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Maybe Civilization Was a Mistake, After All



Photo by [Raphaël Biscaldi](#)

Civilization was possibly a mistake. It led to capitalism five hundred years ago, and that was unquestionably, absolutely a mistake. Capitalism now consumes the planet. It expands like a metastasizing cancer over the face of the earth, heating the atmosphere to unbearable levels and at the current rate may well destroy our world within another hundred years. We would do well to replace it with something that won't render the globe uninhabitable. But what? Well, of the 200,000 years that humans have dwelled on this planet, 95 percent of that time we were hunter gatherers. We had better health, greater longevity than our agricultural descendants who ruled for millennia before the current, unfortunate arrangement, less patriarchy, lived without direct authority over us, and, critically, we didn't ravage the earth.

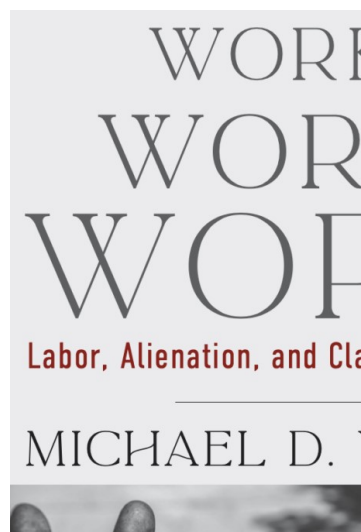
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Michael Yates' new book, *Work, Work, Work* references this human hunter-gatherer ancestry, though he would clearly like to replace capitalism with socialism, rather than return to the wisdom of our nomadic forebearers. But we may not have much choice. From my perch in the peanut gallery, I'd like to note that socialism is about as likely as scavenging for roots and bark. Global brainwashing against socialism and communism may only have succeeded in the west, but that's the place responsible for belching millions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere (though China has lately caught up fast) and thus heating it so badly that polar ice caps melt. Ask an ideologue like House speaker Nancy "We're All Capitalists Now" Pelosi and you'll find her enthusiasm for socialized medicine about on a par with her eagerness to forage in the woods for her dinner.

And then there's senator Marco "Bomb the Chinese Aircraft Carriers" Rubio. He's ready and rip-roaring to go for World War III, which, according to latest estimates would promptly starve over five billion people to death via nuclear winter, and leave the rest of us...hunting in the forest for fiddlehead ferns to eat, while consulting our wild food guidebooks about which mushrooms are not poisonous. Maybe we could just delete the nuclear war step and skip straight to a hunter-gatherer culture. There would be a lot less yellow-peril, racist razzmatazz, thus disappointing GOP demagogues, though certainly many more survivors.

But clearly Rubio's on board with zipping back in time to our hunter gatherer past, it's just how he plans to get us there that's objectionable; indeed, I'm sure he'd prefer nuts, tubers and rhizomes to the socialized state picking up the tab for housing, medicine and education. But actually, in any event, *he* doesn't have to worry. He probably won't be foraging for immature cattail spikes in wetlands. High-ranking congressmembers likely can claim cushy berths in the government's



nuclear apocalypse bunker and feast on evaporated milk and canned corn for a few years, something the rest of us proles will only be able to dream of as we pick the few berries that can grow with sunlight limited by nuclear winter and gather dandelions for salads. So no wonder Rubio wants war with China. Unlike eight billion other people, he had no skin in the game (whose bright idea was it so send him to congress in the first place?)

robably the same imbeciles who voted for the current grand pooh-bah of nincompoops, senator Marsha “Bring on Nuclear Armageddon” Blackburn, who recently informed us that Taiwan “declared their independence.” If that had happened, so would a Chinese invasion of the island and the inevitable futile, idiotic and radioactive U.S. military response. “Taiwan has its own president, military and constitution. It’s obvious it is an independent country,” according to Blackburn, who also thumped her chest and announced that “Xi Jinping doesn’t scare me.”

But this bluster has nothing on the imbecility of Blackburn’s grasp of the past, worthy of any ignoramus elected to the U.S. congress: “China has a 5,000-year history of cheating and stealing. Some things will never change...” said Blackburn who represents a country that recently stole \$7 billion from Afghanistan, over \$300 billion from Russia and loots Syrian oil even as you read these words. Meanwhile China alarms U.S. financial bigwigs by setting a virtuous example that doubtless nauseates them, namely forgiving loans to 17 African nations. Who’s the thief again? Don’t ask fact-free Blackburn. Her moronic pronouncements garnished her recent adventure in Taiwan, one of several by U.S. members of congress in the wake of Nancy Pelosi’s deliberately provocative jaunt there earlier this summer. Apparently, the view among elected U.S. nitwits is that Joe “Russian Roulette” Biden is too lethargic when it comes to his various oaths to support Taiwan militarily, so they outdo each other, more vigorously flirting with atomic apocalypse. Voters who sent these stupids to Washington generally deserve what they get, but even those who backed Blackburn don’t deserve the three years of no sunlight that the nuclear winter she promotes will cause.

By contrast, you’ve got to admire socialists like Yates. They stick to the truth and denounce war wherever it comes. His new book takes apart and then demolishes any myth any idiot might harbor about the dignity of work under capitalism. It also recognizes how capitalism poisons the planet. “Radical change is not utopian; it is necessary,” he writes. “No liberal or social democratic program has any chance of avoiding our annihilation.” That’s annihilation from climate change, folks, which, if you haven’t heard, is killing us. Currently it drowns people in floods or kills them with heat prostration or those once-in-a-

millennium, now routine, freak weather events. But remember, the climate catastrophe is just gearing up. And Yates doesn't even broach the potential global nuclear fiasco of a U.S. proxy war with Russia or an out-and-out one, like Republican lunatics want, with China. The radical socialism Yates says we need presupposes going completely green and ditching all weapons of mass destruction.

And who spearheads this radical socialism? Not only the world's three to four billion workers, but also the two billion global peasant farmers, the many unemployed, who knows how many homemakers, everyone who scrapes by through participating in the informal economy, all 1.46 billion of them, and indigenous hunter gatherers, in short, the vast, humongous majority of humanity. And since capitalism so promiscuously scarred the earth and its people – billions, remember, dispossessed by this economic and political arrangement – any new anti-capitalist order would end private ownership of the means of production, including land.

Yates lists other arrangements that ideally would cease: “Production for profit. The obsession with endless economic growth. The exploitation of wage labor. The expropriation of peasant land, urban and rural common spaces, the labor and bodies of women, Black bodies, and all forms of patriarchy and racism. The private plunder of the natural world. Imperialism.” And more. Perusing this laundry list of things that gotta go, it's impossible not to conclude that billionaire oligarchs won't give all that up without a fight. Workers in the plutocrat-infested pampas of the United States, already beleaguered, have a gargantuan battle ahead of them.

“It takes boldness and courage to attack capital.” Yates writes. “But attack we must. This system is a human disaster, and it proves itself every day to be incapable of satisfying our most basic needs.” Instead, it poisons the earth and renders billions of people destitute, those who somehow scramble to survive on a few dollars or less per day. “The implication of everything said in this book is that the working class must change the world. There is no choice.” Because certainly capital ain't about to do it.

The rich benefit from the current ecological and economic catastrophe. They don't care if oil spills pollute indigenous lands in some faraway corner of the globe or if a million child laborers languish in mines, factories and farm fields around the world. And remember, even for adults, work “is a soul-destroying lethal experience.” That's because “most workers do hard and dangerous labor, wearing out their bodies every minute they toil, fearing the day that they will be discarded.” That includes those one million kids. But

plutocrats don't give a hoot. They've got theirs. And the same, Yates says, holds true of the comfortable middle class in places like the United States.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, things just go from bad to worse. Take, for instance, Ukraine, destroyed in every way by its association with the west. Well, they've just banned labor unions. Another great western neoliberal idea. On August 23 came the news that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky ratified Law 5371. As a result, trade unions no longer protect workers, who have lost the right to bargain collectively. So in addition to serving as cannon fodder for the west's insane proxy war with Russia, ordinary Ukrainians are now the hapless victims of the class war, of neo-liberalism unchained and gone wild.

As anyone can see, the world's billionaire oligarchs remain busy waging that class war wherever they can. And they would undoubtedly prefer to destroy the world than sacrifice one iota of their privilege. Something they are completely capable of doing. If not nuclear war with Russia or China, our elites will undermine any radical change to prevent the climate catastrophe that is happening now, much faster than even the most pessimistic scientists predicted.

Aside from capitalism's climate catastrophe, there are other very good reasons to end this sadistic arrangement. Businesses use employees like machines, Yates observes. "It is profoundly anti-human. It is not just that employers exploit labor. Rather, they consume workers, and, in the process, deaden them. And when no more can be taken by capital, shells of human beings are simply disposed of and fresh new ones put to work."

So capitalism burns through the natural world, burns through workers, and, let's not forget, inflates a deadly, multi-billion dollar weapons industry. "The market will, absent powerful countervailing forces, not only reproduce inequalities, but deepen them, as we have seen so clearly in the United States over the past fifty years," Yates writes. "The greater the inequality of income within a state, the higher the mortality rate." This is so because "it's not the ceo and the managers who suffer depression, hypertension and heart attacks from being too long on the job. Instead, it's the assembly-line worker, the secretary, and the kitchen laborer." And this, Yates adds, is only in the richest country. The injuries of class "get truly demonic as we move outside the rich nations and into the poor ones." And the billionaires in those poor countries live like kings.

In the United States, only a few radical unions remain, having somehow weathered red-baiting vilification and anti-communist hysteria back in the mid-twentieth century. One of those radical unions, the United Electrical Workers led the struggle for workers' rights

during covid. At the pandemic's start, Yates quotes UE leaders, "our union...UE has called on all workers, both our members and nonunion workers, to stand up and fight." This was back when the virus was new and our rulers not yet blasé about compelling employees to expose themselves to a lethal disease. Now such exposure is expected. Workers are thus asked, more openly than usual, to die for capitalism and the moneybags its smooth operation enriches.

The thorniest problem is how to wrest control from the capitalist aristocracy. Yates lists three important elements in any worker movement: direct action, labor organization and political effort. "Direct action is often characterized, even on the left, as wanton rioting, without rhyme or reason. This is never the case." In this context, Yates cites Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. He also several times mentions the impressive community services performed in the 1960s and 1970s by the Black Panther Party. These three movements also share a sharp-eyed assessment of the enemy, whose iniquity is perhaps best recorded in another book by a committed leftist, Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*.

Never underestimate the wickedness of the rich. They'd rather bequeath us mushroom clouds than give up one yacht. Me, I think it's time we started learning to identify our wild, edible plants. Sauteed thistle roots for dinner, anyone?

Eve Ottenberg is a novelist and journalist. Her latest book is *Hope Deferred*. She can be reached at her [website](#).

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