

PVV Blog 3 ~ A Leopard Cannot Change Its Spots, Can't He?



On the previous episode of the Dutch version of my blog about the election victory of the Party for Freedom in the Dutch parliamentary elections of November 22 last year, reader Guus Martens [responded](#) (in Dutch):

Dear editors,

I would not have expected that from Nieuwwij: railing against Mr. Wilders based on his book from 2012. Wilders is getting older and we could show more understanding and sympathy for his current views, which at least seem to have changed in the meantime.

I found the use of the verb 'to rail' remarkable because I believe that I approach the subject of the Party for Freedom 's ideas and its potential effects on the Dutch Muslim community with the necessary distance. But more interesting is of course the second part of the response. Party leader Wilders has gotten older, his views seem to have changed and so we could show more understanding and sympathy.

I'd like to address the last point in this episode of the series. A leopard cannot change its spots, isn't it? Or does the proverb not apply at all to Geert Wilders and is he indeed the man who softens his views with age and power in hand?

Withdrawing bills

It appears that Geert Wilders is indeed softening his views. At the moment of the publication of this blog, he is still negotiating with three other political parties to form a coalition government. As a gesture to the other forming parties, he has withdrawn [three bills](#) (in Dutch).

The first proposal was a ban on owning Qurans, visiting mosques and going to an Islamic school. *The second* concerns a ban on people having two nationalities (in most cases it concerns 'Turks' and 'Moroccans' living in the Netherlands). *The*

third proposal concerned a so-called 'administrative detention' for jihad suspects who could be detained without the intervention of a judge.

The Dutch Council of State rejected the first and third proposals in a response, because they go against the 'essential principles of the democratic constitutional state'.

I consider myself a Party for Freedom watcher, but I am ashamed to admit that I did not know that the party had proposed these bills. Naturally, they had no chance in the House because a majority would never be found for it.

But the proposals clearly show what the Party for Freedom stands for and it would indeed be a constitutional disaster if such proposals were adopted and turned into law.

Now that the Party for Freedom is closer than ever to the center of power, the question is of course whether the party and its leader have actually become 'softer' as expressed in the reader's response.

Forming a new government

Politically speaking, the Party for Freedom is currently playing the game of give and take in the formation of a new government and it is the new political movement NSC (New Social Contract) of Pieter Omtzigt, being one of the future coalition partners, that has expressed itself in a [letter](#) (in Dutch) very critical and concerned about the unconstitutional points in the election manifesto of the Party for Freedom ('[Dutch back on 1!](#)' (in Dutch)). It could be that the NSC only wants to do business with the Party for Freedom if the latter's commitments to actually respect the constitution are clear and ready. But if the Party for Freedom does that, how does the party justify this shift to its voters? There are voters who voted for the Party for Freedom in the hope that the ongoing Islamization of the Netherlands will finally come to an end; there are those who want an immediate end to the arrival of (Muslim) refugees in our country. And there are those who simply want a Netherlands without Islam. Will the Party for Freedom lower its swords?

Compromises

I think that the Party for Freedom will indeed commit to the demands of the NSC in particular. Didn't Mr. Wilders constantly shout during the campaign that it was now the Party for Freedom's turn to govern and didn't he also state once he won

the elections, that give and take is part of the game?

But what will we notice of the Party for Freedom influence in the new government? Readers may probably remember that Wilders went along without a fight to the demand of the then (2010) cabinet, tolerated by the Party for Freedom, to increase the retirement age, even though the party was previously rabidly against this. And just this week, Party for Freedom MP Fleur Agema had to go to great lengths not to vote for an SP (Socialist Party) proposal to abolish the compulsory personal contribution to medical insurances as quickly as possible, simply because two coalition forming parties are against it. And that while its abolishment is a major point in the Party for Freedom election manifesto.

If the four parties succeed in forming a coalition, the three other parties may well keep the Party for Freedom in check when it comes to making unconstitutional proposals. The Party for Freedom as such would therefore be neutralized. Being in power, in collaboration with others, is indeed different from shouting extreme things down the line for years.

So Geert Wilders is not a leopard that basically cannot change its spots? Or is he not a leopard at all?

A leopard? He is a wolf!

I am not sure. I have read too much from and about Geert Wilders and Party ideologue Martin Bosma that I can hardly imagine them behaving like 'good populists' and the danger to democracy having passed.

If we look in the broader European context, we see the same picture as in the Netherlands.

A party like the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany is doing increasingly better in the polls. Marine Le Pen's populist Rassemblement National looks set to become the largest in France in the European Parliament elections later this year. In any case, it is [expected](#) (English) that the extreme right or populist parties will see their share in that parliament significantly increased. In Slovakia, a coalition government with a right-wing extremist party took office last year. In Hungary, the autocratic government of Victor Orbán is firmly in power. Italy is governed by Prime Minister Meloni's populist party Fratelli d'Italia. Populist forces of all kinds are seeing their share in the various parliaments in Europe increasing. And in my opinion, a populist party, with often unconstitutional election programs in the various centers of power, can never do

anything good for democracy in any country.

As strange as it sounds, democracy is also the cradle of totalitarianism. Parties can destroy democracy through democratic means and that might just happen at the same time in

various European power centers. Victorious populist parties that have dutifully promised to adhere to the democratic rules of the game will not be able to restrain themselves from translating their unconstitutional convictions into legislation, once in power. It is their nature to do just that.

So my response to the reader's suggestion above is that I think that not only are we dealing with a leopard that simply cannot change its spots, but that Geert Wilders also resembles a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing.

An Assassination Scandal Threatens India's Relations With The Five Eyes



*John P. Ruehl - Source:
Independent Media*

Institute

01-26-2024 ~ *A burgeoning relationship between India and a select group of English-speaking allies has been held back by various disagreements and historical realities. It will be further tested by assassination scandals that have emerged in recent months.*

Since mid-2023, a series of assassination plots have strained India's relations with Canada and the U.S. [In June 2023](#), a Sikh separatist activist living in Canada was reportedly killed on orders from Indian security services. Subsequently, [in November](#), it came to light that U.S. authorities were investigating an assassination attempt against another Sikh separatist figure on U.S. soil. While [India vehemently denied](#) the accusations from Canada, it [later committed to conducting](#) an investigation following the accusations by U.S. authorities.

The U.S. ambassador to Canada, David Cohen, confirmed that the information that led Canada to accuse India of the assassination was facilitated by the [Five Eyes intelligence](#) alliance, consisting of the U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Originating from intelligence collaboration [during World War II](#), the intelligence-sharing agreement operated in such secrecy that Australian prime ministers remained unaware of its existence until 1971 and it was publicly revealed only [in 1999](#). [The Five Eyes](#) later gained wider public awareness following the 2013 Snowden Leaks.

In addition to extensive data and intelligence sharing, the Five Eyes share substantial military, technology, and cultural ties. With largely cohesive foreign policies, the Five Eyes have become a significant force in international affairs. India values diplomatic relations with all five countries, but its strategic focus is on the U.S., Australia, Canada, and the UK due to their geopolitical significance. India's complex history with these countries has resulted in varying levels of cooperation and apprehension.

There has been significant tension between the U.S. and India since the latter's independence from the UK in 1947. This included [U.S. support for Pakistan](#) during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and U.S. military maneuvers against India during the war. Sanctions were placed on both India and Pakistan following their nuclear tests [in 1998](#), while India grew wary after the [U.S. increased its support](#) for Pakistan to aid the U.S.-led war effort in Afghanistan from 2001

onward.

Nonetheless, almost all U.S. sanctions against India [were lifted in 1999](#), and its relations with the U.S., as well as Australia, have significantly strengthened in the 21st century. The U.S. has been India's largest trading partner [since 2022](#), and in late 2023 India [agreed to most](#) of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economy Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) policies to deepen regional economic ties.

India also stands as Australia's [fourth-largest export destination](#), marked by the signing of the Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (AI-ECTA) [in 2022](#). Growing numbers of Indian emigrants and students increasingly travel to both the [U.S.](#) and [Australia](#).

Washington continues to [pursue closer collaboration](#) with India in space, AI, defense agreements, and [mineral supply chains](#). Yet the primary reason behind enhanced relations among India and all Five Eye countries is the shared concern over China. Their common anxiety has led to closer military ties among India, the U.S., Australia, and the strong U.S. ally Japan in the Indo-Pacific. In 2007, the [first Quadrilateral Dialogue](#) was held, with all four countries' navies later taking part in the Malabar exercises to increase interoperability.

Closer military integration typically [languished because of India](#), until the India-China clash in 2017 prompted New Delhi to [revive the Quad](#). Following another clash with China in 2020, India extended an invitation to Australia to [rejoin the Malabar exercises](#), and India currently conducts [more joint military exercises](#) with the U.S. than it does with any other country.

Nonetheless, India's history as a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War has continued to influence its foreign policy. Three weeks before the 2023 Malabar exercises, India [declined to participate](#) in the Australia-U.S. Talisman Sabre military exercises, underscoring India's aversion to military alliances in pursuit of its own course for increasing power and influence.

India's ascendance as a major power has added complexity to Washington's strategy of preserving the U.S.-led global order. China's assertive foreign policy challenges the established norms and influence of the U.S., while Russia's is characterized by disruptions to that order. But India's accommodating yet somewhat nonchalant foreign policy as a major power doesn't quite fit with the formal alliance-based approach that the U.S. has historically used to develop ties

with allies and isolate adversaries.

Despite ongoing concerns over India's positive relations with [Russia](#) and [Iran](#), hopes were high for an increasingly collaborative foreign policy alignment between the world's two largest democracies. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi received a warm welcome when he visited in [2019](#) and [2023](#), despite reservations from [progressive Democrats](#) about India's democratic backsliding. That was until the assassination attempt in the U.S. revealed in November derailed U.S.-India relations and resulted in significant criticism from U.S. officials.

But the assassination accusations from Canada prompted a notably more confrontational response from New Delhi months before, indicative of the heightened antagonism that has come to characterize Indian-Canadian relations in the last few years. Following Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's accusation that India orchestrated the assassination, India [expelled dozens of Canadian diplomats](#), [suspended visa applications for Canadians](#), and warned Indian citizens to "[exercise extreme caution](#)" in Canada due to anti-India sentiment.

While Sikh separatist activities remain India's most pressing concern in Canada, additional issues have strained relations between Ottawa and New Delhi. Under Trudeau, Canadian officials, more so than those from other Five Eyes countries, have become increasingly critical of [India's democratic backsliding](#) and human rights violations. [This includes](#) India's social media restrictions, internet blackouts, targeting of Muslims and other religious minorities, and the Indian governments confrontations with human rights organizations.

[Trudeau's 2018 trip to India](#) was also beset by controversy. Criticism was directed at his choice to wear full Indian traditional dress and his decision to invite Jaspal Singh Atwal, previously convicted in a 1986 assassination plot, to an event. Atwal had targeted Punjab minister Malkiat Singh Sidhu, and Trudeau's wife later [posed for a photo with him](#), causing Indian media and social media to highlight the issue. Additionally, visa and immigration issues, as well as trade disagreements, have also prevented closer ties, while [economic ties remain limited](#).

Alongside worsening ties with Canada, India's historical resistance to Britain, its former colonial ruler, continues to influence dynamics between the two countries.

Since India gained its independence, the UK's alignment with U.S. foreign policy also contributed to tensions with India, notably during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, British sanctions on India after the latter's 1998 nuclear tests, and British politicians' [continued involvement in Kashmir](#).

Despite historical grievances, British-India ties experienced a positive shift from the early post-colonial era in the 1990s. The establishment of a Defense Consultative Group [in 1995](#) reflected growing military cooperation. Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson committed to elevating UK-India ties [in 2021](#), and the appointment of Rishi Sunak as Britain's first Hindu leader was also [warmly received in India](#).

British leaders [often highlight](#) India and the UK as the world's largest and oldest parliamentary democracies to underscore the significance of the relationship. London also perceives its ties with India as crucial for maintaining global relevance in the aftermath of Brexit.

Yet despite being India's second-biggest trade partner [in 1998-99](#), the UK's ranking plummeted to 17 just two decades later. Attempts by previous prime ministers, such as [David Cameron](#), to strengthen UK-India ties, particularly through increased trade, proved unsuccessful.

Concerns within the British political establishment regarding India's democratic backsliding have also been raised. [In 2013](#), elements within the British Labour Party openly questioned the Labour Friends of India parliamentary grouping's plans to invite Modi to the UK over his role in the 2002 Gujarat religious riots. These criticisms from the UK are often viewed with disdain in India considering the context of Britain's colonial legacy. After a critical documentary on Modi's role in the 2002 riots aired on BBC in 2023, Indian authorities [exerted extreme pressure on the broadcaster that affected its operations in India](#).

Indian politicians have [also long criticized](#) British authorities for what they perceive as inaction over the proliferation of Sikh separatist elements in the UK. [In 2022](#), pro-Khalistan separatists vandalized the Indian High Commission in London and assaulted staff. Dissatisfied with Britain's response, India subsequently reduced security outside the British High Commission and the High Commissioner's residence in New Delhi. Additionally, New Delhi authorities [pledged to build a public toilet outside](#), sparking displeasure from London.

India stands as a unique factor among the foreign policies of the Five Eyes countries, which are typically aligned. New Delhi's growing ties to the U.S. and Australia contrast to its more complex relations with Canada and the UK. With concern growing that shared democratic values will not resonate as effectively in the future, the major factor driving more positive relations between India and the Five Eyes will continue to be anxiety over China.

But the prospect of greater collaboration in areas such as countering piracy and confronting Islamist groups like the Taliban, ISIS, and Al Qaeda will remain stalled as long as India believes insufficient attention is being given to Sikh separatist elements in Five Eyes countries. [In September 2023](#), Indian security agencies were instructed to identify all Khalistan separatists living in Australia, the U.S., Canada, and the UK, cancel their Overseas Citizenship of India status where applicable, and confiscate their assets in India.

The controversy surrounding the assassination plots highlights the broader challenge of Washington's engagement with India, especially when core allies like Canada have additional issues with New Delhi. However, India's leap over the UK [in 2022](#) to become the world's fifth-largest economy reflects the changing dynamics and India's growing international profile.

[Biden's decision to decline Modi's invitation](#) for India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26 reflects Washington's frustrations. The U.S. remains cautious of providing India excessive leverage in international affairs to the point where it feels bold enough to assassinate U.S. citizens on American soil. However, as long as India remains crucial for the U.S. in confronting China, New Delhi will continue to test how far it can push the envelope in Washington, as well as in London, Ottawa, and Canberra.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio:

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

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The Entry Of A New German Left Party Shakes Up The Country

Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht

In October 2023, 10 members of the German parliament (Bundestag) left Die Linke (the Left) and declared their intention to form their own party. With their departure, Die Linke’s parliamentary group fell to 28 out of the 736 members of the Bundestag, compared to the 78 members of the far-right Alliance for Germany (AfD). One of the reasons for the departure of these 10 MPs is that they believe that Die Linke has lost touch with its working-class base, whose decomposition over issues of war and inflation has moved many of them into the arms of the AfD. The new formation is led by Sahra Wagenknecht (born 1969), one of the most dynamic politicians of her generation in Germany and a former star in Die Linke, and Amira Mohamed Ali. It is called the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance for Reason and Justice (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, BSW) and it [launched](#) in early January 2024.

Wagenknecht’s former comrades in Die Linke accuse her of “conservatism” because of her views on immigration in particular. As we will see, though, Wagenknecht contests this description of her approach. The description of “left-wing conservatism” ([articulated](#) by Dutch professor Cas Mudde) is frequently deployed, although not elaborated upon by her critics. I spoke to Wagenknecht and her close ally—Sevim Dağdelen—about their new party and their hopes to move a progressive agenda in Germany.

Anti-War

The heart of our conversation rested on the deep divide in Germany between a government—led by the Social Democrat Olaf Scholz—eager to continue the war

in Ukraine, and a population that wants this war to end and for their government to tackle the severe crisis of inflation. The heart of the matter, said Wagenknecht and Dağdelen, is the attitude to the war. Die Linke, they argue, simply did not come out strongly against the Western backing of the war in Ukraine and did not articulate the despair in the population. “If you argue for the self-destructive economic warfare against Russia that is pushing millions of people in Germany into penury and causing an upward redistribution of wealth, then you cannot credibly stand up for social justice and social security,” Wagenknecht told me. “If you argue for irrational energy policies like bringing in Russian energy more expensively via India or Belgium, while campaigning not to reopen the pipelines with Russia for cheap energy, then people simply will not believe that you would stand up for the millions of employees whose jobs are in jeopardy as a result of the collapse of whole industries brought about by the rise in energy prices.”

Scholz’s approval [rating](#) is now at 17 percent, and unless his government is able to solve the pressing problems engendered by the Ukraine war, it is unlikely that he will be able to reverse this image. Rather than try to push for a ceasefire and negotiations in Ukraine, Scholz’s coalition of the Social Democrats, the Greens, and the Free Democrats, say Dağdelen, “is trying to commit the people of Germany to a global war alongside the United States on at least three fronts: in Ukraine, in East Asia with Taiwan, and in the Middle East at the side of Israel. It speaks volumes that Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock even prevented a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza at the Cairo summit” in October 2023.

Indeed, in 2022, Thuringia’s prime minister and a Die Linke leader, Bodo Ramelow, [told](#) Süddeutsche Zeitung that the German federal government must send tanks to Ukraine. When Wagenknecht [called](#) Gaza an “open-air prison” in October 2023, the Die Linke parliamentary group leader Dietmar Bartsch [said](#) that he “strongly distanced” himself from her (the phrase “open-air prison” to describe Gaza is used widely, [including](#) by Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967). “We have to point out what is happening here,” Dağdelen tells me, “It is our duty to organize resistance to this collapse of Die Linke’s anti-war stance. We reject Germany’s involvement in the U.S. and NATO proxy wars in Ukraine, East Asia, and the Middle East.”

Controversies

On February 25, 2023, Wagenknecht and her followers organized an anti-war

protest at Brandenburg Gate in Berlin that drew 30,000 people. The protest followed the [publication](#) of a “peace manifesto,” written by Wagenknecht and the feminist writer Alice Schwarzer, which has now attracted over a million signatures. The Washington Post reported on this rally with an [article](#) headlined, “Kremlin tries to build antiwar coalition in Germany.” Dağdelen tells me that the bulk of those who attended the rally and those who signed the manifesto are from the “centrist, liberal, and left-wing camps.” A well-known extreme right-wing journalist, Jürgen Elsässer tried to take part in the demonstration, but Dağdelen—as video footage [shows](#)—argued with him and told him to leave. Everyone but the right-wing, she says, was welcome at the rally. However, both Dağdelen and Wagenknecht say their former party—Die Linke—tried to obstruct the rally and demonized them for holding it. “The defamation is intended to construct an enemy within,” Dağdelen told me. “Vilifying peace protests is intended to put people off and simultaneously mobilize support for repugnant government policies, such as arms supply to Ukraine.”

Part of the controversy around Wagenknecht is about her views on immigration. Wagenknecht says that she supports the right to political asylum and says that people fleeing war must be afforded protection. But, she argues, the problem of global poverty cannot be solved by migration, but by sound economic policies and an end to the sanctions on countries like Syria. A genuine left-wing, she says, must attend to the alarm call from communities who call for an end to immigration and move to the far-right AfD. “Unlike the leadership of Die Linke,” Wagenknecht told me, “we do not intend to write off AfD voters and simply watch as the right-wing threat in Germany continues to grow. We want to win back those AfD voters who have gone to that party out of frustration and in protest at the lack of a real opposition that speaks for communities.”

The point of her politics, Wagenknecht said, is not anti-immigration as much as it is to attack the AfD’s anti-immigrant stand at the same time as her party will work with the communities to understand why they are frustrated and how their frustration against immigrants is often a wider frustration with cuts in social welfare, cuts in education and health funding, and in a cavalier policy toward economic migration. “It is revealing,” she said, “that the harshest attacks on us come from the far-right wing.” They do not want, she points out, the new party to shift the argument away from a narrow anti-immigrant focus to pro-working-class politics.

Polls [show](#) that the new party could win 14 percent of the vote, which would be three times the Die Linke share and would make BSW the third-largest party in the Bundestag.

By Vijay Prashad

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest books are [Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism](#) and (with Noam Chomsky) [The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power](#).

Source: Globetrotter

Houthis Emerge As Latest Threat To U.S. Control Over Global Shipping



*Red Sea - Map:
en.wikipedia.org*

01-25-2024. ~ *A powerful symbol of the U.S.-led global security order is increasingly under threat by the Yemeni rebel group. The lack of a robust international response has laid bare vulnerabilities as the U.S. attempts to shore up the world's maritime routes in the aftermath of the COVID-19 disruption to supply chains.*

On December 30, 2023, the Singapore-flagged Maersk Hangzhou, owned by Danish company Maersk Line, came under missile and subsequent boat attacks by Houthi rebels [in the Red Sea](#). The U.S. Navy responded by using helicopters to destroy three of the four ships used in the assault. Maersk, the world's [largest shipping company](#), immediately [announced](#) it was suspending operations in the sea indefinitely, rejoining [major Western shipping firms](#) and [energy companies](#) in redirecting shipping away from the region.

Houthi attacks have occurred regularly [since October 2023](#) after the group [declared](#) it would target ships associated with Israel. In response, Washington announced a task force on December 18—Operation Prosperity Guardian—to combat the attacks, and [imposed sanctions](#) on Houthi funding networks, mainly linked to Iran. But the difficulty in securing the Red Sea's narrow waters and the bottleneck at the Suez Canal have laid bare the fragility of global shipping, with an estimated [20 percent decline](#) in ship traffic through the Red Sea in December 2023. Daily container vessel traffic through the Suez Canal [had meanwhile halved by early January 2024](#), compared to a year before.

The repercussions of redirecting shipping are being felt globally, with ocean cargo rates [skyrocketing](#) since the attacks began. By early January, the logistics company Freightos reported that rates for Asia-to-North Europe shipping had more than doubled to [above \\$4,000 per 40-foot container](#). By mid-January, the cost of sending a 24-foot shipping container from India to Europe and the U.S. East Coast had risen [from \\$600 to \\$1,500](#). Adding to the financial burden, surcharges ranging from \$500 to \$2,700 per container are anticipated, and rates for shipments from Asia to North America have also experienced significant hikes.

For those daring to navigate the Red Sea, insurance premiums have more than tripled from [0.2 percent to 0.7 percent](#) of a vessel's value per journey. Though consumers haven't yet felt the brunt of rising prices, the specter of inflation looms in the coming [weeks](#). The [anticipated domino effects](#) recall the aftermath of the 2021 Ever Given disaster, when a ship ran aground in the Suez Canal for six days, leaving a lasting impact that [reverberated for months](#).

The imperative for the U.S. in controlling and stabilizing threats to shipping is underscored by its commitment to global economic stability, [dollar-dominated international trade](#), and the leverage it gains over allies and adversaries. Being able to ensure or compromise the safe movement of other countries' goods and military vessels complements Washington's ability to enforce blockades and economic sanctions, as well as to respond quickly to global crises and combat terrorism and organized crime.

Despite the challenges in maintaining its influence, the U.S. has successfully dealt with threats to global shipping before. Multilateral safeguards like the [Combined Maritime Forces](#), consisting of dozens of countries under U.S. command, monitor the Middle East, and task forces such as the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), [created in 2009](#), have successfully tackled specific threats such as Somali piracy.

[Since 2015](#), the Houthis have intermittently targeted ships in the Red Sea, but their sustained campaign since October 2023 has raised significant doubts about the U.S. military's capacity to safeguard shipping. Operating out of Yemen, the Houthis employ a mix of missiles, radars, helicopters, small boats, and inexpensive drones, presenting a challenge as they lack substantial infrastructure susceptible to targeting. The use by the U.S. Navy of [\\$2 million missiles to intercept \\$2,000 drones](#) adds to concerns about the cost-effectiveness of its response.

Benefitting from Iranian logistical aid and driven by their steadfast commitment to the Palestinian cause, the Houthis have encountered minimal resistance from regional countries hesitant to escalate tensions. Following its eight-year campaign in Yemen, neighboring Saudi Arabia withdrew from the country and entered peace talks with the Houthis in 2022. Apart from tiny Bahrain, local partners of the U.S. have refrained from joining Operation Prosperity Guardian out of fear of being accused of supporting Israel. Even Egypt, which is witnessing [substantial losses in transit revenue](#) through the Suez Canal, has opted to stay on the sidelines.

The inability of the Saudi military, [bolstered by modern Western weapons](#), to overcome Houthi forces over the last decade by relying on air raids and drone strikes implies that a ground intervention may be necessary to effectively defeat the Houthis. Yet Washington lacks the resolve and influence to undertake such an effort. Notably, NATO allies, including France, Italy, and Spain, withdrew from Operation Prosperity Guardian to avoid being under U.S. command, leaving only a few core allies like the UK and Australia—the latter of which has sent [11 military personnel](#) to the region but no ships.

Meanwhile, other major powers have sought to conduct their own independent operations in the region. After [declining Washington's invitation](#) to join Operation Prosperity Guardian, the Indian Navy [began its own operations](#) in the region. China also [declined the opportunity](#) to join the multilateral coalition, and has also [distanced itself from U.S. messaging](#) on the crisis as it deploys its own military vessels to the region.

Failing to deter the Houthis will inspire others to test Washington's willingness to defend open shipping lanes. After [declining significantly](#) in recent years, Somali piracy [since increased](#) in 2023. Southeast Asia has also seen a steady rise in piracy over the [last few years](#), and there are fears [incidents could continue to rise](#) with the U.S. distracted in the Middle East. Additionally, Iran has [seized Western ships](#) sailing through the region before and was accused by the Pentagon [in December 2023](#) of using a drone to attack a chemical tanker in the Indian Ocean.

The attacks and blowback from the conflict have reverberations beyond regional trade. In December 2023, Malaysia [closed its ports to Israeli ships](#), while Russian actions in the Black Sea have further [disrupted international shipping](#). Moreover, the situation could impact freedom of navigation exercises globally. Heightening

tensions and [China's escalatory movements](#) in the South China Sea and Taiwan have stirred unease in the U.S., prompting [two-day talks](#) between defense officials from Washington and Beijing in early January ahead of Taiwan's recent election.

Russia, China, and Iran welcome the U.S.'s struggle to maintain control over sea lanes due to the Houthi threat, seeing it as an opportunity to exploit Washington's global standing. However, particularly in the case of China, they have also benefited from the stability that this system has provided to global trade, and viable alternative routes for overseas trade remain undeveloped and untested.

Amid the chaos, the Panama Canal, another crucial juncture for international shipping, faces disruptions from severe drought lowering water levels. As only a [limited number of ships](#) can navigate through, Washington's oversight in ensuring the uninterrupted flow of global sea lanes appears more precarious than it has been in decades. While options like [continued military convoys](#) and the rise of [private maritime security companies](#) are on the table, the Suez Canal's [eight-year closure](#) after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War remains an ominous reminder of what is at stake.

As Washington attempts to balance control with the risk of escalation, the Houthis have underscored the resilient influence of non-state actors in 21st-century geopolitics amid the resurgence of great power competition. The situation has become the latest litmus test for Washington's commitment to preserving access to global sea lanes, even as it pivots toward [friendshoring and reshoring economic policies](#) encouraging overland trade and manufacturing in North America.

As the 2024 election season unfolds and the enduring impact of Trump's "America First" policies persists, safeguarding global sea lanes may emerge as a pivotal topic in the upcoming election. Coupled with the unique challenges posed by the Houthis, mounting an effective and decisive response against the maritime threat has so far proven elusive for the Biden Administration. Ongoing U.S. and UK airstrikes against the Houthis have [not prevented further attacks on shipping](#). The longer it takes to respond effectively, the greater the threat to the future of the current state of global supply chains and U.S. dominance of the world's waterways.

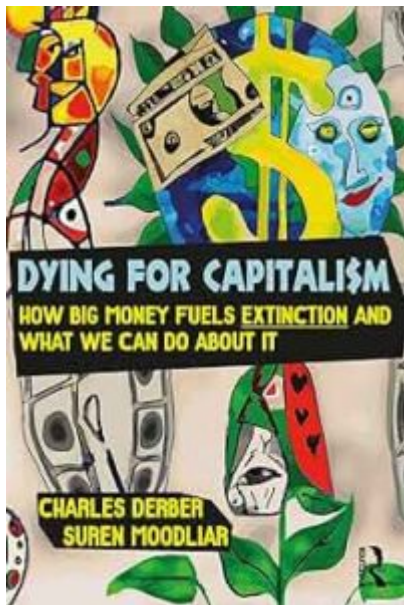
By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributing editor to *Strategic Policy* and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

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The New Cold War And The Risk Of Nuclear Annihilation



01-24-2024 ~ *We are closer to nuclear disaster than ever before.*

The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 is etched into the minds of anyone old enough to experience the terror it triggered. For the first time, our leaders had ordered and succeeded in creating a military system that could destroy us all—and where there was and remains no possible way to survive the inevitable conflict. The reasons for the pursuit of nuclear weapons are different than those publicly described and have little to do with deterring strikes from other countries. Instead, the nuclear program reflects a mad willingness to pursue global profit

and power with force, even at the risk of extinction of all life on the planet.

This mad system remains today. It is even more dangerous now than during the Cold War. At the time of the Cuban missile crisis, nuclear weapons posed a threat to extinction that would likely destroy all life on the planet, today, prospects of general nuclear war are out of the headlines and largely out of our minds—even with the dangerous escalation of this threat focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Until Russia invaded Ukraine, recent wars seemed to many as less likely to become global nuclear wars and more limited or survivable conflicts—whether they were battles with smaller “jihadist” groups, trade wars, immigration battles, and culture wars internal to nations. With terrorism rather than a nuclear Soviet empire at the core of the Western security narrative, the argument has been that current threats—while very dangerous—can likely be managed without a massive nuclear conflagration.

This is a form of denialism by inattention and repressed fear, as well as elite-managed propaganda to help keep the public calm. It ignores the dangers posed by Western and non-Western development of nuclear arsenals, the breakdown of conventional and nuclear arms control treaties, perpetual U.S. wars to protect global power and profit, and the rise of a New Cold War era centered around direct or proxy conflicts with Russia and China, which can escalate over time into nuclear wars.

Pointing to the need to focus anew on the extinction threat of nuclear war, famed Vietnam war whistleblower and high-level nuclear planner, the late Daniel Ellsberg, made clear in his 2017 work, [*The Doomsday Machine*](#), that extinction by nuclear war is as great and probable a threat as during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union when the world was much more focused on it:

“The hidden reality... is that for over 50 years, all-out thermonuclear war—an irreversible, unprecedented, and almost unimaginable calamity for civilization and most life on earth... [was and remains] *a catastrophe waiting to happen*.”

No policies in human history have more deserved to be recognized as immoral. Or insane. The story of how this calamitous predicament came about and how and why it has persisted for over half a century is a chronicle of human madness.”

The madness Ellsberg describes has not ended. Two extinction threats arising from war exist and are growing today—and both are subject to continued denial. This is, in itself, madness, since denying the threats undercuts the ability to respond to them.

The first major threat is the view that the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have dramatically reduced the chance of a global nuclear war destroying life on the planet. This is an illusion partly because the Cold War has not completely ceased. The rivalry and tensions between the United States and Russia are evolving into a New Cold War, arguably more dangerous than the old one. Indeed, the growing competition and hostility between the United States and China is seen by several observers as eerily parallel to the Cold War between the United States and Russia.

The New Cold War can be seen in geopolitical rivalries and the breakdown or weakening of nuclear arms agreements that could quickly escalate political and military tensions in U.S.-Russia relations and, potentially, between the United States and China. The U.S. media and national security apparatus focus increasingly on the “China threat,” a major security theme of the Trump and Biden administrations.

This could bring the United States into conflict with Russia and China around East Asian and global economic and military security matters. In 2021, the Biden administration hit both Russia and China with [sanctions](#) for cyber hacking that signaled a hardening of conflicts with these nuclear rivals, both of which could escalate into extremely perilous military conflicts.

A multitude of other conflicts pit the United States against other Russian allies that could inflame the U.S.-Russian relationship, including conflicts in Iran, Venezuela, Crimea, Cuba, and Syria.

Moreover, border disputes between Eastern European and Baltic nations and Russia, disputes over the existence and purpose of NATO, and conflict over international trade are all dangerous issues that pit Russia and the United States against each other. These issues could escalate into a more severe crisis and war.

The depth of the New Cold War thinking became evident, ironically, when the Democratic Party and many liberal media elites, including progressive MSNBC hosts such as Rachel Maddow, attacked former President Donald Trump for

“going soft” on Russia. The larger hidden story told by even more liberal news outlets is that Russia is a hostile, aggressive, and expansionary enemy of the United States and the “free world.” Defining Russia this way appeared to be how anti-Trumpists of all partisan persuasions felt they could gain legitimacy because it was the foreign policy bedrock view of the national security apparatus and the public.

The extinction threat invisibly grows as both political parties in the United States embrace the story of Russia’s antagonism and dangerousness. Nuclear crises could escalate in the South China Sea and East Asia, where China and Russia tend to be allied in opposing U.S. military and economic dominance. But the dangers of escalation and war with Russia could quickly emerge in places like Iran, where Russia (and nuclear China) both support Tehran. They may try to resist military provocations by the United States.

Perhaps an even more significant nuclear threat lies on the Russia border, where Cold War tensions and NATO expansion have always been fuel for a significant firestorm between the United States and Russia. This began with the U.S. breaking its 1990 promise to the former President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev not to advance NATO “[one inch closer](#)” to the Russian border.

This pledge was made in return for Gorbachev’s acceptance of a unified Germany aligned with the United States and Western Europe. The nuclear extinction threat is particularly dangerous and growing, as the U.S. seeks to deploy new nuclear and anti-ballistic weapons near the Russian border, partly in the name of a growing threat of border expansion by the Kremlin in Ukraine.

Between 2016 and 2019, the Trump administration essentially tore up the major nuclear arms agreements that appeared to be stabilizing the Russian-American nuclear relationship. President Joe Biden upped the ante by approving and funding further new “small” tactical or battlefield nukes, most likely to trigger a nuclear exchange on the Russian border.

President Biden has taken a far more adversarial stance toward Russia than Trump did, especially on issues ranging from Russian expansion of its borders to the suspected U.S. cyberattack on the Russian gas pipeline to Russia’s trade deals with the Europeans.

In 1962, the Cuban missile crisis made the specter of nuclear war an immediate

threat. Anyone old enough to remember this also remembers the folly of “duck and cover” drills that falsely promised protection from a nuclear Holocaust. It was only because of diplomacy and a robust anti-nuclear movement that that threat receded for decades. Today, rampant militarism and leaders willing to take a chance on the fate of the world for economic advantage have, once again, ramped up the risk of nuclear annihilation.

As of January 23, 2024, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has set the [Doomsday Clock](#) to 90 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to a nuclear disaster. Our leaders now play a cynical game of “duck and cover” with the truth.

By Charles Derber and Suren Moodliar

Charles Derber is a professor of sociology at Boston College and has written 26 books. Most recently, he coauthored [Dying for Capitalism: How Big Money Fuels Extinction and What We Can Do About It](#) (Routledge, 2023). He is a contributor to the [Observatory](#).

Suren Moodliar is the editor of the journal [Socialism and Democracy](#) and coordinator of [encuentro5](#), a movement-building space in downtown Boston. He is the coauthor of [Dying for Capitalism: How Big Money Fuels Extinction and What We Can Do About It](#) (Routledge, 2023). He is a contributor to the [Observatory](#).

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The Left Has A Great Story To

Share About Alternatives To Capitalism—But Sucks At Telling It



C.J. Polychroniou

01-23-2024 ~ If we are to expect the frustrated and badly battered working-class people to turn their backs on the false promises of the far right and join instead the struggle for a more humane order based on socialist ideals and values, we need to take winning hearts and minds much more seriously.

For radical socialists, one of the most frustrating political experiences in the post-Cold War era is witnessing the dramatic deterioration of socio-economic conditions throughout the developed world and, at the same time, the failure of the Left narrative to convince the citizenry about the root causes of the problems at hand and that alternative socio-economic arrangements are in turn urgently needed. This is a paradox that open-minded radical socialists should not be hesitant to confront. A critical examination of the failure of the Left narrative to make inroads with the laboring classes in contemporary capitalist society is a must if the political pendulum is to swing back from conservative control.

The Left has always offered solid critiques about the state of capitalism. Armed with a class-driven perspective (“the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”) which has become increasingly complemented by a multi-level analysis that also brings into play the role of race, gender, culture and ethnicity, the Left narrative about the nature of the problems facing

contemporary capitalist societies has no equal among politico-economic discourses. It explains economic inequality on the basis of the dynamics of a profit-driven system geared toward serving almost exclusively the interests of the dominant classes instead of treating it as an outcome of individual failures (the right-wing version of economic inequality); understands racism as a force of its own, instead of trying to sweep it under the carpet as the Right does, but also recognizes that its continuation in present-day society is a consequence of specific institutional arrangements and both implicit and explicit biases; and advocates a succession of policies that aim toward the attainment of the common good instead of catering to the needs and interests of a tiny coterie of corporate and financial elites as conservative policies tend to do.

The Left narrative is intellectually rigorous but also couched in deeply humanistic terms. Since the French Revolution, the Left worldview has always been one that values the common good over narrowly defined private interests, progress over tradition, democracy over authoritarian rule. As such, it favors cooperation over competition, solidarity over rugged individualism, and science over religion and superstition. It is of little surprise, therefore, that the world's greatest intellectuals, artists and writers in the modern age — from Victor Hugo to Arturo Toscanini and from Pablo Picasso to Jean Paul Sartre — have been to the left of the political spectrum. Indeed, in a continent where ideas have always been taken very seriously, one of the great grievances among 20th century European conservatives was over the fact that so few artists and intellectuals were to be found to the right of the ideological spectrum.

Nonetheless, no matter how intellectually *and* morally powerful it may have been, the Left narrative about the brutal realities of the capitalist system and the alternative values that should be guiding societal development was never the dominant political paradigm. The forces of reaction have always been a formidable opponent, relying both on the ideological and repressive apparatuses of the state to block radical change initiatives. From the brutal suppression of the [Paris Commune](#) by French and Prussian troops during the “Bloody Week” (21-28 May 1871), where some 30,000 Communards were killed, to the role of the [CIA](#) in promoting anticommunism in Europe in the period immediately following the Second World War to today's strategic co-optation of once radical groups into mainstream political forces (the German Green Party, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, to name just a few), the powers that be have almost always found ways

to create barriers to radical social transformation.

The Left narrative has also been undermined by the experience of “actually existing socialism.” Socialism, as practiced in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states, was undemocratic and had little tolerance for individual liberties and freedoms. The political system in place actually sabotaged the social, cultural, and economic achievements of “actually existing socialism,” which were in fact quite extensive, and it was a key factor in people turning away from embracing socialism as an alternative socio-economic order.

Formed in the periphery of the global capitalist system, where neither economic nor political development had yet to reach capitalist maturity (Russia was largely an agrarian society that had never before experienced democracy when the Bolsheviks took power in 1917), the type of socialism introduced functioned on the basis of the centralization of economic resources and institutions in the hands of the state and on single party governance. Workers had no say in economic decisions even though they were touted as co-owners of the means of production. This form of system became entrenched in the “motherland” of socialism after Stalin became an autocrat (1929-1953) and remained pretty much intact even during the so-called liberalization period that was ushered in by Nikita Khrushchev (1956-1964), while even less changed under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982). In the land of “actually existing socialism,” the rulers possessed no wealth and had no private property of their own but made all the decisions for the rest of society. The USSR was at best a “deformed workers’ state.”

Still, socialist and communist parties in the western world were quite popular with the masses both during the interwar years and for much of the postwar period. Communist parties carried a great deal of influence in trade unions and student movements and socialist parties were in power in numerous European countries after World War II. Indeed, the future did seem to belong to the Left.

All this changed for the worse with the collapse of “actually existing socialism” and the end of the Cold War. Instead of feeling liberated by the collapse of authoritarian state-socialism, the western Left felt a loss of identity and entered a long period of intellectual confusion and political paralysis. Many of its intellectuals abandoned their long-held ideas about socialism and communism and turned instead to mainstream political discourses, while others fell into

depression and retreated altogether from political and ideological struggles. Subsequently, postmodern philosophers emerged on the scene who not only challenged the ideals of socialism but, in one of the vilest interventions in the history of intellectual discourse, identified socialism and communism with the crimes of Stalinism. The works of Marx were either ignored or completely distorted. By the mid-1990s, the intellectual paradigm shifted from Marxism and socialism to postmodernism. Media outlets to the very left of the political spectrum saw their readership decline in substantial numbers, and communist parties fell out of favor with intellectuals, workers, and students alike. By the early 2000s, most western communist parties ended up in the dustbin of history while trade unions lost entirely their political character and turned ever more toward economism. The end result was that the vision of socialism suffered a tremendous blow and the Left narrative about capitalism became quite marginalized, having little impact on the laboring populations that were experiencing declining standards of living, growing economic insecurity, and a shrinking social state under the auspices of neoliberalism.

And this is where things still stand today. Socialism remains in deep crisis in the developed world, with the only exception being the United States, the only country in the developed world that doesn't even have a left-wing political party.

Indeed, in the metropolis of the neoliberal capitalist universe, socialism is enjoying considerable popular support, especially among the youth. For the first time, socialism in the U.S. has ceased being a taboo. Yet, one could argue that some of the political figures most responsible for the rebirth of socialism in the United States (such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) and [Bernie Sanders](#)) are not socialists per se and that their fight is on behalf of a light version of European social democracy.

To stress this point further, the progressive struggle in the U.S. is over a series of selected economic and social issues (universal healthcare, [student debt](#) elimination, unionization, and defending social security and Medicare) when Europe's postwar left-wing movements and parties, especially from the 1950s through the mid-1980s, were aiming for nothing less than the radical transformation of the entire capitalist system. Social rights such as free higher education and free healthcare had already been realized in western European countries, thus making the struggle for socialism not issue-oriented but a holistic project. For example, demands for the socialization of the means of production

were on top of the political agenda of all radical left parties and organizations in western Europe. The French communist party did not shy away from labelling the socialist revolution and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” as its key strategic objectives. Yet, indicative of how sour things have gone for the socialist project since the end of the Cold War, popular forces in many European countries find themselves today fighting for the mere protection of basic social rights as the wrecking ball of neoliberalism is in full swing, seeking to destroy the last vestiges of the social state.

The Left narrative is failing to convince the bulk of the citizenry in today’s western world not because the analyses advanced about the consequences of neoliberal capitalism are incorrect but because the vision of socialism itself rarely enters the equation. Leftist intellectuals shy away from making a case for socialism. Critiques of neoliberal capitalism are not in themselves a case for the radical transformation of capitalism and its eventual replacement with a socialist socio-economic order. Critiques of neoliberal capitalism without the ideological underpinnings of a socialist vision ingrained into the analysis suggest that there is no alternative to capitalism, only a better version of capitalism. And today’s Left narrative is overwhelmed with critiques of neoliberal capitalism, which are of course very much needed, but remain largely silent about the question of a future beyond capitalism.

If we are to expect the frustrated and badly battered working-class people to turn their backs on the false promises of the far right and join instead the struggle for a more humane order based on socialist ideals and values, then the ideological battle for the minds and hearts of the laboring populations must be resumed. The vision of socialism must return in full force to the public arena. [Ideological belief systems](#) matter in politics. They are what motivates people into political action.

There are, however, also systemic factors responsible for the failure of the Left narrative to convince the laboring population in the developed countries. On the one hand, the ideological apparatuses of late capitalism have elevated the art of political apathy to such great heights that they have succeeded in making an increasingly large segment of the citizenry feel totally helpless about the possibility of making a meaningful change through participation in political struggles. At the same time, they are creating the illusion that success and failure are a matter of character, and that self-realization can be attained based on the pursuit of purely self-centered activities rather than through engagement with

other human beings in common struggles for a better future for all. Whether it is the entertainment industry or marketing strategies for consumers, the prevailing mode of reference is the “self,” the individual as an isolated unit with “unique” experiences. Social injustices are virtually never brought into light by the system’s ideological apparatuses, including public education which acts under capitalism as a mechanism for creating social consensus around mainstream values and beliefs. The corporatization of higher education, with its overwhelming emphasis on market skills instead of critical pedagogy for the betterment of society and the enhancement of the democratic ethos, has also contributed immensely to the politics of apolitical culture.

On the other hand, the political agencies and the cultural institutions that are needed for the enhancement of working-class consciousness and for activating the Left narrative into action have been extensively weakened and, in some cases, even become extinct. As stated earlier, communist parties in western Europe are mostly gone while their socialist counterparts have moved so far to the right that they are now virtually indistinguishable from Christian Democratic and conservative parties in general. As for today’s [radical left](#) parties, they are anything but radical and reflect the ideological confusion that is the hallmark of multiculturalism and the politics of identity. In sum, the working classes in the developed world find themselves today without mass-based political parties that represent the interests of labor. Little wonder then why working-class people are drawn to the far-right as the leaders of those parties claim to be fighting for the primacy of workers’ interests.

Until a few decades ago, the working-class people throughout the developed world could not only rely on mass parties representing specifically their own interests but also had their own cultural institutions whose mission was to foster ideological awareness and forge proletarian culture. Socialist and communist newspapers made an immense contribution to working-class consciousness and raised the level of radicalism. Trade unions performed an equally important role by organizing various educational and social activities that enhanced solidarity. With the collapse of “actually existing socialism” and the onset of a socialist crisis, all working-class institutions experienced a dramatic fallout. In Italy, *l’Unità*, which had been founded by Antonio Gramsci and was the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, went under. In France, the venerable *L’Humanité* has been struggling for years with financial woes and low circulation. As for

workers' clubs, they are a thing of the past.

In conclusion, the Left narrative, no matter how accurate and intellectually powerful it may be, cannot expect to catch the imagination of the citizenry without including a vision for a real alternative future. Moreover, working-class cultural institutions need to be reinstated for the enhancement of class consciousness and authentic socialist parties need to be rediscovered for the Left narrative to become politically effective. Social movements are important, but their actions rarely have lasting effects. Only political parties can succeed in forging the Left narrative into the policy agenda and turn it into a programmatic plan for radical social change. Understandably enough, this is quite a tall order, but the Left needs to win once again the hearts and minds of the laboring classes. But it needs the necessary political agencies and cultural instruments to do so. It cannot accomplish it on intellectual grounds alone, especially with the politics of identity acting as a spearhead for social transformation. *The Communist Manifesto* would have remained just a mere political document if it wasn't for the existence of radical political parties across the globe to embrace it as their guide and vision for the emancipation of the working class from the yoke of capital.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/left-alternatives-to-capitalism>

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky)*, Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).