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## **Jonathan Carey ~ Centuries Of Persian Manuscripts, Now At Your Fingertips**



*These two images come from the miniature book, Ghazaliyāt-i shaykh Sa'dī, containing excerpts of classical Persian poetry. Library of Congress, African and Middle East Division, Near East Section Persian Manuscript Collection*

In the weeks leading up to the vernal equinox, it's common to see people across Iran busily clearing their homes of clutter. Rugs hang outside in preparation for a good beating, to rid them of a year of dust. This is all done in [preparation for Nowruz](#), also known as the Iranian or Persian New Year. The holiday typically falls around March 20 but is celebrated for weeks with a variety of celebrations, ceremonies, and traditions. So who says the Library of Congress can't get in on the festivities?

To wish you a *Nowruz Pirouz*, the library has made [155 rare Persian](#) manuscripts, lithographs, and books dating back to the 13th century available online for the first time. The collection of illuminated manuscripts includes texts such as the *Shahnameh*, an epic poem about pre-Islamic Persia likened to the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, along with written accounts of the life of Shah Jahan, the 17th-century Mughal emperor who oversaw construction of the Taj Mahal. Other manuscripts focus on religion, philosophy, and science. Some are written in multiple languages, with passages in Arabic and Turkish. This wide range highlights just how cosmopolitan the collection is.

Go to: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/persian-manuscripts-online>

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# Trump's 2020 Budget Rewards The Wealthiest Individuals



Gerald Epstein is Professor of Economics and a founding Co-Director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Donald Trump's 2020 budget proposal represents the wildest version of neoliberalism yet. It is just the latest evidence that the United States has become a plutocracy run by an oligarchical elite bent on destroying the last vestiges of a democratic polity.

Trump's fiscal budget proposal threatens to exacerbate all of the major problems facing the U.S. economy and society today "in order to fund more goodies for the wealthy," according to radical political economist Gerald Epstein. In this interview with *Truthout*, Epstein — the co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute and a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst — discusses why the Trump budget proposal is a blatant power grab, why we need to think about economics beyond GDP growth, and why the U.S. government is incurring more debt that does not even begin to address the problems the country faces.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Trump's fiscal 2020 budget proposal, which has been quite fittingly proposed by some critics as "a budget for a sick and declining America," includes major cuts across all programs and agencies [with the exception of the military](#), which receives additional increases for defense spending. In your view, what's the logic driving this budget proposal, and what would be the likely consequences for U.S. society and economy if it were to be implemented?*

*Gerald Epstein:* Let me start with the latter part of your question by saying that, if Trump's fiscal 2020 budget proposal were to be implemented, the consequences would be simply *disastrous*. Indeed, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a reliable source of information on federal budget and tax policy, has catalogued the ["little shop of horrors"](#) that make up Trump's budget. As you indicated, the budget proposes deep cuts in non-defense discretionary spending (NDD) alongside sizeable increases in military spending. The Trump budget proposes cutting the NDD funding by 11 percent after adjusting for inflation. But the overall cuts on key social programs would be even greater than this, because the Trump budget protects or even increases some categories of NDD. As the CPBB says, the budget proposal increases discretionary funding for Homeland Security by 15 percent, while cutting funding for Health and Human services by 12 percent, Housing and Urban Development by 18 percent and the Environmental Protection Agency by a whopping 31 percent. The budget calls for even deeper cuts in the years after 2020; for example, in 2029, it would lower NDD by about 40 percent below current funding in 2019 adjusted for inflation. The budget would take away medical insurance from millions of people by repealing the Affordable Care Act and making [deep cuts to Medicaid](#). It would also cut many other programs for the poor, including food stamps and housing assistance. Trump proposes all this in order to fund more goodies for the wealthy. According to the CBPP, the budget would extend the 2017 tax breaks for rich individuals, making the very rich and the military industries the major beneficiaries of the budget proposal.

If it were to be implemented (which is unlikely in the current Congress because of control of the House by the Democrats), this budget proposal would solve none of the key outstanding problems facing our economy and society — glaring inequality of income, wealth and life chances; runaway destructive climate change; low wages and incomes for many workers, even those that work full time; crumbling infrastructure, including schools, mass transportation and even highways; and a disastrously expensive and unequal medical system, among many

others. And in fact, [the budget proposal] exacerbates many of these problems: wasteful military spending, worsening medical care and glaring and destructive inequality of income, wealth and power.

In short, this policy would amount to a disaster for the American people.

What is the logic behind it? Good question. A general answer might be that it is designed to perpetuate and strengthen capitalism. But this answer does not really capture the venality and destructiveness of the true logic. I think the logic is the same logic that has motivated Republican and some Democratic budgets for decades: steal as much of the nation's resources as humanly possible and put them in the pockets of a few people that will help to perpetuate this theft by changing the rules of American democracy to keep themselves in power permanently. (See Nancy MacLean's brilliant book, [\*Democracy in Chains\*](#), which describes this history and the role of right-wing economists in helping to make it a reality.)

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Trump's White House is predicting a growth rate of 3.2 percent in the economy. It is not just the Congressional Budget Office that has predicted a lower number (around 2.5 percent). Other economic forecasters — including the Federal Reserve and a group of Wall Street Journal forecasters — have put the number at 2.7 percent. The consensus is therefore lower than Trump's, but there is a lot of uncertainty in all these forecasts. It could be considerably worse if problems erupted with China's economy, or the trade war with China gets much worse.

But whether it is 3.2 percent or 2.7 percent [growth] is of much less importance than the question of what kind of growth. Growth that is destructive of the environment, that generates stagnant wages or massive inequality, is no better at 3.2 percent than at 2.7 percent. We really have to stop thinking in terms of the simplistic numbers of GDP growth and really start thinking in terms of what is the economy producing, for whom, at what environmental cost, and how the fruits of that growth are shared.

*U.S. government debt levels keep rising, and have actually increased by a couple*

*of trillion dollars since Trump took office. Does the U.S. have a government debt problem? And how much more can public debt to GDP ratio rise before we see negative reactions from private credit markets?*

U.S. federal government debt levels have gotten quite high by historical standards and are forecasted to get much, much higher. According to the [Congressional Budget Office](#), the federal government debt held by the public to GDP ratio is expected to reach about 93 percent in 2029, its highest level since the Second World War and to 150 percent of GDP by 2049 — far higher than it has ever been (see [CBPP](#)). Even though such long-term projections should be obviously taken with a big grain of salt, the current trends nonetheless suggest big increases in public debt relative to size of the economy.

You ask if the U.S. has a public debt problem and what the limits are to the accumulation of public debt. These are important questions and the answers are murky. Unlike deficit hawks who have wrongly claimed there is a hard cliff at 90 percent debt levels or Modern Money Theorists (MMT) who imply that no level is too high, the answer is that the closer the level gets to highs never seen before in the U.S., the more likely there could be unforeseen difficulties coming from global financial markets. In short, the policies are riskier.

Now taking more risks might be well worth it if the policies that are creating the higher and higher debt are actually creating social and economic goods for the U.S. But if the policies are only redistributing income and wealth to the already wealthy, while failing to address the serious problems facing the U.S. economy and society, then the increases in debt are incurring more and more risks without providing any benefits, and indeed, by fostering environmental destruction and other ills, they are producing even worse than zero benefits.

In sum, these debt levels measured in government debt securities and dollars and cents can thus create uncertainty and lead to problems.

But it is important not to let these financial figures distract us from the more substantial debts our society is incurring as we avoid dealing with our serious problems, partly because of the corrosive policies pursued by the Republicans and Trump administration (with occasional assists from corporate/neoliberal Democrats).

What are these *real* debts? Here are just a few examples:

Economist [Robert Pollin](#) has estimated that we need to invest a minimum of 2 to 2.5 percent of GDP over the next 30 years to stabilize the climate. Every year that

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The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that efforts to address infrastructure needs have a shortfall of \$4.5 trillion over the next 10 years, which amounts to another \$450 billion a year of debt we are incurring. This is a real debt we are incurring.

What about education? It is well known that educational achievement in the U.S. is behind those countries with a comparable standard of living. It would cost billions of investment dollars every year to catch up.

These are just examples of the real debts we are incurring every year, but unlike the national debt, these tend to be hidden and ignored.

The upshot is that we have to keep our eyes on two types of debt: the government's financial debt as it goes into uncharted heights for the U.S., due primarily to wasteful and dangerous military spending; and tax cuts for the wealthy. The financial debts also stem from production decisions made by capitalists to buy back their own stock, rather than investing in their companies — stock buybacks and financialization. There are other factors harming our productive capacity as well, such as excessive foreign investment in certain manufacturing industries by multinational corporations.

But then there are the very important “real debts” we are incurring ... the failure to invest in our society as in the examples cited above. The real investment failures are often more important; but as the financial debt rises into uncharted territory, it raises risks and could become a problem as well because of the financial nature of our economy.

It is important to keep in mind that the sad risks of the financial debt the U.S. government is incurring is being created without even putting a dent in the real problems we face. It raises financial risks while not investing a dime to reduce the real debts our society accumulates every year.

*The United States of today is not simply in an apparently irreversible state of decline, but seems to have become something of a “failed state.” In your view, what will it take to introduce a prosperous, equitable and sustainable socioeconomic order?*

It is, of course, impossible to answer this question. But we can start by looking at



the real proposals that have been put forward by progressive presidential candidates and politicians, such as Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These proposals include Medicare for All, a Green New Deal, universal child care, a \$15 minimum wage, a full employment policy. For the first time in decades, we have a set of policies that provide a basis for discussion, and progressives running for election and moving legislation, that could, if implemented, make a big difference in the problems you identify. We don't necessarily have all the solutions, but many of these proposals provide a great start.

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*C.J. Polychroniou* is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at Truthout and collected by Haymarket Books.

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# Workplace Surveillance Is Central To Capitalist Exploitation



*Ivan Manokha -  
Centre for  
Technology and  
Global Affairs -  
University of  
Oxford*

Surveillance of employees in the workplace through the use of advanced technology represents the latest phase in the long history of capitalism to maintain control of workers and to increase productivity through intensified forms of exploitation. Is [surveillance capitalism](#) an updated version of Big Brother or something even more sinister? Does it really increase productivity? Are workers accepting of surveillance? And how do we ensure that surveillance capitalism does not completely wipe out privacy and individual rights? In this exclusive *Truthout* interview, Ivan Manokha, a lecturer at Oxford University and a leading scholar in surveillance studies, offers penetrating insights into the above questions.

*C.J. Polychroniou: In the age of flexible capitalism, surveillance technologies have become extremely widespread among advanced capitalist societies, with as yet unclear implications. In your view, what is the primary aim and function of the new spying and surveillance technologies?*

*Ivan Manokha: The key distinguishing feature of capitalism is the existence of a labor market, i.e. in capitalism human labor is commodified — it is bought and sold in a market place. From the point of view of employers, purchasing labor represents a production cost, and their objective is to make sure that it is utilized*

to the maximum of its productive potential. This, in turn, requires surveillance and it may be observed that capitalism as a socioeconomic system has always involved workplace surveillance for this reason.

It is actually misleading to use the term “surveillance capitalism” following, in particular, the work of Shoshana Zuboff, now widely employed to refer to the current phase of capitalism with new — digital and biometric — technologies entering the workplace. Capitalism has always been “surveillance capitalism” because in this system the main objective of any business activity is to maximize profits — to make sure that the resources purchased and employed — including labor — are used with the maximum efficiency.

The function of new technologies, as this has always been the case with respect to workplace surveillance, is to seek to maximize worker productivity. This may be achieved in two ways: by extending the amount of time that employees work (e.g. by reducing the duration of breaks, by extending hours of work in the workplace or encouraging employees to work from home after the end of the working day, etc.), or by intensifying the labor process (the speed with which workers move, the number of tasks they complete per unit of times, etc.).

Modern workplace surveillance technologies have the potential to enable employers to do both: to monitor more precisely and continuously the time employees spend to actually work, including the timing of lunch and toilet breaks, as well as to better scrutinize and measure their performance (continuously measuring output, developing performance scoring systems and rankings, etc.).

Here a special mention needs to be made of the so-called “platform labor” — the rise of different digital platforms that bring together clients and “independent contractors,” the euphemism platforms use to refer to their laborers and service providers. They do not know their workers and have to rely on various indicators of performance to measure and compare their productivity, and the central role here is played by customers who perform the role of proxy managers — they evaluate and rank the performance of workers (e.g. of Uber drivers, of cleaners of TaskRabbit, etc.). In short, new workplace surveillance technology is used to improve the capacity of employers to monitor employees, something that they have always done.

*How do they differ from past workplace surveillance, and even from surveillance*



*techniques under authoritarian and former communist regimes?*

The main difference resides in the shift from surveillance based on the “gaze” — on the capacity of supervisors, foremen, managers, etc. to visually monitor workers — to surveillance that is digitalized, i.e. that goes beyond the “gaze” and involves the collection of all kinds of data. This shift greatly enhances the capacity of employers to monitor employees. Thus, if in the past workplace surveillance was limited to the time that supervisors were actually looking at workers, today the use of different types of new equipment (RFID badges, handheld devices carried by employees, and even implanted microchips) makes surveillance continuous.

In addition, the data may be processed in real time and managers on their KPI [key performance indicators] screens may see not only the productivity of each employee, but his or her ranking in comparison to others. For employees this means that there is no breathing time and there is no place to hide — everything may be monitored, recorded, processed and analyzed.

Concerning the second part of the question, there is indeed an Orwellian aspect to it in that new means of workplace surveillance make it totalizing — literally every move of an employee may be surveilled and, what is more, transformed into digital data that may be analyzed in ways that workers do not control and do not know of (e.g., what kind of algorithm is used to calculate performance, what is involved in the construction of a historical trajectory of performance, how will the results be used by managers, etc.). Thus, there is indeed a certain similarity with secret services in authoritarian societies, particularly the totalizing nature of surveillance and a high degree of arbitrariness that may be involved in treating and using the information obtained.

At the same time, let us note once again that this in itself is hardly new; it has always been the case that “democracy ended at the factory gate”; what has changed is the means and the degree to which workplace surveillance may be enhanced by new technologies.

*Do the new surveillance technologies increase productivity?*

No general definitive conclusion may be reached; what is required is a concrete empirical analysis of each particular technology in each particular industry. What we may observe, however, is that in many industries workers are pushed to the limit of their physical and mental capacities. For example, warehouse pickers at

Amazon have only a few seconds to find an item, pick it, and then immediately run to fetch another one, and so on, having to walk over 20 kilometers each day. Going back to the distinction between extending working hours and intensifying the work as a means of increasing performance, it is clear that new technologies do enhance the ability of employees to do the former, and I would say that may, in many cases, also contribute to the latter. This, however, comes at a price of worker exhaustion, both physical and mental, and may lead to burnouts, depressions or illnesses related to stress.

*Is surveillance a value-neutral activity that may be used for good and bad purposes, or is it always problematic?*

It is common to cite Melvin Kranzberg's dictum that "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" with reference to technological innovations, and to add that it all depends on the context and the use to which they are put. Surveillance technologies are no exception. They may be enabling and liberating (e.g., using wearable technology to locate miners unable to get back to the surface after an accident, monitoring health of patients at a distance, [filming police brutality](#), etc.), but they may also be used to increase subjugation, oppression and exploitation.

What we may say is that, overall, surveillance technology is more likely to serve the [interests of the powerful](#) (because they have bigger capacity and means to put it to use that they desire), be it governments, corporate managers or digital platforms. In this respect, what is important is to focus not on surveillance technology in the abstract, but on concrete existing power relations and examine how they are affected by new means of surveillance. Thus, when we speak of workplace surveillance, it is undeniable that they have benefited employers and have greatly increased their relative power over employees.

*Some recent data seems to indicate that employees are accepting of surveillance. Why would employees accept surveillance, and shouldn't unions make privacy concerns part of the collective agreements?*

To begin with, we do not really know whether employees are really OK with it. The fact that they do not openly oppose its deployment and do not organize protests does not necessarily mean that they are willingly accepting it. There may be other reasons for not challenging the introduction of new workplace surveillance technologies (fear of losing a job, of being not well seen by managers, or of simply compromising one's career, etc.). However, it may be

suggested that in part the lack of protest may be due to a more general spread of surveillance and data collection in our societies.

We are used to banks gathering data on our transactions and giving us a credit score, to online shops storing our details and targeting us with products that we are likely to purchase based on our profile, to our smartphones tracking our movements, to CCTVs in the streets and biometric passport scanners at airports, etc. Now, such technologies are also present in the workplace and perhaps for many it is just something that seems unavoidable, a phenomenon that is uncontrollable. This, however, is not the case and it is important that unions take this issue seriously and attempt to control the spread of new workplace surveillance technologies.

It is crucial to note that it is not just about individual privacy; modern surveillance usually raises privacy concerns but privacy is indispensable to the exercise of a whole range of other rights (freedom of association, the right to vote, freedom of expression, etc.). The violation of workers' privacy may thus have an impact on their right to be free from discrimination and to have equal career opportunities, and to the right to form trade unions. It is thus important that unions do not underestimate the risks of new workplace surveillance and attempt to at least put certain limits on its use by employers.

#### *About C.J. Polychroniou*

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [\*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change\*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

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# Carl Cederström ~ Ons geluksideaal - Een nieuwe blik op een versleten idee



Carl Cederström - Ills.  
Joseph Sassoon Semah

Carl Cederström, auteur van *The Wellness Syndrome* en *'Desperately Seeking Self-Improvement'* onderzoekt in *Ons Geluksideaal - Een nieuwe blik op een versleten idee* onze opvattingen van geluk. Hij omschrijft het geluksideaal als een expressie van wat mensen wensen en verlangen als het gaat om het goede leven.

Het geluksideaal bereikte zijn hoogtepunt in de jaren zestig met de Oostenrijkse psychoanalyticus Wilhelm Reich en zijn onconventionele interpretatie van seksuele driften. Reich combineerde de eis om authentiek te zijn met de voorwaarde van seksueel genot: het ideaal van seksuele en existentiële bevrijding. Het ideaal dat dat het rijke Westen nu al bijna een eeuw beheerst zijn weliswaar geworteld in het begin van de twintigste-eeuwse Europese psychiatrie, en de tegencultuur van de jaren dertig, maar leidt alleen tot de huidige hedonistische consumentencultuur. Authenticiteit, genot, narcisme en

zelfontplooiing vormen het hart van dit geluksideaal, en voor ons geluk zijn we zelf verantwoordelijk.

Multinationals en reclamebureaus dringen ons levens op die steeds meer onbevredigend, onzeker en narcistisch zijn. Zelfontplooiing werd decennia later niet een doel op zich maar een manier om je eigen marktwaarde te vergroten. Trainingscentra leerden grote groepen mensen hoe ze persoonlijke bevrijding konden combineren met financieel succes. Grote ondernemingen ontleenden inspiratie aan de 'human potential movement'. Dit specifieke geluksideaal werd opgenomen en verwerkt in bedrijfsculturen. De grens tussen productie en consumptie aan de ene kant en het streven naar geluk aan de andere kant vervaagden. Geluk kon via werk worden bereikt.



Cederström vraagt zich af of nu, in een tijd van schaarste en onzekerheid, andere alternatieven zijn te bedenken voor een zinvol geluksideaal.

Hij sluit zijn boek optimistisch en ietwat hoogdravend af: "In plaats van geluk te definiëren in individualistische termen en waanvoorstellingen, zullen we het in de toekomst moeten zien als een collectieve strijd van toewijding aan de waarheid."

Tegenover het hedonisme en individualisme van de vorige generaties stelt Cederström een andere visie op het goede leven, gekenmerkt door een grotere betrokkenheid bij de wereld. Als we ons laten leiden

door liefde, vriendelijkheid en solidariteit kunnen wij onszelf en onze maatschappij opnieuw uitvinden.

*Carl Cederström is verbonden aan de Stockholm Business School.*

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