cut in half becomes two new jellyfish as each half regenerates what is missing. Following this pattern as well, two rival empires eventually emerged in the lands of the old Kievan Rus' after the Mongol occupation finally ended: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the west and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy in the east.

### *The Mongol Yoke*

The Mongol invasion of central Europe ended in 1242 when they withdrew their troops, never to return, but the Mongol Golden Horde retained control of the Kievan Rus' territories. To administer the forest zone region, the steppe nomads turned to the very Rurikid elite they had come close to annihilating a few years earlier.

However fraught and unequal the relationship between the Golden Horde and its Russian clients might have been, it produced a durable governmental structure that lasted almost two and half centuries. The Mongol administration was far more intrusive and state-centered than that of the Kievan Rus'. The Horde's demands for tax revenue and troops were high and achieved through a wide-ranging set of sophisticated administrative structures, tax systems, and censuses. As much as they may have resented the Mongols, the Rurikid rulers they appointed became richer and more sophisticated state builders in their own territories. Their endemic succession disputes were now resolved by the Horde's Great Khan rather than on the battlefield. Although the Horde's pagan leaders eventually converted to Islam, they maintained the Mongol Empire's longstanding policy of religious tolerance. This included tax exemptions for all clerics and property owned by religious groups, a policy that won the Golden Horde support from the Orthodox Christian Church.

### *Dueling Duchies*

The Horde displayed a stronger interest in controlling its eastern Russian principalities (Tver, Vladimir, Muscovy, and Suzdal) in the Volga River watershed rather than its western ones (Kyiv, and Smolensk) in the Dnieper River watershed. This was because the east was now more populous (1,350,000 people) than the west (800,000 people) and more easily controlled from the Horde's capital of Sarai on the lower Volga. As Mongol interest in the western forest zone receded, the Lithuanians moved in to reorganize it. With their capital in Vilnius, the Lithuanians had avoided the initial Mongol onslaught and began expanding south into the Dnieper region during the early 14th century to create the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL), the largest empire in all of medieval Europe.

What was so striking about the emergence of the GDL and the territories it occupied was how closely the Lithuanians followed the pattern of the Rus' as foreigners moving into a power vacuum produced by the decline of a steppe nomadic power and how they superimposed themselves on an existing political system too fractured to unite from within. The economy improved as the region became more stable within an imperial "Pax Lituanica" that provided security for merchants moving their goods along the strategic international trade networks. The minority pagan and Catholic Lithuanians disturbed the existing order as little as possible. They allowed the Russian nobility to retain both, their privileges and the Eastern Orthodox faith. They created a cohesive upper class that transcended simplistic definitions of ethnic boundaries. Like the Kievan Rus', the GDL was a jellyfish polity that lacked a true metropole. It integrated many different nodes of production and authority into a single political system, expanding and contracting without changing the structure of the polity. The GDL became the dominant power in the forest zone for a short period after Tamerlane destroyed the Golden Horde's capital of Sarai in 1395.

The Grand Duchy of Muscovy arose to challenge the GDL after Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great, (r. 1462-1505) united the northeastern Russian principalities and declared his independence from the nomad Great Horde in 1476. His grandson, Ivan IV or Ivan the Terrible, (r. 1547-1584) proclaimed Russia a tsardom and coronated himself as its first tsar. It was a bid for a new imperial status that sought parity with the Horde—descendants of Genghis Khan who had formerly ruled Russia—the Ottoman sultan, and Europe's Holy Roman Emperor. Within Russia, the tsar's position uneasily combined the paternalism of

a Byzantine emperor responsible for the protection of the Eastern Orthodox faith and its believers with the raw power of a Mongol Khan who ruled an absolutist and secular state. In a series of wars during the 1550s, Ivan the Terrible conquered the steppe regions of Kazan and Astrakhan along the Volga down to the Caspian Sea and took control of a number of Baltic ports. As a direct dynastic successor of its founder Rurik, Ivan then insisted that the Poles and Lithuanians return the lands of the Kievan Rus' to him.

It was not to be. Ivan's destructive domestic policies during the next 10 years weakened Russia and his enemies invaded it. Moscow was burned to the ground during a cavalry raid led by the Crimean Khan in 1571. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's newly elected king, the Hungarian Stephen Báthory, went to war with Ivan in 1578 to reclaim the GDL's disputed territory. Báthory forced Russia to abandon the Baltic ports and cede Pskov to the Poles in a 1582 peace agreement signed a few years before Ivan's death. After Ivan's son Tsar Dmitri died without an heir in 1598 (ending the Rurikid dynasty that had lasted for more than 700 years), Russia entered its Time of Troubles turmoil where its very existence as a sovereign state was threatened. That period of anarchy ended only with the emergence of a new Romanov dynasty of tsars in 1613 who helped restore political stability and went on to rule Russia for the next 300 years. However, it would take another century for Russia to again move north to the Baltic Sea under Peter the Great, and then west and south into Ukraine and Crimea under Catherine the Great. Their success made the Russian Empire the world's largest by area. It collapsed in 1917 during World War I, but most of its old territories remained part of the new USSR.

### *The Legacy of Empire*

Russia emerged as the Soviet Union's most powerful successor state after it collapsed in 1991 (Map 7). Although shorn of about 5.5 million square kilometers of former Soviet territory, Russia remained the world's largest country with 17.1 million square kilometers. Its status as a peer polity with the U.S., the EU, and China rested on its possession of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and robust spending on conventional military forces that amounted to around 3 or 4 percent of its GDP from 2010 to 2020. But in other respects, Russia was not in their league. In 2020, the Russian economy comprised only 1.79 percent of the world's total GDP, more than an order of magnitude smaller than the U.S. (24.8 percent), China, (18.2 percent), or the EU (17 percent). Indeed, its GDP was smaller than

South Korea's, a country that is less than 100,000 square kilometers in size, whose top exports were advanced electronics, machinery, and motor vehicles. Russia's main exports were oil, natural gas, coal, timber, minerals, and metals. While the Soviet Union's population was larger than that of the U.S. when it dissolved, Russia's population of 146 million in 2020 was less than half that of the United States and was shrinking rather than growing.

Its neighbors, Ukraine and the Baltic states returned to their roots, too. With political structures that rejected autocracy and saw their future tied to Europe, Ukraine and the Baltic states restored modes of governance and alliances that were the norm before their incorporation into Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Those of their people who defined themselves as culturally Russian saw no need to be political subjects of Russia to maintain their language and traditions that had long thrived without the need for an autocrat to watch over them.

Putin's post-Soviet Russia is a nuclear-armed Muscovy with frontiers that would have been familiar to Ivan the Terrible. Its mere survival was an impressive feat—most other places would have experienced a cascade of further breakups as seen in the case of the former Yugoslavia—but Russia retained its resilient jellyfish structure. It could reconstitute itself from whatever damaged parts survived, albeit on a smaller scale. Russia moved forward rather than dying, although it failed to realize the Baltics and Ukraine could do the same without it. Despite 70 years as part of a centralized Soviet command economy, Russia remained a network of economic and political nodes where no single part was critical to the survival of the whole. Departing from the Soviet Union's closed economy that aimed at self-sufficiency in all economic sectors, Russia returned to a Muscovite (and even Rus') pattern of exporting its natural resources to the world economy to sustain itself. It was these exports that financed the high military spending required to maintain itself as a peer player with other world powers and pay for the welfare services that were now expected by its citizens.

Despite Putin's intent to restore Russia's status as a world imperial power, his was a far less cosmopolitan polity than either Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union and is apparently happy to be so. Russia now defined itself in nationalist terms that stressed deep historical ties to a Russian cultural past and ignored the existence of the other empires that had ruled the region except to claim they were Russian when convenient.

Putin raised the status of the Orthodox Church and portrayed himself as the defender of its traditional Russian cultural values—the absolutist Tsar-equivalent protecting a Holy Russia from the evils of the outside world. Putin justified his invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as an act of domestic house cleaning by defining the Ukrainians as a variety of wayward Russians—sheep who had strayed and were now being brought back into the fold, not people who had their own independent states and empires when Russia was still being ruled by the Mongols.

And that Mongol legacy runs deep. The many photographs of a bare-chested Putin engaging in horseback riding, hunting, and plunging into icy waters channeled the Great Khan tradition of the steppe whose rulers felt it was necessary to demonstrate their physical vitality because state power was invested in a living person rather than a governing institution. Similarly, Putin made the continued possession of great wealth dependent on personal loyalty to him—creating a patrimonial system resembling that of the Tsars and their boyars rather than a modern capitalist economy.

Many talented Russians are choosing to make their mark abroad under these circumstances, forfeiting Russia's opportunity to remain on the technological cutting edge that China and the United States had seen as the economic battleground of the future. But Russia has not felt the need to compete in these areas to remain relevant so long as it can wield military power backed by nuclear weapons.

What could undermine Russia's ability to act as a peer polity now and in the future are two related things that have resulted from its invasion of Ukraine. In the short term, isolation from the world economy in response to its invasion of Ukraine threatens to choke off the export of raw materials that make up the bulk of its revenue. In the longer term, the instability Russia has created in the oil and gas market hastens the emergence of carbon-free wind, geothermal, solar, and nuclear energy technologies that will leave its oil and gas resources stranded without buyers. Empires that depended on regular flows of outside revenue to finance themselves, whatever way they obtained them, rarely survived once those external revenue sources disappeared.

Vladimir Putin sees himself as another Peter the Great, but the better analogy is to Ivan the Terrible. Ivan's absolute autocratic power, refusal to take advice, and paranoia combined with persecutions at home and wars abroad produced a

powerful state that was on the verge of collapse by the end of his reign. Russian history proclaimed three rulers “the Great,” but Putin is less likely to join their ranks and, instead, is more likely to become the country’s second “the Terrible.”

*By Thomas J. Barfield*



*Thomas J. Barfield –  
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# A Class Analysis Of The Trump-Biden Rerun



*Richard D. Wolff*

04-15-2024 ~ By “class system” we mean the basic workplace organizations—the human relationships or “social relations”—that accomplish the production and distribution of goods and services. Some examples include the master/slave, communal village, and lord/serf organizations. Another example, the distinctive capitalist class system, entails the employer/employee organization. In the United States and in much of the world, it is now the dominant class system. Employers—a tiny minority of the population—direct and control the enterprises and employees that produce and distribute goods and services. Employers buy the labor power of employees—the population’s vast majority—and set it to work in their enterprises. Each enterprise’s output belongs to its employer who decides whether to sell it, sets the price, and receives and distributes the resulting revenue.

In the United States, the employee class is badly split ideologically and politically. Most employees have probably stayed connected—with declining enthusiasm or commitment—to the Democratic Party. A sizable and growing minority within the class has some hope in Trump. Many have lost interest and participated less in electoral politics. Perhaps the most splintered are various “progressive” or “left” employees: some in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, some in various socialist, Green, independent, and related small parties, and some even drawn hesitatingly to Trump. Left-leaning employees were perhaps more likely to join and activate social movements (ecological, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-war) rather than electoral campaigns.



The U.S. employee class broadly feels victimized by the last half-century's neoliberal globalization. Waves of manufacturing (and also service) job exports, coupled with waves of automation (computers, robots, and now artificial intelligence), have mostly brought that class bad news. Loss of jobs, income, and job security, diminished future work prospects, and reduced social standing are chief among them. In contrast, the extraordinary profits that drove employers' export and technology decisions accrued to them. Resulting redistributions of wealth and income likewise favored employers. Employees increasingly watched and felt a parallel social redistribution of political power and cultural riches moving beyond their reach.

Employees' class feelings were well grounded in U.S. history. The post-1945 development of U.S. capitalism smashed the extraordinary employee class unity that had been formed during the Great Depression of the 1930s. After the 1929 economic crash and the 1932 election, a reform-minded "New Deal" coalition of labor union leaders and strong socialist and communist parties gathered supportively around the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration that governed until 1945. That coalition won huge, historically unprecedented gains for the employee class including Social Security, unemployment compensation, the first federal minimum wage, and a large public jobs program. It built an immense following for the Democratic Party in the employee class.

As World War II ended in 1945, every other major capitalist economy (the UK, Germany, Japan, France, and Russia) was badly damaged. In sharp contrast, the war had strengthened U.S. capitalism. It reconstructed global capitalism and centered it around U.S. exports, capital investments, and the dollar as world currency. A new, distinctly American empire emerged, stressing informal imperialism, or "neo-colonialism," against the formal, older imperialisms of Europe and Japan. The United States secured its new empire with an unprecedented global military program and presence. Private investment plus government spending on both the military and popular public services marked a transition from the Depression and war (with its rationing of consumer goods) to a dramatically different relative prosperity from the later 1940s to the 1970s.

Cold War ideology clothed post-1945 policies at home and abroad. Thus the government's mission globally was to spread democracy and defeat godless socialism. That mission justified both increasingly heavy military spending and McCarthyism's effective destruction of socialist, communist, and labor

organizations. The Cold War atmosphere facilitated undoing and then reversing the Great Depression's leftward surge of U.S. politics. Purging the left within unions plus the relentless demonization of left parties and social movements as foreign-based communist projects split the New Deal coalition. It separated left organizations from social movements and both of them from the employee class as a whole.

Despite many employees staying loyal to the Democratic Party (even as they disconnected from the persecuted left components of the New Deal), the Cold War pushed all U.S. politics rightward. The Republican Party cashed in by being aggressively pro-Cold War and raising funds from employers determined to undo the New Deal. The Democratic Party leadership reduced its former reliance on weakening unions and the demoralized, deactivated remnants of the New Deal coalition. Instead that leadership sought funds from the same corporate rich that the Republicans tapped. The predictable results included the failure of the Democratic Party to reverse the rightward shift of U.S. politics. The Dems likewise abandoned most efforts to build on the achievements of the New Deal or move further toward social democracy. They increasingly failed even to protect what the New Deal had achieved. These developments deepened the alienation of many workers from the Democratic Party or political engagement altogether. A vicious downward cycle, with occasional temporary upsurge moments, took over "progressive" politics.

That vicious cycle entrapped especially older, white males. Among employees, they had gained the most from the 1945-1975 prosperity. However, after the 1970s, employers' profit-driven automation and their decisions to relocate production abroad seriously undermined their employees' jobs and incomes, especially in manufacturing. This part of the employee class eventually turned against "the system"—against the prevailing economic tide. They mourned a disappearing prosperity. At first, they turned right politically. The Cold War had isolated and undermined the left-wing institutions and culture that might otherwise have attracted anti-system employees. Left-leaning mobilizations *against the system as a whole* were rare (unlike more single-issue mobilizations around issues like gender, race, and ecology). Neither unions nor other organizations had the social support needed to organize them. Or they simply feared to try. Even more recently the rising labor and union militancy has so far only secondarily and marginally raised themes of systematic anti-capitalism.

Republican politicians and media personalities seized the opportunity to transform the disappearing post-1970s prosperity into an idealized American past. They carefully avoided blaming that disappearance on profit-driven capitalism. They blamed Democrats and “liberals” whose social welfare programs cost too much. Excessive taxes were wasted, they insisted, on ineffective social programs for “others” (the non-white and non-male). If only those others worked as hard and as productively as white males did, Republicans repeated, they would have enjoyed the same prosperity instead of seeking a “free ride from the government.” Portions of the employee class persuaded by such reasoning switched from Democrat to Republican and then often responded to Trump’s “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) mantra. Their switch stimulated Republican politicians to imagine a possible new mass base much broader than their existing mix of religious fundamentalists, gun lovers, and white supremacists. Leading Republicans glimpsed political possibilities unavailable since the Great Depression of the 1930s had turned U.S. politics leftward toward social democracy.

Emerging from within or around the Republican Party, the new 21st-century far Right revived classic U.S. isolationist patriotism around America First slogans. They combined that with a loosely libertarian blaming of all social ills on the inherent evil of government. By carefully directing neither criticism nor blame toward the capitalist economic system, Republicans secured the usual support (financial, political, journalistic) from the employer class. That included employers who had never prospered much from the neoliberal globalization turn, those who saw bigger, better opportunities from an economic nationalist/protectionist turn, and all those long focused on the employer-driven project of undoing the New Deal politically, culturally, and economically. These various elements increasingly gathered around Trump.

They opposed immigration, often via hysterical statements and mobilizations against “invasions” fantasized as threatening America. They defined government spending on immigrants (using native and “hard-working” Americans’ taxes) as wasted on unmeritorious “others.” Trump championed their views and reinforced parallel scapegoating of Black and Brown citizens and women as unworthy beneficiaries of government supports exchanged for their voting Democratic. Some Republicans increasingly embraced conspiracy theories (QAnon and others) to explain diverse plots aimed at dethroning white Christianity from dominating

American society. MAGA and America First are slogans that articulate resentment, bitterness, and protest at perceived victimization. Repurposing Cold War imagery, Trumpers synonymously targeted liberals, Democrats, Marxists, socialists, labor unions, and others seen as close allies plotting to “replace” white Christians. Trump referred to them publicly as “vermin” that he would defeat/destroy once he became President again.

The larger part of the U.S. employee class has not (yet) been won over by the Republicans. It has stayed, so far, with the Democrats. Yet aggravated social divisiveness has settled everywhere into U.S. culture and politics. It frightens many who stay within the Democratic Party, seeing it as the lesser evil despite its “centrist” leaders and their corporate donors. The latter include especially the financial and hi-tech megacorporations that profitably led the post-1975 neoliberal globalization period. The centrist leadership studiously avoided offending its corporate patrons while using a modified Keynesian fiscal policy to achieve two objectives. The first was support for government programs that helped solidify an electoral base increasingly among women, and Black and brown citizens. The second was support for aggressively projecting U.S. military and political power around the world.

The U.S. empire protected by that policy proved especially profitable for the financial and hi-tech circles of the United States’ biggest businesses. At the same time, another part of the U.S. employee class also began to turn against the system, but it found the new Right unacceptable and “centrism” only slightly less so. The Democratic party has so far retained most of these people although many have increasingly moved toward “progressive” champions such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, and Cori Bush. Cornel West and Jill Stein carry similar banners into this year’s election but they insist on doing that from outside the Democratic Party.

Hostility has intensified between the two major parties as their opposition has become more extreme. This keeps happening because neither found nor implemented any solutions to the deepening problems besetting the United States. Ever more extreme wealth and income inequalities undermine what remains of a sense of community binding Americans. Politics ever more controlled by the employer class and especially the super-rich produce widespread debilitating anger, resignation, and rage. The relatively shrinking power of the United States abroad drives home a sense of impending doom. The rise of the first

real economic superpower competitor (China) raises the specter of the U.S. global unipolar moment being replaced, and soon.

Each major party blames the other for everything going wrong. Both also respond to the declining empire by moving rightward toward alternative versions of economic nationalism—"America First"—in place of the cheerleading for neoliberal globalization that both parties indulged in before. Republicans carefully refuse to blame capitalism or capitalists for anything. Instead, they blame bad government, the Democrats, the liberals, and China. Democrats likewise carefully refuse to blame capitalism or capitalists for anything (except the "progressives," who do that moderately). Democrats mostly blame Republicans who have "gone crazy" and "threaten democracy." They erect new versions of their old demons. Russia and Putin stand in for the USSR and Stalin as chief awful foreigners with Chinese "communists" a close second. Trying to hold on to the political middle, the Democrats denounce Republicans and especially the Trump/MAGA people for challenging the last 70 years of political consensus. In that Democratic Party version of the "good old days," reasonable Republicans and Democrats then alternated in power dutifully. The result was that the U.S. empire and U.S. capitalism prospered first by helping to end the exhausted European empires and then by profiting from the United States' unipolar global hegemony.

Biden's plans pretend the U.S. empire is not in decline. In 2024, he offers more of the old establishment politics. Trump basically pretends the same about the U.S. empire but carefully selects problem areas (e.g., immigration, Chinese competition, and Ukraine) that he can represent as failures of Democratic leadership. Nothing fundamental is amiss with the U.S. empire and its prospects in his eyes. All that is necessary is to reject Biden and his politics as incapable of reviving it. Trump's plans thus call for a much more extreme economic nationalism run by a leaner, meaner government.

Each side deepens the split between Republicans and Democrats. Neither dares admit the basic, long-term declining empire and the key problems (income and wealth inequality, politics corrupted by that inequality, worsening business cycles, and mammoth debts) accumulated by its capitalist foundation. The parties' jousting turns on substitute issues that offer temporary electoral advantages. It also reinforces the public's incapacity for systemic critique and change. Both parties endlessly appeal to a population whose alienation deepens as relentless

systemic decline worms its way into everyone's daily life and troubles. Both parties increasingly expose their growing irrelevance.

Neither party's campaign offers solutions to systemic decline. Gross miscalculations of a changed world economy and shrinking U.S. political power abroad underlay both parties' failed policies in relation to Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, and Gaza. The turn toward economic nationalism and protectionism will not stop the decline. Something bigger and deeper than either Party dares consider is underway. Capitalism has moved its dynamic centers yet again over the last generation. This time the move went from western Europe, North America, and Japan to China, India, and beyond, from the G7 to BRICS. Wealth and power are correspondingly shifting.

The places capitalism leaves behind descend into mass depression, overdose deaths, and sharpening social divisions. These social crises keep worsening alongside deepening inequalities of wealth, income, and education. Steadily if also maddeningly slowly, the rightward shift of U.S. politics after 1945 has finally arrived at social exhaustion and ineffectuality. Perhaps thereby the United States prepares another possible New Deal with or without another 1929-style crash.

Hopefully, then, one crucial lesson of the New Deal will have been learned and applied. Leaving the capitalist class structure of production unchanged—a minority of employers dominating a majority of employees—enables that minority to undo whatever reforms any New Deal might achieve. That is what the U.S. employer class did after 1945. The solution now must include moving beyond the employer-employee organization of the workplace. Replacing that with a democratic community organization—what we elsewhere call worker cooperatives—is the missing element that can make progressive reforms stick. When employees and employers are the same people, no longer will a separate employer class have the incentive and resources to undo what the employee majority wants. Replacing employer/employee-organized workplaces with worker coops is the very different “great replacement” we need. On the basis of reforms secured in that way, we can build a future. We can avoid repeating the last half-century's failure even to preserve the reforms imposed on a capitalism that crashed and burned in the 1930s.

*By Richard D. Wolff*

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# The Decline Of Extreme Poverty



*Saurav Sarkar -*

*Source:*

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04-15-2024 ~ One of the foremost accomplishments of the industrial age is the "[immense progress against extreme poverty](#)."

"Extreme poverty" is defined by the World Bank as a person [living](#) on less than \$2.15 per day using 2017 prices. This figure has seen a [sharp decline](#) over the last



two centuries—from almost 80 percent of the world’s population living in extreme poverty in 1820 to only about 10 percent living in these conditions by 2019. This is all the more astounding given that the population of the world is about [750 percent higher](#).

The causes of economic progress are clear. The laborers of past generations around the world—often against their will—gave us industrial revolutions. These industrial economies rely on, and generate, machinery, technology, and other capital goods. These are then deployed in an economy that requires less sacrifice of human labor and can generate more goods and services for the populations of the world, even as populations continue to grow.

Some ideologies, such as socialism, were most effective in fighting extreme poverty. Socialism is defined here as the state control of a national economy with an eye toward the welfare of the masses. Socialist regimes serve to counter and remove extreme poverty. Two regions illustrate this point well and account for billions of people who moved out of extreme poverty in the last century—all of them influenced by or under the rubric of socialism.

In the USSR and Eastern Europe, [extreme poverty declined from about 60 percent in 1930 to almost zero in 1970](#). In China too, extreme poverty has been [eliminated](#) to virtually zero today, though there are [debates over exactly what](#) produced those gains. Some argue that these gains are the product of capitalist reforms; but even if this were the case, those reforms took advantage of the groundwork laid by the post-1949 socialist economy.

There is also a certain logic to why socialist economies in the 20th century were able to eventually generate massive gains for those at the very bottom of their societies. While not the only ideology that can do so, socialism is particularly good at the kind of [state control and support of economies](#) that is required for successful industrialization. Moreover, because socialism sets itself up to be politically evaluated by what it delivers to those at the very bottom, the politics of socialist countries tend to moderate some of the inequality that comes with industrialization in a capitalist world. This makes it markedly different from other varieties of state control like colonialism, imperialism, state capitalism, and fascism.

Socialism’s existence also seems to have pushed forward reductions in poverty in

the capitalist sections of the world. The presence of the Soviet Union and internal left movements across the capitalist world put pressure on capitalist regimes to offer more goods and services to their working classes and underclasses. This is evident from several instances throughout the world, such as the [role of communists in fighting for civil rights for Black people](#) in the United States.

While there might have been an immense reduction in extreme poverty over the decades, a [series of setbacks](#) brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and various ongoing wars across the world have recently made a dire situation worse for those already struggling to make ends meet. According to a 2022 World Bank [report](#), “the pandemic pushed about 70 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, the largest one-year increase since global poverty monitoring began in 1990. As a result, an estimated 719 million people subsisted on less than \$2.15 a day by the end of 2020.”

This means that the world is [“unlikely” to achieve](#) the UN target of eradicating extreme poverty by 2030. Consider what it looks like to live on less than \$2.15 per day. It means that you cannot even [“afford a tiny space to live, some minimum heating capacity, and food” that will prevent “malnutrition.”](#) As we struggle to meet our goals, the majority of the world population has been forced to live on [under \\$10 a day](#), while 1.5 percent of the population receives \$100 a day or more.

Moreover, a racial analysis is also important to include given that extreme poverty is increasingly concentrated in [sub-Saharan Africa](#) and parts of South Asia. Poorer countries (which are home to the vast majority of Black and brown populations) are “encouraged” to produce the cheapest and simplest goods for trade rather than developing self-sustaining economies or upgrading their economies and workforces. In fact, they are often pushed to [destroy existing economies](#).

The final rub in any discussion of poverty is that the preexisting solutions to it—industrialization—may not be feasible with the limitations of a warming planet. If sub-Saharan Africa needs to industrialize to eliminate extreme poverty in that region, who will pay for that carbon footprint? Presumably, the countries of the Global North that have the most historical carbon debt ought to, but it is hard to imagine a world in which they will voluntarily do so. After all, they have yet to make reparations for the stolen labor with which their wealth was built in the first place.

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